

# Firms seek to extend drilling

Game migration  
corridors at risk,  
groups say

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Federal land managers continue to grant most requests to extend exploration activities in areas vital to big game beyond the Nov. 15 winter deadline, and some big game advocates say the practice threatens key migration corridors.

The Bureau of Land Management has approved 31 out of 39 requests submitted by energy companies working within the Pinedale Resource Area in southwest Wyoming for exceptions to big game crucial winter range restrictions, according to federal officials.

Crucial winter range restrictions went into effect Nov. 15 and BLM officials said applications for exceptions continue to be submitted.

Under the BLM's Pinedale Resource Management Plan (RMP), restrictions are in place for elk, mule deer, antelope and moose in crucial winter range on some parts of the Pinedale Anticline from Nov. 15 through April 30. The plan, however, authorizes the exception request process under its mitigation guidelines.

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# DRILLING

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BLM officials said many of the exceptions granted by the BLM will allow energy producers operating on crucial winter range a few extra days to complete the removal of their drilling equipment at the end of the season.

BLM officials noted the agency denied two requests from energy producers who sought longer, several week-long exceptions to drill on crucial winter range.

But conservationists contend the agency continues to grant far too many exceptions on crucial winter range near Pinedale. They say the exceptions threaten key migration corridors for mule deer and pronghorn antelope.

Conservationists also contend the agency is not committed to protecting wildlife on the winter range, particularly on the Mesa within the Pinedale Anticline, because they are not following their own rules.

The approximately 197,345 acre Pinedale Anticline stretches from just northwest of Pinedale for about 30 miles to the southeast. The Mesa area is crucial habitat for many important big game populations, including the 50,000-plus Sublette antelope herd.

A number of natural gas operators were given permission under the Pinedale Anticline Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to drill over 900 new wells, to achieve 700 producing wells over the next decade.

"All this is happening at such a fast pace that we are at risk of losing one of America's world-class wildlife habitats for thousands of pronghorn antelope and mule deer," she said.

Peter Aengst of The Wilderness Society agreed. "The rules the BLM has put into place to protect winter wildlife appear to be merely hollow words," Aengst said.

"Of the 311 requests ... the BLM denied only one, thus demonstrating the chokehold the oil and gas industry has over the Wyoming BLM."

But Keith Andrews with the BLM's Pinedale Field Office said the agency gives serious consideration to each individual exception request while at the same time recognizing the nation's demands for energy and the corresponding needs of winter habitat for wildlife.

Andrews said out of the current 39 requests received thus far this season, 31 were granted, two were denied and six are pending decision.

He noted that most of the exception requests received are for five days or fewer and should not cause adverse impacts to wintering big game animals.

"There was a big problem with (energy producers) getting equipment moved off the Mesa because everybody was finishing up at once and they had trouble just getting trucks," Andrews said in a phone interview.

A coalition of environmental groups noted in a joint release that the BLM Pinedale Field Office recently granted 286 out of 311 requests for exceptions during the winter/spring of 2002-03.

The exceptions were for sage grouse habitat closures during sage grouse strutting season (March 1 to May 15) and sage grouse nesting season (April 1 to July 31).

The groups include the Wyoming Outdoor Council, the Upper Green River Valley Coalition, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, The Wilderness Society and the Wyoming Wildlife Federation.

"Only one of these 311 requests were denied," said Meredith Taylor, WOC's Yellowstone program director. Of the rest, four requests were withdrawn, 16 were not required and four are pending.

She said the BLM's own figures show that more than 93 percent of the industry's requests for exceptions for operating during the wildlife lease stipulations were approved by the BLM.

"The increasing number of requests and the high percentage of exceptions to the wildlife stipulations granted makes a mockery of the whole public process and the decision to manage the land and resources for multiple use," Taylor said.

"There's a lot of factors that go into these (decisions)," he said. "We have to look at each individual request to see what they want to do. We look at it case-by-case."

With each request, Andrews said the agency tried to determine what other oil and gas activity is happening in the area, what other habitat fragmentation is occurring, the condition of the habitat where deer and antelope are located and how many deer are in the area.

He noted the agency denied two requests by companies seeking to drill on crucial winter range for several more weeks.

"For example, there was one request (by one producer) who wanted to go longer and complete some wells on these locations, but we only allowed them to rig-down with no well completion," he said.

"So they've got these three wells sitting up there that the company has got millions of dollars tied up in and they've got no production," Andrews said.

"You can't really say we're bound to the (oil and gas) industry because that's costing them a bunch of money," he said. "If we weren't concerned about adverse impacts ... then you would see a lot more rig activity up there through the winter."