

## **Grouse restrictions kick in**

By The Associated Press

GILLETTE- Annual restrictions that ban most energy-related activities within two miles of active sage grouse breeding areas on federal land are now in effect for the next 3½ months in Wyoming.

Saturday marked the first day of the restrictions.

The federal regulations hit Campbell County especially hard last year and are expected to have a significant impact this year. State and private lands where the regulations do not apply are increasingly drilled out, forcing coalbed methane companies onto more federal land.

In addition, last week, a federal judge decided to hold the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to a May 2009 deadline to decide whether to list the sage grouse as an endangered species, ignoring the service's request for an extension of the deadline. The decision will also require the service to do a new report on the bird and give the public 60 days to comment on that report. The report is due in November.

The more immediate issue of increased restrictions on drilling activities is already being felt in Campbell County, according to Wyoming Oil and Gas Conservation Commission Supervisor Don Likwartz.

### **Declining rig numbers**

"We had about 34 rigs on federal land in November ..." Likwartz said Friday. "By the last two weeks of February, it was down to 29. I expect you will see the number continue to go down until May, when things pick up again."

In addition, Likwartz said that coalbed methane drillers are dealing with tougher terrain this year, which just happens to be the same terrain where other animals - including elk, deer and antelope - live. Those areas often have their own set of restrictions in order to protect wildlife, giving drillers another hurdle to jump when applying for a drilling permit.

Buddy Green, assistant field manager with the Bureau of Land Management in Buffalo, said Friday that the regulations are designed to protect the sage grouse breeding areas, or leks. Drilling can occur only if drillers prove that no active leks are in the area that they wish to drill on.

"We will consider exception requests if the operator follows our protocols and determines the area has no active leks," he said.

Across the West, decisions about the sage grouse are considered crucial to the future of gas and oil drilling, agriculture and urban growth.

Some environmental and conservation groups are seeking to have the grouse listed as threatened or endangered, which would mean imposing stricter rules for protecting the bird.

Federal and state wildlife managers maintain that while the bird's populations are down from historical levels, there are still healthy numbers of grouse.

The Fish and Wildlife Service announced recently that it was conducting a new review of the bird's status.