

BLM should err on side of wildlife

W Wyoming's mule deer and antelope herds are in trouble. The landscapes, the ecological nets that have sustained the free-ranging herds are eroding. Drought is one of the natural problems facing big game and other wildlife that are beyond human control. But the growth of Wyoming's towns has taken away some winter range. Fire suppression over the past hundred years has favored shrubs over grasses, creating decadent shrub stands of much less value to the critters. Roads bisect migration routes. Industrial development carves up the deserts and the high plains. Fences restrict movement. Poor livestock grazing practices in some areas deplete the range.

There's no single cataclysm ahead. But the herds have become more vulnerable. When a drought and an extraordinarily tough winter combine to cause a population crash, it takes longer for the herds to recover. They don't come back to previous levels. So there's a slow notching-down in animal numbers.

The ecological net that supports the herd is not suddenly being shredded. Rather, it's as if the net is slowly being gnawed apart by a hundred mice. Even the people trying to photograph trophy deer trying to hold out on the winter range contribute to the general stress on the herds.

As a society, we've charged our state wildlife agency with the responsibility of protecting wildlife. Federal land management agencies must protect wildlife on the public lands they manage.

The Bush administration's push to find more sources of energy puts greater pressure on the Bureau of Land Management to grant exceptions to oil and gas exploration and development. However, the BLM must not neglect its prime directive, that of protecting wildlife and wildlife habitat.

The BLM gave an exception to a Texas company that is using seismic exploration to map gas deposits in the Adobe Town badlands area of southeastern Sweetwater County. Ordinarily, the BLM closes those critical areas on Nov. 15. However, the BLM granted the company an extension to Dec. 1.

The BLM said that due to the warm weather, continuing seismic exploration would not cause stress on the big game animals. Then came the big snow storm.

Such extensions should be granted on the condition that an operator agrees that a significant change in the weather could force an immediate work stoppage. Flexibility by the agency should be matched by industry flexibility.

Surface disturbance of critical winter range can cause big game to abandon their winter habitat. The Adobe Town badlands are essential to the survival of mule deer and pronghorn antelope. The area provides necessary shelter and

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The Wyoming Game and Fish Department had identified two crucial winter ranges in the Adobe Town badlands. Such critical ranges are normally given greater protection because they are so important to wildlife survival.

There will always be competing interests on our public lands. Conserving wildlife populations should be given the highest priority. When in doubt, the BLM must err on the side of protecting habitat essential to protecting those populations.