

REGIONAL

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STUDY: DRILLING AFFECTS MULE DEER HERDS

PINEDALE (AP) — A seven-year study found that natural gas development is affecting population size and the distribution of wintering mule deer in southwest Wyoming.

But it also showed that mule deer numbers stabilized and then increased during the final three years of the study on the Mesa portion of the Pinedale Anticline.

The study by Western Ecosystems Technology concluded that mule deer numbers declined in the Mesa by 30 percent overall from 2000-2007.

The study was designed to better understand potential energy-related impacts on wintering mule deer in the Pinedale Anticline gas field.

The study authors said the results suggest that efforts to minimize direct and indirect habitat loss from future oil and gas development should focus on "technology and planning that reduce the number of well pads and the human activity associated with them."

Oil and gas industry officials said the study documents the increasing winter use of the Pinedale Anticline by mule deer over

the past three years and reflects the success of the industry's ongoing mitigation efforts in the field.

"Questar is encouraged by this positive trend and believes that recent mitigation such as the installation of a liquids gathering system and increased directional drilling have played a positive role," Diana Hoff, general manager of the Pinedale Division for Questar Exploration and Production, Inc., said in a release.

"We are also pleased to see that the migration routes of

the mule deer, to and from the Mesa, are intact and functional," she said.

"(The study) documented a 30 percent decline in mule deer over seven years. ... By any scientific standards, this is hugely significant," Linda Baker with the Upper Green River Valley Coalition, said.

"The health of our wildlife will depend on reducing the number of well pads and wintertime human disturbance in the field, especially because (the study showed) winter drill pads were avoided the most" by mule deer, Baker said in an e-mail.