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## Male grouse avoid drilling sites, researcher says

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CHEYENNE -- Sage grouse appear to avoid traditional breeding grounds the closer they are to oil and gas activity, new research shows.

A study conducted by University of Wyoming doctoral student Matthew Holloran found declines in breeding males at leks within 3.1 miles of drilling rigs in the Pinedale Anticline and Jonah natural gas fields in western Wyoming. Leks are courting grounds where males compete for females.

In addition, he said the effects on grouse behavior and populations continued even after oil and gas activity ended.

Holloran, who has since graduated and could not be reached for comment Thursday, studied a roughly 420-square-mile area in the upper Green River Basin near Pinedale in western Wyoming.

In his report, he concluded that the Bureau of Land Management's restrictions on drilling activity in the vicinity of sage grouse leks aren't sufficient to protect the birds.

Conservationists who participated in a conference call with media on Thursday agreed with that assessment, but they stressed they were not seeking to stop oil and gas development in the West.

Linda Baker, community organizer with the Upper Green River Valley Coalition, said sage grouse and other wildlife need refuge from development, noting that 7,000 to 10,000 more wells may be drilled in western Wyoming.

"We can have both energy development here, and we can have healthy populations of wildlife," Baker said.

Erik Molvar, a wildlife biologist with the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance in Laramie, and others advocated that the BLM require companies use directional drilling, where one well can do the work of multiple conventional wells by drilling at an angle. However, directional drilling is more expensive.

Molvar argued that any additional cost is minuscule given the value of the natural gas that can be produced.

Tom Christiansen, sage grouse program coordinator for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, was out of the office until Monday and unavailable for comment.