

Official Says Lack of Pipelines Threatens Wildlife

JAMES MacPHERSON, Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Too few pipelines moving crude to market is the biggest threat to wildlife in western North Dakota's booming oil patch at present, an industry official said Tuesday.

About half of North Dakota's record oil production is being shipped by rail and truck because of lack of pipeline infrastructure. Obtaining easements from landowners, acquiring permits and building a sufficient pipeline network "is a huge issue to the state of North Dakota and a huge issue to wildlife," said Ron Ness, president of the North Dakota Petroleum Council.

But a spokesman for the state chapter of The Wildlife Society said after the meeting that oil development in general is damaging wildlife and its habitat.

Ness told a gathering of oil industry officials and wildlife and conservation representatives Tuesday that heavy truck traffic causes safety issues, more road wear and creates "safety issues," and that building more pipelines would reduce traffic and cut the number of animal-vehicle collisions in the oil patch.

Encouraging the movement of oil by pipeline was among a list of recommendations presented Tuesday by those gathered, the volunteer group that's looking at how to reduce impacts on North Dakota's land and wildlife. Other voluntary measures included locating oil wells, related facilities and roads in "clustered configurations" outside of wildlife sensitive areas to lessen disturbance to animals and curb the amount of habitat lost to oil exploration.

Michael McEnroe, The Wildlife Society spokesman and a retired U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologist, attended the event Tuesday. Although he is a member of the so-called Sporting and Oil Industry Forum, he was not one of its invited speakers.

"You can't put that kind of industry in the entire western part of the state and not have an impact," he told The Associated Press. "People think that wildlife will just go over the hill. Except that over the hill in western North Dakota, there is another oil well."

McEnroe said he would like to see more stringent regulations in place — that are not voluntary — to protect the state's wildlife and land.

"Volunteer guidelines are like putting a Gideons Bible in a motel room nightstand," McEnroe said.

Terry Steinwand, director of the state Game and Fish Department, said oil development and wildlife and hunting opportunities in western North Dakota can coexist.

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"Is it a perfect scenario? No it's not," he said. "But it is a workable scenario."

The agency has been working at mapping sensitive wildlife habitat areas for more than a year that will be shared with the energy industry, Steinwand said. A map outlining mule deer habitat in western North Dakota was unveiled Tuesday and similar mapping efforts are being done for bighorn sheep, sage grouse and pronghorn antelope, he said.

Ness, whose company represents more than 400 companies working in the state's oil patch, said most of the employees in the energy industry are sportsmen and most of their companies would adopt measures to protect wildlife.

Blaine Hoffman, a spokesman for Denver-based Whiting Petroleum Corp., said the company has been leasing land around its oil properties, reseeding it with native grasses, solely for the purpose of enhancing wildlife habitat.

"The idea came from our employees," he said.

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