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Widespread virus knocks on Johnson County's door

By JENNIFER BURDEN
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Physicians at the Johnson County Healthcare Center may have discovered the first case of Enterovirus D68 in Wyoming last week when they admitted two individuals into the hospital, both of which had difficulty breathing.

Enterovirus D68 is sweeping across the country and inflicting hundreds of children in multiple states. The virus acts like the common cold but can have devastating effects on children, especially those with a history of asthma or wheezing.

"One of the people who was admitted, a child, fits the pattern and has symptoms that are very characteristic of this virus," said Dr. Mark Schueler with the Johnson County Healthcare Center. "This child has had a history with respiratory illness."

Two individuals were admitted into the hospital, Schueler said, but only one sample will be sent to the state laboratory and on to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lab in Atlanta to determine if the individual contracted Enterovirus D68.

Symptoms of the virus include sneezing, coughing, runny nose, body and muscle aches and potentially wheezing and difficulty breathing. According to the CDC, Enterovirus D68 was first identified in California in 1962, but it has not been commonly reported in the United States.

Until last week, Schueler said the health care center hadn't seen any cases that specifically met the criteria for a severe virus such as Enterovirus D68, and Wyoming Department of Health officials say they are unsure at this point whether there have been any cases across the state.

ENTEROVIRUS

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Bulletin photo by Andy Kerstetter

Buffalo public works employee Jenny Benton shovels snow off of the Heritage Bridge in downtown Buffalo Thursday morning. City crews were out in force, scrambling from dawn to dusk clearing roads and removing branches after Buffalo's heaviest first snowfall on record.

Let it snow

Buffalo sets record for earliest snowstorm

By KRISTI SHALLENBERGER
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Buffalo residents woke up to nearly a foot of white, wet and heavy snow last week, which had devastating effects on trees and power lines across the area.

A cold front from Canada spread across the northern United States, according to Jason Anglin, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Riverton, leaving much of northern and central Wyoming buried in snow.

"You know it's definitely not common to see snow this early," Anglin said. "Normally when you think of snow, you think it starts in October and goes through March."

Buffalo received a record-breaking 6 to 8 inches of snow, measured by the National Weather Service, on Sept. 11, though some areas in the county recorded as much as a foot. The snow fell two weeks earlier than last year and brought at least 4 more inches. The earliest snowfall on record in the state occurred Sept. 6, 1929, near Riverton.

SNOW

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Tending to damaged trees

Broken limbs scattered across yards point to obvious damage from the unprecedented snowstorm last Thursday. But landowners should look further than bark deep when it comes to lasting trauma to their trees.

"Long-term impacts would be obviously when you have breakage of limbs. It's an open wound, which is why getting that pruned and cleaned up is so important," said Kelly Norris, district forester for Wyoming State Forestry division.

TREES

continued on page A17

Landowner calls foul on proposed lake lease

By KRISTI SHALLENBERGER
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Kim Love has been outspoken about his dissent of a proposed Lake DeSmet operation agreement between the Johnson County Board of Commissioners and Sasol Synfuels, and the Johnson County landowner recently expressed those concerns to Cheyenne attorney Bruce Moats.

Dissatisfied with the agreement's perpetuity clause, Love requested Moat's opinion, and the results of that opinion could mean that state law prohibits Johnson County from signing the agreement as is.

When Lake DeSmet passed from the Lake DeSmet Counties Coalition into Johnson County's hands, Sasol desired a new, formal agreement, Johnson County Commissioner Jim Hicks said. That agreement continues to call for Sasol to pay 31 percent of operation and maintenance expenses for Lake DeSmet, but the agreement is also written to last forever.

LEASE

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Aiming for more space

Johnson County Family YMCA eyes use of archery building

By ANDY KERSTETTER
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The Johnson County Family YMCA is running out of room for its growing youth activities, and after a proposed facility expansion was put on hold, YMCA staff members decided to pursue another option — the city-owned archery building across from the Buffalo City Pool.

At a Buffalo City Council meeting earlier this month, YMCA personnel proposed potential uses for the building, like youth enrichment programs and community events.

BUILDING

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Hatching a plan for sage grouse survival

Ranchers and energy producers work to conserve sage grouse

By KRISTI SHALLENBERGER
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Greater sage grouse are struggling in Johnson County.

The struggle stretches over several Western states, including Wyoming. Many factors have been blamed: hunting, ranching and energy development. The thing is, no one knows for sure what exactly has caused the precipitous decline in the species population. The one thing that is known is that greater sage grouse are disappearing across the West.

In 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service named the greater sage grouse a candidate for the endangered species list. The September 2015 deadline has spurred legislators, ranchers and energy producers into laying out plans to conserve sage grouse.

Ryan Fieldgrove, a Johnson County rancher and a banker at the First Northern Bank of Wyoming, considers his motives to conserve the greater sage grouse habitat on his ranch a mixture of nostalgia and fear, especially if the greater sage grouse is listed.

"I grew up seeing the birds," Fieldgrove said. "I think there's some nostalgia behind that and the birds are kind of neat."

Fieldgrove embodies the complex situation faced by many ranchers in Johnson County watching and preparing for the potential listing. While ranching has not been determined as a major factor in the bird's decline, according to Bill Ostheimer, supervisory natural resource specialist for the BLM Buffalo Field Office, overgrazing and converting rangeland into crops are a threat. A listing could bog down ranchers with more regulations if they want to change their ranching operations on their land. Fieldgrove agrees.

"If any species are listed as endangered, it truly reduces your opportunities to make changes on your operations, especially if it's public land."
- Ryan Fieldgrove, Johnson County rancher

SAGE GROUSE

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Moon shines



Bulletin photo by Emma Kennedy

Former Bison Football coach Mike Moon and former Buffalo High School principal George Grace share a joke at Moon's dedication ceremony on Friday night. The BHS football field was renamed "Mike Moon Field" in honor of the coach. Read more about the field dedication on page A3.

Eight-day outlook

provided by www.weather.com

Thurs. Sept. 18

Mostly Sunny
High 89°/Low 58°



Fri. Sept. 19

Isolated T-storms
High 74°/Low 52°



Sat. Sept. 20

Sunny
High 72°/Low 50°



Sun. Sept. 21

Sunny
High 73°/Low 49°



Mon. Sept. 22

Mostly sunny
High 75°/Low 50°



Tues. Sept. 23

PM showers
High 75°/Low 50°



Wed. Sept. 24

Mostly sunny
High 79°/Low 51°



Thurs. Sept. 25

PM showers
High 73°/Low 47°



County residents to tap city water

By **ANDY KERSTETTER**
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Several Johnson County residents will have an opportunity to tap into Buffalo city water, thanks to the nearly completed northwest water supply line — but they have a couple of loopholes to jump through first.

A group of four county landowners near the Johnson County Fairgrounds hope to build a water distribution line off of the project's transmission line that will run past the fairgrounds.

Two of the landowners, Steve Adami and Nick Smith, approached the Buffalo City Council at its regular meeting Sept. 2 with Nelson Engineering project manager Brent Bennett to solicit the council's support in the endeavor.

"What Mr. Adami and adjacent homeowners approached us about is to get your thoughts and permission or support for them to tap onto the northwest water line for the purpose of expanding off of that line," Bennett said.

Bennett said the landowners would like to install an approximately 40-foot distribution line off of the main transmission line at a T in the line included by North Star Energy, the contractor on the project.

"Obviously, this would have to go through DEQ and be approved before it can happen," Bennett said.

Bennett said the four individual landowners would be the users of the new distribution line, which they would fund and would become part of the city-owned system upon completion.

"[The residents] would be responsible for the service lines outside of the distribution line," Bennett said.

The landowners would need to build the 40-foot distribution line — off of which they would build their individual service lines — because Wyoming Water Development Commission, which

funded a majority of the roughly \$3.2 million project, prohibits anyone from tapping directly into a transmission line.

Each resident will need to pay an out-of-city water tap fee of \$5,000. Nelson Engineering estimates the 40-foot distribution line will cost about \$40 a foot, or about \$1,600 total.

Mayor Randy Dyess said he has no problems with the idea, but that the city council should check with WWDC to see if there would be any problems with the plan.

"We cannot risk having a booboo because we decided to approve something without permission," Dyess said.

Dyess said the distribution line would need to be approved by the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality, which itself is contingent upon approval by the WWDC. DEQ approval could take anywhere from 45 to 60 days, Dyess said.

He also said that after construction is complete, the water line's ownership transfers to the city, upon which time the council can make any such decisions.

But during construction and funding, the answer is always going to be "no" or "check," Dyess said.

All of the council members agreed that they needed more information from the WWDC before they gave their approval for the project, although Dyess said the residents and Nelson Engineering could continue drafting plans for their distribution line to eventually show to the DEQ for approval. Councilman Russ Humphrey moved and Councilman Stan Lakin had seconded to table the matter until the council's Sept. 15 meeting.

"We have to get the information from the WWDC whether this is OK and then we'll look at the DEQ permit," Dyess said. "To me it looks fine, but I've

made mistakes before, and these are big dollars."

Adami said he hoped the council would have given their approval at the Sept. 2 meeting, because his need for city water is urgent.

"For me, two weeks is a big deal," Adami said.

Adami said that he used to piggyback water off of the fairgrounds' supply, but he was shut off last winter. Since then, he has had to use an inefficient well to get his water.

He said the well he's been using has brought up water that is full of sand, and it can take a day or two for the water to settle up. And with some sensitive ranching operations going on at his property, access to quality water is vital.

He said his family does most of their ranching operations at their main ranch in the county, but for some high-maintenance operations, such as weaning calves, his property by the fairgrounds is required.

"For stuff that needs a lot of attention, it's nice to have land near town," he said.

And while he does have access to water, the well isn't a viable alternative for the long term, he said.

"It's water, but it's not a long-range solution," Adami said. "After this, that land won't ever have to have this kind of disruption ever again."

Dyess said the waterline has been tested and pressurized all the way to North Main Street. The final test section is by the fairgrounds, and the date for final completion on the northwest water line will be around Nov. 1.

At the council's meeting Tuesday, Adami and Bennett returned with permission from the WWDC in hand to proceed with the project. The council unanimously approved. The residents hope to have designs completed this fall.



Bulletin photo by Krysti Shallenberger
The cracked dirt is a reminder of the heavy rains flooding the Jones' ranch near Dead Horse Creek. The floods added a mini-lake on the state land the Joneses leased and backed up the creek for several miles. But this was just a culmination in a 20-year-long problem after the Wyoming Department of Transportation mashed down a culvert while widening Interstate 90. That action led to water backing up the formerly ephemeral stream and silting over fence-line and fence posts.

Happy ending for Dead Horse Creek

WYDOT, landowners come to agreement

By **KRISTI SHALLENBERGER**
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Rancher Tom Jones, his wife, Helen, and her son and daughter-in-law received some good news recently regarding the state of their leased land surrounding Dead Horse Creek. An agreement with the Wyoming Department of Transportation means that Interstate 90 will be raised and a new culvert will be installed to hopefully prevent future flooding in the area.

The Jones family sat down with Scott Taylor and Isaac Finkle, WYDOT engineers, last week to discuss solutions for the spring flooding that left piles of debris and a mini-lake on their leased land.

In August, the Joneses approached the Johnson County commissioners about the problems on their land that stemmed from 1992 when WYDOT widened Interstate 90 and mashed down a culvert previously used by Tom Jones to move cattle, as well as to drain floodwaters from their properties.

Dead Horse Creek is an ephemeral stream with water only running through it after a storm.

Two years after the repairs on the interstate, Tom Jones saw the creek water back up into the originally dry channel. More than 20 years of silt and standing water created a wetland on state property that the Jones family leases.

Helen Jones called it a "takings of private property" at a commissioner's meeting last month.

"Pushing that water up our creek ruins our best

calving ground, and that's probably my second burn because I fought too hard to keep this the way it is," Helen Jones said.

Five years ago, WYDOT investigated possible repairs to the interstate, which included a road overlay coupled with improvements to the bridge and ramp, according to Finkle. But the flooding changed those plans.

WYDOT adapted its plan to include a dike and a 36-inch culvert. But Tom and Helen Jones weren't satisfied. Finkle visited the Joneses at their ranch several times after the flooding, and WYDOT finally hired a hydrologist to examine other options, and four sprouted from the report. But WYDOT also wanted to discuss those options with the Joneses and select the one that best suited their needs, Finkle said.

They finally found one.

"We got what we wanted," Helen said. "It was a very good meeting, and WYDOT was really cooperative."

Both parties settled on raising the Interstate and installing a 72-inch culvert, Finkle said. WYDOT also plans to clear the debris from the channel. Applying for a permit from the Army Corps of Engineers could take as little as 45 days if there's little impact to the wetlands with little work involved including the public comment period, Finkle said, but that's the very best-case scenario.

Despite the permitting hassle, both parties expressed satisfaction with the new solution.

"We're really happy, and hopefully we can prevent the interstate from flooding and (keep it from flooding) the people too," Finkle said.

Road project stirs confusion

By **KRISTI SHALLENBERGER**
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Several residents appeared at the Sept. 2 meeting of the Johnson County commissioners confused and upset over a proposed road project between the intersection of Shell Creek and Rock Creek roads.

The confusion stemmed from controversy over the proposed Big 5 parking lot, which aimed to ease access issues for hunters and other recreational users. Residents thought the two projects were related when, in fact, they are not, according to the commissioners and Scott Pehringer, supervisor for Johnson County Road and Bridge.

Several residents saw the

surveyor employed by the Road and Bridge Department measuring Cook Hill where the commissioners proposed building the controversial parking lot and perceived that the two were connected, Pehringer said. Hence the objections at the Sept. 2 meeting.

The road improvement project entails replacing three rotted culverts alongside Shell Creek Road and realigning the road to alleviate the poor view at the intersection, Pehringer said.

However, the project needs a construction permit to access the culverts through the Evitt property. The Evitt property is currently undergoing litigation involving the estate since Chuck Evitt passed away, Pehringer said. The delay caused by the

litigation throws a wrench into the project, he said. If the county can't obtain the permit, Pehringer said, Road and Bridge will have to close Shell Creek Road for six to eight weeks to complete construction.

The project is only in its engineering phase right now, Pehringer said. Road and Bridge plans to accept bids in February. The department budgeted \$600,000 for the project. If all goes as planned, Pehringer said, crews will start next summer.

The construction will leave the old culverts and add three new culverts. The permit asks for a temporary use of property that will allow the department to cut through the Evitt property instead of shutting down Shell Creek Road completely.

AROUND the town

Fire ban lifted

The fire ban implemented earlier this year by Johnson County fire warden Rick Farris will be lifted Sept. 19. Farris cautions Johnson

County residents to use common sense when burning as the next few weeks promise warm, dry temperatures that can enhance the potential for wildfires.

THANK YOU

The Johnson County Livestock Committee would like to say thanks to the individuals and businesses who made this years sale a success.

Buyers

Ace Hardware
AM Dirtworks
Anadarko of Linch
Anadarko of Powder River
Annie's Antiques
Arndt Ranch
Bob and Dolly Arndt
Bar 6 Ranch
Bauer Land and Livestock
BF Construction
Big Horn Coop
Big Horn Meat
Big Horn Tire
Big Horn Veterinary Clinic
Black Tooth Large
Animal Services
Lynne Boogaarden
Boot Jack Ranch
Buffalo Bulletin
C&K Equipment
Don & Sheila Camino
Carlat Construction
Castle Rock Ag
CCC Services
Cetera Advisor Network
Cross H Ranch

Ed's Body Shop
Faddis Kennedy Cattle Co.
Farm Bureau - Nick Smith
Farmer's Coop
First Northern Bank
Flat Iron Storage
Foothill Veterinary Clinic
Joe & Linda Foss
Four Mile Ranch
Gill Trucking
Goddard, Wages, & Vogel
Gordon Ranch
Green Mountain Ranch
Grizzly Outfitters
Grouse Mountain Consultants
Heartland Kubota
High Country Insulation
Theo Hirshfeld
JLM Engineering
Johnson Co. Realty
Kilts Contracting
Kirven and Kirven
Mark Lopez
Love Land & Cattle
Mark Lopez
Merlin Ranch

Miller Welding
MTR Ranch Supply
North Fork Repair
North Star Energy
Perry Trailer Sales
Lola Pheasant
Powder River Energy
Powder River Heating
Prescription Shop
Prime Rate Motors
ReRide
Dr. Blaine & Adri Ruby
Tucker Ruby
RWR Outdoors
Sheridan County Implement
Sheridan Motors
Sheridan Orthopedic
Shiptons Big R
Smith Ranch
Sports Lure
Superior Equipment
The Fix
Tom's Tire and Repair
White Frontier Motors
White's Energy Dodge
Yeager Cattle Company

Add-Ons

Bob & Dolly Arndt
Arvada Bar
B & K Ranch
Ballek Investments
Bauer Land & Livestock
Belle Fourche Live
Teri Benz
BF Construction
Big Horn Coop*
Big Horn Tire
Bootjack Ranch
Buffalo Veterinary Clinic
Don & Sheila Camino
Castle Rock Ag
Clear Bent Bars
Dr. Brian Darnell
DJ's
Gerald & Penny Fink

First Interstate Bank*
Fish Creek Vet
Flatiron Storage
Mike and Linda Greenough
Grizzly Outfitters
Harness Funeral Home
Carla & Mike Harper
High Co. Insulation
Hillcrest Appraisal
Hot Fraking Water
Cory & Michelle Jensen
Amanda & Jerry Kaufmann
Kaycee Sinclair
Alecia Kozisek - State Farm
Insurance
Elaine Kozisek
Don Kraen
LeRoy & Kris Malli

Allan Nielsen
Marilyn Novotny
Platte Valley Bank
Prime Rate Motors
Rad Rides Garage
Cleve Redding
Ann & Carl Reiner
Rocky Mountain Equipment
Dr. Blaine & Adri Ruby
RWR Outdoors
Shane Sanburn
T3 Landscaping
Taylor Trucking
The Fix
Dan & Kris Thiele
Mark & Kelli Wilson
Z & W Mill

*Added on to each seller

We would also like to thank J.C. Fair Board-panels; J.C. School District and Merlin Ranch-bleachers; Dan Gay, Larry Brannian, Jacob Gay, Jay Godley, Jim Mader-auctioneers; Dawn Knudsvig-photographer; Dolly Arndt, Stef Buhr, Katie Fennema, Carla Harper, Kristen Hepp, Amanda Hulet, Jennifer Jackson, Amanda Kaufmann, Jonella Malli, Chanda Rule-clerks, Hampton Inn-lodging for judges, Dave Watt Ranch, Rocky Mountain Equipment, Book Jack Ranch and J.C. 4-H Council-buyers dinner.

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BUFFALO BULLETIN

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Sage Grouse

Continued from A1

"If any species are listed as endangered, it truly reduces your opportunities to make changes on your operations, especially if it's public land," Fieldgrove said, waving a hand through his ranch. "Wyoming has a lot of public land and it's mixed. Sure, it's your private property and you can do that over here, but over there is public and you can't do anything."

For energy production, it's a little more cut-and-dry. Both Ostheimer and Fieldgrove acknowledged a potential listing could hogtie energy production with regulations. Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead echoed the same fear when he issued the greater sage grouse core area strategy executive order in 2011.

Studies have determined a range of factors linked to energy production that contributed to the decline, according to Ostheimer, but no one factor is solely responsible.

"It's hard to pin down specifics," Ostheimer said about naming a specific factor for the decline.

Sage grouse conservation is a passion of Ostheimer's. He doesn't want to see the Western icon listed because it signifies that "we failed to save them."

In Johnson County, greater sage grouse battle more than just losing habitat from energy production. Throw a little West Nile virus into the cauldron, and you've got a brew that could wipe out more than half a brood in one outbreak.

A fractured landscape

The greater sage grouse fight for survival against two major opponents in Johnson County: energy development and West Nile virus. While ranching plays a part, Ostheimer said, it's hard to quantify the effects since ranching has been ongoing for more than a century in the

West.

Much of southern and eastern Johnson County sits atop prime energy sources. Taxes from energy production make up roughly 80 percent of the county's valuation. Those taxes fund schools, road projects and the special districts such as the Lake DeSmet Conservation district that partnered with the Natural Resource Conservation District to implement the Sage Grouse Initiative program. Fieldgrove is one of the program's participants.

Just as the coalbed methane natural gas boom gained traction in the Powder River Basin during the early 2000s, government studies began to examine the greater sage grouse decline in the West.

In the 2010 listing decision, John Emmerich from Wyoming Game and Fish wrote that sage grouse population declined by 79 percent in the Powder River Basin since coalbed natural gas production first appeared in the early 2000s.

Fieldgrove recalls cycles of decline in sage grouse before, but this one "had gone on too long," and worried the ranchers.

"All of us are aware of the fact that the sage grouse numbers from 20 years are much less. It's been a gradual decrease, but we're not seeing it go the other way," Fieldgrove said. "Usually you'll see species such as deer and antelope in our area, and in my experience, go through cycles, but they're 10-year cycles, maybe, but this has been 25 to 30 years and that gets scary."

In northeast Wyoming, the numbers of active males on active leks, communal breeding grounds, went from 20 to 11 active males on a lek in three years during the early 2000s. A similar drop

As the September 2015 deadline for listing the greater sage grouse on the endangered species list quickly approaches, greater sage grouse conservation has become even more important. Several avenues for conservation do exist. One of them, the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances or CCAA through U.S. Fish and Wildlife, lays out the groundwork for future conservation, including grazing plans, plastic tags on fence lines and mitigating West Nile virus. Ranchers can also request protection against fines and litigation if they accidentally kill a greater sage grouse.

There's no set deadline to apply, but if the bird is listed, Fish and Wildlife won't accept any more applications, according to Leanne Correll, an independent consultant who spoke at the Area 1 Conservation District meeting last week. Every application until then will be processed, Correll said. There isn't any funding for the program, and the assurances only last 40 years. Though, Correll speculated that if the plans could be renewed if the program proves successful.

For more information, visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service website at www.fws.gov/

occurred in the 1990s, but the cycle quickly rebounded. This cycle is a little different. Though the numbers briefly spiked in 2006 and 2007, additional data shows the numbers have since dropped to 11 active males on average and remained steady, according to the Wyoming Game and Fish. Johnson County experienced a slight surge in activity from nine active males in 2013 to 10 active males, according to Wyoming Game and Fish. Active male and active lek numbers act as a barometer for sage grouse health.

Scientists blame a fragmented landscape for the decline.

"Sage grouse like relatively smooth landscapes," Ostheimer said, gesturing over the silvery sagebrush-covered hills in Indian Creek, roughly 35 miles southeast of Buffalo.

No power lines or roads sliced into that "core habitat," so-called because of its desirable topography and almost whole sagebrush stands.

Ostheimer described northeastern Wyoming as "natu-

rally fragmented" because grasslands mix in with the sagebrush landscape. Toss in ranching and energy development and the landscape evolves into a more fractured one. There are typically eight coalbed methane wells per square mile. Energy companies producing on private lands added roads and power lines that provided nesting roosts for some of the sage grouse's biggest predators: eagles and ravens.

The ranchers, oftentimes, want to keep those roads and power lines after energy companies pull out and reclaim the land under federal regulations.

"It gives them a way to reach land they couldn't before," Ostheimer said.

Roads cut through intact stands of sagebrush and expose nesting greater sage grouse hens to predators. Hens like to nest deep within the stands, Ostheimer said, and a road makes greater sage grouse vulnerable to predators because it creates an "edge" that decreases the distance from the fringes of the sagebrush stand to the center where the hens nest.

The roads also add culverts that along with other man-made water sources allow egg thieves such as raccoons to live closer to nesting sage grouse. Those water sources also draw in coyotes and red fox, Ostheimer said.

The BLM manages a "working landscape" that's divided between ranchers leasing land for grazing, oil and gas development and recreation. This makes sage grouse conservation a little harder as the BLM must manage the lands to accommodate ranchers who lease the grazing rights, energy developers who develop the federal minerals and the public.

Conserving the habitat

A recent report from the Defenders of Wildlife accused the BLM of not using the best science to conserve sage grouse habitat. Several Wyoming BLM field offices are revising their resource management plans – of which a few came under fire. The Buffalo Field Office hasn't fully completed its revision.

Because it's a working landscape, Ostheimer said, BLM must walk the line in an attempt to satisfy all parties. And they rarely satisfy all three.

The BLM Buffalo Field office began revising its existing resource management plan to include new regulations for the greater sage grouse in 2008 after former Gov. Dave Freudenthal issued the first greater sage grouse core area strategy executive order.

When studies linked energy production with sage grouse population decline, Wyoming developed its core area-strategy plan in 2010. But the fight to conserve the greater sage grouse began much earlier when local working groups, including the Northeastern Greater-Sage Grouse Local Working Group, submitted conservation plans to the Wyoming Game and Fish com-

mission in 2003.

The core areas span prime sagebrush habitat in Wyoming. Johnson County can claim 716,589 acres in prime greater sage grouse habitat. An additional 30,000 acres are "connectivity" habitats, a corridor designated to connect greater sage grouse in Montana with the Wyoming greater sage grouse – almost like a bird's version of a genetic interstate.

Core areas typically house the majority of greater sage grouse. The loss of such good habitat accelerates the birds' decline since sagebrush stands take a long time to grow, Ostheimer said. Besides energy production, fire also has its role in consuming important core areas, like the 2012 Cato fire that consumed 28,000 acres of such habitat. Yet energy production still remains the stronger threat.

The 2010 plan devised strategies aimed at reducing the effects from energy production. Now energy production companies must establish a 2-mile buffer from active leks and only a 5 percent disturbance rate per 640 acres. Energy companies also cannot drill during the birds' breeding season between March and July. Despite these regulations, a 2012 University of Montana study showed that leks are affected by disturbances up to 12 miles away.

"They are very fixed in their natural habitat," Ostheimer said. "They don't adjust well to changes in their environment."

Sage grouse are a type of "indicator species" whose "non-plastic" lifestyle helps gauge the health of sagebrush stands, Ostheimer said.

"A lot of sage grouse means we have healthy stands," Ostheimer said.

More species indirectly benefit from healthy sagebrush stands, including pronghorn and mule deer. Unhealthy stands can reduce the number of those herds competing for forage.

West Nile virus

While studies have pointed to energy development as a key factor in the sage grouse's downturn, West Nile virus has also wreaked havoc on the greater sage grouse in Johnson County. In 2003, the BLM picked up 19 sage grouse carcasses that tested positive for the virus.

"West Nile virus can wipe out 50 percent of a sage grouse population," Ostheimer said.

Fieldgrove witnessed the devastation of West Nile virus after losing three horses to the mosquito-borne disease.

"We had West Nile issues with our livestock, so I know the birds had some kind of issue, and we saw population decline," Fieldgrove said.

The ponds filled with coalbed methane water left over from their operations evolved into breeding grounds for mosquitos carrying the virus. Cattle ponds and other pools of standing water, including puddles, also provide prime breeding spots for mosquitos and more mosquitos equals more chances for West Nile virus.

Ostheimer said the agency is encouraging standing tanks for water instead of ponds. He also said energy companies for coalbed methane have monitored their ponds more closely. Though no major outbreak has been recorded since 2003, preventing West Nile virus has remained on the forefront for sage grouse conservation.

A meeting with the Northeastern Sage Grouse Working group on Aug. 22 at the Buffalo Field Office suggested using minnows as a way to mitigate the mosquito threat. A graduate student from the University of Waterloo in Canada conducted a study in Wyoming to see if minnows could reduce mosquito larvae population. Unfortunately the study exists in early stages of experimentation. But his sug-

gestion piqued the interest of many local landowners.

Right now, ranchers and energy production companies can only watch and monitor.

Down but not out

But the greater sage grouse isn't going down without a fight. The NRCS launched the Sage Grouse Initiative program in 2010 to restore the birds' habitats across 56 million acres in 11 states. Allison McKenzie, the NRCS district conservation manager, partnered with the Lake DeSmet Conservation District and the Powder River Conservation District to implement the program in Johnson County.

"This is basically set up to help conserve sagebrush communities and sage grouse with ranchers," McKenzie said. "It increases nesting and brood rearing habitat."

Aimed at ranchers, the program helps producers like Fieldgrove develop grazing plans to leave stubble for nesting habitat and prevent overgrazing among other projects.

There's an incentive payment involved. Fieldgrove started working on sage grouse habitat after reading about enhancing wildlife habitat and best management practices from magazine articles and scholarly articles recommended to him seven years ago. After beginning those practices, he joined the sage grouse initiative three years ago. He estimated his costs around \$90,000 with the incentive payment maxing out at \$100,000 every year for three years. He didn't use the entire amount.

With the new five-year program, the participant can expect a maximum of \$300,000, McKenzie said, but the first and last years are only focused on grazing plans without any incentive pay.

It's not cheap to conserve sage grouse. Fieldgrove put white, plastic tags on fences to deter birds from flying into them. He built wooden structures over water tanks so sage grouse and rodents couldn't drown in them. It also inhibits mosquito breeding. He also divides his land between winter and summer habitat.

"Yes, it's more work," he said, "Especially in the beginning. Now we move cows four times a year instead of two."

But the additional work no longer bothers him.

The cattle no longer chomp the grass to the roots. There's less overall impact to the land, he said, which benefits him as well as the sage grouse.

So far 31 ranchers in Johnson County have taken up the challenge.

McKenzie describes it as an "avenue to better understand sage grouse."

Fieldgrove speaks highly of the program but wishes it lasted longer.

"I think it's too short, and I think the program definitely needs revision and that it's a longer-term program," Fieldgrove said. "You can't make a lot of change in three years – I think it's a seven-to-10-year program at minimum."

Just this past year, NRCS lengthened the program to five years. After five years, ranchers no longer receive incentive pay but can continue the grazing plans and conservation actions they began. McKenzie said she can still advise them about conservation plans.

Fieldgrove can see the benefits.

"Many of us realize the fact if it's public land, the public has the right to utilize it," he said. "We recognize that the land has value in multiple use – these programs protect recreation and wide open space."

On his own land, he's begun spotting more sage grouse scurrying across the range.

"Statistically over the last two years we can show that (there is an increase) with Game and Fish records," he said. "I definitely have seen an increase."



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