

COALITION TO PROTECT THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN FRONT

Montana's Front at a Crucial Turning Point

A Primer on Drilling and Motorized Use Proposals

Montana's Rocky Mountain Front has long been valued for its abundant wildlife, big ranches, vast open space and quiet vistas, both by Montanans and Americans from across the nation. Beginning with the creation of the state's first game preserve in 1913, Montanans have a long history of conservation here that has allowed generations to experience the area much as it was a century ago. Recognizing the unique natural qualities of the Front, a collection of elected officials and local leaders have spoken out against drilling here, including Sen. Max Baucus, the Lewis and Clark County commissioners, the mayor of Great Falls, former Lewis and Clark National Forest Supervisor Gloria Flora, and the former Montana BLM state director. Polls, public comment opportunities and newspaper editorials show that most Montanans want the Front protected. Similarly, there has been tremendous opposition to a proposed travel plan that would open much of the Forest Service lands on the Front to motorized use.

Opening the Front to oil and gas exploration could result in irreversible impact to this beautiful yet fragile area that Montanans care deeply about. An unnecessary invasion of the Front for short-term gain is not the answer to our long-term energy needs.

-- Sen. Max Baucus

OIL AND GAS PROPOSALS

Wasn't this already settled?

In 1997, after careful consideration, the Lewis and Clark National Forest decided to close the Front to new oil and gas leasing. The decision did not affect existing leases, and the BLM is now evaluating new drilling proposals on some existing leases, despite doubts over their legality.

What's at stake now?

Oil and gas activity on the Front could range from a few exploratory wells to full-field development if commercially recoverable reserves are found. Startech Energy, Inc., a Canadian company based in Calgary, has proposed drilling three wells in Blindhorse Canyon, a BLM Outstanding Natural Area. This project would require rebuilding a primitive road up 1,000 vertical feet to accommodate the hauling of 100 semi-loads of equipment. Another company, Grizzly Resources Inc., proposes drill sites on Muddy and Dupuyer creeks.

How does the leasing process work?

Drilling is a two-stage process. In the first stage, the government (usually the BLM) leases the federally held mineral rights for 10-year terms through a bidding process. If drilling results in production, leases are extended. In the second stage, leaseholders apply for a drilling permit and if the exploratory wells produce, they may seek full-field development. A lease conveys a general right to drill, but not in any place or in any manner. The BLM may deny drilling applications because of significant impacts, or it can impose restrictions, such as maximum well-pad density and seasonal activity restrictions.

Where are we in the process?

The BLM is seeking public comments for an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on drilling in the 58,000-acre Blackleaf Area, where Grizzly and Startech propose to operate. BLM has rejected Grizzly's proposal because its application was deficient, but it proposed wells will still be included in the EIS. The Lewis and Clark National Forest is also examining a proposal by Louisiana investor Sidney Longwell to drill in the Badger Two Medicine, which was once Blackfeet tribal land. This proposed well site at Hall Creek is near Glacier National Park and the Blackfeet Reservation. Evaluation of this proposal is on hold while the Forest Service considers a request by the tribe to expand a Traditional Cultural District in the Badger Two Medicine.

What would "full-field" drilling in the Blackleaf and along the whole Front entail?

In its 1992 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on Blackleaf drilling, BLM determined that full-field development here would result in:

- Drilling 15 new wells
- Construction of 15 miles of new road and pipeline
- Reconstruction of 13 miles of existing road

According to the 1997 Lewis and Clark National Forest's leasing EIS, full-field development across the whole Front would include:

- Drilling 43 new wells over 10 to 15 years
- Building 71 miles of new roads and pipeline
- Reconstruction of 30 miles of old road

What does oil and gas development mean for ranchers on the Front?

Much of the state and private land along the Front is in "*split estate*," meaning the surface and mineral rights are owned by different entities with the federal government holding much of the subsurface rights. The BLM may lease these rights regardless of the wishes of surface owners, which could disrupt traditional ranching practices. Ranchers could see a loss of effective range, on both public and private lands. Wildlife displaced from lease areas could make excessive use of grass and hay on private lands. Oil and gas development—especially the increased truck traffic—would increase the spread of noxious weeds. Elsewhere in the Rockies, ranchers have lost cattle to poisoned water found in oil and gas waste ponds, while in Alberta cattle have died or suffered abortions from leaked hydrogen sulfide gas.

How does oil and gas affect recreational use and outfitting businesses?

Drilling and production are round-the-clock operations. Drill rigs, some of which could be in place for many months, will mar the scenic qualities and peaceful recreation on the Front. This will likely concentrate use in adjacent wilderness areas, while some outfitters and guides may have to relocate altogether. Should the proposed drilling lead to full-field development, traffic and industrial activity would increase, greatly altering the sense of place that Montanans have come to expect of the Front.

Are there health hazards?

Blowouts are rare in the oil and gas business, but these accidents do occur. The natural gas under the Front contains hydrogen sulfide, so a blowout here would release this toxic gas, causing severe injury or death to plants, animals or people in the vicinity.

What are some of the landscape effects of oil and gas development?

Air Quality: Dust and pollution from construction, vehicles, generators and compressors would diminish views and air quality. Carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide and hydrogen sulfide could be released during flaring.

Water Quality: Sedimentation and pollution from construction activity and road and pad runoff could degrade surface waters, while ground water could be tainted by accidental discharge of drilling fluids and hazardous waste.

Wildlife: Habitat fragmentation from new roads and well pads, as well as disruption from truck traffic and construction activity will be especially hard on big game species, such as bighorn sheep, elk, moose and mountain goats, potentially leading to a decrease in their numbers. If it were to occur, full-field development would persist for 25 to 40 years, and the BLM admits that, “the wildlife values present before field development may not be totally restored, as negative impact would be cumulative over the life of the field.”

What are the costs and benefits to Choteau and Teton County?

While development could increase business traffic and a few jobs, no major shift in employment or tax revenues is expected. Employment benefits for residents would be limited and temporary since many of the workers would come from elsewhere, although part-time local workers could be hired for construction and transportation jobs. Startech anticipates employing five to seven people at its proposed drilling operations in the Blackleaf.

According to the Forest Service (1997 EIS), *not* developing oil and gas at this time has economic benefits. Development, meanwhile, could strain community services such as law enforcement, schools, road maintenance and emergency services. While local revenues may increase from royalties and taxes paid on production, there could also be a reduction in tourist income. Recent oil and gas revenues to Teton county average \$40,000 per year, while at the height of the last drilling boom in 1984, revenue was \$400,000. However, because the legislature reformulated oil and gas payments, production at the peak 1984 levels would now result in only \$100,000 going to the county.

How much oil and gas is there on the Front?

Not much. Since 1900, 103 oil and gas wells have been drilled along Montana’s Front, most of which lacked recoverable reserves. For example, the Blackleaf’s four wells have produced 7 billion cubic feet (Bcf) of gas, but all were “shut-in” in 1991. One was abandoned in 1997, and the others remain shut-in because of the lack of a processing plant. Reserve estimates vary for the Front, depending on the geographic scale assessed. Some estimates focus on the “Montana Thrust Belt” which covers 6 million acres from Helena north to the Canadian border, while others focus on the 58,000 acre “Blackleaf Unit.” Gas estimates also vary depending on whether they analyze “technical reserves” (total amount that could be extracted), or “economically recoverable reserves” (smaller amount that could be extracted at a profit).

BLM estimates for the Blackleaf Area range from 14 to 106 Bcf, enough to meet the nation’s needs for at most two days. The Wilderness Society recently analyzed the U.S. Geologic Survey’s economically recoverable estimates and found:

- Between 289 and 397 Bcf of natural gas for the 400,00 acres of federal land on the Front, an amount that could feed national demand for less than a week.
- For the Blackleaf, there is 21 to 28 Bcf, an 11-hour supply at best.
- For the Badger Two Medicine, 71 to 97 Bcf, or a 37-hour supply.

Do we need to develop the Front?

No. More than 95 percent of the 8 million acres of BLM lands in Montana is available for leasing. According to a 2003 Department of Energy study of the Rocky Mountain region, 88 percent of the “technically recoverable” natural gas deposits are open. The United States produces 85 percent of the natural gas it consumes, in contrast with oil, which is heavily imported. Natural gas can provide long-term energy security provided we manage our reserves wisely. While there is a place for oil and gas extraction in Montana, the Rocky Mountain Front contains other values and economic benefits too precious to sacrifice.

MOTORIZED USE OF THE FRONT

What is proposed under the revised Travel Plan?

The Lewis and Clark National Forest also is revising its Travel Plan for the Front. This process determines what vehicle use is allowed on trails, roads and across the landscape for the next 10 to 15 years. The Forest Service’s initial proposal in 2002 was to open two-thirds of the Front to some form of motorized use (dirt bikes, ATVs, jeeps and snowmobiles). This proposal would classify 75 traditional trails, covering 281m miles, as “motorized.”

What is the public response to the Travel Plan proposal?

In the largest public response ever received by the Lewis and Clark National Forest, more than 90 percent of Montanans who responded opposed opening the Front’s backcountry to motorized use. Once permitted in unroaded areas, this activity is hard to remove, many wrote.

What are some of the impacts of off-road vehicles?

ORVs can shred the pristine nature and sense of place Montanans have come to expect from the Rocky Mountain Front. This is because their use:

- Spreads noxious weeds that stick to their wheels and undercarriages.
- Escalates erosion as they drive through streams and rivers, increasing sedimentation and damaging fisheries.
- Displaces wildlife and fragments habitat.
- Disturbs traditional recreational users on foot and horse.

CAN THE FRONT BE SAVED?

Many Montanans feel the Front should be kept the way it is and not opened to drill rigs and excessive motorized use. To accomplish this, they have proposed compromises to remove oil and gas leases and confine motorized recreation to Forest roads. Sen. Max Baucus has sponsored legislation encouraging energy development to be relocated off the Front to less sensitive areas through equitable lease buyouts or swaps. Others have suggested Wilderness designation is needed for the Front’s roadless areas. This would not affect existing leases, public land grazing rights or outfitter use, but would ensure no new leasing and prohibit motorized use on trails.

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