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Study: Gas Drilling Hurting Sage Grouse

By Becky Bohrer
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BILLINGS, Mont. -- A boost in methane gas drilling in parts of Montana and Wyoming may be a factor in the shrinking population of sage grouse, a ground-dwelling bird slowly being squeezed out of its habitat by development, a study shows.

Lead researcher David Naugle, a wildlife professor at the University of Montana, said preliminary findings show the need to find a new way of thinking when it comes to coal-bed methane development and wildlife conservation in the mineral-rich Powder River Basin.

"There are going to have to be some tough decisions," he said.

While the study also cited loss of habitat, expansion of roads, increased human activity and West Nile virus as other factors that can hurt sage grouse numbers, the decline in the birds' population _ an estimated 84 percent in the basin since 1988 _ correlates with the period when methane gas development took off in the 1990s.

More than 24,800 coal-bed methane wells have been drilled in Wyoming and about 580 methane wells in Montana, officials said.

The 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.

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, Naugle said.

So far, the drilling has pushed the birds toward undeveloped habitat, which can leave them more susceptible to disease and more vulnerable to predators, Naugle said. "Avoidance in some people's minds means, 'Oh, good. We didn't kill them,'" he said.

The government so far has rejected listing the bird under the Endangered Species Act.

Erik Molvar, a wildlife biologist with the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, said the U.S. Bureau of Land Management protections in place for the sage grouse are inadequate and that current development isn't compatible with maintaining populations. He advocates a wide buffer zone to prevent the habitat from becoming industrialized.

Albright said the study yielded no real surprises. He said the federal bureau and other agencies, as well as energy development firms, are helping fund the research, the results of which he expects will be taken into account in planning and other efforts.

"We're looking for the best information we can get, because we're trying to manage all the resources out there responsibly," he said.

More than 24,800 coal-bed methane wells have been drilled in Wyoming's portion of the Powder River Basin, most of those since the late 1990s, according to the Wyoming Oil and Gas Conservation Commission.