

Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front

Elected leaders and agencies say Montana's premier natural area is too precious to drill

In May 2004, the Bureau of Land Management solicited “scoping” comments from the public regarding a proposal to drill for natural gas in the Blackleaf area of Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, now off-limits to new oil and gas leasing. An overwhelming majority (93 percent of Montana respondents and 99 percent nationwide) denounced the drilling plans in one of the nation's finest natural areas. Many of the 49,000 citizens who sent in comments cited the Front's natural values as a cornerstone to the region's economy and quality of life. Visitors and locals alike treasure this landscape, rich both in scenery and biological resources, as a place to hunt, fish and hike. As many of the comments asked: Why risk sacrificing these timeless assets just to tap limited gas reserves that might feed the nation's needs for a week at most? Native American leaders offered strong comments, pointing to their spiritual connection to the pristine lands of the Front, the setting for vision quests and creation stories. Industrializing the Front would undermine these indigenous communities' cultural identities.

The following direct excerpts come from comments by elected leaders and agencies:

Randall Gray, mayor, Great Falls: *Its identity as an undeveloped, pristine, roadless back country will be permanently changed if the Blindhorse is open to drilling. One well pad with three wells, if successful, will spawn other pads and wells and the eventual cumulative impact will see roads and pipelines crisscrossing the Front in the same fashion as has occurred in the Pincher Creek area of Alberta..... Preserving the wildness of the Front is a tremendous asset for our economic development efforts as we look to diversify [Great Falls'] economy for current and future generations of Montanans.*

Jay St. Goddard, tribal chairman, Blackfeet Nation: *The entire Rocky Mountain Front is an alive and functioning ecosystem that is vitally important to the Blackfeet Nation people and ways of life .It is our “backbone of the world” and a vital part of our culture that gives us life since it exists to be utilized everyday as it was by past generations of our ancestors to provide us strength, subsistence, cultural identity and to connect with our creator. Development of this kind is contrary to historic, cultural and spiritual uses of the area and may irreparably compromise all of them.*

U.S. Sen. Max Baucus: *This habitat is too rich, this area is too important to our outdoor heritage as Montanans to expose it to noise, pollution, and disturbance gas and oil rigs would bring. Let's give leaseholders the option of doing the right thing and find a less sensitive place to drill.....The amount of recoverable gas and oil in the Front is not nearly enough to justify damaging the higher recreational, wildlife and scenic values associated with the Front.*

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: *The option of a lease buyout or trade to avoid development of the Front is gaining public, Congressional and media attention. Given the interest in this option, please consider including in the EIS a discussion of the Agency procedures and Congressional action that would be required to accomplish a no-development option. This discussion should include the measures that would be required to permanently protect the Blackleaf area from energy development.*

Larry Salois, Little Shell Tribe councilman: *We have an opportunity to preserve a unique and special place which was used by our ancestors. Not only for preservation of life but also for preservation of spirit. My great grandfather, Toussaint Salois, homesteaded on the Upper Birch Creek before the flood of 1964. His final resting place is in present-day Heart Butte. I have listened to stories told by my Uncle of tree burial sites and vision quest places in the Heart Butte area. The area all along the Front, from St. Peters Mission to Chief Mountain, still holds religious and cultural significance for both the Little Shell and Blackfeet tribes.*

Lewis and Clark County Commission: *The Rocky Mountain Front in Montana is too special to develop for natural gas and given the Front's cultural and ecological significance, along with its sheer beauty and opportunities for recreation, we agree that every option must be explored to protect this area. ... We are proud to share in a landscape that provides a home for all of the species (except bison) that were here when our predecessors passed through this stunning area. It is much more valuable to us all in its current undeveloped state.*

Rep. Eve Franklin, Great Falls: *I'm here to register my opposition to drilling on the Rocky Mountain Front. The potential yield for energy is no trade-off for the long-term damage to the fragile environmental area.*

Rep. Sue Dickensen, Great Falls: *I oppose oil and gas drilling in the Blackleaf area. Shame to do long-term damage to such a pristine area for short-term energy production.... We fish and camp in that area and seeing an undeveloped, wild Front makes the outing awesome. A sense of peace emanates from that beauty.*

Mary Sexton, Teton County Commissioner (in a Great Falls Tribune op-ed): *How much money is the federal government willing to spend to justify drilling? How much will private property along the Front be devalued due to gas development? How will gas development impact tourism?...I believe that a federal buy-out of existing leases along the Front, including the Startech lease, is the most prudent, practical avenue to pursue. The chances for a revenue windfall to the [Teton] county are minimal, and the possibility for high costs and no income is substantial.*

Mike Aderhold, north central regional supervisor for Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (Note: from MTFWP's travel plan scoping comments on Front submitted December 13, 2002): *For almost 100 years, FWP people have known that the lowlands immediately east of the Rockies were seasonally important for a variety of big game animals. In recent decades, FWP has come to appreciate the area's value for a number of other plants and animals and we are just starting to understand the land's biological relationship to the protected high country.....It's a big wildlife-rich piece of country—a subset of what FWP considers a State and National treasure.*

For more information or to receive copies of the full comment letters:

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