

Drilling restrictions crucial this winter

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GREEN RIVER — Prolonged drought and poor habitat conditions on crucial winter range near Pinedale make the implementation of seasonal drilling restrictions extremely important this year, Wyoming Game and Fish Department officials say.

Under the Bureau of Land Management's Pinedale Resource Management Plan, restrictions are in place to safeguard elk, mule deer, antelope and moose in crucial winter range on some parts of the Pinedale Anticline from Nov. 15 through April 30.

Each year, however, the BLM receives numerous requests from energy development companies seeking exceptions to big game

crucial winter range restrictions. The BLM's environmental documents outlining oil and gas development in the Pinedale Anticline authorizes the exception request process under its mitigation guidelines.

But Wyoming Game and Fish officials have voiced concerns to both Pinedale Field Office and state BLM officials about granting too many winter drilling exceptions this year.

Game and Fish biologists said the seasonal restrictions are very important for big game animals on winter range. The department is recommending that wildlife stipulations affecting big game winter range be implemented by the BLM whenever possible.

"We did tell the BLM in advance this year that we weren't going to

be considering exceptions this year," Game and Fish Pinedale/Jackson Regional Wildlife Supervisor Bernie Holz said.

"We've maintained all along that if the BLM needs to make a decision because of safety concerns, or other reasons, in the short-term, then go ahead," he said.

"But we also told the BLM that because of the poor condition of critical winter ranges in general, we weren't going to recommend going ahead with exceptions on any of the long-term stuff," Holz said in a phone interview.

Game and Fish Deputy Director of External Operations Bill Wichers wrote to BLM State Director Bob Bennett in early September to alert the BLM of the department's concerns about poor conditions on big

game winter ranges.

Wichers said drought conditions over the past few years have dramatically affected forage production in the area.

In some areas, department biologists are reporting significant mortality in important shrub communities, particularly sagebrush, which is the primary winter diet for many mule deer and pronghorn antelope, he wrote.

Wichers said wildlife wintering under poor shrub conditions will be highly susceptible to stress and higher winter mortality of big game can be expected.

"Situations such as these are what make winter range seasonal restrictions (as supported by BLM Resource Management Plans) of

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paramount importance," Wichers's letter said.

"Activities creating disturbances on crucial winter range this winter could have catastrophic results on big game," he said.

"In the past (pre-drought), the great majority of these exceptions were granted by the BLM with the concurrence of our field biologists," Wichers wrote.

"However ... it is unlikely that our field biologists will concur with exception requests because of the shrub conditions on the winter ranges, the condition of wildlife going into the winter and the very high risk of disturbance-related stress to wildlife that are already under drought-related stress," he said.

"By working cooperatively, we can avoid unnecessarily contributing to an already bad situation for wildlife."

Keith Andrews with the BLM's Pinedale Field Office said the agency takes

into account the comments of the Game and Fish when deciding about exception requests.

He noted the BLM and the Game and Fish are involved in a multi-year, comprehensive study of the effects of oil and gas development on wintering deer within crucial winter range in the Anticline.

As part of the study, the BLM last week approved Questar Exploration and Production Inc. proposed Stewart Point well that would be drilled from one pad during the winter season.

The company was also granted permission for a winter-long drilling project during the winter of 2002-03 as part of the study, which is examining the potential impacts of winter-long drilling on deer herds.

Andrews said data collected for the study from last year's Stewart Point well indicates that habitat is continuing to be used by mule deer during drilling.

"We saw deer distribution present ... some deer came within a quarter-mile of the (Stewart Point) well and in some cases came even closer," he said.

"We're not drawing any definitive conclusions yet ... but overall (deer) are not being put off by the level of activity out there," Andrews said. "(They're) having very little impact when you consider the extent of the winter range that's out there. The effective forage is reduced, but we're just not having an adverse impact (on mule deer) from all indications."