

Forest lands eyed for leasing

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JACKSON — A popular hiking trail on the Bridger-Teton National Forest is in an area being eyed for oil and gas leasing, although forest officials say recreation quality will be considered when issuing permits.

Cliff Creek Falls is a highly traveled trail in the southern portion of the Bridger-Teton, and is in an area up for leasing in October.

But Mary Cernicek, spokeswoman for the forest, said when leases are issued, companies still need to apply for a permit.

"The forest still gets to say where they get to drill," she said. Cernicek said forest officials may eliminate an area because it is too steep or in critical wildlife range — or is a popular recreation area.

Tom Darin, an attorney with the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, said the agency does have the ability to impose "reasonable mitigation measures, but in terms of stopping all drilling — no, not when the lease allows surface occupancy."

He said decision makers on the forest need to recognize the importance of the current leasing stage.

"If they think they can stop all this activity after they allow the lease — and sort of let the horse out of the barn — then they in turn take this decision a little more lightly," Darin said. "It's very serious commitment because of the inability to say 'no' later."

And, conservation groups said the leasing of these forest areas — which they say is nearly 100,000 acres in all — is overkill in northwest Wyoming where about

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76 percent of available lands in Sublette County are slated for drilling.

Marisa Martin, an attorney with the Wyoming Outdoor Council, said these parcels were examined in a 1993 supplemental study and determined to be eligible for leasing.

"These are part of the 1990 forest plan," she said.

Cernicek said forest officials did a subsequent study this year examining new information and changes to forest conditions.

"It verifies that there have been no major changes and the science is still good," she said. "There's no new information that the decision maker needs to have."

But Martin said with the presence of wolves, grizzly bears and the boom of energy development, the agency has plenty of new information to consider.

"This is a paper transaction," she said, "and a paper transaction cannot protect a grizzly bear or wolf."

She also said some of the areas open are in inventoried roadless areas.

Dru Bower, vice president of the Petroleum Association of Wyoming, said the area is appropriate for oil and gas drilling. "This is on the southern portion of the BT, in an area where there is already development," she said.

Bower said the Riley Ridge and South Piney areas already have oil and gas activity.

The forest lands in question are largely on the Big Piney Ranger District. The areas spread from Alpine, east nearly to Bondurant, north into Willow Creek on the Jackson district and south to Barge Creek and Riley Ridge.

The lease areas include Middle Piney Lake, the Little Grey's River and parts of the Hoback River.

But according to Forest Service maps, not all the land in the soon-to-be-leased area is available for permitting.

Much of the area is marked for "no surface occupancy," because slopes are too steep or soils are deemed "technically unsuitable."

Other areas have timing

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limitations, meaning limited activity can occur in areas like elk calving grounds.

But conservation groups question why the agency is not restudying this area when it conducted a full Environmental Impact Statement on areas around Jackson Hole up for lease consideration two years ago.

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Cernicek said the only science examined on those 400,000 acres was part of the 1990 forest plan, and the EIS was needed.

"We said we would work harder on pending leases that have built up on the forest," she said. "We spent so much time and money deciding on sensitive areas that now ... there are all these pending requests, and we wanted to work on those."

Industry nominated the latest areas in the southern Bridger-Teton for leasing in 1990.

"They jumped through all the hoops," Cernicek said.

Once the areas are leased — through a Bureau of Land Management administered sale in October — Cernicek said more environmental studies would be conducted.

"We don't know how long that would take," she said.

Conservation groups — including WOC, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, the Wilderness Society, the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance and the Upper Green River Valley Coalition — said the agency should wait for its forthcoming forest plan revision before leasing areas.

The Bridger-Teton is slated to begin revising its forest plan next year.