

Montana's Rocky Mountain Front: A Conservation History

OVERVIEW: *A continuing legacy of stewardship over a national treasure*

Montanans' long-term conservation investments in the Rocky Mountain Front have returned huge dividends to the Treasure State. The benefits include wildlife security, scenery, tourism draws and a quality of life that is the envy of the world. Consider:

- Congress has set aside much of the mountainous area to the west of the Front as Wilderness and established Glacier National Park to the north.
- State wildlife officials set up wildlife management areas to protect winter range on the Front.
- The Blackfeet Nation has identified the Badger-Two Medicine as a place of spiritual significance and applied for it to be made a Cultural Historic District under the National Historic Preservation Act.
- Federal land managers have temporarily put the Front off limits to new drilling.

[Note: More Front information is at: <http://www.savethefront.org/issues/agreement.php>]

PRIVATE EFFORTS: *Keeping ranching and private enterprise alive*

Perhaps most significantly, ranchers, the state, hunters and conservation groups are working together to protect the Front because of its value as a haven for wildlife. It is only through these broad efforts that Montana's Front remains unparalleled habitat in concert with a vibrant working agricultural heritage. This mosaic of federal, state, private and tribal land, has undergone a number of changes since the first pioneers arrived, but has proved to be one of Montana's most treasured landscapes, where matchless recreational opportunities exist alongside compatible private enterprise, such as ranching, hunting outfitters, and tourism operations.

Some 100,000 acres of private land east of the Front are under conservation easements, which prevent subdivision and habitat fragmentation and preserve wide-open, scenic working ranches. In 1978, The Nature Conservancy began to assemble its Pine Butte Swamp Preserve south of the Teton River which now covers 18,000 acres. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has spent almost \$4 million to buy easements on 22,600 acres on private ranchlands and in 2004 the Service launched a program to acquire easements on up to 170,000 more acres.

THE EARLY DAYS: *Protecting timber and wildlife resources*

After generations of respectful stewardship by Native Americans, the Front won its first measure of protection from the United States government with the 1897 creation of the Lewis and Clark Forest Reserve. Out of that original 3 million-acre Reserve, several national forests, as well as Glacier National Park, would be created in 1910. Three years later, the Montana state legislature established the state's first-ever game preserve here. The 200,000-acre Sun River Game Preserve protected the popular Sun River elk herd and other game mammals and birds. The Front is now home to the state's largest collection of wildlife management areas and federal outstanding natural areas. Also, the Montana State Land Board adopted "Front Sensitive Area Stipulations" in 1996, imposing "no surface occupancy" restrictions on energy leasing on state-trust lands.

MORE RECENT HISTORY: *Continuing the Tradition of Protecting the Front*

Recognizing the long history of private, state, and federal efforts to protect the world class wildlife and scenic values of the public lands on Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, a wide variety of Montanans, local leaders, newspapers, and elected officials support efforts to continue to protect the Front. Recent support for the Front includes:

- In the fall of 2005, more than 37,000 Americans contacted the Forest Service about a proposed new travel plan for the Front and a resounding 97.95 percent urged the agency to support traditional recreation on the Front.
- In the fall of 2004, more than 49,000 Americans contacted the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) about proposed drilling along the Front with more than 93 percent of Montanans and 99 percent of all Americans urging the agency to not proceed with any new drilling.
- In 2004, a statewide poll question conducted as part of a Lee Newspaper poll showed that by more than 2-to-1 Montanans supported protecting the Front by swapping out the energy leases there in exchange for leases in less sensitive areas.
- A March 2002 statewide poll by Fairbanks, Maslin and Associates found that only 28 percent agreed with the statement that, “For future growth in our economy and population, we need to increase our supply of energy and reduce our dependence on foreign oil by drilling for more oil and gas in the U.S., including the Rocky Mountain Front.” (margin of error: +/- 4%).
- A 1998 statewide poll for the Great Falls Tribune also showed that, by 2-to-1, Montanans opposed any energy development of the Front.
- In 1997 the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council passed a resolution opposing any energy development in the Badger-Two Medicine portion of the Front.

MONTANA AND NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS: *Protect the Front*

The Front has received significant coverage in Montana and national newspapers and the need for its protection has been consistently and repeatedly advocated on the editorial pages of local, regional, and national newspapers. No paper has come out supporting drilling.

- From 2002-2006, the following Montana papers editorialized against oil and gas drilling in the Front: *Great Falls Tribune*, *Bozeman Chronicle*, *Kalispell Daily Interlake*, *Missoulian*, and *Helena Independent Record* with many editorializing numerous times.
- Editorials in national papers have also included the Front as an example of a place that is too special to drill including *The New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, and *Los Angeles Times*. In an August 10, 2003 editorial (“The Land of Lewis and Clark”) the *New York Times* stated: “*The Rocky Mountain Front, home to the largest big game herds in the Lower 48, is greatly in need of permanent protection from the oil and gas companies and their friends in the Interior Department.*”
- In Montana, the *Missoulian* editorialized: “*Anyone who gazes at the Front, even from afar, must have some notion of why so many care so deeply about it. It is here, where the Rocky Mountains spill onto the Parries and amid the elk, bighorns, grizzlies, and other wildlife, that you discover the soul of Montana. There are people that would drill holes in that soul! And to them we say this: not even if this were the last place on earth left to drill.*”