

Casper Star Tribune

November 26, 2005

Poaching in the oil patch

By *JEFF GEARINO*

Southwest Wyoming bureau

GREEN RIVER -- Canadian Ivan "Rooster" Gross says he has no plans to ever return to southwest Wyoming to work in the booming oil and gas fields.

That's good news for Wyoming's wildlife.

Gross recently told Wyoming Game and Fish Department officials -- during a telephone interview from his home in Manitoba -- that he killed one buck mule deer and a buck antelope last October while working for a contract drilling operation at a coal-bed methane well southwest of Rock Springs.

The self-admitted poacher also remembered driving over and killing four sage grouse.

The incidents occurred in a company truck, during work hours, on the way to the drilling rig site and in close proximity to well pads, Gross told game wardens.

He said employees also used a backhoe to dig a hole to bury a whole fawn antelope carcass that was either shot or deliberately run down with a vehicle.

Gross -- who was working as a driller for El Paso Corp. contractor Ensign US Drilling Inc. at the time -- said he skinned and butchered the antelope and deer carcasses at the rig site. The meat was cooked at the site and eaten by Gross and coworkers in the crew trailer.

The Gross case is one of several major poaching incidents uncovered by Game and Fish over the past year in the gas-rich energy fields in southwest Wyoming.

In February, two men were convicted -- and another is being sought -- for poaching an antelope and a mule deer at a drilling rig near Baggs and then storing the meat in a freezer at the work site. In a third incident, a Colorado man who identified himself as an energy drill site worker was also investigated for poaching a four-point buck mule deer north of Baggs.

Wildlife and oil and gas industry officials said they hope the poaching cases are isolated incidents, but they also worry it may become a growing problem in southwest Wyoming's oil and gas fields.

With that in mind, Petroleum Association of Wyoming officials approached Game and Fish this week to schedule a meeting Tuesday to discuss ways to minimize poaching incidents at drilling sites, Game and Fish Wildlife Division Chief Jay Lawson said.

"I think where we're coming from is that we don't want this to become a real big problem, (precisely) because there is so much energy development going on and there are so many

people out on these winter ranges in these remote areas where wildlife is," Lawson said in a phone interview.

"We don't necessarily think (poaching) has grown too big or out of proportion, but we don't want it to get there," he said.

Lawson said the agency believes the remedy is to work with oil and gas industry people in charge of drilling operations.

"The key to deterring a lot of this is to get with these folks in the industry (and) look at prohibitions against carrying firearms and taking dogs onto drilling pads and wells and bringing stuff like that onto these work sites ... so you don't even get into these situations in the first place," he said.

According to El Paso Corp. spokesman Donnie Trimble, company policy strictly prohibits firearms on any location by El Paso. He said in a statement that the policy applies to employees of all subcontractors associated with drilling operations.

Rig-hand culture

Rock Springs Game Warden David Hays said there is an increasing amount of drilling going on in southwest Wyoming, and the three cases are the only ones the agency's knows about thus far.

He said oil and gas workers have a lot of time on their hands during the rigging-down process and work in areas that are often abundant with big game animals and other wildlife.

"These incidents are occurring in remote places, within a work culture of rig workers who will not talk about any illegal activities going on," Hays said in a release. "(We) hope that when people find their highly valued wildlife is being poached, they will get more involved and report poachers."

He noted poaching incidents such as those Gross admitted to are often complex and difficult to determine. He said the Gross case would have gone unnoticed had Hays not been contacted by an anonymous caller.

"This was no easy investigation," he said.

"There were multiple big game animals and game birds, numerous suspects and no one at the drilling location willing to come forward with any information to explain how they got there," Hays said. "A search of the drilling site and surrounding area revealed one buck mule deer head and four buck antelope heads, one buried fawn antelope and three sage grouse carcasses."

Petroleum Association of Wyoming President Bruce Hinchey said most oil and gas workers are responsible and don't poach animals. He noted the most recent incidents mostly involved employees from out of state who were working for contractors in the fields.

"That's one of the reasons why we talked to the Game and Fish about this ... to see if they can put together some sort of seminar or something so that they can come in and talk (with workers) about stopping poaching, how to go about that and their 'Stop Poaching' hotlines," Hinchey said in a phone interview.

Hays said after being confronted with possible penalties and after consulting with his attorney, Gross indicated he has no plans on ever returning to the United States to work or face the charges pending against him.

Others involved in the poaching weren't so lucky. Some fines ran as high as \$8,000, and \$10,000 for restitution was ordered in one case. Gross, if convicted, faces fines and restitution approaching \$30,000.

"We're talking fines, jail sentences and workers could lose their hunting privileges ... This is serious," Hinchey said. "So if anyone looks at those aspects of it, and most people don't want that to happen to them, then hopefully that will also help stop it."