

Field & Stream - April 30, 2006

# Energy Development is Ruining Public Hunting Grounds in the West

By Hal Herring

Alan Lackey has been an elk and mule deer guide in the high country of New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains for over 21 years. When he is not pulling a pack string into the mountains, he's a ranch manager in Roy, New Mexico. Before that, he owned the Chevrolet dealership in Raton, where he also served as the president of the Chamber of Commerce. By his own description, he is a deeply conservative person.

Like huge numbers of sportsmen across the American West, however, Lackey is quick to tell you that there is nothing conservative about the pace or scale of energy development on public lands in the region. "This is a giveaway of public resources at the cost of every other value we hold," he says. "Oil and gas production has been elevated to the primary use of our public lands, even when the local people say no to it. The whole plan is like burning down your house to stay warm for one night."

Lackey is referring to the potential energy development of the Valle Vidal (Spanish for "The Valley of Life") in the Carson National Forest of northern New Mexico. It is a 100,000-acre expanse of wild country that starts with open grasslands at around 8,000 feet, runs to parklands threaded by snowmelt-fed trout streams and huge stands of aspens, and reaches into the high timber country and beyond to snowfields and high peaks. It is home—both winter range and calving ground—to New Mexico's largest elk herd, said to be about 2,500 animals. The valley is targeted for as many as 500 coal-bed methane wells.

"If you were going to create a perfect elk country, the Valle Vidal would be it," says Lackey. "There is no way to replace it if we let it be destroyed."

It's largely a myth that public lands are restricted from development on a massive scale. Of all federal lands, 88 percent are open to oil and gas exploration. Until recently, much of that land was ignored because energy prices were too low to make it worth developing. That has changed, as anybody who pays a heating bill can tell you.

The rapid giveaway of energy-extraction rights has resulted in an unprecedented amount of drilling up and down the Rocky Mountain West, much of it on public hunting land. Many thousands of wells are planned or already in operation, as well as thousands of miles of roads and pipelines to service them. Here's a look at five regions that have been targeted for such energy development, and its potential impact:

## **POWDER RIVER BASIN, MONTANA & WYOMING**

Austere and unpopulated, the Powder River Basin is targeted for as many as 82,000 natural gas and coal-bed methane wells. Full development of the area will mean the construction of at least 26,000 miles of new roads and 53,000 miles of pipelines to transport the gas.

Development here is focused on coal-bed methane. A producer must first free the gas by pumping out the groundwater that traps it in seams of coal. Federal officials from the Bureau of Land Management estimate that around 4 trillion gallons of water will be pumped out of those seams during the course of exploiting the methane. Since much of the water contains a high level of salts and other minerals, what will happen to it next is a subject of controversy. Currently the water is held in temporary ponds, thousands of which already dot the landscape. The pumping will lower the water table in the region by 600 to 800 feet, with unknown results (though ranchers' water wells dried up in other areas where pumping took place). The effect of so much industrial activity on the area's herds of pronghorn and mule deer, and on the increasingly rare sage grouse, is unknown.

## **PICEANCE BASIN, COLORADO**

To oil and gas producers, the area around Meeker, Col-

orado, is known as the Piceance Basin. Hunters, especially the estimated 40,000 elk and mule deer hunters who travel to the area every fall, know the Piceance (pronounced PEA-yonce) as the home territory of the nation's largest elk herd.

The Bureau of Land Management is working on a plan for 13,000 new gas wells in this famous hunting country, along with the networks of roads to service them. "All that infrastructure has an impact," says Vern Rholl, a BLM supervisor for the local White River Field Office. "All you used to have was an old two-track road out there. Now you've got a big gravel road with traffic on it."

### **ROAN PLATEAU, COLORADO**

Moving south to the juniper deserts and high mesa country around Rifle, Colorado, energy development is in a kind of frenzy, with grids of roads and well pads being dug into the winter ranges of the Porcupine Creek elk herd, and along the flatlands falling away to the Rio Grande River.

On top of the Roan Plateau, a 9,000-foot oddity walled with 3,500-foot cliffs, the land is pure Colorado high country—trophy mule deer in the aspens, bugling elk, spruce-shaded creeks that hold the Colorado cutthroat trout. Energy companies have 72,000 acres of public land under lease here, with 335 coal-bed methane wells planned for the upper plateau, and another 1,652 for the lower section.

Keith Goddard, who operates Magnum Outfitters, guiding big-game and lion hunters on the Roan, says that the drilling would put him out of business, in addition to destroying one of the country's most unique places. "This is my heritage," he says, "and they have no right to take that away." Goddard is already worried about the effects of the drilling in the low elevations. "They say they will release their plan for the Roan Plateau, but they're already drilling. It's time to draw the line."

Wildlife officials in Colorado readily admit that they have little idea of how the energy boom is affecting wildlife. State agencies lack the power to change policy on federal lands. John Ellenberger, a retired big-game manager for the Colorado Division of Wildlife, told a reporter from the Denver Post in January, "When you start increasing drilling activity to the level we see today, there's going to be displacement; there's going to

be indirect loss and direct loss. What's it going to look like in the end? Well, that's the \$64,000 question, isn't it?"

### **GREEN RIVER VALLEY, WYOMING**

Biologists here are answering that very question. Studies released this winter show that energy development around Pinedale has resulted in a 46 percent decline in mule deer on the critical winter range known as the Pinedale Anticline (locally called "the Mesa"), where as many as 6,000 deer once wintered. There are 516 miles of new roads constructed on the anticline, with half the fields developed. A total of 3,100 wells are proposed south of Pinedale, with 1,065 wells currently in operation.

In an ongoing study that has been in place for four years—funded in large part by the energy industry—biologist Hall Sawyer tracked deer as roads and equipment spread through their winter range. "It is kind of ironic that industry is funding its own impact studies on big game," Sawyer said in an interview during the second year of the study, "but they know that we have to find out what we can expect, because we are just seeing the tip of the iceberg of energy development here."

The energy companies operating on the anticline were supposed to have been bound by restrictions to protect wildlife during the winter, but the local BLM office granted exemptions in eight out of 10 requests. The same office granted every one of the requests made by industry to exempt them from regulations designed to protect sage grouse and their leks, which are used during mating rituals every year. Not surprisingly, the most recent study found that the sage grouse were disappearing. At the current rate of decline, the study says, local populations of the gamebird will be extinct within 19 years.

All that drilling in the winter range is taking a toll on the Green River's pronghorn antelope herd, too. After more than two years of development, the BLM reported that 11,000 vehicle trips onto the anticline were made during December 2005. A new study of pronghorns using the winter range on the anticline was released in January 2006, but it was difficult to draw conclusions from it. The pronghorns collared for the study had all disappeared.

Those animals were part of the herd, at least 500 strong,

that migrates from the Yellowstone country through the Green River Valley and down into the Red Desert, the longest mammal migration in the continental United States. The Red Desert—also home to the largest desert elk herd in the world—could have as many as 20,000 wells, including a new pipeline project to be built at Wamsutter.

### **DECISIONS IN D.C.**

Federal land managers in the Forest Service and the BLM are, in many cases, trying their best to balance the energy boom with the other uses of the lands. “I honestly believe that we could develop these resources responsibly,” said a staffer in the Pinedale office who asked not to be named, “but we have to be allowed to do our jobs. Right now the decisions about development in our area are made in Washington, D.C., not here.”

By law, the BLM is required to manage public lands for both energy development and wildlife. What are they doing to protect habitat during this massive drilling initiative? “BLM consults with state and federal fish and wildlife officials and requires a site visit for every permit issued,” says BLM director Kathleen Clarke. “Wildlife biologists will work with companies to identify areas where there are concerns in order to minimize the number of permit applications that are submitted with wildlife impacts.” Clarke notes that biologists attend on-site meetings with the operator at proposed drilling and access points to identify wildlife issues and to make recommendations to reduce wildlife or habitat impacts. They consult with the state game and fish agency concerning species of state interest.

Clarke says that the BLM is faced with a unique situation in the Pinedale area. “World-class mineral resources are found beneath world-class wildlife habitat. Finding the balance between providing domestic sources of natural gas and minimizing or mitigating impacts to other natural resources will continue to pose a challenge.”

For veteran BLM biologist Steven Belinda, who was assigned to the Pinedale office two years ago, the disappointment of working as what he terms a “biostitute”—simply rubber-stamping energy development on the public lands—ruined his dream job in the famed country of the Upper Green River, the home of elk and grizzlies, antelope and wolverines. Belinda quit the BLM in February to take a job with the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership. He told a reporter for the

Washington Post that he had spent all but 1 percent of his time in the BLM office working on drilling permits. “If we continue this trend of keeping biologists in the office and preventing them from doing substantive work,” said Belinda, “there is a train wreck coming for wildlife.”

### **WESTERN DRILLING: A SNAPSHOT**

**POWDER RIVER BASIN: 82,000 gas wells proposed, 26,000 miles of new roads, 53,000 miles of pipelines**

**GREEN RIVER VALLEY: 3,100 gas wells proposed (1,065 in operation)**

**RED DESERT: 20,000 gas wells proposed**

**PICEANCE BASIN: 13,000 gas wells proposed**

**ROAN PLATEAU: 1,987 gas wells proposed**