



January 20, 2006

Study blames drillers for grouse decline

By Todd Hartman

Populations of sage grouse declined sharply in breeding habitat near oil and gas development, according to a new study paid for by the federal government and the industry.

The study, which focused on exploration fields in western Wyoming, found that drilling activity cut male sage grouse populations at nearby mating grounds by an average of 51 percent, compared with only 3 percent drops at undisturbed sites.

The findings led environmental groups to call Thursday for renewed talks on how to better balance the expanding needs of the oil and gas industry against preserving habitat for the sage grouse, a prairie bird known for its elaborate mating dances and a species that many conservationists say has seen a sharp drop in numbers across the West.

"This study is going to change the debate on sage grouse and oil and gas development," said Erik Molvar of the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance in a statement issued by wildlife advocates. "The (federal) Bureau of Land Management won't be able to tell the public that (its) standard oil and gas . . . mitigation measures will protect the sage grouse anymore."

The Wyoming results are directly transferable to parts of Colorado's Western Slope, where oil and gas development is booming, said Clait Braun, a former state Division of Wildlife researcher and among those touting the new study.

"There's no doubt you'd get the same findings" in Colorado, he said.

The study, conducted by a University of Wyoming graduate student at the request of the BLM and EnCana Oil & Gas USA, found that drilling activities up to three miles from sage grouse breeding sites - known as leks - led to declines in breeding males.

At three lek sites surrounded by oil and gas activities, male sage grouse numbers fell by 89 percent, the study found. It also predicted that sage grouse populations would become extinct in two large oil and gas regions, the Pinedale Anticline and Jonah Fields, within 19 years if current population trends continued.

Steven Hall, a spokesman for the BLM in Wyoming, said the fact that his agency helped pay for the study demonstrates its "commitment to having the best possible science to guide our decision-making process."

"Obviously, there's some very good information contained in this study, and what we need to do now is digest that information and figure out what the implications are to management," Hall said.

A spokesman for EnCana said the company hasn't had the chance to review the study but doesn't question the credibility of its author.

The need to protect sage grouse habitat is "a message we have heard from the conservation community for some time, and we've tried to take that very seriously," said Randy Teeuwen, community relations adviser for the company.

He noted that the company has formally agreed to spend more than \$24 million to improve wildlife habitat to make up for the disruption caused by growing exploration at the Jonah Fields.