

Casper Star Tribune

May 24, 2006

Labor protests oil, gas lease

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ROCK SPRINGS -- Green River resident Mike Burd labors in the soda ash plants west of Green River, but on his days off, he spends most of his time hunting and fishing in the Wyoming Range in the Bridger-Teton National Forest.

Burd remembers shooting his first elk three decades ago in the Wyoming Range. And he captured the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's coveted "cutt-slam" award a while back by catching four native cutthroat trout species in the range's Piney, LaBarge, North Cottonwood and South Cottonwood creeks.

All three of his children bagged their first elk, first deer and first moose in Wyoming Range hunt areas. And most recently, his 7-year-old granddaughter caught her first fish ever in Big Piney Creek in the Wyoming Range.

Burd believes that legacy is threatened, however, by another planned oil and gas lease sale next month on public lands in the Wyoming Range. Drilling in the range will put intense pressure on hunting and angling resources, he said Tuesday.

Some Wyoming landscapes targeted by the oil, gas and coal-bed methane industries -- including the portions of the Bridger-Teton National Forest within the Wyoming Range -- should be off-limits to further energy development, Burd and other labor leaders said during a press conference Tuesday at the local labor hall in Rock Springs.

"As Gov. Ed Herschler used to say ... we need to develop Wyoming's resources at Wyoming's pace for Wyoming's people," said Burd, a member of the United Steel Workers of America Local 13214 union, which represents hundreds of workers at the trona mines and soda ash plants.

Energy industry officials, however, have said that drilling in the area can be done in an environmentally sensitive manner and without significant harm to wildlife and other recreational resources. They contend that drilling in areas such as the Wyoming Range provides stability for job growth, provides the state with a stable revenue source and helps the country be less dependent on foreign oil for energy production.

Thousands of union workers including Burd labor in Sweetwater County's trona mines and coal mines and in a host of other union jobs, but in their spare time, they enjoy Wyoming's abundant wildlife, clean air and open spaces.

They hunt, fish and generally recreate with an intense passion. And thanks to their union membership, they have a lot of money to spend on their guns, boats, fishing gear and other recreational items.

"We are union, we are proud of it, and because we are, we make a good living with good benefits," said Kim Floyd, executive secretary with the 18,000-member Wyoming State AFL-CIO.

"As a result, we hunt and fish and recreate in extremely high numbers in areas (such as the Wyoming Range) ... and we see the incredible impacts in the Jonah gas fields and Pinedale Anticline gas fields right next door, and our membership is very concerned," Floyd said.

First-ever protest

Floyd said for the first time in Wyoming State AFL-CIO history, the union has sent a formal protest to the Bureau of Land Management concerning oil and gas leasing.

He said the union is asking the BLM to suspend a planned June 6 oil and gas lease sale on about 12,000 acres within the Wyoming Range. The BLM oversees oil and gas lease sales on Forest Service lands.

The protested leases are located in the North Cottonwood and South Cottonwood Creek areas of Sublette County and are considered a "valuable resource" to the roughly 6,000 union members who live in southwest Wyoming, Floyd said.

Floyd and other union members said it was time for labor to become more vocal on oil and gas leasing issues, particularly in areas such as the Wyoming Range, where they feel their recreation areas are under threat from possible oil and gas development.

"We value the hunting, fishing, recreation and tourism economies that these lands support," Floyd said.

"We're looking at the long term ... You've never, ever seen us do this before, but the time is now, and with this pace of development, the day is gone where we can sit back and say nothing," he said.

Floyd noted there were 12,000 hunting licenses sold for hunt areas in the Wyoming Range. He said the area features half of Wyoming's moose populations, several world-class trophy mule deer hunt areas, and the highest elk hunt success ratio in the state.

In April 2005, the Forest Service decided to lease lands in the Bridger-Teton after a long public involvement process, including parcels within the Wyoming Range. All told, about 44,600 acres have been slated for oil and gas leasing in the Bridger-Teton, which has raised the ire of conservationists, Gov. Dave Freudenthal and now labor groups.

In December 2005, a BLM oil and gas lease sale auctioned a 1,280-acre parcel in the foothills of the Wyoming Range. Conservation groups, as well as outfitters and guides, protested December's lease sale, saying drilling on Forest Service lands threatened to harm streams and other wildlife habitat in the forest. Those appeals are still pending.

In April, the Forest Service proceeded with another lease sale auction and offered nearly 20,000 acres on the Bridger-Teton forest for oil and gas development.