

For Immediate Release
October 29, 2002

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Oil and Natural Gas Estimates in Wyoming Greatly Exaggerated by Administration

Analysis Also Demonstrates that Energy Development Significantly Fragments Habitat and Harms Wildlife

Pinedale, October 29, 2002 – Two scientific studies released today raise strong doubts about the underlying assumptions of the Bush Administration’s energy policy for Western states. Together, the reports demonstrate that the amount of economically recoverable natural gas and oil in Wyoming’s roadless areas is miniscule when compared to U.S. demand, and that -- in places where energy development does take place – it often causes habitat fragmentation that extends far beyond the physical structures of the oil or natural gas field.

“The Administration’s National Energy Plan to open more public land in Wyoming and throughout the west to natural gas and oil drilling is based on inherently flawed assumptions,” said The Wilderness Society’s Dr. Pete Morton, lead-author of the studies. “If we’re going to have an honest public debate over energy extraction from our nation’s wildlands, the Administration must stop exaggerating the amount of gas and oil that is economically viable to recover and downplaying the impacts to wildlife and recreationists”

The report on habitat fragmentation utilized a case study in the Big Piney-LaBarge oil and gas field in the Upper Green River Valley of Wyoming. The Upper Green provides the largest publicly owned block of big game winter range in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem with over 100,000 pronghorn antelope, mule deer, elk and moose using the Valley every winter (including the largest mule deer herd in the country and second largest antelope herd).

Unfortunately, more than 3,000 oil and gas wells have been drilled in this world-class wildlife area, which is managed primarily by the Bureau of Land Management, and permits for 4,500 additional wells have also been authorized. To make matters worse, new subdivisions are further fragmenting big game habitat and restricting migration corridors in the Valley.

The overall area of oil and gas infrastructure – such as roads, pipelines, pads, and waste pits—at Big Piney-LaBarge consumes 7 square miles of habitat, but The Wilderness Society scientists found that the effect of that infrastructure is much greater. The entire 166-square-mile landscape of the field is within one-half mile of a road, pipeline corridor, well head, retention pond, building, parking lot, or other infrastructure. One hundred and sixty square miles, or 97 percent of the landscape, fall within one-quarter mile of the infrastructure.

“The wildlife values of the Upper Green River Valley in the southern Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem are unparalleled in the Lower-48 States,” said Tory Taylor, a Dubois-based guide outfitter, “This study shows the need for the BLM to thoughtfully consider where further development should be allowed outside of migration corridors and winter range, instead of blindly granting industry’s push to get more oil and gas.”

The second analysis completed by The Wilderness Society focuses on the amount of oil and natural gas found in National Forest roadless areas. In Wyoming, the study demonstrated that economically recoverable natural gas and oil on National Forest roadless areas would meet U.S. natural gas and oil consumption for roughly 50 days. In specific regions, such as roadless areas of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest, the available energy supply was much smaller: less than 35 minutes of oil and below half-an-hour of natural gas for the United States.

Nationally, The Wilderness Society analyzed the potential economically recoverable natural gas and oil on National Forest roadless areas in Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, North Dakota, Utah, and New Mexico. The analysis determined that economically recoverable natural gas in these areas would meet total U.S. natural gas consumption for only about 9 to 11 weeks; and that economically recoverable oil in those areas would meet total U.S. oil consumption for a less than 24 days.

In addition, the 15 National Monuments managed by BLM combined contain less than seven days of natural gas use and 15 days of oil use for the United States, according to the analysis.

Energy and Western Wildlands: A GIS Analysis of Economically Recoverable Oil and Gas, which reflects more than 18 months of research by Wilderness Society scientists and economists, was prompted in part by the Administration's stated intention to fast track drilling permits. The report's analyses are based on the premise that "economically recoverable" oil and natural gas (defined as energy resources that are profitable to extract) is the appropriate basis of policy analysis, as recommended by the Congressional Research Service and others, not "technically recoverable" reserves, which may not be economical to produce with today's technology.

Additional analysis in the second study focused on three recent reports that indicated substantial amounts of potential natural gas and oil resources are off limits to development, primarily because of environmental stipulations in government leases. The analysis found that the reports failed to take into consideration a number of criteria, including the full cost of bringing the resources to market.

"The bottom line is that a careful examination of their flawed assumptions and methods indicates that environmental stipulations do not pose a major roadblock to exploration and development of potential energy resources on public land," said Morton. "We found that, in actuality, a relatively large area in the western United States is available to leasing, but that a huge percentage of natural gas in the region is off limits because of economic constraints."

Note: Both Wilderness Society reports – *Energy and Western Wildlands: A GIS Analysis of Economically Recoverable Oil and Gas* and *Fragmenting Our Lands: The Ecological Footprint from Oil and Gas Development* – are available at www.wilderness.org/energyreport.htm