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**Report: Grouse protections not working**

*Report says drilling puts grouse at risk Study by UM says existing CBM rules haven't been effective*

**By Dustin Bleizeffer**

GILLETTE-- When state and federal regulators opened the door to drilling of 51,000 coal-bed methane wells in the Powder River Basin several years ago, they did so not knowing the implications to wildlife.

Now ongoing monitoring indicates that seasonal restrictions intended to protect sage grouse and their wintering habitat in the region isn't working. The University of Montana report suggests that year-round restrictions on coal-bed methane development are needed in some areas -- particularly in the northern portion of the basin on the Wyoming/Montana border.

The report concludes that "conservation strategies to date to protect the species have been largely ineffective. An effective conservation strategy is one that limits the cumulative impact of disturbances across the landscape at all times of the year."

David Naugle, a wildlife professor at the University of Montana, has headed up the sage grouse research, paid for by the Bureau of Land Management in both Wyoming and Montana. Naugle released a related report earlier this month noting a 84 percent decline in sage grouse in the Powder River Basin, where much of the coal-bed methane production takes place.

In the most recent report, Naugle notes that it's not too late to protect isolated wintering ranges in the north portion of the basin because some areas have not yet been developed, but that regulatory changes are needed to do so.

A Wyoming BLM spokesman said the agency finds the new sage grouse data "interesting," but hasn't been compelled to make any policy changes based on the information.

"What we're hoping is, by continuing to fund studies like this, we can determine what the best approach is to manage both sage grouse and coal-bed methane development in the region," said BLM spokesman Steven Hall.

Hall also noted that several other regulatory agencies would be involved in making any policy changes regarding the protection of sage grouse in the area.

Several coal-bed methane companies in the basin are involved in a regional working group to make habitat improvements they hope will offset negative development impacts. Some industry leaders recognize that thousands of new wells each year inevitably have some impact on sage grouse, but still urge regulatory officials to refrain from imposing more stringent protections.

Karen Brown of the Coalbed Natural Gas Alliance, an industry-sponsored organization, said it would be premature to make regulatory changes based on the data that Naugle's research has produced so far.

"It's critical for industry to have one of their wildlife specialists to look at Dr. Naugle's data to see how it was all put together," Brown said.

Eric Molvar, wildlife biologist for Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, said regulators should heed Naugle's advice to better protect sage grouse wintering range to maintain and rebuild the population.

"At least in the northern Powder River Basin, winter range could be one of the real limiting factors on sage grouse populations," Molvar said. "If we fail to (protect winter range), the consequences to the sage grouse populations could be pretty dire."