

Minutes of the Wildlife Monitoring Task Group
Pinedale Fire Hall
June 28, 2005

Attendees

Steve Belinda - BLM
Michelle Hosler – Citizen, Pinedale
Whitney Royster – Casper Star Tribune
Ron Hogan – Questar
Bob Barrett – PAWG
Tony Gosar – Citizen, Pinedale
Dean Clause – Wyoming Game and Fish Department
Clint Gilchrist – Citizen, Pinedale
Rollin Sparrowe – Task Group Chair
Bill Bender – Examiner
Dan Lamoreux – Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

The purpose of this meeting was to consider the information presented on June 27, 2005, by mule deer researcher Hall Sawyer. The minutes of that meeting summarize many of the findings and not all are repeated here.

Task Group member Archie Reeve of Laramie was unable to travel to the meetings because of uncertainty about BLM reimbursement for expenses. He offered written concepts that lay out the conceptual and scientific basis for identifying impacts to wildlife using monitoring data. How to determine mitigation effectiveness is also covered.

Dean Clause led a discussion of lower fawn survival indicated by 2004-2005 winter range age ratio counts by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD). He presented comparative data for the Pinedale Front and Mesa Winter Range units of the Sublette Deer Herd. Historically, reproduction and survival of these two units track each other well in good and bad years. The Pinedale Front thus serves as a control for the Mesa wintering deer. It was noted that winter range was in excellent condition in 2004, but survival still is reduced.

Habitat quality differences were of interest. While the sage habitats on the Mesa alone are not superior habitat, the combination of topography and (in the past) isolation are valuable to deer. Predevelopment data on deer use of habitats helps overcome quality differences.

Improvement of habitats on the Mesa was discussed. Questar is doing some enhancement work in cooperation with BLM and WGFD.

A wide-ranging discussion occurred about how to approach the question of mitigation alternatives. A key finding by Hall Sawyer's research is that disturbance effects are immediate and do not seem to moderate as drilling proceeds. So a first priority is to consider how to alleviate disturbance effects.

The Task Group acknowledged that habitat value has declined and not all can be mitigated, at least in the short term. Discussion centered on how much critical winter range can be developed while still maintaining mule deer at desired levels. What are those deer numbers? Since habitat appears to be used at capacity (over 5,000 wintering deer on the Mesa), can we set thresholds of amount of critical winter range to maintain a specific number of mule deer? Is our goal maintaining a core population for future recovery or a higher level? Ron Hogan expressed a desire to conduct mitigation to avoid damage where possible.

The lack of a current Resource Management Plan raised questions about winter Off Road Vehicle management and enforcement of winter range closures. BLM has little enforcement capability and has been reluctant to enforce existing closures. Other potential enforcement agencies are confused about authorities and extent of closures. It was noted that most of the roads on the Anticline are not BLM “system roads”, but are easements to industry for the purpose of development only. The public sees the roads as public. All agreed that tighter management of winter range use was needed while development continues. Most agreed that current data do not necessarily support the need for total closure.

Dan Lamoreux expressed concern about general closure of access because it has become a problem in the West for sportsmen accessing public lands.

Bob Barrett supported closure of pioneered roads on the Mesa. He noted that the PAPA ROD called for inventory, closure, and rehabilitation of such roads. No one could confirm that this has been done.

The Task Group agreed after extensive discussion that reduction in activity and traffic was important to reduce disturbance to mule deer wintering on the Mesa. Likely additional winter drilling in recent proposals raises the importance. Between the two alternatives of 1) widespread closure of roads, and 2) attempting enforcement of existing winter range closures, the enforcement alternative offers most promise at this time. Our recommendation to PAWG in February to gather data on activity on the Mesa was an attempt to answer some questions that have now emerged. Working toward collaborative enforcement first seems an achievable goal.

What is needed is 1) clear maps of roads and trails; 2) documentation of existing closures of winter range; and 3) bringing together BLM, Sublette County, WGFD, and operators to consider needs for effective enforcement of existing winter range closures.

It appears that existing winter use restrictions for construction of wells may not be effective at the densities of wells being employed on Jonah and the Anticline. A future question is what to do instead of maintaining those seasonal restrictions where development is very dense.

Other mitigation considered included: gating (as Questar has done), managing road density (reclaim roads not needed), keeping activity clustered, identifying thresholds for disturbance or development, and education. There was wide interest in incorporating videos, information cards, and behavioral expectations into employee training and orientation in the gas fields.

The Task Group decided to inform PAWG that we recommend a serious attempt at collaborative enforcement of existing winter range travel restrictions on the Mesa starting this next winter. Collaborators at least should include PAWG, BLM, WGFD, Sublette County, and operators.

The Task group will provide a concise briefing document justifying this action by August 1.

BLM liaison Steve Belinda will obtain clarification of existing Federal or other restrictions now in place, clarifying geographic area and exact dates. Industry data on travel and activity will be obtained.

The Task Group offers to PAWG that the Task Group will take the lead in talking with the agencies and companies to raise the request. PAWG can perform a strong service by recommending this collaborative enforcement effort as a high priority to BLM.

Respectfully submitted,
Rollin Sparrowe
July 12, 2005