

# Revision of grouse rules cut down on permits

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CHEYENNE - The Bureau of Land Management's office drastically cut back on issuing drilling permits in northern Wyoming's Powder River Basin while it revised protections for sage grouse, a department official said Thursday.

Field office manager Duane Spencer said the office in Buffalo, Wyo., has issued only about 220 permits so far this year, compared with nearly 3,000 issued last year.

A federal appeals board in March ruled that the BLM failed to adequately consider the negative effects of drilling on the chicken-sized birds when it issued drilling permits on more than 80 wells in the basin. The BLM had to scrap its former sage grouse protection standards and reissue the permits with better protection for the birds before issuing any new permits.

The lack of permits, combined with low prices for Wyoming natural gas, has crimped activity in the Powder River Basin. In May, there were no drilling rigs in operation in the expansive basin.

Bruce Hinchey of the Petroleum Association of Wyoming said he knows of several operators that would be drilling now despite low prices, but "they're not getting any new permits."

Spencer said the Buffalo office should begin issuing permits soon with the better sage grouse protections.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering requests from environmental groups to place the sage grouse on the federal list of threatened and endangered species.

Studies by biologists in 2007 indicated the standard density and pace of coalbed methane development was devastating sage grouse populations in the basin. The birds' population has been in decline for decades, but how many remain is unknown.

Spencer said the new BLM protections will apply to a "much broader area" of grouse habitat. They shouldn't limit the number of drilling permits issued through the office, he said.

"But it may result in more mitigation measures being applied to more wells," he said.

The new protection measures will not have to be reviewed by the federal board that rejected the earlier protections, Spencer said.