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HEADLINE: Thunder can help protect fragile area

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BODY:

In 1997, as forest supervisor of the Lewis and Clark National Forest in Great Falls, Montana, I declared more than 350,000 acres of the Rocky Mountain Front off limits to new oil and gas leases. Instead of a firestorm of protest, the decision was nationally acclaimed. But today, the wild and ecologically significant Front remains vulnerable and Thunder Energy, a Canadian company, may hold the key.

Two years earlier, when I became the forest supervisor, the front, as we call it, was scheduled for a review of its potential for energy development. After extensive scientific analysis and discussion with thousands of people in organizations, tribes, government, industry and the general public, one thing was abundantly clear. Some places, with their wildness and biodiversity, are too valuable to people and wildlife to turn into industrial zones.

Albertans know that well. In 1999, you showed it. Collectively, ranchers, First Nations, conservationists, regulators and finally industry all had to agree that a place like the Whaleback was just too significant ecologically, socially and culturally, to drill for gas there. Today, Albertans know the area will be preserved forever as Black Creek Heritage Rangeland and Bob Creek Wildland.

I'm struck by the parallels between the two places -- our Rocky Mountain Front here in Montana and your Whaleback.

The soaring ramparts of Montana's Rocky Mountain Front run from the Canadian border to just north of Helena -- more than 250 kilometres of grandeur where the rolling plains collide with sheer limestone reefs, towering thousands of metres above the grasslands. Geologically, it's similar to your Eastern Slopes, but it's wilder. With sprawling ranches and scattered roads, it's not changed much in 100 years.

Abundant and diverse wildlife populations put the Front in the top one per cent of the best wildlife habitat in the United States. All large mammals (except free-roaming bison) found during the Lewis and Clark expedition 200 years ago are still thriving here, including wolves, grizzly bears, lynx, eagles, bighorn sheep and mountain goats. The Front provides winter range for vast herds of elk and the largest gathering of wintering mule deer in the U.S. Just like the Whaleback, diversity abounds.

But unlike the Whaleback, we still have old leases on the Front. Thunder Energy of Calgary holds the largest block. The public and media across the U.S. have decried the idea of drilling in such a pristine area, and the Blackfeet remain appalled that their sacred lands stand to be defiled. In October, the normally gung-ho-for-drilling Bush administration yielded to public opposition and terminated mid-stream the environmental impact statement analysing Thunder's proposal to drill.

Thunder has discovered, as Chevron and Fina have on the Front and Amoco in the Whaleback, drilling in some places is neither smart business nor in the public's best interest. Chevron, Fina and Amoco all relinquished their leases for the sake of stockholders, the public and future generations. But Thunder's lease, and desire to drill, remains.

No one expects Thunder to drop its leases without compensation. With surprising solidarity, Montana's governor, Congressional delegation, Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Department of the Interior have concurred on an effective way out of this stalemate. Willing lease holders on the Front could sell their leases for appraised value or trade for bidding credits, royalty holidays or tax credits. A foundation is willing to spend millions in private money to facilitate such an exchange.

The Whaleback symbolizes what can happen when a society -- citizens and corporations -- plans for a balanced and sustainable future. We need the co-operation of lease holders such as Thunder to achieve lasting protection for the Rocky Mountain Front, and to be remembered as thoughtful, forward-thinking ancestors.

After 23 years with the U.S. Forest Service, Gloria Flora leads Sustainable Obtainable Solutions, a non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring the sustainability of public lands.