

For Immediate Release

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MONTANA AND WYOMING WILDLANDS PUT AT THREAT BY BUSH ENERGY PLAN

(Bozeman, MT, May 17, 2001) --- One of the biggest threats to treasured wildlands in Montana and Wyoming emerged today with the release of the Bush plan to open more public lands to oil and gas drilling. Montana's Rocky Mountain Front and the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument, as well as Wyoming's Bridger Teton National Forest and Red Desert have all been put at risk by the Bush Administration's new "drill America" energy plan.

"The administration's 'drill America first' policy will provide no relief for Americans struggling to pay their gasoline and electric bills this summer," said Bob Ekey, Northern Rockies regional director of the Wilderness Society. "Instead, this plan caters to industry friends who helped fund Bush's campaign while increasing pollution and despoiling pristine wildlands."

Along the eastern spine of the Montana Rockies, the Rocky Mountain Front and the adjacent Badger-Two Medicine roadless area are two regions that have long been recognized as having some of the highest wildlife values found anywhere in the lower 48 states. One stunning example is that this area is the only place left in the lower 48 states where grizzly bears roam from the mountains to their historic ranges on the Great Plains.

Both areas have also long been targets of the oil and gas industries. With the Bush Administration's "energy plan," the threat to these areas looms ever greater because the plan recommends canceling lease suspensions. Under the Clinton Administration, existing leases in the Badger-Two roadless area were suspended pending completion of a study on the cultural and historical significance of the area. Although the cultural study has yet to be released, there is no mechanism in place to stop the current administration from revoking the suspension at any time.

With the Rocky Mountain Front, the Forest Service completed in 1997 a 15-year withdrawal of leases for the 356,000 acres in the Lewis and Clark National Forest. This administrative decision could be rescinded under the new Bush energy plan which emphasizes increased development along the Rocky Mountain overthrust belt.

"Having lived on the Front all my life and fought for it's protection for the last 30 years, I can honestly say that bringing oil and gas wells in here would essentially be to 'gut shoot' it," said outfitter and dude ranch operator, Chuck Blixrud. "Although opening the Front to industry would hurt my business, by far the biggest loss would be the degradation and loss of unsurpassed wildlife values for Americans everywhere," he said.

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Also at stake in Montana is the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument. The Bush administration proposes to look at "all public lands" for new sources of energy, including some of the country's newest national monuments, such as the Missouri Breaks. While the administration has tried to justify this extreme measure on the grounds that there wasn't public input in the designation process, this claim is totally false. With the Missouri Breaks, Montanans worked for decades to keep the Missouri River and the lands around it wild and undeveloped.

"The Missouri Breaks was designated a national monument following two years of public meetings and hearings, after leading newspapers issued calls for vigorous protection, and after public opinion polls and letters to editors of papers across the state reflected impassioned public support," explained Dave Dittloff of the Montana Wildlife Federation.

In western Wyoming, significant acreage has already been sacrificed to oil and gas development – over 89% of the state is currently open to leasing. The Upper Green River Basin, which includes portions of the Bridger Teton National Forest, and the Red Desert are two key areas that could be opened to development under Bush's "drill America" energy plan.

"Wildlife habitat in the Green River Basin is already being transformed into gas producing industrial zones," said Scott Groene with the Greater Yellowstone Coalition. "A big push to open more lands to drilling might push our big game herds right over the edge."

In the case of the Bridger Teton National Forest, opening more of this area to oil and gas leasing would not only undermine key wildlife habitat in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, but would fly in the face of local sentiment. Over 90% of public comment letters, as well as the local Chamber of Commerce, County Commission, and Wyoming Senator Craig Thomas have all recommended that the 370,000 acres of the Bridger Teton Forest now under review for leasing be put off limits from the oil and gas industry.

In southwestern Wyoming, the Red Desert is a truly unique and spectacular landscape. The desert's stunning rainbow colored hoo-dos, towering buttes and prehistoric rock art, define this rich landscape and provide a truly wild "home on the range" for the largest migratory game herd in the lower 48 states – over 50,000 pronghorn antelope in addition to a rare desert elk herd.

"Allowing the Red Desert to be laced with a spaghetti-like maze of roads and drill pads would be a tragic loss," commented Dan Heilig of the Wyoming Outdoor Council. "Wyoming is already America's energy colony. Will we have to become America's sacrifice zone as well?"

In short, the Bush "drill America" energy plan fails to acknowledge that the vast majority of public lands are already open to development and that opening the last unspoiled remnants would provide little new energy and come at a huge environmental cost.

Explained the Wilderness Society's Bob Ekey, "The Badger Two Medicine, Rocky Mountain Front, Missouri Breaks Monument, Bridger Teton National Forest, and Wyoming's Red Desert – we're talking about special places that residents of Montana and Wyoming have already said they want protected for their greatest values, not sacrificed as giveaways to Big Oil."

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