

STATE OFFICE PRESS RELEASE
Oil and Gas Rules Protect Sage-Grouse



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State Oil and Gas Commission Approves Rules That Help Ensure Wildlife's Future in Colorado

Five leading wildlife conservation groups are praising the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission's approval of new rules to protect wildlife during energy development and say the rules help ensure the future of the state's wildlife habitat.

"The future looks a lot brighter for wildlife than it did two years ago," said Steve Torbit, a veteran wildlife biologist and regional executive director of the National Wildlife Federation.

"Industry will find that these rule are workable and reasonable," Torbit said. "Factoring in wildlife conservation will become a natural way of doing business for the natural gas industry."

The rule making requires drilling companies to consult with the Colorado Division of Wildlife before development begins and emphasizes the use of comprehensive development plans and the best available technology to minimize the number of well pads. The rules are required to implement the intent of the Colorado Habitat Stewardship Act passed unanimously by the Colorado Legislature and signed by Gov. Bill Ritter last year.

"The Commission and staff processed an enormous amount of detailed information over the summer and came up with a compromise that factors in the minimum protections needed by wildlife to withstand the intensive development of Colorado's oil and gas resources on the West Slope," said Suzanne O'Neill, executive director of the Colorado Wildlife Federation.

"We view the Commission's actions as a workable, balanced compromise," O'Neill said.

The work of staff members from the Colorado Division of Wildlife and Department of Natural Resources drew support from the wildlife conservation groups.

"As a former director of a state agency, I couldn't be more proud of the work of the DOW and DNR staffs to credibly use science as a guide to develop regulations to avoid and minimize impacts to wildlife," said Gary Graham, executive director of Audubon Colorado.

“These rules offer the best protections in the West for wildlife in the face of a daunting challenge from expanding oil and gas development,” Graham said. “They are particularly important for Greater Sage-Grouse, a species that has declined a great deal following development.”

“Future generations will look back at what the wildlife conservation community has achieved here and say, ‘They gave their best,’” said Ivan James, vice-chairman for legislation for the Colorado Bowhunters Association. “Now it’s time for us to work for the full implementation of these rules,” James said. “Industry has the technical expertise to do a great job to conserve our wildlife resource and sportsmen and other wildlife conservationists remain ready to help them achieve our common goal.”

The new rules limit the number of well pads that can be developed in important wildlife habitat, particularly in areas important to the protection of Greater Sage-Grouse, a native species that has already been proposed for listing under the endangered species act.

“If rules like these were implemented in other states as they will be in Colorado, that could go a long way toward precluding the necessity to list the sage grouse as endangered,” Graham said.

Bob Elderkin, the former Bureau of Land Management regulator who first conceived the set of wildlife guidelines that led to the Habitat Stewardship Act, also emphasized the importance of the compromise regulations.

“The conservation community didn’t get all it wanted and neither did industry,” said Elderkin, a member of the Colorado Mule Deer Association. “But these rules are important because the number of well pads in an area can be reduced to avoid impacts to wildlife.

“Industry has the technical ability to drill a number of wells directionally from a single pad,” he explained. “Reducing the number of well pads will probably have a greater positive impact than anything else we’ve done for wildlife.”

The DNR staff will now write the final rules and the Oil and Gas Commission will consider final approval this October.

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