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Game and Fish takes a stand

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JACKSON -- The Wyoming Game and Fish Department in the past has approved of some natural gas drilling during the winter in crucial big game winter range around Pinedale.

Not this year.

The department is asking that no new winter drilling exceptions be granted to energy companies this winter, after surveys of shrub and forage growth in the area determined the past growing season has been "abysmal."

"We wanted to give them (the Bureau of Land Management) a heads up that winter range conditions are extremely poor, and when they ask for our recommendation to approve or deny an exception, our recommendation will be to deny it," said Bernie Holz, wildlife supervisor for Game and Fish's Jackson and Pinedale regions.

That recommendation comes at a time when more requests are coming in to the BLM -- the agency authorizing drilling on most of western Wyoming's public lands -- to conduct business during winter. Typically, winter drilling is not allowed after Nov. 15 to protect wildlife during the difficult season. But energy companies have repeatedly said winter drilling will allow them to "get in and get out" more quickly, and Game and Fish has largely been on board with that idea.

But now, forage conditions are so poor -- due in large part to drought -- that the wildlife agency is taking a stand.

According to Game and Fish, biologists measure "leader growth," which is the new growth on shrubs from the current growing season that browsing animals including mule deer and pronghorn eat during winter.

Average leader production on sagebrush was only 0.3 of an inch, compared with 1.07 inches the past couple of years. The sagebrush data from the Pinedale Mesa showed even less at 0.12 of an inch, according to Game and Fish.

The mountain mahogany production averaged 0.85 of an inch this year, compared with 3.94 inches the past couple of years. Bitterbrush averaged 2.55 inches of leader growth this year, compared with 7.18 inches the past couple of years.

Some winter drilling already has been approved on the Pinedale Anticline, and those operations will continue. The BLM is working on a draft environmental study to expand winter drilling, which is expected in the next few months. That expanded operation would begin next winter.

Paul Matheny with Questar Corp., one of the main players on the Anticline, said his company is trying to finish operations during the next two weeks before winter closures begin Nov. 15.

He said each year there can be a handful of requests for exceptions to finish certain operations, and the BLM looks at them on an individual basis to see if the deer have moved in, how big of a bind operators are in, and other considerations.

"From Questar's position, since we got our permanent winter drilling arrangement, we don't plan to do other operations over the winter," Matheny said. Questar has three wells in operation during the winter, and Ultra Resources has one.

Cindy Wertz with the BLM in Cheyenne said her agency received the recommendation from Game and Fish, and the BLM will consider overall impacts to wildlife when considering winter drilling exceptions.

Wertz said Game and Fish still supports winter drilling measures including those granted to Questar and Ultra, and they "continue to support our efforts in this."

In a letter to BLM Pinedale Field Manager Dennis Stegner, Gregg Arthur, Game and Fish deputy director, said because of poor forage growth, "(W)e can anticipate elevated winter mortality, even if climatic conditions are mild. If the winter is severe, significant population reductions from stress and starvation could result."

"Significant disturbance activities on big game crucial winter ranges this year could have catastrophic results on at least a local basis (e.g., the Mesa), if not greater," Arthur wrote in the Oct. 24 letter. "Every winter, there are numerous requests for exceptions to BLM winter range seasonal stipulations. In recent years, many of these requests for exceptions have been granted by the BLM with the concurrence of our field biologists. However, this year our field biologists will probably not concur with exception requests if there is an increased risk to animals already under stress."

Lara Azar, spokeswoman for Gov. Dave Freudenthal, said the governor "will take everyone's opinion into account as he continues to consider these sorts of proposals on a case-by-case basis," and noted this is one agency's opinion.

Bonnie Foster, spokeswoman for Ray Hunkins, Republican challenger for governor, said the BLM has been a good steward of the land, and it should make decisions.

"We're going to rely on the recommendations of the BLM, because they are out there studying that and researching that every day," she said.