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Drilling proposal raises concerns for Little Mountain

DAVID MARTIN, Green River Star

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(This is part one of a three-part series exploring the issue of energy development near Little Mountain.)



THE SCAR FROM a pipeline that was completed last fall runs close to the road going to Little Mountain. Various roads, old seismograph sites and pipelines can be seen from the air. Star photo by Eric Nielsen

The push for natural gas and energy is knocking at the door of Little Mountain, and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department are concerned about wildlife and sportsmen who use the area.

The Little Mountain area, according to Dave Hays, a game warden with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, is one of Wyoming's crown jewels.

"It (hunting at Little Mountain) is Wyoming's equivalent to winning the lottery," Hays said.

With license draw rates as low as they are for the Little Mountain area, residents and nonresidents alike feel lucky to receive a license to hunt the area.

Drawing odds for 2008 list residents having a 6 percent chance of drawing an elk license for the area while residents hunting for deer have a 9.3 percent chance of drawing for a deer permit on Little Mountain.

However, with such small drawing rates, hunters enjoy a high success rate in their hunts.

The 2007 Harvest report shows an 80.2 percent success rate for elk hunters in the area. In 2007, 278 elk licenses were issued, 240 of which were given to resident hunters.

The high success rate and limited quota area leads many hunters to get extremely picky in their choice of animals, according to Monte Morlock.

Morlock, an avid sportsman himself, said some hunters can get greedy because of the number of trophy-quality bull elk in the area.

"If they don't see the big one, they won't shoot," Morlock said.

However, energy development in the area could change that, according to conservation group Sportsmen for Responsible Energy Development.

The group is concerned about recent proposal by Devon Energy for two exploratory well sites to be drilled in the area. One site has already started while the other is hinted at through a line of surveyor's stakes denoting a future road to the planned site.

They're not the only ones concerned either.

The Game and Fish Department also has its concerns.

According to a document outlining the concerns it has with energy development near Little Mountain, the Wyoming Game and Fish consider Little Mountain to have the highest habitat value to aquatic and terrestrial wildlife species, calling the area "a very unique environment in southwest Wyoming."

According to the document, Devon Energy has conducted intensive seismograph exploration involving 45 to 60 workers, two helicopters and vehicles working seven days a week.

The process involved drilling a 2,600 50-foot holes and setting off 10-pound explosives.

The game and fish recommended no seismic activity August through October, suggesting that a window of time for seismic work after Oct. 30 be discussed between the Bureau of Land Management, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and Devon.

The document also states that the public hasn't been adequately informed about the activity and how it will affect people recreating in the area.

"If this seismic activity occurs and the predicted displacement of big game occurs during the hunting seasons, there will be a large outcry from the hunting public," the document states.

The Game and Fish department believe development could harm hunting and other recreational activities for many years.

Another concern for the Game and Fish department is the \$2.1 million ecosystem restoration project that they've conducted since 1990.

The enhancements were paid for through a variety of organizations outside of the department, including the BLM, Trout Unlimited and the Western Wyoming Mule Deer Foundation.

"I really hope its developed in such a way that they think about future generations," said Kevin Spence, wildlife biologist for the Game and Fish Department.

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