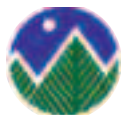




Rocky Mountain Front, Montana

PHOTO COURTESY PETER AENGST



THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

Too Wild to Drill

Rocky Mountain Front, Montana

What's at Stake?

A land of spectacular mountains towering over rolling plains and sparkling rivers, Montana's Rocky Mountain Front is where the short-grass prairies of the Great Plains slam into the east face of Northern Rockies. The Front is an integral part of the Crown of the Continent, one of North America's largest and most intact ecosystems, spanning the Bob Marshall Wilderness, Glacier National Parks and Canada's Waterton National Park. In the north, the Front includes the 200-square mile Badger-Two Medicine, a portion of the Lewis and Clark National Forest held sacred by the Blackfeet Tribe.

The intersection of mountains and grasslands found in the 100-mile long Rocky Mountain Front produce what has been called the top one percent of wildlife habitat left in the lower 48 states. The Front still retains almost its entire native species base (only free-roaming bison are missing) and harbors the country's largest bighorn sheep and second-largest elk herds. The Front also supports the largest number of grizzly bears south of Canada and is the only place in

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— MONTANA SENATOR CONRAD BURNS, JUNE 2006

the lower 48 states where these animals still roam from the mountains to their historic range on the plains. Such threatened and endangered species as lynx, wolves, and wolverines are also found on the Front, as are mule deer, pronghorn, mountain goats, badgers and mountain lions.

"It's clear this is a critical area for habitat, recreation, agriculture, and just to appreciate the majesty of Montana," said Sen. Conrad Burns, when he unveiled legislation to withdraw the Front from future leasing in June of 2006. ■

Protection Status

In partnership with the grassroots Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front, The Wilderness Society has helped forge agreements with the two energy companies that hold all the federal leases in the Front's Blackleaf area. One company has donated its leases to Trout Unlimited, while Startech Energy has agreed to sell the energy leases it had been preparing to drill when the Bush Administration terminated an environmental study of the project in the fall of 2004. Meanwhile, Montana's Sen. Burns has proposed legislation that would bar future leasing on the Front, essentially broadening and making permanent a 1997 leasing moratorium imposed by the Forest Service.

Historically, the Front has benefited from a century-long tradition of stewardship that has kept it much the way it has been since Lewis and Clark first laid

eyes on it 200 years ago. Montana's first game preserve was established here to protect the Sun River elk herd in 1913. This move has been followed by numerous other efforts to protect pieces of the Front as state Wildlife Management Areas and BLM Outstanding Natural Areas. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Nature Conservancy are at the forefront of private land conservation here, purchasing conservation easements that not only protect habitat, but keep ranchers on the land.

The National Register of Historic Places has deemed much of the Badger-Two Medicine eligible for designation as a Traditional Cultural District, and the Forest Service is in the process of setting the proposed district's boundaries. Such a designation would not stop development but does erect a hurdle to those proposing to drill in the Badger-Two Medicine. ■

Status of Threat

Although the Blackleaf leases are on their way to being retired, about 50 leases remain, covering 80,000 acres, or two-thirds, of the Badger-Two Medicine, the northern part of the Front that the Blackfeet revere as sacred land. One leaseholder, Sidney Longwell of Louisiana, has pushed for over a decade to drill on his lease at Hall Creek, close to the boundary with Glacier National Park. His drilling application has been put on hold while the Forest Service studies a request from the Blackfeet Tribe to

expand the boundaries of the Traditional Cultural District.

“The Front is a vital part of our Blackfeet history and culture and continues to give us an opportunity to experience the life of our ancestors understood to provide strength, subsistence, cultural identity and to connect us with our creator,” wrote Pat Thomas, chairman of the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council, in a May 2006 letter urging retirement of oil and gas leases. The Tribe opposes any development in the Badger-Two Medicine. ■

Why is the Rocky Mountain Front at Risk?

Industry has a long-standing interest in drilling in the Front and over the past few decades has acquired leases on thousands of acres of federal land here. Drilling would introduce roads and industrial activity into a place that is largely roadless and would undermine its magnificent wildlife values.

“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,” wrote Montana’s Sen. Max Baucus in April 2004. “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.” ■

Current Development

No energy production or exploration currently is taking place on the Front’s public lands. The last company to drill on the Front’s public lands, EPS Resources, plugged most of its Blackleaf wells in the early 1990s, declared bankruptcy and walked away, leaving a mess on the ground and thousands in unpaid debt. In the summer of 2005, Suncor Energy sunk \$10 million into a 16,000-foot dry hole at Flesher Pass just south of the Front and cancelled plans for a further drilling. ■

Solution

Retiring oil and gas leases – through buybacks, trade outs, or other means – is a first step toward permanent protection. Also necessary is a Congressional withdrawal of the area from future leasing, which would be accomplished if proposed legislation recently inserted in the 2007 Interior Appropriations bill becomes law. But lasting protection will require wilderness or other special designations for the roadless parts of the Front. Such designations could be packaged with economic development assistance for Front communities, such as Browning, Choteau and Augusta, to help them use the Front’s natural assets to attract investment and visitors. ■

Where is the Rocky Mountain Front?



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TWS Research on Oil and Gas Issues:

A wealth of research focused on oil and gas development in the West and Alaska is available on The Wilderness Society's website at <http://Wilderness.org/Library/OilAndGas.cfm>