

Minutes of the Wildlife Monitoring Task Group
Pinedale Fire Hall
July 13, 2005

Attendees

Steve Belinda, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Pinedale
Ron Hogan – Questar, Pinedale
Bob Barrett – Pinedale Anticline Working Group (PAWG), Pinedale
Rollin Sparrowe – Daniel (Wildlife Task Group Chair)
Dan Lamoreux – Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, Jackson
Aimee Davison – Shell, Pinedale
Michelle Hosler – Pinedale
Dean Clause - Wyoming Game and Fish Department
Dan Stroud – Wyoming Game and Fish Department
Tony Gosar – Pinedale
Whitney Royster – Caspar Start Tribune

A meeting of the Wildlife Monitoring Task Group followed the previous evening briefing by researcher Matt Holloran. The purpose was to consider whether alternative or additional mitigation should be recommended to the Pinedale Anticline Working Group (PAWG).

Dean Clause displayed a map of the Upper Green with sage grouse leks grouped into eleven “lek complexes”. Several, like on Jonah or the Mesa, are under development and others are scheduled for future development. Overall, lek attendance had been declining during prolonged drought; good production in 2004 may have swung the trend backward.

Ron Hogan asked if we should wait for final data and study completion to consider action. In discussion, the Task Group generally agreed that negative effects on leks were established and that current mitigation was not meeting the needs for sage grouse conservation.

The Task Group discussed the concept of using site specific characteristics of wells to conserve a core of leks in a gas field. Steve Belinda pointed out that BLM policy direction was going away from such site-specific flexibility. Ron Hogan acknowledged that industry had pushed for standardization to avoid individual bias by some BLM staff.

Dean Clause noted that sage grouse leks in some areas of the Basin have shifted location outside of gas fields. Discussion concluded that a variety of influences other than energy development were affecting sage grouse. Dan Lamoreux suggested that sage grouse conservation should address all problem areas. The group discussed the perceived differences in effects of drilling versus production phases, but noted that no fields appear to be anywhere close to that stage of production only. Further, new technology seems to be bringing infill projects to most fields, with renewed drilling activity.

Extensive discussion proceeded on the charge to the Task Group to evaluate mitigation and stipulations for effectiveness and to consider whether more or different mitigation is called for. We also noted the need for a plan for actions that we will recommend in response to change indicated by monitoring.

Dean Clause and others suggested consideration of “thresholds” of allowable change. The group supported the concept of trying to work during development to improve habitat offsite and reclaim habitat onsite to sustain such thresholds as: a certain number of leks; number of deer in winter; herd size; or amount of critical winter range or nesting habitat. The question was raised about how much anyone is willing to sacrifice to reduce wildlife impacts.

The absence of the Resource Management Plan was noted. It should be a key to understanding what else will happen in the larger area and how further development will be managed. The need to coordinate habitat restoration and reclamation to meet site-specific goals is missing from any visible process for mitigation. The Task Group suggests that a greater priority be placed on advance planning.

The Task Group reviewed existing protective measures:

- 1) Leks are monitored by Game and Fish with volunteer help.
- 2) BLM requires the following to offset impact:
 - a. One-half mile activity buffer on active leks,
 - b. Two mile surface disturbance buffer March 15 – May 15,
 - c. No surface activity on roads from 8 pm – 8 am within one-fourth mile of an active lek,
 - d. No surface disturbance activity in nesting habitat with documented nest presence, and
 - e. No surface disturbing activity in known wintering concentration areas November 15 – March 15 (new, and not yet universal in practice)..

Discussion by the group reflected that some of these are not rigorously enforced, most have not been studied for effectiveness, and BLM has the flexibility to grant exceptions.

Recommendation 1: The Task Group endorsed reductions in road traffic and activity as likely to help sage grouse. The effectiveness of Questar actions last winter was a point of interest, but no data were available. The Task Group concluded that the enforcement of winter range closures for mule deer may do much of what would benefit sage grouse.

Recommendation 2: The Task group endorsed further rerouting traffic on the main Mesa road and relocation of access from the south of Lovatt Draw to benefit one specific lek. We asked Questar and BLM to report on existing requests for these changes.

Recommendation 3: The Task Group endorsed including sage grouse conservation needs in training materials to be developed for gas field workers to explain conservation actions.

Raven predation was considered, but results of initial work by Game and Fish and the Sage Grouse Working Group were inconclusive. This issue will be watched.

Respectfully submitted,
Rollin Sparrowe
July 27, 2005