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BLM more focused on drilling than wildlife

Agency allowing energy programs trump conservation efforts, officials say

By Blaine Harden

PINEDALE, Wyo. - The Bureau of Land Management, caretaker of more land and wildlife than any federal agency, routinely restricts the ability of its own biologists to monitor wildlife damage caused by surging energy drilling on federal land, according to BLM officials and bureau documents.

The officials and documents say that by keeping many wildlife biologists out of the field doing paperwork on new drilling permits and that by diverting agency money intended for wildlife conservation to energy programs, the BLM has compromised its ability to deal with the environmental consequences of the drilling boom it is encouraging on public lands.

Here on the high sage plains of western Wyoming, often called the Serengeti of the West because of large migratory herds of deer and antelope, the Pinedale region has become one of the most productive and profitable natural gas fields on federal land in the Rockies. With the aggressive backing of the Bush administration, many members of Congress and the energy industry, at least a sixfold expansion in drilling is likely here in the coming decade.

Recent studies of mule deer and sage grouse, however, show steep declines in their numbers since the gas boom began here about five years ago: a 46 percent decline for mule deer and a 51 percent decline for breeding male sage grouse. Early results from a study of pronghorn antelope show that they, too, avoid the gas fields.

Yet as these findings have come in, the wildlife biologists in the Pinedale office of the BLM have rarely gone into the field to monitor harm to wildlife.

'Biostitutes'

"The BLM is pushing the biologists to be what I call 'biostitutes,' rather than allow them to be experts in the wildlife they are supposed to be managing," said Steve Belinda, 37, who last week quit his job as one of three wildlife biologists in the BLM's Pinedale office because he said he was required to spend nearly all his time working on drilling requests. "They are telling us that if it is not energy-related, you are not working on it."

Belinda, who had worked for 16 years as a wildlife biologist for the BLM and the Forest Service, said he came to work in the agency's Pinedale office 20 months ago because of the "world-class

wildlife." He has quit to work here for a national conservation group, the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, as its energy initiative manager.

"It is a huge attraction for biologists to work in western Wyoming," he said. "But in this [BLM] office, they want you to look at things in a single-minded way. I have spent less than 1 percent of my time in the field. If we continue down this trend of keeping biologists in the office and preventing them from doing substantive work, there is a train wreck coming for wildlife."

Belinda is not alone in his view that the BLM, in its focused pursuit of increased drilling, is neglecting its congressional mandate to manage federal lands for "multiple use."

For years the BLM has reallocated money Congress intended for wildlife conservation to spending on energy. A national evaluation by the agency of its wildlife expenditures found three years ago that about one-third of designated wildlife money was spent "outside" of wildlife programs.

'Doing our level best'

An internal BLM follow-up study found last year that this widespread diversion of money has caused "numerous lost opportunities" to protect wildlife. The study found that the unwillingness of the agency to use wildlife money for conservation programs has "reduced ability to conduct on-the-ground restoration" and made the BLM unable "to conduct adequate inventory and monitoring of habitats and populations."

The sum effect of these diversions, the study said, has damaged the credibility of land-use planning by the BLM. These findings were echoed last year in a report by the Government Accountability Office, which said that BLM managers order their field staff to devote increasing time to processing drilling permits, leaving less time to mitigate the consequences of oil and gas extraction.

"It has become almost a cultural practice in the BLM to spend money that is appropriated for one purpose for whatever purpose somebody deems is a higher priority," said a senior BLM official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he said he would be fired for speaking publicly. "There is really no penalty for this."

The BLM's Wyoming director, Bob Bennett, disagreed strongly with this assessment. Bennett said that the BLM is "doing our level best to deal with the impacts" of energy development on wildlife.

"If a wildlife biologist is working on an application for a permit to drill, that doesn't mean he is not doing wildlife work," Bennett said. "The wildlife job is a broad job, and it does involve energy."

Here in Wyoming, what has angered Gov. Dave Freudenthal (D), along with state wildlife managers, environmental groups, many local residents and some oil industry executives is what they describe as growing evidence of a lack of balance in the federal push for more drilling -- even as scientific studies show significant and worrisome declines in wildlife around gas fields. Those studies have been funded by the BLM and the energy industry.

The BLM's pace of issuing new permits to drill in Wyoming and across the West has continued to increase, even though the oil and gas industry -- which is chronically short of drilling rigs and skilled workers -- cannot drill nearly enough holes in the ground to keep up with the permits that have already been granted. In the past two years, the BLM issued a record 13,070 drilling permits on federal land, but industry drilled just 5,844 wells.

"The pressure comes from Washington," said Freudenthal, who said he has assigned more state wildlife biologists to Pinedale and other active drilling areas in an attempt to keep up with the federal push. "As you go up the chain of command of BLM and into the Department of Interior, I am not sure they share our commitment to balance. No matter how large the benefits are from this development, it does not justify turning a blind eye to the environment."

'Demand for gas'

At the BLM state office, Bennett said his agency would like to "take it slow and easy. We are trying to do that to the extent we can." But he said the bureau is under "a lot of national pressure, from industry and from Congress. The demand for gas is a real issue to people."

Pinedale is an especially profitable place to address that demand. With more gas extracted from a smaller footprint than anywhere else on federal land in the West, it produced an estimated \$4 billion worth of gas last year.

In the Pinedale BLM office, as in agency offices across the West, monitoring and research on the impact of drilling on wildlife are almost never done by staff biologists, according to Roger L. Bankert, associate field manager for lands and minerals.

"This is an energy office, and our biologists don't have time to do the monitoring," Bankert said. He said it is "done by private consultants who are hired by the energy companies," with BLM approval.

Under a federal law intended to enlist the local community in the planning of oil and gas development, the Interior Department has named an advisory group to study and make recommendations about the impact of drilling here. The chairman of the group, Linda Baker, says she is alarmed by what she describes as the BLM's refusal to listen to her group's advice or adapt its management to findings that drilling is harming wildlife.

"We are seeing the handing over of a multiple-use valley to the energy industry," Baker said. "This is a disaster in the making."

'Approving plans ad hoc'

Rather than slowing down to assess wildlife impact and to allow energy companies to catch up to drilling permits already issued, as recommended by Baker's group, state officials and several national environmental organizations, the BLM appears to be stepping on the accelerator. It has just released a proposal that recommends granting permits for drilling 3,100 more wells in nearby Jonah Field -- a sixfold increase over the number of current wells.

Federal management of drilling here has angered a former senior energy executive who lives near Pinedale.

"There is no well-thought-out, overall development plan for this field," said Kirby L. Hedrick, a former vice president at Phillips Petroleum Co. in charge of worldwide exploration and now a member of the board of directors of Noble Energy Inc. in Houston. "The BLM has been approving plans ad hoc."