



THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

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SENATE AMENDMENTS COULD THREATEN CHERISHED WILD LANDS IN MONTANA, WYOMING, AND NORTH DAKOTA

Debate Begins This Week on Energy Bill

Bozeman, MT – Seven cherished wild lands across the northern Rockies – including Montana’s Rocky Mountain Front and the Red Desert in Wyoming – are threatened by “drill everywhere” legislative provisions that the Senate will consider beginning this week. These federal public lands are some of the 18 examples of endangered lands that are profiled in a new report “*Big Oil’s Energy Plan: The Cost to Our Wild Lands and Waters*,” that was released today by The Wilderness Society.

“Citizens of Montana, Wyoming, and North Dakota believe that many of these wild lands are ‘off limits’ to new drilling and energy exploration,” said Peter Aengst, a Regional Associate with The Wilderness Society. “Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. This week the Senate will take up a number of amendments that could undermine existing safeguards and hand the lands over to the energy industry.”

Last July, the House of Representatives passed a bill (HR 4) that would weaken existing safeguards, limit public involvement, and re-open lands previously protected from energy exploration. At the same time, HR 4 also shells out \$34 million in subsidies to energy corporations. If the Senate approves similar provisions as part of its consideration of comprehensive energy legislation, it will be much more difficult to protect sensitive wild lands in Montana, Wyoming, and North Dakota from oil and gas drilling.

The Wilderness Society report highlights seven places in the Northern Rockies region: Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument (MT), Rocky Mountain Front (MT), Valley of the Chiefs – Weatherman Draw (MT), Upper Green River Basin (WY), Red Desert (WY), Bridger-Teton National Forest (WY), and Little Missouri National Grasslands (ND).

The report details how each of the profiled areas would be impacted by pending legislation:

- **In Montana**, a 1997 Forest Service decision to close the Rocky Mountain Front to new leasing for 15 years could be undone, as HR 4 includes a provision allowing industry to petition for re-consideration of past protective decisions regarding energy development.
- **In Wyoming**, the Red Desert is threatened by legislative provisions that would pressure the BLM to follow inadequate state standards for oil and gas development. HR 4 also would give the Secretary of Interior a blank check to overturn critical environmental analysis and safeguards being considered in a new management plan for the Red Desert.

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- **In North Dakota**, roadless lands found in the Little Missouri National Grasslands could be further opened to oil and gas development and new road construction. This month, for example, BLM plans to issue oil and gas leases for several inventoried roadless areas.

“Whether it’s hunting, hiking, or camping, these profiled areas are some of the best that the nation has to offer,” continued Aengst. “In addition, they provide clean drinking water and are home to a stunning variety of wildlife. Congress should not trade these wild lands as a favor to special interests. We don’t need to lease every last acre. Some places are simply too special to drill.”

Extensive oil and gas exploration is presently occurring on America’s public lands. In 2001, the Bush Administration issued a record number of drilling permits. The vast majority of the public lands managed by the BLM in the Rocky Mountain region – over 90 percent – is open to energy exploration.

Aengst noted that major energy activity already is occurring on public lands – even without new energy legislation that would further open the floodgates. Last year, for example, 2,500 oil and gas leases were issued nationwide on federal lands. These leases totaled 2.8 million acres.

<u>State</u>	<u>Number of New Leases</u>	<u>Acres of Federal Land</u>
Montana	395	541,000
Wyoming	1,047	1,131,000

“There is a path to securing the nation’s energy future without drilling the nation’s wilderness heritage,” states Aengst. “The solution lies in American know-how and technology. Rather than drilling the nation’s Parks, Forests, Monuments, and coastlines on behalf of big oil and gas companies, the Administration should invest in renewable, clean energy sources and energy-efficient cars and appliances.”

Other wild lands highlighted in The Wilderness Society’s report are listed below:

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska
California Coast, California
Roan Plateau, Colorado
San Juan National Forest, Colorado
Vermillion Basin, Colorado
Big Cypress National Preserve, Florida
Otero Mesa, New Mexico
Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania
Book Cliffs – Uinta Basin, Utah
Grand Staircase – Escalante, Utah
Utah’s Redrock Parks and Wildlands, Utah

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