

Press Release:

Wyoming wildlife supporters tell federal government: Don't risk our mule deer herds

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Contact:

Dustin Bleizeffer
Communications Director
Wyoming Outdoor Council
307.267.3327
dustin@wyomingoutdoorcouncil.org

Federal actions to increase oil and gas development on public lands threaten the viability of the state's already declining mule deer herds.

(LANDER, WY) — In light of overwhelming evidence that energy development is linked to mule deer declines, the Wyoming Outdoor Council is calling upon the federal Bureau of Land Management to stem the tide of oil and gas leasing in crucial habitat. In a letter submitted to the BLM this week, the Outdoor Council summarized the wealth of science regarding the sensitivity of mule deer to development, asking the agency to modify its leasing approach to protect big game herds. Currently, the BLM has put no enforceable measures in place to prevent oil and gas companies from fragmenting and disrupting narrow migration corridors and limited areas of winter range, habitat that allow thousands of mule deer to survive Wyoming's harsh winters.

"This isn't a case where we are uncertain about the impacts of oil and gas development on mule deer," Outdoor Council staff attorney and letter co-author John Rader said. "There is a growing body of peer-reviewed scientific literature to point to, and we are asking that the Department of Interior honor its own commitments to protect our big game herds when they make decisions about where to lease oil and gas parcels."

Under the Trump administration, the BLM has drastically increased acreages offered to oil and gas companies for development, with nearly 1.5 million acres put up in 2018 alone. In the face of these unprecedented and reckless leasing actions, Wyoming residents were encouraged by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke's February directive that federal agencies prioritize conservation of big game winter range and migration corridors. Yet Interior has not acted in good faith to put this order in practice. In a September lease sale, for example, oil and gas companies were able to purchase lease parcels in the middle of the well-documented Red Desert to Hoback migration corridor — at 150 miles long, the world's longest mule deer migration.

Mule deer herds have been steadily declining in the West for decades. In Wyoming, populations have decreased by about 31 percent since 1991. Leading research shows that

industrial development in crucial habitat such as winter range poses a major threat for this already-challenged species. Dr. Kristen Gunther, a co-author and staff member at the Outdoor Council, says that's partly because mule deer lack the adaptability of other big game species.

"They're an anomaly — they use the exact same migration routes every year, and their winter ranges are incredibly well-defined," Gunther said. "When those areas are interrupted, mule deer cannot go somewhere else." This means that the stakes of developing in sensitive habitat are incredibly high. "Even limited development in small, crucial portions of a migration corridor could ultimately have devastating impacts on a deer population."

Declining mule deer herds present a serious challenge to a boom-and-bust energy state that relies on its natural resources to stabilize its economy. Hunting brings in \$300 million to the state annually, and deer are one of the most lucrative game species.

Meanwhile, some oil and gas leases in crucial habitat are selling for just \$2 per acre — the minimum allowable bid in a competitive lease sale. In September, leases sold within the Red Desert to Hoback corridor brought in only a little more than \$50,000. Leases in mule deer winter range and corridors, overall, represent only a small fraction of the lease sales. In the next scheduled sale, for example, less than 8 percent of total acreage put up for bid falls into these habitat types.

"It's simple: winter range and migration corridors are critical for mule deer abundance," said Darek Farmer, Executive Director of Wyoming Hunters and Anglers Alliance. "Without intact habitat, our herd sizes will diminish and these hunting opportunities will be lost forever. I don't know of a single hunter who wants to see that."

Wyoming advocates are losing patience with the BLM, and increasingly worried about what oil and gas leasing will do to local deer herds. Elaine Crumpley, a retired middle school science teacher and co-founder of the grassroots group Citizens United for Responsible Energy Development (CURED) in Pinedale, said she's very concerned with the BLM's reckless leasing actions. The scientific evidence clearly shows that energy development threatens the functionality of these crucial mule deer habitats. "We need more than a lick and a hope that energy companies will cooperate with Wyoming scientists and citizens in protecting deer," Crumpley said. "We need a science-based solution. The leases that we're concerned about are not vital to our state's economy, but our mule deer are."

She notes that residents in Pinedale are very aware of the potential consequences of energy development. Research documented a nearly 40 percent decline in the local deer herd since the onset of major energy development in the Pinedale Anticline. "Oil and gas are vital to the state's economy, but reckless development is extremely dangerous for our communities and natural resources. It's time that we learn from the past and take a more balanced approach to energy development on our public lands."

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