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Study: Pinedale wells would hurt wildlife

Impact statement says big game, sage grouse, eagles would be harmed.

By Cory Hatch

Additional oil and gas wells on the Pinedale Anticline would create barriers to wildlife and fragment habitat, according to an environmental impact statement released in December.

The Bureau of Land Management is proposing 4,399 new wells on 12,278 acres and allowing winter drilling in crucial big game habitat.

The BLM's plan came in tandem with a 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.

According to the supplemental environmental impact statement, the project would likely "create additional barriers to wildlife movements with increased fragmentation ... within former contiguous habitats."

The document states that big game would continue to be "adversely affected" by the construction of wells and the direct loss of habitat, including crucial winter range.

Population declines

The development would substantially affect about 4,400 acres of crucial pronghorn habitat, according to the EIS.

"Loss of habitat and diminishing habitat function may eventually lead to population declines," the document states.

For mule deer, the drilling would disturb about 3,500 additional acres of crucial winter range under the BLM's plan. About 1,000 acres of mule deer winter range were disturbed during the initial development.

Additional surface disturbance in moose winter range would also occur; elk are not expected to be affected.

In addition to big game, sage grouse and migratory birds would also feel the effects of more drilling, the document states.

Construction and drilling disturbances, along with humans, would affect sage grouse leks within a quarter-mile and nesting and brood-rearing habitats within two miles, the document states. Leks are locations where male sage grouse gather to compete for breeding rights while females watch.

Noise would also affect sage grouse, rising above 10 decibels at leks up to roughly a half-mile away from drilling, roads or other development.

Fragmentation and direct loss of native habitats by surface disturbances would also harm migratory birds, particularly in habitats used by species that rely on sagebrush.

In terms of endangered species, the environmental impact statement says bald eagles would likely feel the most effect. Surface disturbance and human presence by 2011 would be “substantial” within one mile of the New Fork River, an area that is crucial winter habitat for bald eagles. Approximately 860 acres of habitat near the river and 124 acres in forest riparian zones would be impacted by oil and gas drilling. One acre of disturbance would occur near an active bald eagle nest.

By 2023, 40 acres would be disturbed near active bald eagle nests and 2,100 acres would be disturbed within one mile of the New Fork River riparian zone.

The document states that the development is not expected to affect endangered Colorado River fish, despite short-term surface water withdrawals and groundwater withdrawals. So-called “special status” species, animals that federal and state agencies say warrant extra protection, would be affected in a variety of habitats, including sagebrush steppe, forests and wetland habitats. Special-status fish would be affected by “increased sedimentation in aquatic habitats.”

“The proposed action alternative, through 2011, would disturb a variety of habitats utilized by BLM sensitive species,” the document states.

Drilling, testing and dust control would remove about 3,000 acre-feet of water from the Colorado River basin over the five-year development period.

In terms of plant life, by 2023 about 1,500 acres of sensitive soils in the Blue Rim area would be affected by development, threatening the large-fruited bladder pod, a special-status plant.

More human-based impacts

Development associated with the drilling, including the need for additional houses and other support facilities, could also lead to increased recreation — especially off-highway vehicles — urban and suburban sprawl, habitat degradation by humans, increased noise, air and water pollution, more game poaching, increased wildlife road kills and more harassment of wildlife by pets, especially dogs, according to the EIS.

The public comment period on the proposal ends Feb. 13. Comments can be sent to Matt Anderson, Bureau of Land Management, 432 E. Mill St., P.O. Box 768, Pinedale, WY 82941 or call (307) 367-5300.