

# Wildlife's Future Along the Colorado/Wyoming Border

Mule deer and pronghorn antelope herds on both sides of the Colorado-Wyoming border are declining and may not be able to fully recover unless federal and state agencies act to protect core habitats, according to a new National Wildlife Federation analysis.

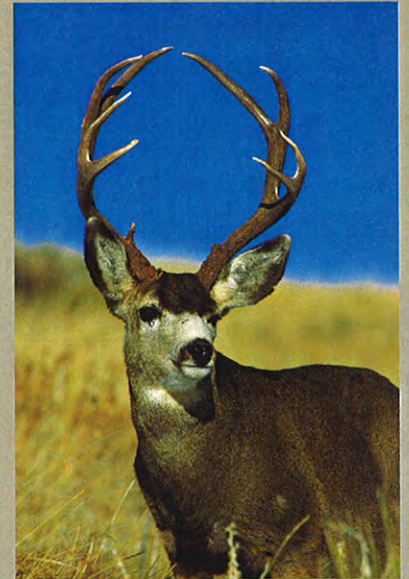
The report, "Population Status and Trends of Big Game along the Colorado/Wyoming State Line," was prepared by veteran wildlife biologists John Ellenberger and Gene Byrne. Instead of only reviewing the most recent data, Byrne and Ellenberger analyzed wildlife agency statistics collected during the past 30 years, including population, hunter harvest and hunting license trends.



"We are concerned that at some point, the resiliency of these herds to recover will be lost, creating a situation where we can only expect further declines," Ellenberger explained.

"We are seeing a slow but steady decline in populations of both species and a corresponding decline in hunting opportunities in both states," said Steve Torbit, a veteran wildlife biologist and NWF's regional executive director.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages the habitats that stretch across state lines and over the interior Rocky Mountain West and most of the West's vast federal lands.

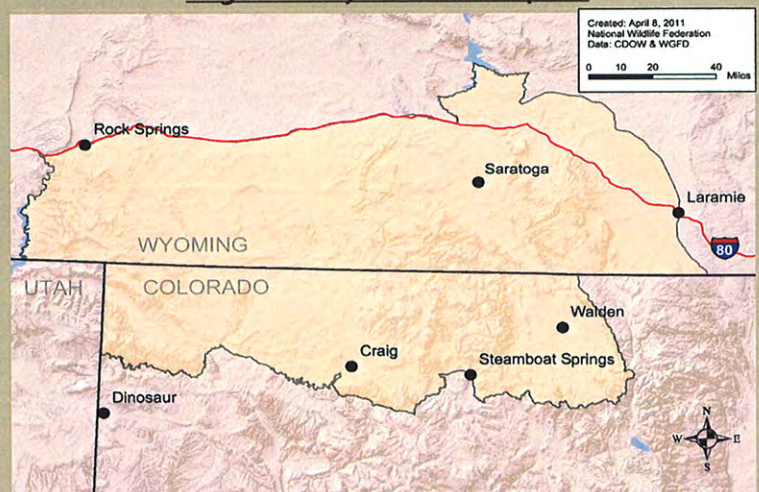


"Forty years ago a hunter could see hundreds of sage grouse in a single day," Torbit said. "But due to landscape-wide factors, the sage grouse population has suffered a slow, inexorable decline and so has sage grouse hunting. "As a Westerner, biologist and hunter, I don't want to see that same decline occur in our mule deer and pronghorn populations," Torbit said.

"Ultimately, it will be up to all who value wildlife herds to urge federal and state agencies to make decisions that will protect and restore our wildlife resource," Torbit said. "The future of our hunting heritage and the billions of dollars wildlife brings to the region's economy, are at stake."

"Unless measures are taken to reduce or mitigate the effects of drilling activity and wind power, it is the opinion of many in the field of wildlife management that there will be significant negative impacts to native wildlife and their habitats."

## Region Analyzed in the Report





## MULE DEER STATUS

Mule deer herds over most of the study area have declined over the past 30 years. The long-term trends for these native herds suggest a continued decline, because the ratio of fawns to does is declining in most areas. As a result, the opportunity to hunt deer is showing a similar, steady decline over the study area.

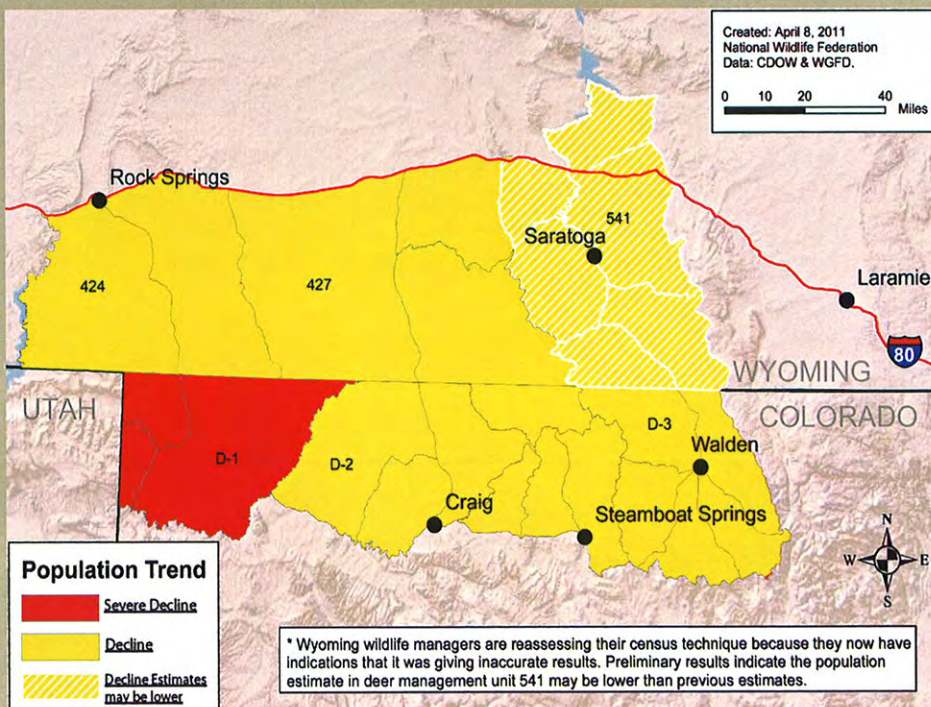
In northwestern Colorado's game management unit D-1, the population declined by two-thirds. Hunting opportunities plunged more than 90 percent, with the hunter harvest falling from a high of more than 800 in 1989 to just 48 in 2009.

Across the state line in Wyoming south of Rock Springs, the decline of the mule deer, while not as steep, is still dramatic. The population estimate declined by 38 percent from 1986 to 2008, the last year that records were available. But the decline in the hunter harvest in the Wyoming unit is more severe, from a high of nearly 1,200 in 1987 to fewer than 400 deer harvested in the unit in 2008.

And the pattern, while not as pronounced, is similar through the analysis area on both sides of the border. In five of the six game management units surveyed, the long-term trend for both hunter harvest and hunter numbers is experiencing a steady decline. Adding to the worry of game managers is a corresponding decline in the number of deer fawns. The ratio of fawns to does decreased in four of the six surveyed units and increased in only one unit.

Combined, the analysis shows a troubling future for what was once one of the West's most important mule deer populations. With increasing pressure from energy development and other human activities, the future of mule deer in this area is uncertain unless land managers incorporate wildlife concerns upfront, including analysis of cumulative impacts to deer.

### Mule Deer Population Trends Along the Colorado-Wyoming Border



NWF evaluated three standard sets of data from each state to determine the status of mule deer and pronghorn herds along the Colorado/Wyoming border: the ratio of fawns to does; the overall population trend; and how near herds are to the long-term population objectives. (Note: The Wyoming Department of Game and Fish is reevaluating the herd count for Unit 541 because of new information suggesting the herd may be declining.)

# PRONGHORN STATUS

The pronghorn, a unique North American critter long confused with an unrelated African species, has suffered from major confusion over its proper name.

Though long-called antelope—which early Western explorers thought they resembled—the pronghorn is a North American original and the fastest wildlife on four hooves with a top speed of 60 mph. Yet even with speed, over-sized eyes to spot predators a mile away and excellent camouflage, pronghorn almost didn't make it out of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Though determined wildlife management work has restored the population from the brink of extinction in portions of its native range, pronghorn may again be headed for trouble.

A new National Wildlife Federation analysis of populations along the Colorado-Wyoming border, part of the species core habitat, has found that pronghorn numbers have declined. The ratio of fawns to adult females is declining in most areas, a red flag for wildlife managers in responsible for maintaining a sustainable herd.

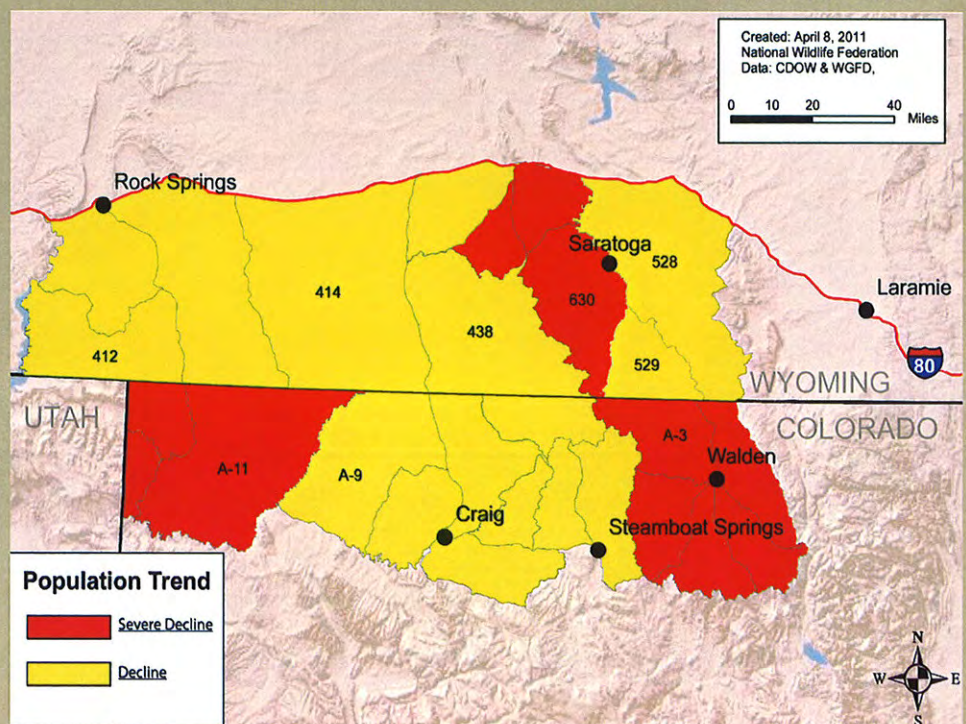
A climate too harsh for many species is perfect for pronghorn that forages on the plants adapted to cold, high-altitude windswept deserts. The low vegetation growth allows pronghorn to spot predators long before they're an immediate threat. And their speed allows them to cruise across the terrain at highway speeds leaving predators far behind.

In Colorado, the land along the border is the best place to find trophy bucks on public land. In Wyoming, with more pronghorn than any other state, some of the best, most accessible herds are in southern Wyoming south of Interstate 80.

But with some herds declining and the fawn to doe ratio falling, game managers have been forced to reduce the number of licenses in some areas.



## Pronghorn Population Trends along the Colorado-Wyoming Border



NWF biologists are urging hunters, anglers and other wildlife advocates to call on federal and state land managers to balance varying demands on the landscape straddling the Wyoming-Colorado border as more energy development in the form of oil, gas and wind occurs in the heart of the West's wide open spaces.

## West's Wide Open Landscape Facing Unprecedented Pressure

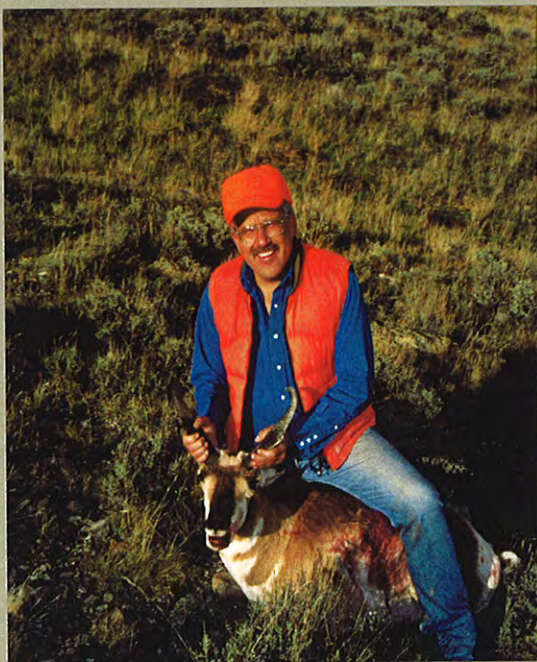
The dry, windswept country along the border of Colorado and Wyoming seems an inhospitable landscape to new arrivals, without the dramatic vistas, abundant streams and forested slopes found in Wyoming's Snowy Range or Colorado's Mount Zirkel Wilderness. But this biologically rich lower elevation sagebrush steppe is absolutely critical to the survival of the West's wildlife.

Two of the continent's iconic species, mule deer and pronghorn antelope, thrive in this high, cold desert. The brutal winter winds that keep most people away serve a beneficial role by sweeping snow from basins, ravines and hillsides. Sagebrush and other brushy plants are left exposed, providing forage critical for the winter survival of deer and pronghorn.

The harsh climate and lack of moisture has effectively spared this high desert country and its native wildlife from the boom and bust of development that has transformed many other classic Western landscapes over the past 150 years.

But change has begun. Energy development in the form of gas and oil wells and wind farms is underway or planned in what some observers have long considered the heart of the West's wide open spaces. As a result, the resiliency of these native wildlife species to thrive despite periodic drought and brutal winters is increasingly in question.

We are at a pivotal time for this iconic portion of the Rocky Mountain West, for Westerners and all who value the natural landscapes and wildlife species that define the character of the region.



## Actions you can take...

- Demand that BLM recognize and fully consider wildlife population trends early in the decision-making process.
- Encourage hunters to play an active role when decisions are being made, to ensure public access to valuable big game herds.
- Emphasize the need for BLM to consider the *cumulative impacts* to wildlife habitat when new development occurs.
- Tell BLM officials that state and district offices need to collaborate when making land-use decisions that affect wildlife habitat across local and state boundaries. Contact the Colorado BLM office at (303) 239-3700 and the Wyoming BLM office at (307) 775-6256.

Tough decisions are being made by managers at BLM who must balance varying interests as they fulfill their duty to sustain natural landscapes and wildlife populations while allowing for multiple use of the land. For those who love to hunt and fish, or view wildlife, or who treasure a land that personifies the West, now is a critical time to advocate for sound decisions.

Westerners must demand that the needs of wildlife are fully addressed before land managers make decisions about the future of large swaths of the land that Americans treasure. Ultimately, the people of the West should help determine the future of public lands, including the high, cold deserts along the Colorado/Wyoming border.

For more information go to: [www.ourpubliclands.org](http://www.ourpubliclands.org)

PHOTOS: Pronghorn, front cover, Corbis images.

All other photos, Steve Torbit, National Wildlife Federation

