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Ongoing Study to Help BLM Refine Sage Grouse Efforts

Initial findings confirm natural gas development may displace bird populations

BILLINGS – Preliminary studies carried out by University of Montana researchers and funded by the Bureau of Land Management and other Federal and private partners may soon provide reliable, scientific statistics on sage grouse populations in areas of coal bed natural gas development in the Powder River Basin.

As widely expected, the initial findings indicate that coal bed natural gas (CBNG) development can indeed reduce sage grouse populations in natural gas fields. These preliminary findings from a team headed by Dr. David Naugle are contained in a progress report on the first phase of a three-phase study. While this is in no way a definitive work, the progress report does show a correlation between CBNG development and reduced sage grouse populations within the development areas. It is not clear whether these population reductions are entirely due to avoidance of energy development, or if lower nesting success or higher bird mortality rates are also major contributing factors. The report also shows that other disturbances such as agricultural development and surface mining can have similar effects.

“While we have long believed that sage grouse populations were affected by development, this progress report will provide us a better assessment of those effects,” said Howard Lemm, BLM’s acting Montana State Director. “This comes at an opportune time since we’ll be able to account for the findings in upcoming planning documents that deal with CBNG.”

“Our plan as land managers is to identify more and improved ways to keep sage grouse habitat healthy,” said Bob Bennett, BLM’s Wyoming State Director. “As land managers, we will continue to work with Dr. Naugle as he completes the next phases of his study. The BLM will maintain an open dialogue with habitat managers, wildlife managers, energy operators and our other partners.”

While the effects of development cannot be totally mitigated, impacts can be lessened. BLM does this by limiting the disturbance of habitat through its leasing process, placing timing or season-of-use restrictions on drilling, and through adaptive management, which changes requirements based on the results of monitoring. In addition to the study itself, the university is providing the agencies and other sponsors with conservation planning tools that point to landscapes in the Powder River Basin where the right conservation activities could be implemented to protect sage grouse.

The Bureau of Land Management is one of the major sponsors of the study, and uses research such as this to obtain the best scientific analyses possible as the agency considers the orderly development of natural gas reserves in the Powder River Basin.

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