

Study Seeks Balance in Rockies

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The pronghorn--the fastest land animal in North America--is the subject of a new study that focuses on the effects of natural gas development on the species in the Upper Green River Valley Basin. Credit: Julie Larsen Maher/Wildlife Conservation Society

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) today--with key support from leading energy producers in the Rockies--released first-year results from a study on how natural gas development in the Rockies might be influencing wildlife, particularly pronghorn antelope.

The report--titled *The Wildlife and Energy Development*

Report--represents initial data of a yet-to-be-completed five-year study by WCS, funded by Shell Exploration & Production Company, Ultra Resources, Inc., and others. The study focuses on how natural gas development influences wildlife in a region that serves as a critical wintering ground for pronghorn antelope, the focus species of the study.

“The Upper Green River Valley Basin contains some of the nation’s most spectacular wildlife, including pronghorn, one of the most prominent and wide-ranging species of the western United States,” said WCS researcher Dr. Joel Berger, co-author of the study with WCS scientists Dr. Jon Beckmann and Kim Murray Berger. “With support from our energy producing partners, this study will provide empirical information on how pronghorn respond to energy development, which will not only inform the process for responsibly managing the valley’s resources, but can serve as a model to balance wildlife needs with energy development across the Rocky Mountain region.”

While subject to change after further data are collected, preliminary findings from the first year of the five-year study point to the following:

- 1) Pronghorn can adapt to the presence of humans when not hunted or harassed, but tend to avoid areas that are fragmented by gas fields, roads, and other types of development.
- 2) Based on statistical models, pronghorn are more prone to use undisturbed parcels greater than 600 acres in size.
- 3) Animals captured both in and among gas fields and outside of petroleum development areas had no differences in either body mass (a measure of an animal’s health), mineral deficiencies, disease, fecundity, or contaminant levels, indicating that proximity to development had no effect on the health of the pronghorn.

Renowned for its natural beauty and abundant wildlife populations, the Upper Green River Basin in western Wyoming also holds vast reserves of clean natural gas needed for home heating, industrial production, and electric power generation.

“For Shell, excellence in energy production requires our operations to be environmentally sustainable, as well as economically viable,” said J.R. Justus, Shell Exploration & Production Company. “We are investing in this important study to better understand how we can responsibly meet growing energy demands while protecting wildlife. In the end, high standards for energy development, innovative technologies and partnerships between industry and research groups like WCS will create the win-win solutions ensuring pronghorn and other wildlife are protected.”

The study also utilized input from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, the Bureau of Land Management, and local groups, including sportsmen, environmental planners and activists, town and county officials, ranchers, and the general public. Further analyses of the movements of pronghorn in the study will be presented in later reports and may alter the current conclusions.

“We believe that if we have enough reliable data, we will be able to shape our operations in ways that allow pronghorn and other wildlife to continue thriving,” said Bill Picquet, Ultra Resources, Inc. “Working together with WCS allows us to create efficiencies and make informed choices on how to responsibly recover the clean natural gas Americans need to sustain our way of life.”

Source: Wildlife Conservation Society

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