

No Home on the Range?

Pinedale Roundup 10/27/05

By Meredith Taylor

The Pinedale Mesa has provided critical winter range for much of the Sublette mule deer herd forever ... until recently. Now the onslaught of thousands of oil and gas wells in the Upper Green River Valley paints a much different picture.

Here roads snake through an obstacle course of well pads, tanks, pipelines and drill rigs to transform this once rich high desert sagebrush grassland into an industrial zone and the development is only beginning. The Pinedale Mesa has always been a winter destination for wildlife, where are they going to go now.

The WEST, Inc. mule deer study, which began in 2002 to evaluate the impacts of the natural gas development on wintering deer herds, recently released a report for 2005.

In just three years, biologist Hall Sawyer has found that the Mesa deer herd has decreased 46 percent while the control population on the Wind River Front, which is not leased for oil and gas development, is maintaining its same numbers.

"The majority of the loss is due to mortality rates, not emigration," Sawyer claims.

On the same front, Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) pronghorn researchers wonder if pronghorn can survive the rapid habitat change taking place on the Mesa. The Mesa provides critical winter range for pronghorn as well as mule deer. WCS research has shown that increased road density has already resulted in habitat fragmentation and displacement of the pronghorn herds.

Crucial winter range designation used to be considered sacred ground. Neither public access nor development were allowed on winter range to assure wintering wildlife had a refuge from harassment during their most energy-expensive time of year.

But times have changed. Despite conservationists' protests, the winter range stipulations have been waived

on a case-by-case basis for a few years and were eventually dropped for Questar's winter drilling proposal two years ago.

Now industry wants the winter wildlife stipulations waived on the rest of the Mesa while they drill multi-well pads year around.

So, the question is raised - were the winter wildlife stipulations working and should they be maintained? If not, what should be done to mitigate the

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impacts of development?

In evaluating the status of BLM's winter range timing restrictions, WEST's report indicates that the wildlife stipulations failed to reduce habitat impacts because the development footprint on the winter range was compromising habitat integrity and size.

Industry has plans to expand the footprint of habitat loss even more to the south and west by expediting the winter drilling program to infill the wells on existing leases.

While conservationists support industry's efforts to reduce its footprint

and consolidate more wells per pad by directionally drilling, there would still be 1-2 pads per section on much of the Mesa's crucial winter range.

Where's the balance if industry operators' ultimate goal is thousands (or tens of thousands?) of wells on the Pinedale Mesa? Even with 32 wells on one pad per section, the general sprawl of pads and connecting roads and pipelines covers the majority of the crucial winter range.

In its search for energy independence, the BLM and industry must protect remaining crucial winter range and migration corridors to ensure wildlife's chance of survival in the future.

At the end of the day, we have long known that habitat fragmentation causes wildlife displacement and population loss, so we know that we need to conserve crucial habitat to maintain adequate doe/fawn ratios and fawn recruitment.

How can we best avoid a train wreck between mule deer and pronghorn with industry on the Mesa?

The opportunity is ours now to mitigate these impacts by protecting crucial winter range and migration corridors to limit the footprint of this boom to prevent a wildlife bust before it's too late.

Where the impacts have already occurred or are irreversible, we must provide off-site mitigation as alternative habitat and migration corridors for wildlife.

With a \$1.86 billion surplus in Wyoming's coffers this year from this fossil fuel development, wildlife interests, sportsmen, and conservationists challenge the Governor and Legislature to help mitigate these impacts with an additional appropriation to the Wildlife Trust Fund to assure that Wyoming's wildlife legacy remains with us forever. None of us should stand by and allow this travesty to Wyoming's wildlife on our watch.

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