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**BLM FAILS TO FOLLOW ITS OWN RULES FOR WILDLIFE PROTECTIONS
Conservationists File Lawsuit over Winter Drilling in Critical Big Game Habitat**

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Pinedale, Wyoming -- Four conservation groups today challenged the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) decision to allow winter-long drilling in crucial winter habitat in the Upper Green River Valley near Pinedale, Wyoming.

In October 2002, the BLM granted a six-month exception to seasonal drilling restrictions for wintering wildlife without the required public participation and without the necessary environmental analysis required by law. The groups filed a lawsuit against the BLM today in federal district court in Cheyenne.

"This decision sets a terrible precedent," explained Peter Aengst of The Wilderness Society. "Allowing drilling and truck traffic throughout the winter in crucial habitat for mule deer ignores the findings from BLM-sponsored wildlife research done in this area." Aengst elaborated, "Should this decision stand, we'll undoubtedly see more of these season-long exceptions. The cost will be reduced wildlife viewing and hunting opportunities in this world-class wildlife area."

Because of the BLM's granting of this season long exemption, Questar Exploration Inc. is currently conducting drilling on the "Mesa" area of the Pinedale Anticline Project (photo available). This area has some of the most important big game populations in the Rocky Mountain region, and it provides winter habitat for mule deer and antelope that summer in five western Wyoming mountain ranges. To protect important big game winter habitat, the BLM's 2000 Pinedale Anticline EIS prohibited drilling from November 15 through April 30 with a provision for possible *short-term* exceptions (i.e. not season-long).

"Simply put, this lawsuit is about the BLM breaking its own rules," explained Kelly Matheson from the Wyoming Outdoor Council. "We're not seeking an outright ban on drilling, but we do want compliance with the seasonal restrictions that BLM initially imposed to make sure drilling is not done during the time of year when wildlife desperately need undisturbed habitat."

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The Wilderness Society, Wyoming Outdoor Council, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, and Defenders of Wildlife are plaintiffs on the suit and are represented by attorneys with The Land and Water Fund of the Rockies and the Wyoming Outdoor Council.

“The timing of this project could not be worse,” said Noah Matson with Defenders of Wildlife. “Big game in western Wyoming are already stressed by the multi-year drought we’re experiencing. They need all the help they can get, but instead the Bush administration chose to appease the whims of industry over the needs of wildlife.”

Existing laws require the BLM to be more accountable to the public before making decisions that affect the quality of the environment. “The BLM made this decision behind closed doors,” said Tim Stevens with the Greater Yellowstone Coalition. “Without public input, the BLM allowed drilling in the same wildlife habitat where the agency has prohibited the public from driving in the winter.”

Attorneys for the conservation groups said the BLM still has the opportunity to protect wildlife and get the Pinedale Anticline project back on track. “This case is about complying with reasonable limitations on development when herds are most at risk from cold, drought and lack of forage,” stated Mike Chiropolos, Lands Program Director for Land and Water Fund of the Rockies. “Our goal is to protect healthy game populations in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and elsewhere in the West.”

Oil and gas activities in the Pinedale Resource Area are quickly escalating. Six major drilling projects have been approved by the BLM and the agency is now reviewing new proposals for an “infill” (40-acre spacing) drilling project in the Jonah field and a new coal bed methane project west of the town of Big Piney. In addition, the BLM is currently conducting “scoping” for the revision of its Pinedale Area Resource Management Plan, which will govern future energy development over a million acres of public land for the next 10-20 years.

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