

Greater Yellowstone Coalition \* Wyoming Outdoor Council  
Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance \* The Wilderness Society

## Bridger-Teton energy leasing: Wrong place, wrong time Facts vs. fiction in the Wyoming Range

The Bridger-Teton National Forest's Wyoming Range is one of Wyoming's unsung natural gems. While the crowds descend on nearby National Parks and Wilderness areas, these mountains provide places for locals to explore, hunt and fish. The Wyoming Range also may soon be auctioned off as one of the state's latest gas fields with the Forest Service's April 2005 announcement to lease later this year 44,600 acres of the range's eastern slope. The decision, which primarily targets a wildlife-filled area west of Merna, puts at risk world-class scenery, recreation, wildlife habitat and streams harboring remnant populations of native trout. Adding insult to injury, officials gave the public no opportunity to weigh in on this consequential decision.

Moreover, there is no need to issue these proposed leases. More than 150,000 acres of the Wyoming Range are already under lease for oil and gas development. Why add to this inventory of undeveloped leases that taxpayers may have to buy back some day? Should these proposed sales go through, a total of 200,000 acres of forest would be under lease in the Wyoming Range. It would also encourage drilling dormant leases on the north end of the range in Teton County.

Nearby in the Upper Green River Valley, more than 3,000 gas wells have been drilled in recent years, pumping tons of pollutants into the air and disrupting wildlife winter range and migration routes. The BLM is poised to authorize up to 10,000 new wells in the Upper Green over the next decade. How would drilling the Wyoming Range add to this damage? We don't know because the Forest Service hasn't bothered to study the issue of cumulative impacts. At the very least, officials should put off any leasing decision until they revise the Forest's 15-year-old land-use plan. Inviting the Valley's industrial boom into our scenic mountains makes no sense. Here are some myth-busting points for concerned citizens to take to the state's political leaders.

*Isn't leasing a paper transaction that does not in itself result in impacts on the ground?*

**Fact:** Leases enable impacts. Selling a mineral lease obligates the government to accommodate leaseholders' efforts to develop their leases. A lease is a virtual property right to the natural gas under the ground.

*Leaseholders have no right to degrade the environment to extract minerals, right?*

**Fact:** Wrong. Once we open the door to major gas development by leasing an area, it can never be closed. Land managers must allow drilling and its associated environmental impacts somewhere on the lease. Mitigation measures often prove to be little more than a paper shield. Time and time again industry has secured exemptions from environmental protections in the Upper Green, arguing such measures make it unprofitable to produce gas. For example, winter drilling stipulations are routinely waived in crucial wildlife range. Operators in the Jonah gas field are expected to win authorization to increase well densities from 16 per square mile to as many as 64, thereby turning this area into an industrial sacrifice zone.

*How much public input went into the recent Bridger-Teton leasing decision?*

**Fact:** Zero. The Forest Service is offering these leases without fielding a single word of public comment, although to its credit the agency did respond to public pressure when it withdrew its initial 175,000-acre lease proposal for this area.

*Didn't the Forest Service analyze drilling impacts in the Wyoming Range in the early 1990s?*

**Fact:** The explosion in energy development in the nearby Upper Green in recent years has rendered the Service's studies from the early 1990s worthless. It is crucial that new Bridger-Teton leasing be reviewed in light of the massive industrial development in the Pinedale Anticline, Jonah and other nearby gas fields. Air-quality impacts associated with emissions from these fields have yet to be fully analyzed. In an April 2005 report, the Forest Service's own scientists say these emissions threaten to violate Clean Air Act requirements for protecting air quality in pristine wilderness areas. These under-analyzed air quality concerns are what prompted the Forest Service to require a supplemental environmental review before any new drilling can occur in the Riley Ridge gas field, located on southern end of the Wyoming Range.

*Wouldn't leasing help Wyoming's economy?*

**Fact:** Industry has more Wyoming acreage under energy leases and more approved drilling permits than it has capacity to develop. In 2004, for example Wyoming officials approved a record 3,416 drilling permits, but industry drilled only 1,244 wells, adding more than 2,000 approved wells to an already huge backlog of undrilled permits. More leasing here will not add jobs and boost energy production. But industrializing these mountains would undermine outdoor recreation, a cornerstone for Wyoming's emerging diversified economy.

*Aren't the proposed leases outside roadless areas?*

**Fact:** Yes, but they generally abut unroaded land. The bulk of what the Forest Service proposes to lease this year is a contiguous block of Wyoming Range foothills around the Horse Creek drainage west of Merna. Much of the surrounding roadless land is leased, but not one acre has been developed. These leases are "under suspension," meaning the leaseholder is not being penalized for not developing them. Because these lease suspensions are to be lifted after the proposed leases are sold, this new round of leasing could be the key to unlock much of the northern Wyoming Range—including roadless areas in the Cliff Creek and Hoback drainages—to new drilling.

*What should happen?*

**Common sense dictates that the Wyoming Range be put off-limits to new leasing until the public and the Forest Service can make an informed decision about the wisdom of opening this scenic area for energy extraction. In the meantime, concerned citizens should voice their support for protecting this mountain range to Bridger-Teton National Forest Supervisor Kniffy Hamilton, Wyoming's Congressional delegation and Gov. Dave Freudenthal.**

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:** visit [www.uppergreen.org](http://www.uppergreen.org).

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