

# The Salt Lake Tribune

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*Tribune Editorial*

## **Drilling at any cost: Let's not sacrifice wildlife for energy**

Mule deer are skittish. They try to avoid humans and the things they build - such as oil- and gas-drilling pads and pumps, and the roads that carry equipment and people to the drilling sites.

So, when energy development companies scatter such structures on the deer's range, the animals are forced to forage elsewhere. Human activity disturbs them during winter when they are living off the fat they accumulated during summer.

As a result, many of them don't make it through winter or are not healthy enough to reproduce when spring comes. Deer are just one example of the myriad animals threatened by the recent oil and gas drilling frenzy. Fish, too, are hurt when roads are bulldozed through pristine areas, sedimentation increases, forests are cut and water tables dry up.

Such losses are rightly worrisome to hunters, anglers and those who love the outdoors. The Utah office of the federal Bureau of Land Management responded correctly to those concerns when it canceled its November sale of drilling leases on 141,000 acres.

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources argued that about 139,000 of those acres - 84 of the 86 parcels on the auction block - are important habitat for wildlife and urged the BLM to study more thoroughly the potential harm to the animals. Fortunately, this time, the BLM agreed to take another look.

But that has not happened often enough. The Bush administration's drive to drill, regardless of the consequences, has resulted in more than 25 million acres of the Mountain West being leased for gas and oil drilling, 3.9 million acres in Utah.

In some areas the effects on wildlife have been dramatic. Pinedale, Wyo., the site of a boom in natural gas drilling and exploration, saw a 46 percent decrease in mule deer from 2001 to 2005.

The same could happen in Utah. Already the Book Cliffs, a popular hunting ground, and Strawberry Reservoir, a blue-ribbon fishery, are threatened.

We agree with conservation and hunting groups who are urging the BLM to demand that energy developers show how they will mitigate the eventual effects of drilling on fish and wildlife before they can get a permit. State wildlife agencies should keep a close eye on BLM lease auctions.

Utah's wildlife is too important to Utah's long-term economic health and natural heritage to sacrifice on the altar of energy. After all, the animals live here, too.