

BLM may limit drilling even more

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CHEYENNE — The U.S. Bureau of Land Management is directing its Wyoming offices to consider certain restrictions for oil and gas drilling, new wind turbines and other types of development in sage grouse habitat.

In many cases, the BLM could limit drilling to one well pad per square mile. Also, the BLM will prohibit many activities during sage grouse breeding season each spring.

Acting BLM State Director Bill Hill sent the guidance to Wyoming's BLM field offices in a memorandum Monday. While restrictions to protect sage grouse aren't a new idea, BLM officials said they want their Wyoming field offices to adopt a more uniform approach to such restrictions statewide.

At the same time, the restrictions are guidelines and don't mandate the same approach to every bit of development proposed in sage grouse habitat, said Chris Keefe, a BLM wildlife biologist in Cheyenne.

"It doesn't say, 'Here's your restrictions, here's how to approach every project,'" said Keefe. "It says, 'These must be considered in your range of alternatives in how to develop things.'"

The guidelines come as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service prepares to decide whether to list sage grouse as an endangered species. That decision is expected no later than next month.

One goal in the memorandum says there should be no more than one new oil or gas well or wind turbine per square mile in core sage grouse habitat.

"There are places where that goal can't be met, but that certainly should be our goal everywhere," Keefe said.

Environmentalists praised the drilling density goal, which is much lower than the density of existing wells in much of Wyoming. It could pre-empt an endangered species listing, said Brian Rutledge, executive director of Audubon Wyoming.

"If we can limit the total development to no more than one pad per section and apply it broadly, we can see this ecosystem continue," Rutledge said. "We can have the energy we need and we can maintain tourism, hunting, et cetera."

Also, any activities that might disturb sage grouse would be prohibited during breeding season. For example, disruptive activities could be prohibited in core area nesting habitat each March 15-June 30.

The BLM restrictions resemble many restrictions already in effect on state land, said Ryan Lance, a deputy chief of staff to Gov. Dave Freudenthal who's been consulting with the BLM and Fish and Wildlife Service on sage grouse.

"It's kind of a unification of the management now across the state," Lance said.

Lance said he's confident about resolving energy industry concerns about seasonal sage grouse restrictions.

Sage grouse are found in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, South Dakota and Wyoming, as well as in Canada. Disappearance of sagebrush habitat is one reason why the birds are believed to have declined between 55 and 90 percent from their historic numbers.