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## Report lays out value of Wyoming Range

Outdoor sports people get it. The 40 million Americans who hunt and fish. The many who recreate by skiing, snowmobiling, trapping, climbing, hiking, birdwatching, riding horses, guiding backcountry clients, painting, taking pictures, mountain biking, camping with their families. Etc. etc., etc.

You don't have to explain to these folks why the Wyoming Mountain Range south of Jackson, west of Pinedale, east of Idaho Falls, possesses a rare and special quality.

The Wilderness Society gets it too. This environmental group quite correctly grasps the political power that sporting people possess.

The Society also wisely knows that some Westerners — those who favor the full onslaught of natural resource extraction on public lands — often accuse conservationists of sounding too negative, of being interested only in throwing stones, of having an elitist attitude toward land use.

That's why a new report — "The Wyoming Range: Wyoming's Hidden Gem" — published this week by The Wilderness Society makes so much headway in demonstrating how the maligning portrayal of mainstream environmentalists is off the mark.

Creating an argument for protecting the Wyoming Range, the report features positive testimonials from snowmobilers, politically conservative former county commissioners, old-guard outfitters, and guest ranchers. They all call into question efforts being advanced by the U.S. Forest Service to open up tens of thousands of acres — and possibly much more — to natural gas drilling akin to what is already occurring in the Jonah Field and soon to sweep across the Pinedale Anticline.

We already know that in 2004, the Forest Service proposed leasing 175,000 acres in the middle of the Wyoming Range yet the agency resisted demands to hold public hearings on its proposed action. Only after U.S. Sen. Craig Thomas and Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal complained in bipartisan fashion did the Bridger-Teton National Forest pull that plan and then come back with another offering to the oil and gas industry of some 44,000 acres.

Here is what's so baffling to observers, including the long list of outdoor sporting people mentioned above:

Why is the Forest Service pushing forward with leasing the Wyoming Range in the face of such strong public opposition? Who is pushing the Forest Service to offer the leases? What com-

panies and individuals stand to gain from drilling?

Moreover, how much confidence should the public have in Forest Service claims that it will expedite development responsibly when its sister agency, the Bureau of Land Management, has failed to responsibly manage full-field gas development nearby at Jonah?

Even with huge revenues from energy production rolling into state coffers, both Thomas and Freudenthal recognize that the special quality of life in Wyoming, represented by its inspiring outdoor recreational opportunities, is priceless.

How valuable is the Wyoming Range? Here are a few facts mentioned in the Wilderness Society Report:

■ Almost 12,000 hunting licenses for elk, mule deer and moose were issued for areas in and around the Wyoming Range in 2004.

■ The Wyoming Range moose herd, a subpopulation of the famous Sublette moose herd, is the largest subherd in the state.

■ The Wyoming Range mule deer herd — numbering close to 50,000 — is one of the largest in North America in terms of the land mass it inhabits. (Recent scientific studies of nearby mule deer herds in areas being leased for oil and gas show that deer are being displaced by drilling activities).

■ The Wyoming Range provides excellent habitat for elk. "If you were going to design elk habitat, the Wyoming Range would be the perfect model," said Tom Toman of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

■ Streams flowing off the Wyoming Range serve as one of the last major strongholds for Colorado River cutthroat trout. It is the only range in Wyoming with four species of native cutthroat.

■ Tens of millions of dollars flow into Wyoming Range communities each year from recreation-related activities — part of a \$50 million economy built upon wildlife in the B-T.

■ It's no coincidence that the Wyoming Range, with its abundant wildlife, represents the largest roadless area in the B-T Forest.

Sportsmen get it. The Wilderness Society gets it. But does the Forest Service?

Free copies of the report can be obtained by calling the Wilderness Society's Northern Rockies Office in Bozeman at (406) 586-1600. Or, e-mail [bozeman@tws.org](mailto:bozeman@tws.org).



The New West

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Todd Wilkinson's column appears in the News & Guide every week.