ONLINE
Gillette's choice for news
The News-Record

July 22, 2007

CBM industry paid for part of sage grouse study

By Brantley Hargrove

Information used in a controversial study foretelling a gloomy future for the sage grouse was gathered, in large part, by consultants hired by the coal-bed methane industry, according to wildlife managers.

As much as 70 percent of the data about sage grouse leks, or breeding grounds, for northeast Wyoming for the Wyoming Game and Fish were gathered by consultants in the employ of the methane industry, said Dan Thiele, Game and Fish wildlife biologist.

“They’re contributing a huge amount of information,” he said. “When coal-bed methane development started in the Powder River Basin, it increased the amount of survey work going on in the field.”

A study spearheaded by University of Montana professor David Naugle also relied heavily on state Game and Fish databases, said Brett Walker, lead author of the sage grouse study.

Naugle’s study evoked an outcry from industry when it reported that between 2001 and 2005, sage grouse populations within coal-bed methane development areas declined 86 percent.

Contrary to what has been widely reported, grouse populations outside of development areas declined by only 12 percent, rather than 35 percent, Walker said.

Those numbers were changed after the release of the preliminary study to account for a decline in sage grouse populations throughout the basin.

The smaller decline outside development areas paints a gloomier picture of its impact on the bird. Walker said it is possible that the study’s predictions for the grouse are “conservative.”

“Wells completed between January and March (i.e., before lek counts were conducted) in the second year of each transition may have caused us to underestimate the amount of (coal-bed methane development) around leks at the time counts were conducted,” the study said.

With the release of Naugle’s preliminary findings in 2006, industry contracted Renee Taylor of Taylor Environmental Consulting to make her own assessment.

“I’m looking at how birds responded,” Taylor said. “I don’t find the drastic decline (Naugle) finds.”

Taylor presented a PowerPoint presentation of her study to biologist Pat Deibert of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Tuesday.

Deibert says the two studies both document sage grouse declines, but that the studies were not totally comparable.

Naugle's gave the bird's status in the basin as well as a predictive model of its future decline, while Taylor's examined only the bird's present status. Much of Naugle's report was based on field work by University of Montana students while Taylor's report relied solely on Game and Fish and Wyoming Oil and Gas Conservation Commission data.

Taylor's study hasn't been reviewed or published yet, but she says she intends to submit her work when she completes it to the Journal of Wildlife Management, the same publication that will soon publish Naugle and Walker's work.

"All we've seen of Renee Taylor's work is a PowerPoint presentation," said Tom Christiansen, sage grouse coordinator for Wyoming Game and Fish. "No paper has been presented to us and there's nothing to analyze except what's been projected on the screen."

Wildlife and land managers have widely accepted Naugle's study, and Christiansen added that he differentiates between peer-reviewed, published literature and other work that hasn't been vetted in that manner.

"If you look at a scale, the most reliable gold standard is peer-reviewed, published literature," he said.