

## Leasing plan gives too much

The U.S. Forest Service's latest plan to offer oil and gas leases in the Wyoming Range on the Bridger-Teton National Forest presents a significant reduction from a previous proposal but still lacks assurances necessary to protect the wooded mountains. The Forest Service this week said it would trim its lease offerings from 176,000 acres to 44,000, targeting an area just beyond the Hoback River drainage for sale to the highest bidder.

The area under scrutiny today lies about 25 air miles southwest of Hoback Junction. It is near the headwaters of the Hoback, Greys and Little Greys rivers, Willow, Cliff and Beaver creeks. Located in Sublette County, the area is home to wildlife and is prized for recreational activities such as hunting, skiing, snowmobiling, four-wheeling and mountain biking. Nearby, snow-capped peaks soar higher than 10,000 feet, overlooking a valley that serves as a migration route and wintering ground for tens of thousands of animals, including antelope that migrate from Grand Teton National Park.

As envisioned by the Forest Service, the acreage would be leased to the highest bidder without the public knowing what development might take place. Issues, such as air quality, road building, clearing of well pads and construction of power and pipelines would be addressed later. Such a commitment makes little sense to Wyoming residents and visitors who deserve to know the impacts up front.

Dangers of this leasing system have become apparent in the Upper Green River valley. Environmental safeguards are waived on a regular basis. Air quality in the nearby Wind River Range, a federally protected wilderness, may be suffering, but there's not enough money to find out. The federal government allowed the Jonah Field to sprawl across the valley floor. But now industry seeks to drill thousands more wells like the proverbial camel inching under the tent.

Fifty years from now the oil and gas will still be in the ground. Leasing the area today, especially using a decade-old study that doesn't recognize oil fields that have sprung up nearby, will do little to resolve energy crunch facing the world. Leaders around the globe have yet to propose a way out of our dependence on oil and gas, suggesting that alternative sources won't emerge until fossil fuels have all been consumed. Sacrificing another 44,000 acres of forest that can't be replaced doesn't make sense, especially the way the Forest Service is doing business today. Once it's leased, it's lost.

