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## **Study: Drilling damages sage grouse**

**By Gary Harmon**

Conservation organizations hope a new study detailing harm to sage grouse from drilling will force federal land managers to regulate exploration more closely.

The study, released Thursday, shows not only that drilling contributed to reduced populations of sage grouse, but the populations also failed to rebound once drilling and construction ceased.

The work of a University of Wyoming graduate student “underscores what conservation organizations have been saying all along,” said Erik Molvar, a wildlife biologist with the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance in Laramie, Wyo.

It illustrates that drilling is “fundamentally incompatible with sensitive species in general and sage grouse in particular,” Molvar said.

Molvar and others discussed the findings in a conference call Thursday with reporters.

While the study documents the damage drilling does to sage grouse, conservation organizations aren’t trying to shut down the oil-and-gas industry, Molvar said.

Rather, the use of directional drilling could reduce the amount of land needed for drilling pads, thus avoiding damaging leks, or breeding grounds used year after year by male grouse, Molvar said.

The study covered sage-grouse populations in the Pinedale Anticline and Jonah fields in Wyoming.

Leks affected by drilling and production showed an average population decline of 51 percent, while the three leks surrounded by development declined by an average of 89 percent.

Two of the three leks were abandoned within four years, the study said.

The study found that if the sage grouse population continues to decline at the rates measured, local populations within these gas fields would become extinct within 19 years.

In addition to directional drilling, companies should be required to maintain the number of birds present on the land when they arrive, as well as increase habitat on lands that aren’t being drilled, said Clait Braun, a wildlife biologist with Grouse Inc. and a former avian research leader for the Colorado Division of Wildlife.

There is some evidence that sage grouse populations persist around the edges of old oil fields as observed in the North Park area, Braun said.

Scientists have long been aware of the effects of drilling on sage-grouse populations, but U.S. Bureau of Land Management officials have taken no action to protect the birds, Molvar said.

“This agency is like an alcoholic that’s in denial,” he said.

With the documentation available, the directors of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management could halt population reductions and start the return of the grouse almost immediately by implementing the appropriate drilling regulations, Braun said.

Sage grouse live in 11 states, and populations have been declining in nine of them over a period of decades, Braun said. The number had stabilized during the last two or three years but have taken a hit again with the advent of the drilling industry in states such as Colorado, Utah and Wyoming, home to both sage grouse and burgeoning drilling industries.