

# CASPER STAR-TRIBUNE

July 14, 2005

## Study: Drilling displaces grouse

By WHITNEY ROYSTER  
Star-Tribune environmental reporter

PINEDALE -- The effect of oil and gas development on imperiled sage grouse is a big question in the Upper Green River area, and a "bigger picture" of populations is needed to make adequate protection recommendations, members of a working group said Wednesday.

A Pinedale Anticline Working Group dedicated to sage grouse wrestled with the impacts to grouse, saying in part that research was lacking both in specific areas and from a broader, basinwide, perspective.

Steve Belinda, biologist with the Bureau of Land Management, said people looking to limit harm to sage grouse may be "spinning their wheels," as no one really knows what is happening to the overall grouse population.

"We don't have a coordinated effort in Upper Green or Wyoming for that matter," Belinda said.

With heavy development facing the Upper Green, and much of that surrounding leks, or grouse breeding sites, more active mitigation measures may be needed to stay ahead of declining sage grouse numbers, some say.

Dean Clause, wildlife biologist with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, said road management to steer traffic away from leks might be a way to mitigate impacts.

Questar representative Ron Hogan said his company had tried to get the BLM to allow building of some roads to avoid use on others, but has been unsuccessful.

The group suggested approaching BLM again about this road planning.

Despite lack of long-term data, Clause said, "Sometimes you have to make decisions with what you've got."

The working group's meeting came a day after University Wyoming doctoral candidate Matt Holloran presented his research, which is among the most exhaustive on sage grouse in the area.

Holloran said it is clear development in the Pinedale Anticline is causing a decrease in productivity on sage grouse in the immediate area. Birds are not breeding in leks near development, he said, but whether those birds are not breeding at all or are relocating to other areas is not clear.

"The numbers themselves don't mean anything," Holloran said. "It's the trend line that means something, and what we're showing is we do appear to have a distance effect. The closer to a disturbance source, the more disturbance to males in a negative direction. So it appears those leks are not being used."

Holloran said there is some indication some of the birds are moving, because overall populations in the area are not plummeting.

But, Holloran's research is in a specific area near the Mesa, and focuses exclusively on the impacts related to drilling. Effects of drought, or whether more predators are coming to drilling areas, or other possible effects are not clear, he said.

Rollin Sparrowe, working group member, said one possibility is to restrict human access to lek areas during breeding times -- generally from March to April. He also suggested using topography to keep drilling rigs "out of sight" of leks that might help breeding.

Belinda suggested specific recommendations might surround what to do if leks appear to be severely impacted, moderately impacted or not impacted, but what numbers would correspond with those levels is difficult to surmise.

Holloran said his research started in 1998, when development had already begun. He said without a strong baseline data, it is difficult to see the birds' population trend.

Dan Lamoreaux, a working group board member representing sportsmen, questioned whether drilling was the only impact.

"If we're trying to solve the problem of displacement, and our approach is strictly oil-field-related, then maybe we're not addressing the real problem," he said.

Clause said the question is what kind of displacement and impacts people are willing to endure before mitigation measures should be enacted.

He also said sage grouse are loyal to historic breeding areas, so if there is displacement of grouse on the Mesa, "there's a chance we won't get grouse back on the Mesa."

"We need to maintain viable populations in areas we know there is going to be some disturbance," he said. "We have little or no information displaced animals will be successful somewhere else."

Belinda said survivability goes down when birds are displaced, according to existing studies.

Sparrowe said it is likely there would be leks in other areas now if the habitat were suitable.