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Report: Anticline deer numbers drop

By Whitney Royster

JACKSON -- Seasonal drilling restrictions on the Pinedale Anticline natural gas field may not be helping mule deer, which appear to be avoiding development areas regardless of activity levels, a report released this week says.

Hall Sawyer and Western EcoSystems Technology Inc., based in Cheyenne, released the 2005 annual report studying the impact of energy development on mule deer in the Pinedale Anticline. It is the eighth year of study, and the fifth year under oil and gas development conditions.

The report says the well densities on the anticline -- and the roads and activity that go along with it -- "may negate the potential effectiveness of timing restrictions on drilling activities as a means to reduce disturbance to wintering deer. Limiting public access and road management strategies may also be a necessary part of mitigation plans."

Sawyer said Friday winter stipulations in lower-density gas fields might be more effective for mule deer.

Peter Aengst with the Bozeman, Mont.-based Wilderness Society said the results should make people take notice, particularly because the gas field is still relatively new.

"These are documented impacts from a scale of development that is just tiny compared to what's coming," he said.

The results should push the Bureau of Land Management, which oversees development activity, to implement "adaptive management" triggers, Aengst said.

"We better build in some adaptive process, trigger or threshold so when things really get bad we can make changes," he said. "If we all of a sudden approve things that are locked in for decades, we're basically then going to be studying a huge wildlife loss."

Aengst also said that even though seasonal stipulations may not help mule deer, they do likely help sage grouse and some other species, and should not be deemed irrelevant on the anticline.

Restrictions on drilling in the Pinedale Anticline generally run from Nov. 15 to April 30 in order to protect wildlife and habitat. Questar Exploration and Development Corp. has been allowed to do limited winter drilling under a pilot project that also includes the study by Sawyer's company,

research funded in part by Questar. The BLM recently approved another winter drilling "demonstration project" by three other companies on the anticline, and those companies have now asked for a broad lifting of the winter restrictions to accelerate development.

In exchange, the companies propose to use directional drilling techniques similar to those employed by Questar in the Pinedale Anticline to help wildlife and other natural resources. The number of well pads used by Questar is significantly smaller than the amount authorized by the BLM.

Questar representatives, and representatives from the Petroleum Association of Wyoming, were not available for comment Friday. But Ron Hogan, Pinedale project manager for Questar, said previously that research showing mule deer avoid places with human development should make the company's winter drilling plans more attractive -- because of the reduced footprint resulting from directional drilling and other techniques.

Sawyer's study -- funded by Questar, TRC Mariah Associates, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and the BLM, and prepared with three other associates -- also said mule deer numbers in the anticline have decreased by 46 percent over four years.

In 2002, some 5,228 mule deer were estimated to be in the area; in 2005 the number dropped to 2,818, according to the study.

Sawyer said the decline reflects decreased adult survival, fawn survival and emigration, but the study was not set up to determine which was the largest factor in the decrease.

"Estimates of deer abundance on the Mesa have significantly declined since development began," the report says. It also notes that deer populations in a control area have not declined.

Aengst called this documentation of dramatic population losses the "canary in the coal mine."

"One study on mule deer is finding pretty dramatic results," he said. "It's a pretty big signal. We better not just say, 'That's nice,' and go on with standard practices, but we better be building some mechanisms that allow for mid-course corrections."

Steven Hall, a spokesman for the BLM in Wyoming, said the agency takes studies like this into account as it makes decisions about drilling projects. He said some companies have proposed or are trying to reduce impacts during the drilling phase, when disruption to wildlife are more apt to occur.

"In order to have natural gas and oil from public lands, there will be some impact to the environment," he said, adding it's BLM's to find an appropriate balance.

The mule deer study was originally supposed to continue through 2007, though with new allowances for winter drilling on the Mesa, it may continue longer.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.