



June 19, 2006

Pronghorn affected more by habitat fragmentation, study says

By Whitney Royster

JACKSON -- Pronghorn are less affected by activity on gas fields than on the intense fragmentation of habitat caused by development, according to a first-year study on the animals.

Scientists from the Wildlife Conservation Society released results of the first year of a five-year study on pronghorn in the Upper Green River area. They say pronghorn using habitat near gas wells are as healthy as animals not near wells, but the growing array of roads, wells and human infrastructure is affecting the way pronghorn use habitat.

"Pronghorn habituate to human presence when not hunted or harassed, but the continued fracturing of previously undisturbed lands is leading to reduced use and abandoned small parcels," the study said.

The study, conducted by Drs. Joel Berger, Jon Beckmann and Kim Murray Berger, is a \$1.8 million project by Shell Exploration and Production Company, Ultra Resources, Inc., Anschutz Petroleum and the WCS.

The point is to determine how energy development in the Upper Green affects pronghorn. It is hoped the study will help land managers and energy companies better manage for wildlife in the Rockies.

The study aims to record first-year baseline data, and results may change as the study continues.

Berger said one of the most valuable parts of the study will be determining the point at which pronghorn abandon habitat because the land is too fragmented.

Shell employee Deena McMullen said energy development does not appear to affect the health of animals, and pronghorn appear to be able to coexist with development. She also agreed habitat fragmentation appears to be important, although it is still early in the study.

"We believe our long-term management proposal for the Anticline allows for cooperative arrangements that minimize surface fragmentation by using multi-well pads in concentrated development areas, thereby leaving large contiguous blocks of land available for wildlife use," she said.

The study also noted that none of the pronghorn collared by the study team -- a total of 50 females -- used the increasingly developed Jonah Field.

Leigh Work, associate conservationist with WCS, said there are pronghorn in that field, but on the day the animals were captured for the study there were not significant groups in Jonah to capture. This year's study does include animals from Jonah, she said.

The study also said body mass of animals captured in and around gas fields did not differ from those captured away from development.

The study will also examine how the indirect human impact from the gas boom, including new homes, roads, fences and dogs affects pronghorn movement.

Since 1999, there has been a 36 percent increase in the total amount of roads on the Mesa, and a 100 percent increase in Jonah, according to the study.

Since 1999, there has been a 108 percent increase in number of pads on the Mesa, and an 89 percent increase in the Jonah field, the study said. Those numbers will rise in the coming years, and land managers recently approved a large-scale increase in development there.