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Wyoming Range reopens to drilling

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JACKSON -- A portion of the Wyoming Range west of Pinedale that was at the center of a leasing controversy last fall will be eligible for energy development, Bridger-Teton National Forest officials announced Tuesday.

The eligible area covers 44,600 acres in 38 parcels, a number scaled down considerably from the 175,000 acres and 99 parcels previously eyed for development. Among the acres eliminated in the latest round are roadless areas.

"My staff and I have done our best to meet our responsibility to address the Bridger-Teton leasing request backlog," Forest Supervisor Kniffy Hamilton said in a statement. "We are committed to maintaining a strong working relationship with the State of Wyoming in the responsible development of its energy resources."

Last September, members of the public criticized forest officials for their plan to lease the entire 175,000-acre area that included popular recreation spots and elk habitat. U.S. Sen. Craig Thomas, R-Wyo., called the area "inappropriate for drilling" because of its proximity to Grand Teton National Park and the heavily developed Upper Green River area. Gov. Dave Freudenthal said leasing needs to occur in a "deliberate fashion that takes into account all the impact it brings."

On Tuesday, Thomas issued a statement saying the decision to reduce the acreage available for leasing by 75 percent "is a real victory for public input and for standing up for what is right."

Hamilton said public input swayed the agency to re-evaluate the lease sale and led to the decision not to include any roadless areas in the lease parcels. She said Tuesday's decision adheres to forest plan objectives and allows leasing around existing, roaded developments.

"We heard a wide range of ideas and opinions concerning leasing on this forest from all of our constituencies and stakeholders," Hamilton said. "Our task was to implement the forest plan leasing decision in a way that reflected their concerns."

'Disappointing'

Peter Aengst with the Bozeman, Mont.-based Wilderness Society called the decision "disappointing."

Aengst said the Forest Service failed the public in two ways: by using outdated analysis from a forest plan developed 10 years ago, and by not allowing the public a chance to comment.

Aengst pointed to the Riley Ridge area around Big Piney that is the subject of additional analysis currently on the Bridger-Teton. There, energy companies have asked for more permits to drill, and the agency has decided to reanalyze the proposal.

"That same line of reasoning should apply when it comes to leasing in the Wyoming Range," Aengst said.

Greg Clarke, district ranger for Big Piney, said that case involves an existing energy field and a company asking for additions not analyzed in previous documents. Lynx and air quality issues are new and have not been studied with respect to proposed development, he said.

Jay Anderson, spokesman for the Bridger-Teton, said there is no additional study needed for the 44,600 acres because a supplemental study was completed in 2004, which validated the agency's early 1990s plan to lease the area.

He also said there is not additional analysis at this point because there is no proposal yet for the area.

"Leasing itself gives us very, very little to analyze," he said. "There is no finite specific action by which to base our analysis. Anything we do could be more or less useless because of actions in the future."

But Aengst called this approach a "shell game," saying the idea that the Forest Service will analyze impacts once the area has been leased is short-sighted.

He said the leasing stage is the most important stage, because it's like "cracking open the door to new emission, and once you open it you can never shut it all the way. Yeah, it's a slight improvement, but it's still unacceptable and a terrible proposal."

The lease parcels will be sent to the BLM for auction and administration. The next lease auction is slated for early June and August.

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