Casper Star Tribune
Wyoming's News Source

June 14, 2006

Study: Grouse decline in methane fields

By Dustin Bleizeffer

GILLETTE -- A preliminary report suggests sage grouse are in serious trouble in the Powder River Basin, where coal-bed methane development has cast a wide network of new roads, drilling pads, pipelines and power lines.

The University of Montana study, headed by professor David Naugle, backs up previous findings and documents an overall 84 percent sage grouse population decline in the Powder River Basin, while populations outside the basin seem to be relatively stable.

Naugle will present his findings at 10:30 a.m. today at an interagency working group meeting at the Bureau of Land Management's Buffalo field office. The meeting is open to the public.

The BLM opened the door to full-scale coal-bed methane development in the basin several years ago when it OK'd a plan for 51,000 wells and declined to withhold any federal minerals from leasing. The agency issued a press release Tuesday cautioning that Naugle's preliminary report is "in no way a definitive work."

"It is not clear these population reductions are entirely due to avoidance of energy development, or if lower nesting success or higher bird mortality rates are also major contributing factors," the BLM stated.

Wyoming BLM Director Bob Bennett said his agency will maintain an open dialogue with various stakeholders working together to try to protect the sage grouse in the area. The BLM already imposes several stipulations on the industry, including seasonal restrictions and habitat restoration.

"Our plan as land managers is to identify more and improved ways to keep sage grouse habitat healthy," Bennett said.

A spokesman for coal-bed methane producer Williams Production RMT Co. said his company is involved in a sage grouse "working group" and stands ready to adopt mitigation measures that lessen the impact on the bird.

"I think we all realize that any time you have the level of activity we have, there are going to be some impacts," said Tom Doll, an operations manager for Williams.

Doll said he wants to learn more about the preliminary findings, and he suspects sage grouse may be moving out of the area only to re-establish themselves elsewhere.

"We support this study, and we want to see it continue into the future, because I think it will track the impacts," Doll said.

Others say the BLM needs to make dramatic changes in the way it permits coal-bed methane development.

"This study shows that current methods of coal-bed methane development aren't compatible with maintaining healthy populations of sage grouse," said Erik Molvar, wildlife biologist with Biodiversity Conservation Alliance.

Molvar said Naugle's study seems to echo the findings of a separate study of sage grouse in oil and gas development areas of the Upper Green River Valley.

"This study (Naugle's) shows that previous studies showing sage grouse declines in the gas fields of western Wyoming were no fluke," Molvar said.

He added that a failure to adapt development patterns in ways that do not harm the sage grouse "will almost certainly drive this magnificent bird to the brink of extinction."

Molvar said he hopes the findings cause the BLM to consider stringent stipulations for a current proposal to begin coal-bed methane development in the Fortification Creek area, which is home to sage grouse and an elk herd.

Over the past few years, federal officials have received numerous petitions to list the greater sage grouse for protection under the Endangered Species Act. In January 2005, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined that the bird did not meet the criteria for federal protection, in part because its numbers are stable to increasing across much of the West.