

Wildlife Monitoring Task Group Minutes
Evening Meeting, June 27, 2005
Lovatt Room, Sublette County Library
Pinedale, Wyoming

Attendees

Steve Belinda, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Ron Hogan – Questar
Bob Barrett – PAWG
Tony Gosar – Citizen, Pinedale
Clint Gilchrist – Citizen, Pinedale
Rollin Sparrowe – Daniel, (Task Group Chair)
Bill Boender – Examiner
Dan Lamoreux – Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Aimee Davison – Shell
Matt Anderson – BLM
Lisa Fretz – BLM
Carol Kruse – BLM/PAWG Liaison
Lisa Solberg – BLM
Kirby Hedrick – PAWG
Scott Smith – Wyoming Game and Fish Department
Craig Kling- TRC
John Dalke – Wyoming Wildlife Consultants LLC
Linda Baker – PAWG

This meeting was a public briefing by deer researcher Hall Sawyer who reported on the first three years of studies monitoring effects of drilling activity on mule deer mainly on the Mesa near Pinedale, the north end of the Pinedale Anticline. It was specifically to provide information for discussions the next day by the Task Group to consider whether changes in mitigation were warranted.

Study results and maps are available in detail at the website www.west-inc.com. Some highlights included:

- 1) Current studies benefit from baseline data on use of habitats by mule deer prior to current drilling activity.
- 2) The long-term studies on mule deer use a three-pronged approach to document a) direct habitat loss (such as well pads and roads); b) indirect habitat loss (such as displacement due to industrial activity; and c) changes in survival or reproduction (which may affect deer long-term).
- 3) The basic study method has been using radio collars that regularly record exact geographical locations of individual deer. This method yields a strong base of habitat use information.
- 4) The extensive data on habitat use by deer on the Mesa is then used to predict likely habitat use by deer across the expanding well fields.
- 5) Results show that deer have been progressively displaced from active drilling activity. In each year of study, highest deer use is further from well pads and roads. Some deer still use well pads and areas near them, but not much of the time. The radio collars measure deer activity around the clock, in good or bad weather.
- 6) Steps 1 and 2 of the three-pronged study approach have shown that a) drilling activity reduces habitat through such things as well pads and roads (direct loss of habitat), and b) drilling activity and traffic on roads and around well pads, reduces habitat use by deer on a larger area (indirect loss of habitat).
- 7) The third step in studying impacts (looking for changes in reproduction and survival of deer) is not yet complete but more data will come. Data from Wyoming Game and Fish Department herd

composition counts indicate a reduction in fawn survival in the Mesa wintering deer when compared to other deer herds in the Upper Green that have historically reproduced similarly to the Mesa deer.

Extensive discussion with those who attended raised many issues.

- 1) This long-range research is focused on the north portion of the Anticline.
- 2) About 70% of females from the Mesa have their fawns from the Rim into the Hoback Basin, increasing the concerns about possible new drilling activity on migration routes and summer range in the Bridger Teton National Forest.
- 3) Some questioned the use of models to indicate deer-habitat use relationships. Sawyer explained that the models are not theoretical models, but are direct extrapolations over the well fields based on extensive, real data on deer use. He acknowledged that all deer do not behave alike, but that patterns of changes are clear.
- 4) The Mesa wintering tradition by 5-6 thousand mule deer has developed over thousands of years. The value of the habitat to deer is a combination of location, topography, a basic food supply, and an ability by deer to move where and when they need to in order to cope with winter weather. Deer in the Upper Green have excellent summer range in most years.
- 5) Traffic levels and activity around well sites seem a likely key to disturbance effects on deer and will be studied more intensively.
- 6) Impacts of winter drilling were discussed. The Questar program has begun, but is not fully implemented. New proposals to drill in winter on a larger part of the Anticline may affect deer on a larger scale.
- 7) Individual deer consistently return to winter on the Mesa. In easy winters (or early in any given winter), deer may be on the Cora Hills, Grindstone, Ryegrass or SoapHoles, but they move to the Mesa if weather is severe.
- 8) The number of deer on the Mesa has reduced from over 5,000 to 3,000 this last winter. The die-off in 2003-2004 is thought to be the biggest factor.
- 9) The Mesa wintering deer comprise 15-20% of the Sublette Deer Herd. That herd objective is 34 thousand and is now at 25 thousand.
- 10) Sample sizes were discussed. While research samples are a small portion of the total deer, the long-term studies and existence of predevelopment data help strengthen confidence in the data.
- 11) Current deer studies have not been designed specifically to measure effects of winter drilling. Likely increases in that activity may require redesigned and expanded studies to address the changing situation.

The Wildlife Monitoring Task Group planned to meet the next day, June 28, 2005, to consider whether changes in mitigation are called for in light of these results.

Respectfully submitted,
Rollin Sparrowe
July 12, 2005