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No room for strutting

By Jennifer Frazer

CHEYENNE - Sage grouse mating rituals could be described as goofy, astonishing or even magical.

The large, speckled birds faithfully return to their breeding grounds - called leks - every year in spring, where males gather early each morning to strut, fret and heave out their chests in search of a mate.

Birders and locals alike often flock to see the yearly ritual by a bird that a former Wyoming Game and Fish Department director called "as distinctively western as the Stetson hat."

Yet if energy development continues as it is right now, there will be a lot less strutting in the future, according to new research by Wyoming and Montana scientists, and that could mean that environmental groups will again petition for the listing of the sage grouse under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Should the bird be listed as endangered, ranchers, drillers and anyone else whose activities could impact sage grouse would be subject to much more stringent regulations.

Several studies, released within the last year, are finding that sage grouse populations are declining in the Pinedale Anticline and Jonah Field in western Wyoming and Powder River Basin in northeast Wyoming. Those are areas with gas and coal-bed methane development, seriously threatening the birds' future. Similar levels of oil and gas development are planned for other sage grouse strongholds, including the Red Desert of southern Wyoming.

Sage grouse used to range over a broad swath of western lands, but have been lost from half of their former range, and population declines vary from 15 to 90 percent across the existing range, said Dave Naugle, professor of wildlife biology at the University of Montana. Right now, the population in the Powder River Basin is lower than it has ever been recorded, and the population is down to 16 percent of what it was 17 years ago.

Energy development isn't the only stressor - West Nile virus and certain grazing and fire management practices also are threatening the bird, scientists say. But energy development is the factor that is increasing the most rapidly.

Because the energy leases for the land that many sage grouse inhabit have already been sold by the federal government, only a change in the way the Bureau of Land Management allows

energy companies to develop the land they have leased can protect the bird and avoid listing, they say. Such an action would need to happen decisively and soon.

"We've provided the science to those decision makers, and it will be in their hands to make up their mind on what direction we're to go," Naugle said. "But the one thing I have to remind folks is the longer we wait, the fewer options will be available, because development is occurring very quickly."

And though recent petitions to list the sage grouse as endangered under the Endangered Species Act have been rejected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, with the new evidence in hand, another petition may be imminent without a change in policy.

"When (former Secretary of the Interior Gale) Norton denied listing, she said we can do it better without listing," Mark Salvo, director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign, said in an interview in July. "I think what we've noticed here in the past 16 to 18 months is that it's not doing what's necessary to save the grouse."

At least three new studies seem to show current energy development practices in Wyoming are hurting sage grouse.

In December 2005, graduate student Matthew Holloran at the University of Wyoming published evidence in his doctoral thesis that the sage grouse population shrank in the Jonah Field and Pinedale Anticline with energy development, and the evidence suggested current natural-gas development techniques were to blame.

Naugle, at the University of Montana, co-authored two studies released this year that found that leks with extensive coal-bed methane development in the Powder River Basin had a much higher chance of being abandoned in a gas field than a lek located outside the field.

The second study found that in winter, the grouse avoid otherwise suitable habitat if it's been developed by energy - even after construction is finished.

Then, when his group compared maps showing where good sage grouse populations remain and those showing where energy development already occurs or will in the future, he said, the two essentially overlapped.

"That's where a lot of people working on oil and gas and sage grouse issues right now look at that overlap between energy extraction and where the bird remains and think we're lined up for a train wreck," he said.

West Nile virus presents another problem. In 2003, one-fourth of the entire sage grouse population in the Powder River Basin died from West Nile virus, followed by another 10 percent in 2004 and 2 percent in 2005, Naugle said. Some thought the disease was running its course, but higher temperatures this summer brought more West Nile infections to both humans and sage grouse, and Naugle expects this year's toll to be closer to 2004's numbers.

"Some people throw up their hands and say, 'Maybe this disease has us beat,'" he said. "I would argue the opposite - that we need to do a better job in conserving large sagebrush landscapes so in years when the risk of disease is low these birds have a chance to rebound. But if we don't give them good habitat to do that, that's when West Nile could act as a double whammy."

To combat the population decline, several local environmental groups are supporting a plan by Clait Braun, a former avian research program manager for the Colorado Division of Wildlife who has 35 years of experience with sage grouse science and management issues.

Now a consultant in Arizona for a company called Grouse Inc., Braun wrote "A Blueprint for Sage Grouse Conservation and Recovery," he said, because others in the sage grouse community told him they thought he knew about as well as anyone what needed to be done for sage grouse - and because he couldn't be fired for doing it. He has submitted it to all the Bureau of Land Management offices that manage sage grouse.

Based on the current science, he said, it was clear to him that the current restrictions placed on oil and gas development - timing restrictions and keeping development one-quarter of a mile away from leks - simply don't work.

"The BLM's prescription for allowing oil and gas drilling is a prescription for extinction of local populations of sage grouse," he said.

Braun doesn't foresee total extinction, but he fears a sparse population would be vulnerable to being wiped out by West Nile or some other threat.

In his plan, he calls for no surface occupancy or road construction within three miles of existing leks and advocates setting aside sage grouse refuges: tracts of 20+ square miles of land that would not be explored or produced for 30 years or until developed areas could be returned to their natural state.

"When you're drilling like mad in one area, you need to have a substantial area elsewhere that is not being violated," he said. "Someone needs to make strong recommendations and say you can't drill here until these other areas can support sage grouse again."

Naugle said he has no comment on Braun's work or proposal, but an analysis his group just completed shows that the current stipulations on federal minerals enforced by the BLM are insufficient to protect the sage grouse.

"The one-quarter mile isn't even close," he said. "It needs to be something like four miles or more."

In his thesis, Holloran also recommended protecting all areas within three miles of known leks from development.

There is still time for that to happen, though not much, advocates say.

"All of the federal agencies have a wealth of opportunity to do this soon," said Josh Pollock, conservation director for the Center for Native Ecosystems. "A number of land-use plans are up for renewal, and dozens of oil and gas project reviews are about to be approved."

BLM spokeswoman Cindy Wertz said her agency is concerned about the status of the sage grouse in the Powder River Basin, and keeping it healthy is one of their goals.

"We do have current steps for oil and gas development," she said. "That's what we're going with because we just don't have enough data or information, nor do we know enough to change practices."

To learn more, the agency is working with Naugle and has received preliminary data from him, Wertz said, but this year is just the first in a three-year study, and the final report of phase one is not due until January 2007.

Naugle said he had indeed provided the BLM with detailed maps of the Powder River Basin that show where good winter habitat is, where the active leks remain and where key places for sage grouse outside of energy development are located. If the agency would set aside protective areas and beef up their stipulations for sage grouse habitat, he said, "I think we would at least have a fighting chance at a strategy that could keep birds in the Powder River Basin."

That's doubly important, he said, because the basin is the largest gas field in any western state, and what happens there is likely to set a national policy for what happens in all the other places federal leases have already been sold.

Wertz said the agency also has received Braun's study and is reviewing it.

"This is giving us an opportunity to start talking with Montana, Wyoming, industry and private parties and discuss how to change," she said. The situation is complicated by the amount of privately owned land in the Powder River Basin, she said.

And she noted that the agency also is under a mandate by law to manage its land for multiple uses - not just sage grouse.

A message seeking comment left with the Wyoming Petroleum Association Thursday was not returned by Friday afternoon.

Braun acknowledged that managing for multiple uses is the status quo, but says something has got to change if sage grouse numbers are to rebound, and what needs to change is indeed clear.

"Populations are remnants of what they once were. Some populations are no longer viable," he said. "I can't make it any blunter than that. Consequently, we need to have a plan. I'm not saying we're going to stop oil and gas or grazing, but we need to stop the decline, and you need to start some place."