



## **WildEarth Guardians asks BLM to postpone, restrict, oil drilling in Douglas sage grouse area**

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CHEYENNE, Wyoming — The environmental group WildEarth Guardians has asked the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to postpone approving and then impose restrictions on oil drilling in designated sage grouse habitat east of Douglas.

BLM officials say they are reviewing the request but haven't been planning to approve Chesapeake Energy's handful of currently pending federal drilling permits in the Douglas Core Area any time soon.

"We really haven't started working them yet because we have such a big backlog of permits to get through," Joe Meyer, manager of the BLM's Casper Field Office, said Monday of the company's plans to drill in the core area.

A recent agreement between Chesapeake and the Wyoming governor's office, however, could allow hundreds of new oil wells in the Douglas Core Area in years to come.

"Just because the state of Wyoming falls down on the job in terms of protecting sage grouse core area habitat doesn't make it acceptable for the Bureau of Land Management to do that for the public lands and minerals," Erik Molvar with the group said.

WildEarth Guardians formally asked Interior Secretary Sally Jewell and Interim BLM Director Neil Kornze on Thursday to postpone approving new roads or well pads in the Douglas Core Area. The core area covers about 140 square miles of rolling sagebrush country targeted for oil development.

Wyoming officials have designated 31 such areas statewide that contain sage grouse leks, or breeding areas, and abundant sagebrush as core sage grouse habitat. Restrictions on development in core areas include not allowing more than one well pad per square mile.

The goal of the strategy is to help sage grouse sufficiently to convince the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that the birds don't need federal protection.

The BLM has praised the core area strategy and is adopting it throughout the state. BLM officials expect to finish that process next year. WildEarth Guardians has asked Interior to wait on the well pads and roads until that happens.

After that, the group says, the BLM should follow several conditions for approving new drilling within the Douglas Core Area, including restrictions on work during nesting and breeding seasons.

Additional development of as-yet undeveloped land in the core area, on the other hand, will preclude core area protections from being "a viable alternative to listing under the Endangered Species Act," the group's letter states.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service faces a 2015 deadline to decide whether to protect the greater sage grouse as a threatened or endangered species. On Friday, Fish and Wildlife announced that it proposes to list greater sage grouse in Nevada and California as threatened.

Sage grouse are chicken-sized birds found in 11 Western states and over only about half of their historic range. Wyoming has more sage grouse and suitable habitat for them than any other state and a substantial oil and gas industry that could be impeded by a sage grouse listing.

The Douglas Core Area development plan recently agreed to between the governor's office and Chesapeake would allow the company to build 92 new well pads. The well pads would be clustered away from undisturbed sage grouse habitat, but each pad could support half a dozen or more wells.

Chesapeake spokeswoman Lindsay McIntyre did not respond to emailed questions, including how many wells Chesapeake intends to drill in the Douglas Core Area.

As it is, human development and wildfires have disturbed as much as 22 percent of the Douglas Core Area — far more than the 5 percent maximum allowed under the state core area strategy.

Less than 1 percent of the Douglas Core Area is federal land, but the federal government owns the minerals, including the oil and gas, underlying about 40 percent of the core area.

The BLM has been aware of the more than yearlong process between the governor's office and Chesapeake to negotiate the Douglas Core Area development plan, Meyer said, but hasn't been directly involved in that work.

Chesapeake has the right to drill on valid, existing leases in the Douglas Core Area, and the development plan will allow drilling to occur while directing development away from where the birds are found, said Renny MacKay, spokesman for Gov. Matt Mead.

"There's going to be a lot of monitoring as we look at that population there to make sure they are OK," MacKay said.