



**June 15, 2006**

## **Gas drilling drives away sage grouse, study finds**

**By Becky Bohrer, Associated Press**

BILLINGS, Mont. - New research suggests the booming coal-bed methane development of Montana and Wyoming may be driving sage grouse away from areas of the mineral-rich Powder River Basin that are being drilled for gas.

Given the current pace of drilling in the region, which includes parts of eastern Wyoming and southeastern Montana, "the full extent of suitable habitat" will be developed within the next 20 years, leaving sage grouse with no place to go, lead researcher David Naugle said Wednesday.

"There are going to have to be some tough decisions" made, said Naugle, a wildlife professor at the University of Montana.

The university researchers found that areas in which methane wells are being drilled didn't have the same strong population growth recorded elsewhere in the basin in 2004 and 2005.

In so-called "energy leks," where wells covered at least 40 percent of a two-mile buffer around grouse mating sites, the bird population last year was about 12 percent of what it was in 2000, researchers said. In areas defined as outside development, the population was nearer 70 percent of the 2000 population.

The findings are preliminary and the study of coal-bed methane's development on sage grouse is continuing. But researchers say the results support the notion that sage grouse avoid developed areas, and new development pushes them toward undeveloped habitat.

This isn't a good thing, Naugle said.

"Avoidance in some people's minds means, 'Oh, good. We didn't kill them,' " he said. But moving wildlife populations, particularly more sensitive species such as sage grouse, can leave them more susceptible to disease, on less suitable habitat, more vulnerable to predation, "and, eventually, with no place to go," he said.

Sage grouse inhabit large areas of the West. But the health of the species concerns conservationists because of sharp declines.

Their numbers have dropped from historical levels of 16 million in the United States and Canada to fewer than 150,000 by some estimates.

The government has rejected listing the ground-dwelling bird under the Endangered Species Act, saying conservation efforts among local, state, federal and private entities are adequate.

In the new study, the researchers cited loss of habitat, expansion of roads, increased human activity and West Nile virus as aspects of development that can hurt sage grouse numbers.