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Feds want more wells even as deer decline

By Cory Hatch

The Bureau of Land Management has proposed a substantial increase in the number of wells on the Pinedale Anticline along with winter drilling in crucial big game habitat, even as the mule deer population has fallen 46 percent in the area.

In a document released this month, the BLM proposed 4,399 new wells on 12,278 acres. According to the supplemental environmental impact statement, “drilling and completions within big game crucial winter habitats would occur in each of three Concentrated Development Areas within a core area centered on the Anticline Crest.”

The wells could eventually access a predicted 40 trillion cubic feet of natural gas under the anticline. Drilling is proposed about 60 miles southeast of Jackson in areas previously off limits in winter to all human presence.

The BLM request comes in tandem with a new mule deer study, focusing on the northern half of the Pinedale Anticline, that shows a 46 percent decline in the mule deer population since drilling began in the area. This year, the herd’s population numbers held steady after four years of decline.

Conservation groups say the decline in mule deer is proof that drilling hurts wildlife. And some of the wildlife comes from Jackson Hole – as far away from the anticline as Snow King Mountain.

“With wildlife, they are proposing something here that would set a precedent across the West. ... a big experiment, year-round, every year,” said Wilderness Society spokesman Peter Aengst. “The Pinedale anticline contains one of the largest and highest density mule deer winter ranges in the state of Wyoming. ... 19 to 30 deer per square kilometer.”

Aengst said that the new proposal for drilling comes along with some mitigation measures that he considers “frankly good things” such as directional drilling and busing employees to and from the sites.

“I call it a big experiment because no one knows until afterwards if it’s a net benefit or a net negative,” he said. “I’m all for directional drilling and some of the other mitigation measures, but I am unconvinced that their benefits are enough to compensate for the impacts of the wholesale removal of seasonal timing restrictions in part of the gas field.”

This year’s mule deer study by biologist Hall Sawyer points out that the 1,300 acres of well pads and roads in the study area are only part of the story when it comes to habitat loss for mule deer.

“The avoidance of areas near well pads created a functional loss of winter range that was substantially larger than the direct habitat losses incurred when native vegetation was

removed during construction of a typical 3-4 well pad,” Sawyer wrote.

As part of the study, Sawyer documented a new mule deer migration route on the Wind River front that is 40 miles in length and is used by roughly 3,500 deer. A temporary moratorium on the leasing of 200,000 acres of Wind River front, Gros Ventre foothills, and Hoback Basin has, so far, protected the migration route.

Further, Sawyer radio-collared one deer and tracked its movements during its migration to and from summer winter range. The deer traveled from the Pindale Anticline, up along the Hoback River, and due north up to the top of Snow King Mountain. During its winter migration, the deer took the same route back to the anticline.

The deer traveled through a number of proposed oil and gas leases, including some areas in the Wyoming Range.

“There’s been so much written and so much is known about the antelope,” Aengst said, referring to pronghorn from Grand Teton National Park that winter in Sublette County. “The same thing is happening with the mule deer. It’s not just antelope that are connected by migration to Jackson Hole, it’s also mule deer.”

Even with this year’s stabilization in the decline of the herd, Aengst said that more drilling and operation of rigs during the winter time will harm wildlife. “To us, the take-home message is that oil and gas development has definitely had an impact on the deer population,” he said. Drought can’t account for the loss of deer. “There’s an additional impact that is happening here that is directly linked to oil and gas.”

Environmental groups also have raised questions about air quality with the proposed plan. While the document suggests that there would be no violations to the federal and state air quality standards, the project would affect visibility in some Class 1 airsheds including the Bridger Wilderness.

“Already in the Upper Green, local citizens have complained about a growing brown cloud that’s from the drilling that’s already happened,” said Aengst. “If you increase it by an order of magnitude, you better have an order of magnitude cleaner approach,” with better technology to reduce emissions.

Linda Baker of the Upper Green River Valley Coalition said that energy companies already have failed to follow through with obligations.

“That could be a world class example of how to do it right,” she said. “Instead we are being asked to compromise our mule deer, pronghorn, and sage grouse populations in exchange for a short-term nonrenewable resource, and that’s not a trade we need to make.”

The anticline, she says, already sees a substantial amount of vehicle traffic, even during the winter closure period. The BLM’s own records show nearly 7,500 back-and-forth trips through the Pinedale Mesa South Access Station during January of this year.

“We know that current winter stipulations are not enforced,” she said. Some mitigation measures, such as piping of condensate, do help the problem, but not enough to warrant winter drilling. “What they need to do is prevent the need for mitigation in the first place.”

Another mitigation measure proposed by the BLM is a one-to-three trade on acreage in the anticline. In other words, for every acre that is used for oil and gas drilling, three acres is preserved for wildlife. But Baker says such a trade is not so simple.

“The mule deer, as well as many of other animals, have a fidelity to habitat that is not easily interrupted,” she said. “They have chosen these preferred habitats for a reason.”

According to Tom Darin, public lands director for the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, both air quality and wildlife issues show how the Jackson area is linked to the consequences of more drilling on the anticline.

“The wildlife movement and the air quality all demonstrate how we are all connected,” he said. “If they are going to have any hope of addressing air quality concerns they are going to have to use the best available control technologies and be very aggressive in trying to space out the rate of development over time.”

Darin said he has a problem with BLM’s attempts at more drilling during the winter, when mule deer have already shown that they can’t adjust well to the development.

“Now those studies are in and they are showing significant impacts, to mule deer in particular,” he said. “There’s a public trust that’s being violated here. They’ve already done the studies We’ve kind of asked and answered that question.”

The public comment period ends on Feb. 13. Mail comments to Matt Anderson, Bureau of Land Management, 432 E. Mill Street, P.O. Box 768, Pinedale, WY 82941 or call (307) 367-5300.