

THE LARAMIE BOOMERANG

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Sage grouse population is in a decline, according to UW study

By Eric Baker

Environmental groups have been grouching about the decline of the bird, a cultural icon of the West, for some time. Now they have a scientific study to back up their claims.

Matt Holloran, a doctoral student at the University of Wyoming, recently released the results of his five-year study in Pinedale Anticline and Jonah Field showing that oil and gas development is adversely affecting greater sage grouse population.

“This study changes the debate on sage grouse and oil and gas development,” said Erik Molvar, a wildlife biologist with Biodiversity Conservation Alliance. “The Bureau of Land Management will have to change their oil and gas practices and mitigation measures to protect the sage grouse.”

The study found drilling activity cut male sage grouse populations at nearby mating grounds by an average of 51 percent, compared to 3 percent drops at undisturbed sites. There was a 21 percent decline in the population of nesting females relative to undisturbed females during the study.

Much of Holloran’s study focused on the impact of oil and gas drilling close to leks, which are areas where grouse congregate to annually to breed. The grouse is a small, chicken-like bird and the male engages in an elaborate dancing ritual on the leks.

As one might expect, increased road traffic and well densities decreased the number of breeding males on affected leks. The grouse is being considered for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

“The sage grouse is important because they are a signal for the health of the sagebrush steppe,” said Clait Braun, former researcher for the Colorado Division of Wildlife. “They are a nesting species that live there year-round, so they depend solely on the sagebrush environment.”

Holloran predicted localized extinctions for the sage grouse in the areas he studied within 19 years if current trends continue. Braun extrapolated that number to other areas in Wyoming and Colorado, pointing out that extinction might not occur but there are battles over appropriate habitat for sage grouse.

The study calls for specific set asides, refugia, for the bird to breed and live among the oil and gas drills. But even the environmentalists touting the new study are skeptical about the viability of such a suggestion.

“The set asides would be a minimum of 200 square miles and a maximum of 400 square miles,” said Braun. “Do you think the oil and gas companies are going to allow that?”

The BLM is under enormous pressure from the current administration and even Dick Cheney to maximize profits in these lands, said Braun.

“The administration thought they had a mandate to develop an energy policy without environmental concerns,” said Braun. “What I’m seeing in Wyoming is crazy. Wyoming and Colorado were thought to be the core of the sage grouse population, now they’re considering listing it as endangered. A lot of people in Wyoming like to hunt and get outdoors, and I look at the state and see some of the last true outdoors people. I hope we can pull together and find a solution.”

The study was funded by BLM and EnCana Oil & Gas, the company that does all the drilling in Jonah Field.

“We believe Matt is a credible academic scholar, but we haven’t looked to see if we agree with his methodology,” said Randy Teeuwen, community relations adviser for the company. “But we don’t think there’s going to be any extinction at all. We go down to Jonah Field a lot, and they’re running around all the time.”

EnCana has a mitigation plan that involves committing \$28 million to areas surrounding Jonah Field for wildlife habitat. Jonah Field is 3 percent of Sublette County, and EnCana wants to increase sage grouse population in the remaining 97 percent, said Teeuwen.

The Jonah Interagency Office is to be developed soon in Pinedale, a mix of officials from BLM, the Department of Agriculture, the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality, and the Wyoming Fish and Game Department. This office will determine the best ways to spend the \$28 million, said Teeuwen.

Yet environmentalists aren’t satisfied with the effect of current mitigation plans.

“97 to 98 percent of the land in the Pinedale Anticline has been leased,” said Braun. “Where are they going to move these populations?”

Molvar would like the oil and gas companies to explore new technologies that leave less of an environmental footprint on the land such as directional drilling.

“The reason this is so important is that 2,750 square miles of the Red Desert are slated for oil and gas development,” said Molvar. “This is an enormous area that is much too large to ignore environmentally.”

“We’ve already heard from one assistant secretary in the Department of the Interior that what Holloran did is not science,” said Braun. “He was there for five years, he had a peer review process, he had adequate controls on his study — I think it’s very good science. His study echoes the guidelines published by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies in peer reviewed technical journals.

“In the short term, the BLM is going to try and hide this study and denigrate it. But if they continue to do so, they’ll be right back in court over listing with the Endangered Species Act.”