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Development effects upon wildlife studied

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WAMSUTTER - High oil prices drive industrial development, industrial development drives residential development - and both types of development might be driving out wildlife.

That's what wildlife managers throughout Wyoming are trying to ascertain as booming oil and gas development - and the coinciding housing and retail booms - are putting people and wildlife into close contact in more places than ever.

Hall Sawyer, a wildlife biologist with Laramie-based Western Ecosystems Technology, said development tends to trickle through wildlife populations.

For example, building roads, well pads or other development has a direct effect, reducing the amount of space wildlife has in which to roam. But the effects can also be indirect. Animals change their behavior based on development, choosing to spend their time elsewhere.

That, too, can have secondary effects. Sawyer said mule deer populations in the Pinedale area aren't doing as well as they have in the past, possibly because of natural gas development that has pushed them away from some natural habitat.

Similar effects on sage grouse

Alison Holloran, of Audubon Wyoming, said she'd seen the same thing with sage grouse when researching her master's thesis.

"I found that in areas disturbed by gas development, the hens moved farther to nest than hens in undisturbed areas," Holloran said. "There's potential for them to be pushed out into subpar habitat, and that could impact their recruitment and nest success."

Residential development, too, can have an effect on wildlife. Bill Rudd, the state Game and Fish Department's wildlife management coordinator for the Green River Region, said pets can prey on wildlife, changing the distribution of species in an area. Coyotes are replaced by foxes; birds that nest on the ground are displaced by birds that nest in trees.

Upper Green River Basin study

Shell Exploration and Production has teamed up with the Wildlife Conservation Society for a five-year study on the impacts of natural gas drilling on pronghorn in the Upper Green River Basin. Such studies, Sawyer said, would give wildlife managers better information about how development affects wildlife, allowing both for better wildlife management and for more environmentally friendly development.

"In most areas around the West, industry will only do what they're required to do," Sawyer said. "But in Pinedale, having the predevelopment information has been invaluable. We're trying to start that with the Atlantic Rim now."

Similarly, some new housing developments are incorporating more open space, where wildlife might remain. Larry Sutherland, who is developing the Rocking Star Ranch outside Cheyenne, said that development would leave 675 acres of open space. For people, that means hiking and horse riding trails; for wildlife, that means a chance to avoid human interaction without having to relocate.

But Jim Cochran, district manager of the Laramie County Conservation District, said he didn't know whether such limited open space reservations go far enough.

"The question is, are these open spaces that we're leaving? Are they going to be enough or not? We'll probably end up having some deer and antelope, but will it maintain others? A lot of those species just don't do well with people, so the question is, are we leaving enough space for them?"