

The Wilderness Society

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Peter Aengst, The Wilderness Society: 406-586-1600

Ralph Faler, Avid hunter and fifth-generation Wyoming resident, 307-367-3177

Study: Energy Development in Western Wyoming Significantly Fragments Habitat and Harms Wildlife

Emerging Scientific Studies in Upper Green Demonstrate Negative Impact on Wildlife, BLM Urged to Take Action to Prevent Long Term Damage

PINEDALE, Wyo. – A study released today by The Wilderness Society shows that profitable gas extraction and healthy wildlife populations can co-exist in the Upper Green River Valley of western Wyoming, but only if the federal government adopts measures to close and reclaim unnecessary roads and minimize the impact of remaining and future roads on wildlife habitat.

“We are at a tipping point in the Upper Green as the drilling boom already is harming wildlife,” said Peter Aengst, one of the study’s authors. “Whether it’s elk, antelope, mule deer, or sage grouse the study shows that constraints on road use and new energy development are needed to ensure healthy wildlife populations over the long term.”

The Upper Green River Valley is the winter destination for the world’s longest-migrating populations of mule deer and pronghorn, as well as home to some of the nation’s largest populations. All told, over 100,000 big game animals rely on the Upper Green, since it is the largest block of publicly owned winter range in the 19 million-acre Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and the region’s wind-scoured slopes ensure year-round exposure of sagebrush. Beneath the Upper Green lies a reservoir of natural gas. In recent years thousands of wells have been drilled and the Valley criss-crossed with miles of access roads by an industry eager to reap the rewards of rising energy prices.

The Wilderness Society study utilized information provided by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to analyze road densities and “core” wildlife habitat areas for four of Wyoming’s signature game species across the 2.9 million-acres of federal, state, and private land in the Upper Green. An extensive review of scientific literature allowed the study’s authors to compare these road density findings with documented impacts to the four species: elk, mule deer, antelope, and sage grouse.

Roads impact wildlife in a variety of ways. Animals die in collisions with vehicles; they change behavior to avoid disturbance, possibly abandoning preferred habitat; roads spread noxious weeds, which displace native forage; roads consume land so there is less range for animals to use.

Roads also “fragment” habitat by breaking it up into smaller and smaller units of secure habitat. The study found that the Upper Green’s road networks, which are expected to become more extensive with increased energy development, already are harming wildlife populations through fragmentation and destruction of habitat. Non-transportation energy infrastructure, such as well pads, retention ponds, pipelines and compressor stations, make the consequences even more severe.

Within the study area, for example, 90 percent of mule deer crucial winter range is within a half-mile of a road and most crucial big game winter range has densities greater than 1 mile per square mile: 80 percent for pronghorn; 64 percent for elk. On BLM land, 80 percent of the Pinedale Resource Area has road densities greater than 1 mile per square mile, with 36 percent greater than 2 miles.

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Also, 87 percent of BLM land is within half-mile of a road, and 65 percent within a quarter-mile.

“Wildlife habitat fragmentation is one of the hidden costs of energy development,” said Ralph Faler, a life-long hunter and fifth-generation Sublette County resident. “Big game like elk or mule deer are important to me, and current energy development is happening too fast before we know the full consequences. Energy work is important, but the BLM needs to make sure the work is done in a way that protects our great hunting and wildlife traditions in Wyoming.”

The findings of The Wilderness Society study are similar to other ongoing studies. Late last year, a study funded by Questar and the BLM showed that natural gas development in the Upper Green is affecting the distribution patterns of wintering mule deer. That study, which will continue through 2007, is being conducted by Hall Sawyer, a wildlife biologist with Western Ecosystems Technology, Inc. Another study concerning the Upper Green’s antelope population and their response to energy development is being conducted by the Wildlife Conservation Society. That research has found that fragmentation may be leading to habitat abandonment.

Noting the impact of roads on wildlife, Bill Rudd, a Wyoming Game and Fish biologist told *Bugle Magazine*: “Think of the road network as a spiderweb. Crush the spiderweb and roll it into a ball and it is statistically insignificant. But fully extended it controls and dominates its entire area. It’s the influence that matters, not the actual acres consumed.” [January/February 2005 edition.]

The Wilderness Society study makes a series of recommendations for the BLM to adopt so that energy development and wildlife can continue to co-exist in the Upper Green. Some of these:

- Through the upcoming Pinedale Resource Management Plan revision, implement road closure plans to meet the following scientifically derived standards within crucial winter range and migration routes:
 1. **Mule deer:** increase amount of core habitat within crucial winter range and migration routes that is greater than 1,542 feet from a road.
 2. **Pronghorn:** increase core area that is farther than 3,168 feet from a road and reduce road densities to less than 1 mile per square mile.
 3. **Elk:** reduce road densities to less than 1 mile.
 4. **Sage grouse:** Implement seasonal road restrictions barring traffic within 656 feet of winter habitat, within 3 miles of leks, nesting and brood-rearing areas. Impose a 30 mph speed limit during non-restricted hours.
- Follow Wyoming Game and Fish Departments guidelines in construction of all new roads.
- Evaluate roads’ impacts on wildlife as part of adaptive management process. RMP revision must assess these impacts and devise ways to mitigate them.

Aengst noted that the BLM rarely, if ever, conducts landscape-level analyses as part of its review. “If a few scientists with a shoe-string budget can complete a fragmentation analysis in less than a year, so can the BLM with its multi-million dollar budget. The Upper Green’s exploding energy drilling is providing tremendous industry profits. It’s common sense that we make sure that the wildlife that now are so much a part of Wyoming’s heritage are here for the next generation.”

The full 44 page Wilderness Society study, *Wildlife at a Crossroads: Energy Development in Western Wyoming*, can be found at <http://www.wilderness.org/library/documents/pinedale.cfm>. The web page www.uppergreen.org also has additional information, photos and contacts. A media friendly version of one of the report’s key maps is also available.

Attachment: Report Summary, two pages