

Wildlife

The HD Mountains provide prime habitat for mule deer, elk, turkey, bear, northern goshawk, and numerous migratory songbirds and raptors. Bald eagles are often seen circling on the west side of the HD's. The HD's are so important as winter range for wildlife that the Forest Service closes the few publicly accessible roads throughout the winter so that the wintering wildlife is not disturbed.

The HD's are one of the last undeveloped north-south migration corridors left for elk and other migrating wildlife in the San Juans. The access roads, drill pads, pipelines, compressors and increased traffic that accompany coalbed methane development fragments wildlife habitat, and disrupts home range, winter range, and migration routes. State and federal agencies estimate that each coalbed methane well disturbs **three to four acres of land**, and results in the construction of **a quarter to a third of a mile of new roads**. Remaining habitat is scattered into isolated patches, which increases edge to area ratio and leads to the loss of "core area", or prime species habitat. Specific edge effects for forest environment fragments include microhabitat alterations, increased wind, more direct sun, dryer soil conditions, more dramatic fluctuations in temperature, hotter midday, cooler at night. Habitat fragmentation also favors certain species (i.e. deer, raccoons, skunks, blue jays) over others, and allows access to forest interior by edge species.

Roadless areas at lower elevations such as the HDs are extremely rare, according to Dr. Bill Romme, professor of forestry at Colorado State University and widely-recognized expert on ponderosa pine forests in the San Juan Mountains. He notes the proposed coalbed methane development will radically transform the HD Mountains and break up one of the last, unfragmented low-elevation roadless areas in the Southern Rocky Mountains.

Recreation

The HD Mountains are used by many different groups of recreational users, including hikers, horseback riders, hunters and mountain bikers. The scenic beauty of the old growth forest and quiet solitude of so much land uncrossed by roads are major draws to recreationists. Wildlife attracts many of these recreational enthusiasts and adds significantly to the region's economy by bringing in visitors to hunt, fish and camp.

Most recreational use of the HDs occurs during hunting season. Mike Murphy, a hunting outfitter in the HDs for the past 25 years, says drilling will disrupt the migration and scatter the mule deer and elk herds. Murphy packs hunters into the HDs on horseback, sets up camp, and guides the hunt. He fears his business will suffer when the drilling starts.

Under industry's proposal, roads will lace every ridgetop and every valley bottom, obliterating any opportunities for quiet recreation and solitude. Massive compressor stations will be sited on ridgelines and in saddles, reverberating industrial noise across dozens of square miles.