

The Wyoming Range and Energy Development

The Wyoming Range is one of the state's true gems, providing exceptional wildlife and trout populations, unsurpassed outdoor opportunities, pure waters and clear vistas. But today the Forest Service is offering new oil and gas leases here, has made a "unit agreement" with industry that could lock in drilling rights—even under private land—and is considering permitting of new exploratory wells and access road. These decisions, made without the benefit of public input, threaten the natural assets that underlie western Wyoming's diversifying economy and fine quality of life. Tell the Forest Service to slow down, incorporate the public's desires, and manage this treasured area for its natural and sustainable values. Here are more key issues behind energy development in the Wyoming Range:

1) Opening the Door to More Drilling = New Oil and gas leasing in the Wyoming Range:

More than 150,000 acres are already leased for energy development here. While leases typically expire after 10 years, the clock has stopped ticking on these leases because they are either "held in production" or "under suspension." Leases carry a virtual property right to develop them. The latest leasing proposal is based on limited analyses and public involvement conducted in 1990-1992, well before the current drilling boom.

The Forest Service's plan is to lease another 44,600 acres of the Wyoming Range. The first two rounds of leasing, involving more than 20,000 acres took place in April, 2006 and December, 2005 and were legally protested by conservation, outfitter sportsmen, and landowner groups. Another 12,494 acres in 13 parcels are proposed for lease in the June 6 sale.



This area near South Dry Beaver Creek was leased in April. Photo by Lloyd Dorsey

2) Locking in Drilling Rights and Future Conflict = The South Rim Unitization Agreement:

The BLM agreed to "unitize" nearly 20,000 acres under existing lease in the upper Hoback drainage and Hoback Rim area at the northeastern end of the Wyoming Range. This move, made without public involvement, requires leaseholders to share infrastructure and drilling costs, but also allows them to keep leases from expiring. Half of this acreage is national forest land and the other half is "split estate" under private land and homes in the Hoback Ranches subdivision. About 80 homes are located in the unit. The homeowners association has contested the creation of the South Rim Unit to the Interior Board of Land Appeals.

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3) Expanding Energy Development into Roadless Parts of the Wyoming Range = New Exploratory Drilling Proposal in Upper Hoback

A Houston energy company, Plains Exploration & Production Co., is seeking approval to drill three exploratory or “wildcat wells,” in the Noble basin off the Upper Hoback River. Four miles of new road would be built to provide access from Merna. This project, in the recently designated South Rim unit, may serve to keep ALL the leases, including those covering minerals beneath private homes, alive in perpetuity for future drilling. The Forest Service is conducting an Environmental Impact Statement on the Plains proposal with a final decision by 2008.

As proposed, the project would bring roads into a roadless area, disrupt big game habitat and migration routes, inflict noise and other industrial impacts on Hoback Ranches residents and national forest visitors, and could lead to further drilling and industrialization of the Upper Hoback. To the fullest extent possible, the Forest Service should limit the scope of this project, such as allowing no roads or other development in roadless areas, preferably denying it outright.

4) An Opportunity to Improve Management of the Wyoming Range = Revision of the Bridger-Teton National Forest Plan:

The Bridger Teton National Forest is in the process of revising its land-management plan, which will guide energy development decisions for the next 10 to 15 years. The current plan was adopted in 1990 before the drilling boom began. The revised plan will detail which areas are suitable for leasing in the future. Currently, more than 1 million acres are available, but not yet leased. Key public involvement opportunities occur in 2006 and 2007 with a final plan in 2008.

In 2003, the Bridger Teton imposed a moratorium on new energy leasing on 376,000 acres north of the Upper Green River Valley, from the Gros Ventre foothills to Union Pass. In light of the rampant pace of drilling on adjacent BLM managed lands in the Upper Green, the new plan should severely limit development in the national forest. The revised plan should bar new leasing in the Wyoming Range and in the 2003 moratorium area. Existing leases on the national forest that expire should not be resold.

What You Can Do:

With so much development already happening next door on BLM lands, now is not the time to allow the drilling boom to sprawl into our scenic mountains. Enough public land in western Wyoming is already under lease to keep oil and gas operators busy for decades. The Wyoming Range and Hoback basin are economic drivers these days because of their wildlife, scenery, pristine waters and outdoor opportunities—not because of their mineral potential.

Contact Wyoming’s Senators and Governor and ask that they ensure a wiser management approach is adopted for the Wyoming Range, one that conserves its exceptional wildlife, water, and recreational values. Tell them to halt any new leasing or well permitting on the Bridger-Teton National Forest. The Forest Service must first utilize the Forest Plan revision process now underway to take a comprehensive look at the entire region, taking into account the growing air quality and wildlife impacts from rapid drilling in the adjacent Upper Green River Valley.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

visit www.uppergreen.org (Wyoming Range page)

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