

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

Bridger-Teton energy leasing: Wrong place, wrong time

Questions and answers on the Forest Service effort To issue new leases in the Wyoming Range

The Bridger-Teton National Forest's Wyoming Range is one of Wyoming's unsung natural gems. In addition to alpine scenery and recreational opportunities, this 100-mile range provides important wildlife habitat in the southern reaches of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Prized herds of big game, remnant populations of native cutthroat trout, threatened predator species, and sensitive bird species, such as sage grouse and mountain plover, rely on the Wyoming Range's forested highlands, sage-covered foothills and pure water for survival. These lands also support a traditional ranching lifestyle on the open range. While tourist 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 become a place to prospect for fossil fuels. In April 2005, the Forest Service announced its intent to lease 44,600 acres, thereby laying the groundwork for extending the West's natural gas boom into this cherished range. The move puts at risk world-class scenery, recreation and wildlife habitat. Officials have given the public no opportunity to weigh in on this consequential decision. The first two rounds of new 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. These leases are located around Dry Beaver and Horse drainages a few miles west of Merna, an important area for elk, mule deer, cutthroat and lynx.

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

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?

Once we open the door to major gas development by leasing an area, land managers must allow drilling and its associated environmental impacts somewhere on the lease. Industry frequently has secured exemptions from environmental protections in the Upper Green River Valley's nearby gas fields, arguing such measures make it unprofitable to produce gas.

How is the Wyoming Range connected with nearby energy development?

In the Upper Green River Valley, industry has drilled more than 3,000 gas wells in recent years. This activity is fouling the air, displacing wildlife from crucial winter range and disrupting migration routes, according to an industry-funded study and agency reports. The Bureau of Land Management is poised to authorize up to 10,000 new wells in the Upper Green over the next decade. Because the Forest Service has not studied the issue of cumulative impacts, we don't know how new leasing and development in the Wyoming Range will add to the environmental damage. Free-roaming herds of big game, for example, already have to run a gauntlet of roads, residential development and drilling equipment to reach their winter range. Drilling in their summer and transitional range in the Wyoming Range could prove devastating to these animals' survival. Better to assess impacts to air, water and wildlife now before opening the door to drilling.

Are officials turning a blind eye to industrial impacts reaching out of the Upper Green?

No. The Forest Service and the Environmental Protection Agency, for example, have raised concerns about how “infill” drilling in the Jonah gas field will degrade air quality in Bridger-Teton’s Wilderness areas. Forest officials pointed to under-analyzed air-quality impacts as the basis for a supplemental environmental review before allowing further drilling on Riley Ridge in the south end of the Wyoming Range. These concerns accentuate the need for fresh, comprehensive analyses prior to new leasing.

But isn’t the Forest Service required to analyze drilling impacts before issuing leases?

The Bridger-Teton National Forest did review leasing proposals in the early 1990s for impacts to wildlife and fisheries habitat, but the recent explosion in energy development in the Upper Green has rendered any conclusions unreliable. It is crucial that new leasing be reviewed in light of the massive industrial development in the Pinedale Anticline, Jonah and other nearby gas fields.

Won’t there be updated analysis and public involvement when leaseholders apply for a drilling permit?

Yes, but options are constrained at that point. Once leased, access to the natural gas generally must be accommodated, even if the leasehold lies under private property. This is the case in the recently designated South Rim unit, which covers part of the Hoback Ranches subdivision, where a Houston company is proposing to drill three wildcat wells. An environmental review is being conducted on this project, which would require four miles of new road into a roadless areas, but already the Forest Service is saying it can only mitigate, not stop drilling here.

Wouldn’t leasing help build domestic energy supplies and Wyoming’s economy?

Industry has more Wyoming acreage under lease 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 undeveloped permits. Leasing the Wyoming Range will only add to this backlog without doing much in the way of contributing to jobs and domestic energy production. By enabling industrial development in mountains prized for their scenery and wildlife, on the other hand, energy leasing here could undermine outdoor recreation, a cornerstone for Wyoming’s emerging diversified economy.

What should happen?

For years, Wyoming residents—from Rock Springs, Pinedale, Green River and other nearby towns—have enjoyed the Wyoming Range for camping, hunting, fishing and picnicking. With so much at stake, these public lands should be put off-limits to new leasing until the public and the Forest Service can make an informed decision about opening one of Wyoming’s treasures to energy extraction. Citizens can voice their support for protecting this mountain range by contacting these officials:

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