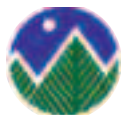


Wyoming Range, Wyoming

PHOTO COURTESY SCOTT BOSSE



THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

Too Wild to Drill

Wyoming Range, Wyoming

What's at Stake?

With spectacular mountain meadows, blue-ribbon trout streams and lush valleys that contain vast free-roaming herds of elk and mule deer, the Bridger-Teton National Forest's Wyoming Range is rich in recreational opportunities and cultural heritage. Wyoming's namesake mountains are among the state's hidden gems, a place where local folks can hunt, fish, and enjoy nature away from the tourist hordes. The least protected part of the Bridger-Teton National Forest, the Wyoming Range forms the southern leg of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, one of the largest intact temperate zone ecosystems left in the world.

The 70-mile Wyoming Range National Recreation Trail traverses much of the range's crest. All four subspecies of Wyoming's native cutthroat trout have found refuge here, and the range harbors prime habitat for returning populations of such endangered predators as the grizzly, lynx, and wolf.

Because of its stunning scenery and rich wildlife, the Wyoming Range helps support an emerging diversified economy centered on tourism and recreation. Hundreds of jobs depend directly on the Bridger-Teton's wildlife, and travel spending in three counties

"Our customers come here to enjoy the natural beauty and world-class hunting available in the Wyoming Range. Responsible energy development means recognizing that some places, like the Wyoming Range, are just too special to drill."

— DAN SMITHERMAN, OWNER, HOBACK PEAK OUTFITTERS, JACKSON, WY

surrounding the Wyoming Range reached \$20 million in 2004. With dozens of ranchers continuing to make a living on the open range, this is a place where Old West and New West coexist in harmony. ■

Protection Status

A moratorium on oil and gas leasing covers 376,000 acres of the national forest to the north and east of the Wyoming Range. And through an agreement with Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal, the U.S. Forest Service will refrain from leasing in the Bridger-Teton's roadless areas until the National Forest revises its Forest Plan. This gives temporary protection to some of the Wyoming Range, but the federal government nonetheless offered new leases on 44,600 roaded acres in 2005 and 2006. The Wilderness Society and its partners have challenged all

of these lease sales. Administrative law judges at the Department of Interior recently ruled in our favor, halting the issuance of the initial lease offerings.

"Frankly, even though it's been leased, my general feeling is we shouldn't be drilling National Forests," Wyoming's Republican Sen. Craig Thomas told reporters in June of 2006. "They're there for special reasons and I don't think we should diminish those reasons. Even if you do it well, you're changing the character of these lands." ■

Status of Threat

Industry is keenly interested in drilling the Wyoming Range, hoping the huge payouts found in the neighboring Upper Green River Valley will extend into the mountains. One Houston, Texas-based firm, Plains Exploration and Production Co., is seeking permission to drill three wildcat wells in a roadless

area in the upper Hoback drainage on the north end of the Wyoming Range. The project, known as the Eagle Prospect, would lay four miles of road and utility lines across inventoried roadless terrain.

Plains executives expect the Eagle Prospect to result in full-field development akin to the Upper Green's

Status of Threat, continued

Jonah field, which is becoming one of the most intensively drilled patches of ground in Wyoming. “We’re hoping to get a thicker, much more commercial play, so we can develop a nice field right in the middle of the forest,” CEO Jim Flores told investors at a presentation in April 2006.

Meanwhile, more than 150,000 acres of the range are already under lease for oil and gas development. Many of these old dormant leases are in roadless areas. The conservation community suspects the recent round of

controversial leases is intended to usher development into these unroaded highlands. A broad array of voices—including ranchers, Wyoming’s governor and senior senator, property owners, business owners, outfitters, labor leaders, hunters and outdoor recreation enthusiasts—are protesting these new leases.

Meanwhile, industry has misleadingly used a provision in the law to keep old undeveloped leases alive for years after they would otherwise have expired. ■

Why is the Wyoming Range at Risk?

In the high desert valley to the east of the Wyoming Range some of the nation’s most productive gas fields are being drilled at a feverish pace. The Upper Green River Valley provides crucial winter range for a world-class wildlife resource, but rules to protect habitat have done little to slow development. Another 10,000 wells are expected to be drilled in the coming years. Meanwhile, diesel exhaust from drill rigs and trucks, road dust, and other industrial emissions are polluting the skies over the valley and nearby wilderness areas, as well as Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks.

Extending this drilling boom into the Wyoming Range would add to this growing haze in a formerly pristine air shed and further degrade the area’s rural quality of life. It would also deliver another blow to

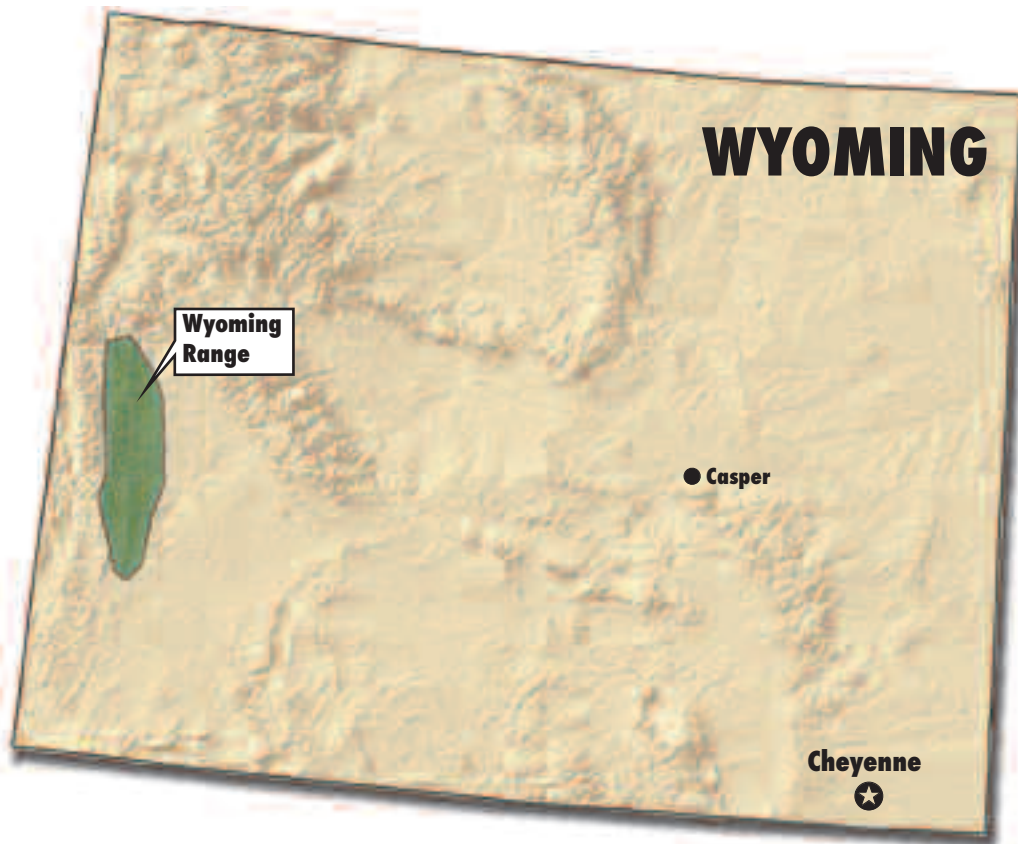
the thousands of pronghorn, mule deer and other big game that winter in the Upper Green, where researchers have documented a pattern of habitat avoidance near drilling activity. Many of these animals migrate, spend summers, and birth their young in the Wyoming Range’s foothills and lush alpine meadows—the same areas currently being eyed for development. And industrializing these mountains would undermine western Wyoming’s long-term economic prospects.

“Our clients don’t want to be looking at a drill pad when they come out West to get away from the cities,” says outfitter Gary Amerine, a local outfitter who is helping lead efforts to keep drillers out of the mountains west of his home in Daniel, Wyoming. ■

Current Energy Development

Modest natural gas production has been occurring for years on the southern end of the Wyoming Range’s east slope on BLM and Forest Service lands. There are several producing wells in the Riley Ridge gas field, as well as an active field called Big Piney-LaBarge. Industry is seeking to expand operations on Riley Ridge and has proposed a coalbed methane field, which would be western Wyoming’s first, nearby in the South Piney drainage. ■

Where is the Wyoming Range?



Solution

Given the rampant pace of development on neighboring BLM lands in the Upper Green, there is no need for industry to rush into the Wyoming Range. The mountains arcing around the valley hold far too many permanent natural assets to sacrifice for the short-term benefits associated with mineral extraction. A diverse coalition of local residents, Citizens Protecting Wyoming Range, has formed to confront energy development here and to build momentum for long-term protection.

The Bridger-Teton is in the process of revising its Forest Plan. Public involvement is crucial to ensure officials adopt a plan that manages the Forest for the long-term health of its natural assets. Local elected leaders carry a great deal of influence, so it is imperative that concerned citizens contact Wyoming elected officials and the Forest Service and let them know that the Wyoming Range is not the place for oil and gas development. We cannot let one of the nation's premier public playgrounds get turned into a private industrial zone. ■

For More Information

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TWS Research on Oil and Gas Issues:

A wealth of research focused on oil and gas development in the West and Alaska is available on The Wilderness Society's website at <http://Wilderness.org/Library/OilAndGas.cfm>