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The Growing Conflict Between Hunting, Fishing, and Energy Development on Federal Lands

By Stephen P. Mealey
B&C Honorary Life Member

BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB TESTIMONY **House Committee on Natural Resources Oversight Hearing** **Washington, DC**

Steve Mealey testified on behalf of the Club March 27, 2007, at the House Committee on Natural Resources Oversight Hearing in Washington DC. The hearing of the full committee chaired by Nick Rahall (D-West Virginia) was part of the committee leadership's "ongoing effort to examine the rapid oil and gas development that has taken place on our nation's public lands in recent years... and the impact of this development on other public uses, natural resources, and values."

Steve's testimony featured "a brief case study of cooperation among sportsmen, and folks from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WG&F), the BLM, and the Secretary's Office of the US Department of Interior, who continue to work hard together to balance wildlife and energy development in the Upper Green River Basin in Wyoming." Steve was one of a panel of six who testified. Others on the panel were:

Steve Williams – Wildlife Management Institute (B&C Professional Member)

Dan Gibbs – Colorado State Representative

William Hite – Plumbers and Pipe Fitters Union

Kinsey Robinson – Roofers and Waterproofers Union

Rollie Sparrowe – Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (B&C Professional Member)

Charles Greenhawt – Questar Corporation

The challenge of balancing energy development and wildlife needs in the West is not a new issue, and industry and wildlife professionals continue to create novel ways to solve these challenges.

The following case study describes how cooperation among sportsmen and representatives from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WG&F), the BLM, and the Secretary's Office of the USDI created a balanced approach to wildlife and energy development in the Upper Green River Basin in Wyoming.

Background

In the summer of 2000, 35 dedicated wildlife conservation organizations representing nearly 4.5 million hunter-conservationists met in Missoula, Montana, at Boone and Crockett Club headquarters. At this meeting, they formed the American Wildlife Conservation Partners (AWCP), a federation of groups who work together to unify their collective strength and apply it to common challenges and opportunities to protect wildlife, habitat, hunting, trapping and the way of life they represent.

In August 2005, the AWCP held its annual meeting at the Safari Club International Headquarters on the Gros Ventre River in Wyoming. Part of that meeting included a four-hour tour of part of the Pinedale Anticline Energy Development Project in Wyoming's Upper Green River Basin.

Four months later at the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, several members of AWCP groups and some other interested parties met to discuss and analyze observations and information from the Pinedale Anticline field trip. This Energy Working Group prepared a draft report that identified several major issues that affected wildlife during energy development. These included:

- Accountability for Records of Decision
- Implementation of adaptive management
- ESA concerns — especially sage grouse
- Evaluation of stipulations, and
- Importance of implementing a large-scale habitat initiative.

These issues were shared informally with then-BLM Director Kathleen Clarke in February 2006 and again with USDI Deputy Secretary Lynne Scarlett in an Energy Working Group meeting in March 2006.

Also in March 2006, then-USDI Secretary Norton created a new Sporting Conservation Council (SCC) to advise the department on resource conservation issues, including energy development and wildlife resources. Twelve individuals were appointed to the council from AWCP partner organizations, including:

- Boone and Crockett Club
- National Wild Turkey Federation
- Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
- Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation
- Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
- National Rifle Association
- Ruffed Grouse Society
- Ducks Unlimited

The SCC charter has been revised to include USDA as an advisory agency for SCC. On January 8, 2007, the SCC sent Secretaries Kempthorne and Johanns recommendations, including ones supporting the implementation and funding of a large-scale (landscape scale) energy/wildlife conservation initiative and a cooperative sagebrush initiative to protect dry shrublands and sage grouse.

There are several recent and very positive signs of progress toward reaching balance between energy development and wildlife conservation in the Upper Green River Basin.

The Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative (WLCI): A partnership among federal and state agencies, industry and stakeholders to improve habitat conditions and long-term viability of species at the landscape scale. (The following may be necessary to assure that the WLCI succeeds: Slowing development of existing leases; completing landscape level analysis before new leases are issued; verifying that current staffing and funding are sufficient; and involving state agencies early in BLM project planning.)

The Cooperative Sagebrush Initiative: A mostly private partnership designed to conserve the shrub-steppe ecosystem and sage grouse.

Elk and pronghorn are at or above WG&F desired population levels, while mule deer numbers are below, but not far from objectives. The stage is set to find a sustainable balance point for energy development and wildlife in the Upper Green River Basin.

The Healthy Lands Initiative: A USDI-BLM program to emphasize and fund landscape-level approaches for continued multiple uses. The \$22 million program will support energy/wildlife planning in Wyoming, New Mexico, Utah, Southern Idaho, Colorado, and Oregon-Idaho-Nevada. The Green River Basin will receive a major part of the funding.

Also important is the commitment of the BLM, in the updated BLM Pinedale Resource Management Plan documents, to

“manage to provide habitat consistent with WG&F Department population objectives for the area.” That means the BLM is committed to providing the habitat necessary to support the wildlife population levels WG&F thinks appropriate for the Pinedale area.

In the end, wildlife populations, habitat and places to hunt on federal land in the Upper Green River Basin are a function of the WG&F Department, the BLM, and the energy development companies doing their jobs effectively, separately and together.

The right commitments to wildlife population numbers and landscape level planning have been made with substantial funding provided. Elk and pronghorn are at or above WG&F desired population levels, while mule deer numbers are below, but not far from objectives. The stage is set to find a sustainable balance point for energy development and wildlife in the Upper Green River Basin. ■

Steve Mealey is an Honorary Life Member of the Boone and Crockett Club and co-chair of the USDI/USDA Advisory Sporting Conservation Council Wildlife/Energy Subcommittee.