



Wildlife Management Institute

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September 28, 2001

Energy Task Force
Council on Environmental Quality
722 Jackson Place, NW
Washington, DC 20503

I am writing on behalf of the Wildlife Management Institute, a nonprofit organization staffed by experienced professional wildlife managers, dedicated to the improvement of wildlife and habitat management in North America. We have been deeply involved in tracking and commenting on proposed and ongoing oil and gas developments in Wyoming's Green River Basin and Red Desert. This experience serves as a contemporary laboratory for how accelerated energy development occurs in our society, and provides us with some insights as to needs for wildlife and fish resources that we wish to pass on to your committee.

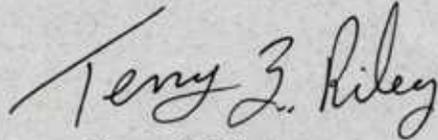
We are concerned about impacts of accelerated energy exploration and development on wildlife and other natural resources. Though some impacts are not fully understood, it is clear that these activities represent a major hazard to wildlife in some of the nation's most imperilled habitats. We believe that it is critical that other wildlife professionals, advocates, and organizations quickly focus on this issue and take action to influence its future.

The process of extracting methane gas from coal beds involves de-watering the saturated coal beds to reduce pressure that traps methane vapors. Once the pressure is released, well rigs extract the liberated gas. This process results in huge amounts of water of varying quality being brought to the surface at each well site. This massive amount of ground-water removal can negatively influence amount and quality of important underground aquifers.

Major big game herds, blue ribbon trout fisheries and some declining species depend on many of the Northern Rockies habitats where oil and gas deposits exist. In Wyoming, where large-scale development has accelerated over the last decade, the state wildlife agency has had to divert key staff and pay less attention to other programs, because there is such intensive energy activity requiring their time. Further, these staff and programs are supported by sportsmen's dollars and hunting and fishing license revenues, a cost hunters and anglers should not have to bear.

We suggest that a stable funding source for fish and wildlife habitats and other natural resources be developed to directly assist the affected states in managing these resources through the development period (see attachment). This would bring credit to the Administration and the energy industry. We would appreciate a chance to discuss this concept in more detail with the Energy Task Force. Other wildlife conservation organizations have similar concerns and should be included in such discussions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Terry Z. Riley". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Terry Z. Riley
Director of Conservation

cc: Office of the Vice President

Attachment

Energy and Wildlife: Needs For Conservation In National Policy

BACKGROUND

For the past decade accelerated energy development has been underway in Southwest Wyoming, with a recent focus on the Upper Green River Basin near Pinedale. About 8500 wells currently are active in Southwest Wyoming and thousands more are forecast in this decade. There are legitimate concerns for the welfare of valuable migratory wildlife resources that are important to the general public, a large hunting community and local towns. The Green River, New Fork, East Fork, and other tributaries in the Green River Basin support blue ribbon trout fisheries. An impressive array of big game animals winter in the basin. From interstate 80 north to Pinedale, 15,000 elk, 52,000 mule deer, 40,000 pronghorn, 3,500 moose, 100 whitetail deer, and 150 bighorn sheep all depend on habitats affected by oil and gas exploration and development. Mule deer and antelope in this basin travel farther between winter and summer ranges than any other population in North America.

On the Pinedale Anticline Project, which could result in 700 to 1000 wells, an integrated "Adaptive Management Process" has been instituted by the Bureau of Land Management. Working teams concerned with water quality, air quality, wildlife, and other aspects of the local landscape bring together ranchers, industry, and wildlife interests. These local citizens consider the needs of wildlife and the local landscape as development proceeds. An emerging problem is funding to cover the substantial cost of monitoring the impacts of development as they occur, and to cover management costs to restore or improve key habitats. The key to this adaptive process is being able to work together with industry to monitor the impact of development on wildlife and fish and adjust development and production schedules to lessen impacts as they are revealed by the monitoring activities. Such work already has identified habitat essential to the future of game herds, but funding is needed to take the next steps. This adaptive management process offers the best science-based approach to helping wildlife through the prolonged development period, and has application elsewhere.

Landmark studies of mule deer, pronghorn, and sage grouse, partly funded by industry, all have focused on providing a baseline from which to judge future impacts of development. All of these studies have revealed impacts to wildlife from industrial activity, and highlight the need to continue to study the situation and try to adjust to help wildlife through the development period. Unfortunately, no designated funds exist to ensure that this important work is done throughout the energy development period to sustain these wildlife resources.

Other places, such as the Powder River Basin in North Central Wyoming, are in the midst of a rapidly developing boom in exploration and development of coal bed methane reserves. This development extends well into Montana, and suggestions by industry and the Bureau of Land Management are that as many as 40,000 to 50,000 new wells may be developed in the future. With potentially over 10,000 sites in the Green River Basin, and the potential of this huge

new development in the Powder River Basin, it is quite clear that the habitat of many wildlife and fish will be affected directly in various ways as these energy resources are exploited.

NEED FOR SPECIFIC FISH AND WILDLIFE PROGRAMS

A responsible approach to this process must include a more comprehensive program to manage fish and wildlife as energy resources are developed. Neither the Bureau of Land Management or Forest Service, nor the individual states involved in this new energy boom have the data or staff and money to do all the work necessary to take care of renewable fish and wildlife resources, considering the pace and magnitude of the proposed development.

We hear from energy companies, the Administration, and many in the Congress that we must remove restrictions on exploration, development, and operations and open new areas—without specifying which ones. Please keep in mind that these mule deer, elk, and pronghorn are important wildlife populations that support local businesses and culture, and whose recovery from past over-exploitation at the turn of the century was paid for over the past 65 years by sportsmen's dollars. It is simply unfair to expect American sportsmen and women to foot the bill to recover wildlife populations a second time.

Decisions on all of this should be made carefully, based on specific consideration of geographically distinct areas and impacts on wildlife populations and their seasonal ranges. So far, wildlife interests are not at the table as discussions occur about plans and proposals to open important lands to more exploration. Planning for this development through the Interior Department and the Office of the Vice President has not consulted any of us. We have been invited to appear at only one of more than 30 congressional hearings on energy, most of which do not appear to be conducted with concern for the wildlife resources we care about.

We are not opposing orderly development of energy resources to meet our country's needs. However, not all of the restrictions on energy development are products of last minute decisions of the departed Administration. In fact, many of them occurred over several years, with lots of input from wildlife and fisheries organizations. Neither the Congress nor the Bureau of Land Management should make hasty decisions to roll back processes and procedures currently used to conserve wildlife while development occurs.

The problems that would be caused by precipitous action on existing protections for wildlife are shared not only by hunters and anglers. Rural towns in the Green River Basin of Wyoming tell us that half of their annual income is collected during hunting season to motels, restaurants, grocery stores and the like. The Fish and Wildlife Service's National Survey of Hunting and Fishing indicates that annually \$1.8 Billion in retail sales and 43,000 jobs are realized by the states in the Northern Rocky Mountains from hunting alone; add fishing and observing wildlife, and the value is about three times that figure. It is important to note that these are long-term, substantial benefits that accrue regularly to local communities only if wildlife and their habitats are secure. Local people will need to rely on wildlife and fishery resources to sustain their local economy and culture long after energy development is gone.

Accelerated energy development must be done with much more attention to detail, and careful evaluation of costs and benefits, than is evident in much of the recent dialogue. Importantly, organizations representing hunters and anglers have a lot to offer that has not yet been used by government or the Congress. The diverse array of wildlife and fishery organizations can provide evaluation and analysis of important resource values, and we are ready to help. The generalized calls to "open things up" must get back to reality and deal with specific, geographically identified areas to which we can all relate.

We suggest a reasonable platform for the consideration of energy development on public lands: (1) development and production of energy on public lands should be conducted with as much care as such development on private lands; (2) renewable resources such as mule deer and cutthroat trout require equal consideration under law along with mineral extraction; (3) scarce hunter and angler dollars from excise taxes should not have to pay to monitor the effects of development nor fund remedial action, but those tasks must be done and paid for as a required cost of development; and (4) where development occurs, it must be carefully authorized on a site by site basis with specific attention to the fish and wildlife resources.

THE KEY QUESTION FOR THE FUTURE

The real question is: at what cost do wildlife and fish adapt to further intrusions on the landscape? Neither wildlife managers nor the energy industry has the answer, and BLM as the responsible agency for energy development has not been willing to consider the large issue of incremental effects. The issue in most cases will not be that a single road or a single development or a single industry should be blamed for its effects on wildlife. Our mule deer, elk, pronghorn and sage grouse have been affected by roads, fences, ranching and farming, towns, second home development and long-term reduction in habitat quality. Migratory herds in Wyoming live on the National Forest in summer where accelerated development is proposed, and migrate over 100 miles to the sage desert where accelerated development is already underway. Can they persist as we know them with major changes on all parts of their annual range? Herds of elk that previously migrated even further from Jackson Hole to the sage deserts along the Green River can no longer do so because of those multiple influences. At some point the next new activity will be the one that leads to a potential irreversible reduction in the ability of some of these herds to survive—and certainly to sustain the current level of public use and local economic benefit.

A critical need for coping with these changes as they occur is for effective, science-based monitoring to answer specific questions. Many of the potential effects of accelerated energy development are subtle, long-term in nature, and difficult to measure. This results in a continuing standoff where wildlife managers say "look at those roads, structures and activities, they have to have an impact", and development interests say "look at those wildlife standing around the structures, they don't care at all". Our wildlife and fish resources cannot stand this impasse while development occurs.

We propose a concept of "a fund for energy development and wildlife" for your consideration. Revenues from energy development are substantial, and those already collected

from onshore oil and gas producers that go into the U.S. Treasury offer a logical source of funding for wildlife. This would not interfere with the revenues that go to the states or elsewhere. The funds could be redirected for a specified number of years to build up a substantial dedicated fund, and then the revenue stream could be redirected back to the Treasury. The annual proceeds from investing in a dedicated funding base would be available for monitoring and evaluating impacts, and for habitat protection and enhancement of fish and wildlife populations influenced by development. In this manner, the long-term nature of development and necessary active management can be accommodated. All appropriate property rights and other concerns could be dealt with directly in legislation. The funds—designated for wildlife and fish in proportion to the development activity—would go back to the states to fund programs designed to manage these wildlife through the development period. We envision distribution of funds proportional to the amount of development occurring in each state involved in onshore production.

In conclusion, a wide array of wildlife and fishery organizations and our hunters and anglers across America have a stake in the outcome of any decision to accelerate energy development on public lands. It is not enough to proclaim that energy development can occur in all areas in an environmentally sound manner. Some areas are so important, and the alternatives for wildlife in harsh climates are so few, that such sweeping statements are likely incorrect. There is not the current knowledge base that will allow such action to be taken and still assure that wildlife will be sustained, unless a long-term investment is made for the welfare of fish and wildlife that are affected. We suggest that implementing this funding concept would reflect positively on the Congress, Administration and the energy industry. It would bring the solutions back to the states where the issue arose.

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