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Study: Energy use bad for bird

By Brandon Johansson

Groups on both sides of the debate about oil and gas development in the West are paying close attention to a sage grouse study released last week by a University of Wyoming graduate student.

Increased energy development in the gas fields of western Wyoming has driven male sage grouse from mating sites, according to the study, which was funded by the Bureau of Land Management and the energy industry.

The study focused on sage grouse in the Pinedale Anticline and Jonah Fields in the upper Green River Valley.

Sage grouse is a chicken-like bird found in the West and known for elaborate mating dances.

The bird is regularly the subject of controversy about energy development in the West.

Conservationists say drilling for oil and gas harms an already-declining sage grouse population and that the industry needs to be more heavily regulated to protect the bird.

But industry representatives say regulation would make it difficult to gain access of much-needed oil and gas reserves.

Conservationists hailed the release of the study as proof that oil and gas development is harming sage grouse and that the energy industry should be more regulated.

According to the study, populations of breeding males in areas subject to heavy natural gas development decreased by 51 percent. Populations in areas without gas development decreased by 3 percent.

The density of oil rigs, pipelines and drilling pads on gas fields must be substantially reduced, said Clait Braun, a former avian research manager for the Colorado Division of Wildlife.

There are so many rigs in places such as the Jonah Field in Wyoming, where the study was conducted, that grouse can't find refuge from development, Braun said.

The Bureau of Land Management should reserve more land for sage grouse so the birds can escape development, he said.

Braun worked with sage grouse in Moffat County for more than 25 years with the Division of Wildlife. He works as a consultant on sage grouse issues.

The only difference between the region where the University of Wyoming study was conducted and Moffat County is the density of drilling, he said.

If drilling in Moffat County were to grow to the levels in western Wyoming, sage grouse would be driven out in similar fashion, he said.

But energy industry officials cautioned against using the results from the Wyoming study to predict what could happen in Colorado.

"The influence of oil and gas activity in Jonah and Pinedale Anticline is a lot more intense than what is occurring in Moffat County," said Stephen Flaherty, a spokesman for Western Gas Resources in Denver.

Flaherty said it isn't prudent to compare grouse in Northwest Colorado to those in Wyoming because birds in different regions respond differently to gas development.

Jeff Comstock, natural resources director for Moffat County, said the county would pay close attention to the University of Wyoming study.

There is a lack of good science about the relationship between sage grouse and gas development, so any study is welcome, Comstock said.

Comstock said Moffat County would like to see more research conducted on the local sage grouse population.