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Wildlife in peril?

By Jeff Gearino

GREEN RIVER -- Every new gas or oil well drilled in Wyoming costs time and money for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

That's chiefly because a lot of the state's wildlife, many of the sensitive species such as sage grouse, and acres of important wildlife habitat are located in areas already undergoing or slated for intense energy development.

"We've already seen an awful lot of development ... and much more is coming," warned Game and Fish Deputy Director Bill Wichers. "We've got to come up with additional resources to deal with all this."

With the energy boom in full force in Wyoming, the state is set to receive billions of dollars in revenues from natural gas, coal and oil production over the next few decades, according to industry estimates.

Game and Fish officials say it would be a good idea for the state invest some of that new-found revenue in the department, if residents want their grandchildren to enjoy Wyoming's wildlife.

With that in mind, the Game and Fish Commission decided last week to support the department's pursuit of additional funding and personnel to address the increasing needs for department involvement in energy development.

The department is going to need plenty of financial and manpower help over the next 25 years if the state is going to maintain its current level of wildlife, agency officials told commissioners during a meeting in Casper.

Significant portions of the state's "key" wildlife habitat lie within areas slated for or undergoing intense natural gas development, particularly in western Wyoming in such fields as the Jonah and Pinedale Anticline.

"As development increases, our need to plan mitigation and reclamation efforts increases," said Vern Stelter, coordinator for the Game and Fish Department's habitat protection section.

"We expect a huge workload increase over the next 20 years ... As development increases, the need will become much more intense as time goes by," he told commissioners. "We expect that effect to ripple through essentially every facet of our department."

Lots of development

Stelter said the department is dedicating more of its current personnel time to addressing the effects of energy development on fish and wildlife. Agency money, he said, is increasingly being applied to areas "other than our existing duties."

He said the extensive level of expected energy development in Wyoming will require funding for the hiring of more Game and Fish workers to address the necessary agency involvement in planning, monitoring, mitigating and reclaiming the energy developments.

The Game and Fish Department is funded mostly through license sales, but also with grants and interest from trust funds. It is one of the few state agencies that traditionally does not receive any money from the state's General Fund.

Stelter said the department expects a decrease in the agency's primary income source -- hunting and fishing licenses -- as a result of decreases in fish and wildlife populations in heavy energy development areas.

"This decrease will be significantly greater in the absence of a meaningful (agency) response and involvement in future energy developments," he said.

Game and Fish directors emphasize, however, that energy development and the state's wildlife can coexist.

"We don't have to say we can have energy development in Wyoming or we can wildlife in Wyoming ... I think we can have both," Director Terry Cleveland said.

"We're not opposed to development, and it can be done taking wildlife into consideration," he said. "With legislative attention, I think we can address all these issues."

Commissioners agreed that funding increases for department efforts will be critical for the future of the state's wildlife.

They noted EnCana Oil and Gas Inc.'s \$24 million donation to the state to help deal with impacts associated with the development of the huge Jonah gas field located in southwest Wyoming near Pinedale. Part of that money will be used to fund a Game and Fish habitat position.

"The state (coffers) are going to get an awful of money from energy ... and these are energy-related costs," said Commissioner Clark Allan. "We need to tie those things together whenever we can."

Commissioner Bill Williams said the department will have to get funding from both the energy industry and the Legislature to stay ahead of the curve.

"We're trying to stop a freight train here, and we need a little help," he said.

Wichers said department officials will meet with members of the Legislature's Joint Travel, Recreation, Wildlife and Cultural Resources Interim Committee Monday and Tuesday in Cody to discuss department budget needs and possible future funding sources.