

BACK THE FRONT!

MONTANA'S BADGER TWO MEDICINE: TOO SPECIAL TO DRILL

Part of Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, the Badger-Two Medicine is a 130,000 acre area of the Lewis and Clark National Forest (LCNF) bounded by Glacier National Park, the Blackfeet Reservation, and the Bob Marshall Wilderness. In 1982 this area was leased for oil and gas development. After protracted, expensive attempts to secure permits to drill, the primary leaseholders at the time recognized that unresolved social, environmental and cultural concerns would consistently delay and likely stop development here. Yet, the threat of drilling remains. Today new policies encourage the removal of "impediments" and a controversial drilling permit here is being reviewed.

A Truly Special Place:

The Badger Two Medicine is intimately connected with the significant oral traditions and cultural practices of the Blackfeet people. Tribal members continue to use the area for traditional purposes and value the area as important to maintaining their cultural identity. The area is also rich in wildlife values with important habitat for grizzly bears, elk, mountain goats, lynx and many other species. It serves as the pristine headwaters for the Badger and Two Medicine rivers, which supply water to ranchers and others in north central Montana.

Problematic Oil and Gas Leasing:

The Badger Two Medicine leases that were issued in the 1980s had fundamental problems from the outset. The 1982 LCNF Oil and Gas Environmental Assessment failed to consider 'No Leasing' as an alternative, or the loss of roadless values, as clearly required by law. Nor did the Forest Service analyze the cumulative effects of potential development. In other parts of the Rocky Mountain Front and on the adjacent Flathead National Forest, virtually identical leasing processes were found to be illegal and invalidated by court order (See *Bob Marshall Alliance v. Watt* and *Conner v. Burford*).

Despite treaties, agreements and existing law, there was no consultation with the Blackfeet Nation and no consideration of sacred lands and cultural resources. Only under the threat of litigation did the LCNF finally evaluate cultural values. This study resulted in 70 percent of the area being deemed eligible for designation as a Traditional Cultural District under the National Historic Preservation Act. The Tribe has passed a resolution opposing all drilling in the Badger-Two Medicine and is currently studying expansion of the District boundary.

Efforts to Find A Solution:

In 1997, a collaborative agreement to allow lessees to relinquish their leases was negotiated between the Department of Interior, the principle lessee (Chevron), U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, the Blackfeet Nation and Montana conservationists. In the agreement, these leases, which cover almost half of the Badger-Two Medicine, could be traded for bidding or royalty payment credits on other federal oil and gas lease properties. Despite Chevron's support, this proposed legislation failed to be passed. Chevron subsequently relinquished all their leases within the Badger-Two Medicine, to other entities (primarily Ocean Resources, now owned by Devon Energy). More recently, Sen. Baucus has introduced legislation that would suspend all leases in the Badger-Two Medicine and authorize a study of the buy or trade out of these leases. Sen. Conrad Burns has recently said that he is not opposed to the buy out of controversial leases in the Rocky Mountain Front.

The Drilling Threat Remains:

To expedite energy development, the Bush Administration has implemented policies requiring any impediments to development be reviewed and potentially removed as agencies see fit. Despite less than a three percent chance of finding a producible field (1992 LCNF Leasing EIS), a lease-holder in the Badger-Two Medicine recently renewed efforts to drill a wildcat well near the border of Glacier National Park. The Forest Service will not decide until 2005 in order to first assess the Traditional Cultural District boundaries and formally consult with the Tribe, as well as determine whether additional environmental analysis is needed.

Conclusion: Time to Protect the Badger Two Medicine!

After 22 years of expensive, fruitless efforts, it's time to recognize that Montana's Badger-Two Medicine area is worth far more to the Blackfeet tribe, Montanans, and Americans than to speculative oil and gas development. Legislation should be passed to buy or trade out the leases here.