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## Gov, forests reach roadless accord

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JACKSON -- In an apparent effort to protect roadless areas, Gov. Dave Freudenthal and the U.S. Forest Service have agreed not to approve any new oil and gas and mineral leases in roadless areas in two national forests.

The agreement, announced Thursday, affects the Bridger-Teton and Shoshone national forests only until new forest plans -- which are under way -- are completed. But exactly what this means for lands set for lease sale is unclear.

Randy Karstaedt, regional director of physical resources for the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Region, which covers the Shoshone, said there are only two parcels the forest has forwarded to the Bureau of Land Management for lease sale. One of those parcels, covering 1,000 acres, has a small pocket -- about 100 acres -- that is categorized as roadless.

Karstaedt said whether those acres will be left in the lease sale is "being kicked around right now."

The agreement only gives forest managers direction between now and completion of forest plans -- estimated in 2008.

On the Bridger-Teton, managers appeared to have already adhered to this agreement, though it was never formalized. Last year, about 175,000 acres in the Wyoming Range were eyed for leasing, but forest managers pulled all but 44,000 acres that were not in roadless areas. Some of those acres were offered for lease sale in December; others will be offered April 4. Those acres have all been protested, but are not in roadless areas.

"I encourage people who feel strongly about leasing in the Bridger-Teton and Shoshone to actively participate in the forest planning process," Freudenthal said in a statement. "This agreement with the Forest Service does not end leasing forever -- it simply delays decisions until such time as they can be properly made."

Terri Gates, public affairs officer for the Rocky Mountain Region of the Forest Service, said the "biggest deal" is that the agency and the state are working together to protect roadless values, and allow the forest plans to determine if areas are suitable for leasing.

Erik Molvar with the Laramie-based Biodiversity Conservation Alliance praised the agreement.

"We congratulate Governor Freudenthal on taking this very positive first step toward protecting western Wyoming's wild country," Molvar said in a statement. "These roadless areas have some of the state's most dramatic scenery, best hunting and fishing, and most outstanding opportunities for recreation in a natural setting, and they deserve permanent

protection. It would have been inappropriate to commit these special places to oil and gas development during a time when the Forest Service is rewriting its blueprint for managing these public lands."

A Clinton-era rule sought to protect roadless areas in national forests from development. That rule was pulled by the Bush administration, which ultimately said any roadless decision was to be made in a forest plan. The administration also told governors they could petition to retain roadless acres, though Freudenthal has said he will work through forest plans for any protection.