

The Rocky Mountain Front's Century of Wildlife Protection A Proving Ground for Montana Conservation Initiatives

The state of Montana's conservation investment in the Rocky Mountain Front stretches back nearly a century to the creation of one of the state's first game preserves, and leads straight to recent actions by the state Land Board that impose strict limits on energy exploration on state-trust lands. Thanks to a prevailing ethic that puts wildlife ahead of short-term profits, robust populations of 10 big-game species roam the Front, considered among the finest wildlife habitat remaining in the lower 48 states. As a result, the Front is among Montana's most treasured landscapes, an unspoiled paradise for hunting, fishing and the kind of high-quality outdoor recreation that holds much promise for the state's economic future.

The state Land Board steps up for conservation

The state Land Board, comprised of Montana's five statewide elected officials, administers state-trust lands clustered on the eastern margins of the Front for the benefit of the state's schools. Despite a mission to maximize revenue flow off trust land, the Board set tough no-surface-occupancy rules in 1996 on the use of its most sensitive holdings. The awe-inspiring reef arising from the Great Plains in northcentral Montana presents a land-ownership mosaic, stitching together federal, state, private and tribal lands. Federal land managers are currently considering controversial proposals to open the Front to exploratory gas drilling. Proposed well sites are within or surrounded by conservation districts. East of the national forest boundary, for example, are state wildlife preserves, along with the checkerboard array of state-trust land totaling 94,000 acres, about a third of which have been leased for oil and gas exploration.

"It is critical that we continue to recognize the special nature of this area. I am comfortable with the Sensitive Area Stipulations, which requires extensive public involvement, scoping an environmental impact statement, and final approval by the Land Board before development can take place," Atty. Gen. Mike McGrath told Montana Conservation Voters Education Fund for a February 2004 report, *Focus on Montana State Lands and the Montana Land Board*. (The report is available at www.respectmontna.org.) The Land Board unanimously re-affirmed the stipulations for the Front in December 2001, at a time when the energy industry renewed its interest in old leases on nearby federal land. "Development of the Rocky Mountain Front state lands has the most restrictive rules of any state land," said Secretary of State Bob Brown, a current Republican gubernatorial candidate.

A proven tradition of state-sponsored conservation

In taking these actions, the Land Board was honoring a long-standing commitment to the Front's preservation by Montana's political leadership. At the end of the 19th century, Montana lawmakers were alarmed enough at the disappearance of wildlife to enact increasingly sweeping conservation measures. The board of Game and Fish Commissioners was created in 1895 and two years later the Legislature banned

market hunting. Saving game animals in the wild was one of the few things Montana lawmakers could agree upon in the contentious days of early statehood.

The state's conservation investment on the Rocky Mountain Front formally began in 1913 when lawmakers created the Sun River Game Preserve, setting aside 195,877 acres of important elk habitat on national forest land in the upper reaches of the Sun drainage. Years later, sport hunters and stockmen, who had historically been in conflict over elk management, worked together to establish a zone for Sun River elk to spend the winter where they would not eat ranchers' hay and knock down their fences. An elderly rancher sold 20,000 acres of prime winter range to the state in a sportsmen-brokered deal in 1947. The resulting wildlife refuge was confusingly named after the Sun River as well. The Sun River Game Range, now a wildlife management area administered by the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, is located 9 miles northwest of Augusta, where the Sun River Canyon spills onto the prairie. In the 1950s, state wildlife officials spoke out to keep oil and gas exploration and a missile site out of the preserve.

State officials in the 1970s established the two more wildlife management areas (WMAs) on state land along the national forest boundary. The Ear Mountain and Blackleaf WMAs incorporate parts of the dissolved Blackleaf Game and Bird Preserve, created by legislative action in 1923. The 11,107-acre Blackleaf was created to protect elk, grizzly bear and mule deer habitat, but a Colorado company, Grizzly Resources, is seeking to drill for the federal gas beneath this land. So sensitive is the 3,047-acre Ear Mountain unit that public access is forbidden from the end of hunting season to May 15.

In recent years FWP has tried to establish the fluvial variety of grayling to the two forks of the upper Sun. The planted fish wind up in downstream in Gibson Reservoir, however, without colonizing the streams. Another disappearing native game fish, westslope cutthroat trout, persists in isolated pockets in some 27 drainages on the Front. State fisheries officials hope to tap this genetic bank in their ongoing efforts to restore this subspecies of cutthroat to parts of its original range in western Montana. In other native species re-introduction efforts, the Blackfoot Indians have brought back a wild population of the diminutive swift fox to tribal land at the northern end of the Front. And decades ago, state wildlife officials tapped the Sun River bighorn sheep herd to re-establish this big-game species in many parts of Montana after market hunting nearly eliminated ungulates from the wild

Managing private land for biological diversity

Private efforts play a key role in the Front's conservation legacy. The Nature Conservancy began in 1978 to assemble the lands that now make up the Pine Butte Swamp Preserve south of the Teton River. This 18,000-acre complex of varying habitat types features the largest network of fens—unique groundwater-fed wetlands--south of the Canadian border. Botanists have documented the presence of more than 700 plant species in the area, representing about a third of all species in Montana. In 1986, the Boone and Crockett Club purchased the 6,000-acre Triple Divide Ranch for use as a research and educational reserve. It was renamed Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch in honor of one of the nation's great conservationist presidents.

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