

reprinted by permission Casper Star Tribune 10/4/02

Group: Wildlife route in danger

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JACKSON — Possible, and ongoing, oil and gas exploration and development in the Upper Green River Basin in southwest Wyoming is impacting a key wildlife migration corridor near Pinedale, a conservation group says.

Officials with The Wilderness Society's Bozeman office contend the cumulative effects from a decade of drilling activities in the South Jonah Field (also known as Jonah II) in Sublette and Sweetwater counties and from a 3-D seismic mapping project proposed for the Upper Green Basin is negatively impacting a natural antelope migration "bottleneck" between two river drainages in the basin.

The Bureau of Land Management should consider a moratorium on all new oil and gas leases until it finishes its revisions of a 14-year-old land-use plan in the Pinedale area to protect those migrating big game animals, said Peter Aengst with The Wilderness Society.

He said the conservation group is also worried that the more extensive drilling alternative recently put forth by Bridger-Teton National Forest officials for the Hoback Basin area near Bonduant could also add to those impacts to big game migration.

"The cumulative effects of all these projects, planned or under way, is hindering one of the most important wildlife corridors and winter range in the Greater Yellowstone Area," Aengst said on a recent overflight of the basin.

"If we destroy this corridor and winter range, there will be broad implications for migrating antelope and mule deer," Aengst said.

BLM officials said they are sensitive to the wildlife migration concerns, but believe the mandatory mitigation measures in effect through the agency's current land-use plan is more than adequate to protect wildlife and crucial winter range.

They note that oil and gas development in the Upper Green River Basin has been addressed in several field or development-specific Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) and that development in areas like the South Jonah Field, also known as Jonah II, has not exceeded the reasonable foreseeable development scenario for oil and gas development.

The Trapper's Point bottleneck is well-documented by Wyoming Game and Fish Department biologists.

Twice a year, several thousand deer and antelope migrate through the small, sagebrush corridor on a low ridge between the riparian areas of the Green River and New Fork River.

State, federal and University of Wyoming researchers say some of the Sublette antelope herd moves from summer ranges in Grand Teton National Park through Trapper's Point to winter

Please see ROUTE, C2

Continued from C1

ranges south of Pinedale.

State archeologists have documented a 6,000-year-old antelope kill site in the bottleneck and archeological records suggest deer and antelope have been migrating through the corridor for thousands of years.

The natural bottleneck's crucial winter range has been further restricted in recent years by subdivision development, highway and county roads, and new fence construction. Development has narrowed the bottleneck to approximately a half-mile in width.

Game and Fish movement data collected from radio-collared animals suggest at least 2,000 mule deer and 1,000 to 1,500 antelope migrate through the bottleneck each spring.

Aengst said recent land-use decisions and practices are fragmenting and further restricting the existing migration routes through the bottleneck.

He points to the extensive, high-density drilling over the past eight years in the South Jonah Field and the recent approval by the BLM of a 3-D seismic-mapping project near Merna as threats to migrating wildlife.

Aengst said the Bridger-Teton National Forest's ongoing EIS that is looking at managing oil and gas development in the BTNF's Hoback Basin, Moccasin Basin, Union Pass and Upper Green River management areas could also impact animals migrating out of the Gros Ventre mountain range.

Federal officials last week approved the controversial Merna 3-D seismic-mapping project that will cover approximately 265 square miles in Sublette County. That decision comes on the heels of another 3-D seismic-mapping project approved earlier this summer on 410 square miles south of the Jonah Field.

And Bridger-Teton officials announced last month they are considering a more extensive drilling alternative for the Hoback Basin near Durand.

In 2000, the BTNF issued a draft EIS that examined petroleum development in the four management areas.

The agency's preferred alternative outlined in the document proposed to make the four management areas unavailable for oil and gas leasing on approximately 370,000 acres of largely roadless, undeveloped acreage.

The new alternative relates to 72,400 acres just south of the Gros Ventre Wilderness and would allow up to 87 oil and natural gas wells, with 914 acres of disturbance from well pads and pipeline construction. The proposal would also allow pads in roadless areas of the Hoback Basin, the area considered to have the highest potential for oil and gas reserves.

"There's really two aspects in terms of conflict that we're concerned about ... the gross loss of winter range from all these projects and the specific, narrow corridors that antelope and mule deer need to use to get to that crucial winter range," Aengst said.

"This is the largest big game migration route in the lower U.S. and those animals move from 100 to 250 miles from Yellowstone and Grand Teton parks," he said. "It would be a disaster if those migration routes are lost."

Delay leasing

About 80 percent of the area around Trap-
per's Point contains active leases or leases that

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KEITH ANDREWS, BLM WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST

are held in production, Aengst said.

He said the BLM should not approve any more oil and gas exploration projects until the agency finishes its revisions to the Pinedale Resource Management Plan (RMP).

The agency announced in February it was beginning a multi-year effort to modify the RMP. The finished document will guide the direction of land use within the BLM's 930,000-acre Pinedale District.

"The revised plan is the big potato ... the development in this area over the next 10 or 15 years is really going to be in this land-use plan," he said.

BLM wildlife biologist Keith Andrews with the agency's Pinedale Field Office said the BLM is "just as much respectful of the values of the wildlife resources up there as any other group ... we're not insensitive to the problem."

He noted the South Jonah project and the Merna project are separated by about 15 miles and neither project is actually located in the bottleneck, though the Merna project comes within a mile or two.

BLM natural resources specialist Bill Lanning said concerns about the bottleneck are "valid," but the agency believes those concerns were addressed in the mitigation measures outlined in the Decision of Record document approving the Merna project.

Under the Pinedale RMP, the project area is protected by No Surface Occupancy and No Surface Disturbance from Nov. 15 through April 30.

"If (the company) is not off of crucial mule deer winter range (by Nov. 15) ... they will have to discontinue the project," Lanning said.

The BLM acknowledges in the Decision Record approving the Merna project that the proposed geophysical activity would coincide with some mule deer, antelope and possibly elk migration in portions of the project area.

"The Merna Project will likely cause some animals to divert their path to avoid the geophysical operations," the document said.

However, "due to the narrow area of active geophysical operations at a given time, the transient nature of the geophysical operations and the broad width of the migration corridor, animal divergence is not expected to be consequential ... the project is not expected to adversely affect the big game migration," according to the Decision Record.

Lanning said the agency is operating under the Pinedale RMP approved in 1988 until the revised RMP is issued, perhaps as early as next year. He said the agency looks at the "merits" of individual projects before issuing any decision.