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Report: Drilling squeezes hunters, habitat

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BILLINGS, Mont. -- Loss of wildlife habitat and fewer places for sportsmen to hunt in the West are blamed in a new report on Bush administration energy policies that spurred a boom in oil and gas drilling.

Drilling on federal lands in five Western states doubled over the last decade, to more than 2,000 wells per year, according to the report to be released today by the Environmental Working Group and the National Wildlife Federation.

That so-called "rush to drill" in Wyoming, Utah, Montana, Colorado and New Mexico is squeezing hunters off public land and destroying crucial habitat for species including antelope, mule deer, elk and sage grouse, the report says.

"What we've seen is runaway drilling on many of our public lands that has turned these areas into industrial zones where hunters and wildlife are pushed out," said Dusty Horwitt with the Washington, D.C.-based Environmental Working Group.

A spokeswoman for the Bureau of Land Management, which oversees most drilling in the West, said the boom was a result not of actions by her agency but market forces that have seen demand for oil and gas rise worldwide.

Spokeswoman Celia Boddington said the BLM attempts to balance the nation's energy needs against concerns about development, and conducts lengthy environmental reviews before allowing projects to proceed.

"When we lease land now, it's very, very different from the drilling of wells even a decade ago," Boddington said. "The science is improving, there are best management plans in place, land is reclaimed" after drilling.

The report comes amid growing pressure to rein in drilling on public lands in the West.

The 19-state Western Governors Association recently urged the administration to end automatic waivers of some environmental reviews for oil and gas projects. And over the last two months, Democrats in Congress hosted a series of hearings to highlight the oil and gas industry's negative impacts to the landscape and those who hunt on it.

The environmental groups' report was based on comparisons of state wildlife agency habitat maps with BLM oil and gas lease sales. Their analysis showed the agency has leased 23 million acres of mule deer habitat, 18 million acres of antelope habitat, 17 million acres of sage grouse habitat and 13 million acres of elk habitat.

The report attributes the increase in activity on those leases to an aggressive push by the

Bush administration to give drilling priority over other uses such as hunting. It cites a memo issued by a BLM official in Utah, who wrote, "staff need to understand that when an oil or gas lease parcel ... comes in the door, that this work is their No. 1 priority."

Jason Begger with the Petroleum Association of Wyoming said opponents of drilling who pit industry against wildlife ignore the complexities of the issue. He pointed to a recent meeting hosted by his organization that challenged companies -- and also state and federal regulators -- to find ways to drill with fewer impacts.

"It's very narrow-minded to believe oil and gas development is not going to occur," he said.

In tailoring the report around the issue of hunter access, the environmental groups targeted a constituency normally thought of as friendly to the administration.

Emerging research out of Wyoming and Montana shows two frequently hunted species -- sage grouse and mule deer -- on the decline in areas of intensive oil and gas exploration, including the Powder River Basin in Montana and Wyoming and the Pinedale Anticline in Wyoming.

"George Bush has lowered the bar down to the ground, and you can just step over it," said Chris Marchion, president of the Montana Wildlife Federation.

A BLM official in Wyoming, Steven Hall, said in the case of the Pinedale Anticline, any local mule deer decline appears to have been offset by a statewide increase in the animal's population, as tracked over the last decade by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.