



August 28, 2007

Guest Opinion: Drilling opponents wrong to claim wildlife threats

By Dave Galt

Almost every week, I'm asked the same question: Why isn't our country utilizing the domestic energy supplies in our own backyard? While there are number of possible answers, the one that seems to be resonating the most is attacks from so-called "sportsmen's" groups, acting under the guise of protecting sportsmen. Alarmist and obstructionist groups, such as the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, spread misinformation and make it increasingly challenging for our industry to access domestic energy supplies.

As an avid hunter and angler, born and raised in central Montana, and an industry representative, I know it is possible for energy development and wildlife to coexist. Throughout the years, America's oil and natural gas industry has invested billions of dollars and entered numerous partnerships, underscoring its commitment to developing energy supplies efficiently and responsibly.

These pseudo-environmental groups are wrongfully using the sage grouse, along with mule deer and antelope, as a roadblock to further oil and natural gas development. In an effort to have the sage grouse placed on the endangered-species list, environmentalists have tried petitioning the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. However, after an extensive review, the sage grouse was not listed. **Not satisfied with the court's decision, these organizations have been filing frivolous lawsuits, costing taxpayers millions.**

It is time these organizations face facts and stop discrediting hunters and anglers by using "sportsmen's issues" as an obstacle to energy development. Over the past 30 years, sage grouse populations have declined, yet today the populations are stable and increasing. Wildlife biologists even testified before the Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks Commission, stating that sage grouse populations are strong.

These overzealous environmental organizations shouldn't be so quick to single out energy development as the only factor to affect game animals. Many other causes - including drought, increased predation and increased housing development - affect the species' health and habitat. One study by the University of Montana contends that oil and natural gas production are harmful to sage grouse. However, there is considerable research and actual bird counts that contradict those findings. Until conclusive scientific data is available, it is counterproductive to prohibit the development of American oil and natural gas our nation desperately needs.

Claims that oil and natural gas development can't be balanced with hunting and fishing are simply untrue.

Since 1915, Montana has had nearly 40,000 oil and natural gas wells drilled, in many cases located in prime hunting grounds, and less than 10,000 of them are still active today. Inactive well locations are abandoned and reclaimed. At the same time wildlife populations of all species are flourishing. Oil and natural gas developers in Montana work hard to produce our energy resources in an environmentally responsible way.

Energy development has had an overwhelmingly positive impact on the state, contributing more than \$5 billion dollars and supporting more than 12,000 jobs, according to a study done by Montana State University Billings. Last year alone, oil and natural gas production taxes provided more than \$200 million dollars to the state and local governments.

Decisions to defer designated multiple-use public lands affect everybody. I encourage you to take the time to read the "objections" these alleged "sportsmen's" groups have inundated the Bureau of Land Management with (i.e., "we should not develop oil and natural gas in southeastern Montana because it harms prime grizzly bear habitat"). There's a false story spreading across Montana under the pretext of losing our ability to hunt and fish. When all is said and done, unfortunately, it will be the American people, particularly Montanans, who suffer the most if organizations like TRCP get their way in the name of "sportsmen's rights."

*Dave Galt of Helena is executive director of the Montana Petroleum Association,
www.montanapetroleum.org.*