



## **Are we losing the home place?**

WALT GASSON

Perspective

I wanted to be able to get behind the new alternative being proposed for natural gas drilling on the Pinedale Anticline. I have friends who worked hard to try to craft this alternative. They all got together for months and months of meetings. They even tried to think outside the box. I appreciate that.

But in the end what I see here, despite weeks of media hype and what must have been a jillion dollars in public relations spending, is more of the same. The Bureau of Land Management continues to pursue its development at-all-costs policy for natural gas development in Wyoming. If you're not familiar with the Anticline, what we have here is the collision of world-class wildlife resources and world-class natural gas. In the year 2008, after all we've done to work together, you'd think we could reconcile these two great but conflicting blessings. Unfortunately, BLM has chosen a new alternative proposal that falls far short of its claim of being balanced.

We have an abundance of peer-reviewed scientific information from which to base management decisions. The gas companies themselves have funded much of this research, and that's a good thing. They're very particular about how those results are stated, so let me be very particular: In a bad winter, deer on the Anticline die at a rate higher than those on undeveloped winter ranges. Obviously this directly impacts hunting opportunities. Will more deer die when the core of the Anticline is drilled all winter long? Wildlife professionals, including those at the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, agree that drilling on big game winter range stress mule deer and pronghorn populations during the time of the year when they are most vulnerable.

Over the past nine years of research we have also learned that greater sage grouse are very sensitive to energy development activities -- they move away from gas fields and have lower survival rates. Research indicates there should be no more than one well pad per section within two miles of a sage grouse lek and winter concentration areas should be off-limits to drilling. Recently, biologists from Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, North Dakota and Utah produced a 10-page report stating more proactive measures are needed to protect sage grouse from the effects of oil and gas development. However, even with all the data available, the preferred alternative still only provides a quarter-mile buffer for leks and eliminates existing protective seasonal stipulations in the core of the

Anticline.

What gets lost in the countless full-page ads in Wyoming's newspapers and radio commercials are the long-term cumulative impacts these management decisions will have on our crucial big game winter range and sage grouse habitats. To people unfamiliar with Wyoming's landscape and wildlife it may look empty, an area that can be developed without much thought to the future. But to us, the sportsmen and women of Wyoming, the open country and the wildlife it supports is a rich part of our culture -- it is our day-to-day life, weekends away, our family vacations, our opportunity for quiet solitude and reflection. We can have energy development while conserving and sustaining our open spaces and wildlife; but the approach currently endorsed by the BLM on the Pinedale Anticline does not adequately protect our wildlife resources. Instead, it assures energy extraction at the expense of our natural heritage, our customs and culture.

As a lifelong resident of the great state of Wyoming, I have a half-century of history with energy development and the BLM. My family has ridden the waves of boom-and-bust cycles for four generations. Yet, we find ourselves in a place we've never been before, given the pace and scope of development across our landscape.

My great-grandfather came to the Green River country and established our "home place" well over a century ago. The high desert country that generations of our family has known and loved still retains our hopes and dreams. It is the legacy we will leave for future generations. I'm concerned about that legacy. How will we explain what we did to the Anticline and other important areas of Wyoming to our grandchildren? I don't expect us to stop drilling for gas, especially here. I do think we ought to slow down and think about this a bit, and I suspect I'm not alone in that. I ask that Wyoming residents get engaged in energy development conversations, so that we can collectively decide about what we want to have happen on our "home place."

*Walt Gasson is executive director of the Wyoming Wildlife Federation, Wyoming's oldest and largest sportsmen's conservation group.*