

Wildlife Monitoring Task Group Minutes and Report to PAWG  
Meeting at BLM – Pinedale  
November 10, 2005

Attendees:

Tony Gosar – citizen  
Craig Cling – TRC  
Ron Hogan – Questar  
Aimee Davison – Shell  
Steve Belinda – BLM  
Rollin Sparrowe – Task Group Chair  
Michelle Hosler – citizen

Rollin Sparrowe summarized the October 25, 2005 meeting of the Pinedale Anticline Working Group (PAWG). In discussing the need for measurable thresholds in response to declines in mule deer and other wildlife, PAWG requested the Wildlife Monitoring Task Group (TG) meet as soon as possible to develop recommendations for what to do about these issues. This meeting is for that purpose.

Steve Belinda thanked Aimee Davison and Shell for aggressive work to implement the TG's recommendations for signage, public outreach, and gates to control access to the Mesa. Further work on outreach has involved the Transportation TG, signs and posters, and a press release targeting January 15, 2006, road closures.

The contract to review the backlog of operator-sponsored monitoring data has been let and BLM has met with contractors and is refining a scope of work. Since the contractors will have 180 days to perform their review, it will not be available in time to plan the revised Monitoring Work Plan for 2006. BLM will revise that plan. The TG will have input into the main questions to be discussed.

The TG discussed a wide array of ongoing and potential mitigation actions. One of the new issues is the possibility of winter completions and their impact on wildlife. The TG has supported expanded mule deer research, access management on the Mesa, public outreach, and continuing the sage grouse monitoring under way as part of research. Operationally, it is our conclusion that neither the TG nor PAWG are active players in mitigation negotiations and that there is no comprehensive plan to mitigate effects on wildlife. .

Thresholds of wildlife impact requiring management response was discussed. This was a wide-ranging discussion that referred back to the TG recommendations in February that documented EIS and ROD statements about intent to change operations if wildlife impacts were demonstrated. These actions were not taken even though wildlife data have shown impacts to mule deer and sage grouse.

A main conclusion of the TG was that thresholds, such as a selected percent decline in populations or in the amount of undisturbed habitat needed to sustain a certain population, should have been set before development started. Such thresholds are not very useful after declines have been seen. For example, declines in mule deer of 15% would have likely been a starting threshold for a high profile herd with high cultural and economic values..

The TG generally agreed that:

- 1) Thresholds are hard to apply after changes have already exceeded them, and are not useful without commitment to management actions in response to reaching the threshold.

- 2) Given the actual situation where ownership rights have been transferred by BLM to lessees and that extremely rich gas deposits have been proven, many value judgments come into any numerical threshold.
- 3) While no thresholds were set in the past, the TG and PAWG itself have expressed concern over significant, impacts documented for both mule deer and sage grouse. Research reports have been available to all participants.
- 4) Energy impacts are not the only contributor to the 46% decline of mule deer on the Mesa; other impacts are either not under any control (climate) or are not being addressed (housing development).
- 5) The real issue for mule deer is whether the herd can rebound this time given the new knowledge about the impacts of disturbance on their limited winter range. Other declines such as from severe winter weather have occurred in the past and they have recovered, but the disturbance was absent.
- 6) A new issue of concern is timing. This unique deer herd comes to the Mesa to winter in a unique behavioral tradition. Each step that increases the length of time for development disturbance, such as additional downhole density, casts doubt on whether the behavioral tradition will continue.
- 7) All agree that conserving target wildlife populations will require expansion of attention beyond the crest of the Anticline, such as to other winter and summer ranges now heading toward development and to the effects of changes like housing growth.
- 8) Among the long-term issues not being dealt with are BLM management of habitats through various treatments for other resources, such as grazing, water resources, etc.
- 9) Goals suggested by this TG to PAWG for mule deer are: a) maintain current numbers – specifically, no further decline in wintering deer numbers, and b) maintain current remaining, undisturbed habitats useful to deer in winter. If such goals are recommended by PAWG and accepted by BLM, an implementation plan can address the “how to do it” question. Concepts such as retaining as undisturbed winter habitat in all undeveloped parts of the Mesa off the Anticline Crest and tighter management of future development of critical winter range off the Anticline would be possible tools.
- 10) Once more is known about development scenarios and in order to restore wildlife populations as gas fields mature, a recovery sequence must address remaining habitat quality, activity levels, and population objectives wherever they affect the resource in question.
- 11) This TG recommended a GIS-based Habitat Quality Assessment as a baseline for a broader attempt to manage wildlife in the face of development. We are here suggesting that turning the declines around will be complicated and must be part of a larger planning and implementation effort than the PAWG has itself shown interest in, and certainly broader than BLM has shown a willingness to lead.

Note: While this discussion occurred, BLM and several companies were moving toward decisions to allow additional winter drilling with winter completions. The BLM decision document said it would likely result in further decline of mule deer. This may change the assessment of monitoring, research, and mitigation needs. Such a moving target provides a strong argument for a broader GIS-based plan for the Upper Green and for more open exchange of information.

Submitted by Rollin Sparrowe, Chair

11/18/05