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Groups Urge BLM to Withdraw Proposed Oil and Gas Lease Sales in Bridger-Teton National Forest

Leasing Process, Once Started, Begins “One Way Bias” Toward Even More Drilling in the Wyoming Range of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem

Jackson, Wyoming (November 21, 2005) – Saying that further energy drilling would risk the Wyoming Range’s world-class scenery and wildlife, a coalition of conservation groups and a local homeowners’ association has formally urged the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to withdraw plans to sell an oil and gas lease parcel in that region of the Bridger-Teton National Forest. The BLM handles energy leasing issues for the Forest Service.

The concerned groups said the proposed lease sale would be held without providing the public a chance to comment and is based on an analysis, now twelve years old, that fails to account for new circumstances such as booming development in the nearby Upper Green River Valley and related air quality concerns. The Wyomingites also expressed concern about the future impact of leases on regional wildlife and the “one way bias” that new leases would create toward eventual drilling.

“More energy drilling will threaten what makes this region so special and worth protecting,” said Judi Adler, Chairman of the Hoback Ranches SID. “We choose to live near the Wyoming Range because of the clear streams, pristine forests, and outstanding wildlife. We’re deeply disappointed that leasing could occur without a chance for public involvement and based on a terribly outdated analysis.”

While the decision to sell leases sometimes has been portrayed as a meaningless “paper transaction,” previous statements by the Forest Service and BLM make clear that once a lease is sold it represents a commitment to future drilling by the agency and creates a right to the natural gas under the ground and an inherent bias in favor of how and where to drill rather than whether to drill at all. The Forest Service has stated that it “cannot deny, in general, occupancy of the surface for the exploration and development of federal minerals that have been leased...”

[Note: Wyoming Outdoor Council submitted the request on behalf of groups listed above.]

In April, the Forest Service announced its intent to lease 44,600 acres for oil and gas drilling in the Wyoming Range. The lease sales would be spread out over the coming months. The first parcel, a 1,280 acre block that includes important mule deer fawning areas, is scheduled to be auctioned by the BLM on December 6th.

The lease sale, in addition to failing to provide for public comment or an updated analysis, also bucks public opinion. Last year, for example, the Forest Service temporarily withdrew plans to lease 175,000 acres for oil and gas drilling in the Wyoming Range after hearing opposition to the lease sales from a broad spectrum of the public, including Governor Dave Freudenthal, local elected officials, and many potentially affected businesses in Jackson, Bondurant, and Alpine.

The State of Wyoming continues to have concerns about future leasing in the Wyoming Range. Earlier this year at a conference in Jackson, Governor Freudenthal stated that he was opposed to any leasing in the Bridger Teton Forest, explaining, "I am a clear supporter of oil and gas, but I am not a supporter of oil and gas in the Bridger Teton.... I believe over time, its contribution to the state, and not just economically, is such that we don't need to lease it right now."

"We fully agree with the Governor's conclusion," said Lisa McGee with the Wyoming Outdoor Council. "The BLM should withdraw the parcel from its December lease sale until the Forest Service at least updates its environmental assessment on which the lease decision is based. There is significant new information – such as growing air quality concerns – that must be taken into account before new leasing occurs in the Wyoming Range. Because the Forest Service is in the process of updating its 15-year-old Forest Plan, it would be a good time to pause and determine whether leasing in this part of the Bridger-Teton is still appropriate."

A new drilling proposal demonstrates how the Forest Service has little discretion after issuing a lease. A Houston company last month submitted a plan to drill three wildcat wells on an existing lease in a roadless area in the Wyoming Range's upper Hoback basin, which could lead to industrial development in a scenic part of the National Forest and possibly impact the adjacent Hoback Ranches residential subdivision. When asked about the leases and drilling there, a Forest Service official said the agency was "not going to look at if they drill but how, where and when." (Pinedale Roundup, October 29, 2005).

"The broad group of Wyoming hunters, hikers, anglers and the business community is just as concerned about leasing this year as it was last year," noted Peter Aengst, an energy expert with The Wilderness Society. "Once the leases are made, there's a future bias in favor of going ahead with drilling. Given this, now is the time for careful analysis, public comments, and deliberative decision-making."

"When you realize that the Bridger-Teton National Forest already has 150,000 acres under lease and a number of working wells, it's hard to see why the Forest Service is in such a rush," said **second quote**. "We're urging the Forest Service to provide the public a chance to comment and to take a close look at the impacts of leasing in the Wyoming Range before it commits to more oil and gas development. It's just common sense to look before you lease."

In the nearby Upper Green River Valley, industry has drilled more than 3,000 gas wells in recent years, fouling the air, displacing wildlife from crucial winter range and disrupting migration routes. The Bureau of Land Management is poised to authorize up to 10,000 new wells in the Upper Green over the next decade. Because the Forest Service has not studied the issue of cumulative impacts, it does not know how new leasing and development in the Wyoming Range will add to the environmental damage.

Free-roaming herds of big game, for example, already have to run a gauntlet of roads, residential development and drilling equipment to reach their winter range. Drilling in their summer and transitional range in the Wyoming Range could prove devastating to these animals' survival.

Note: The protest letter to the BLM and photos of the 44,600 acres of the Wyoming Range that could be leased are available. A backgrounder fact sheet is attached.

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