

COMMENTARY

The BLM needs to rethink how it looks at wildlife biology.

First, the Pinedale Field Office just lost one of its three wildlife biologists, Steve Belinda, who resigned because he felt that wildlife was being overlooked in the effort to speed up gas development.

Belinda's complaints, a lack of time to work on wildlife specific projects and little time in the field are not unique in that in almost every occupation, people wish they had more time to spend doing hands on work instead of pushing paper at a desk.

But those complaints alone should spur the BLM to evaluate both the number of biologists at each field office (especially in energy producing areas) and also evaluate the tasks those biologists do on a daily basis. Perhaps the agency could hire biologists with less experience to handle routine permit work and free up its experienced staff to concentrate on more complex issues.

In my eyes working on the wildlife aspects of oil and gas drilling projects is a fine job for a wildlife biologist but it should not be the only one. Simply analyzing the impacts of each individual well or each individual project will produce a narrow data set and a shallow analysis. It is like taking fifty snapshots of rocks, trees and lakes without ever stepping back to get the entire landscape.

One biologist, at least in Pinedale, should be freed up to look at the big picture- to look solely at the wildlife resource.

The BLM could defend its wildlife protocols if it had numbers showing that they were working to protect wildlife, but the numbers show just the opposite. The number of mule deer wintering on the Mesa is down 46 percent and the number of male sage grouse lekking in the fields is down more than 50 percent. It is hard to support business as usual when business as usual is demonstrably failing.

The Pinedale Anticline Working Group has called for no further loss of mule deer. How can we protect deer using the same protocols that led to their decline in the first place?

Steve Hall, public affairs officer for the state office suggested that the BLM needs to wait for three to five years for the Game and Fish Department to complete a comprehensive assessment of the valley's deer herds.

I hear the same argument as we waited for the data from both the Mesa mule deer study and the sage grouse lek study. When both of those studies showed steep declines, the BLM's position has been to tell us to wait for more studies and once those are done to wait for more studies after that.

With wildlife numbers down on its land and it's biologists leaving, maybe it is time for the BLM to do an internal study of its own wildlife programs and how it can improve them.