

P R E S S R E L E A S E

BAUCUS HAILS VICTORY IN FIGHT TO PROTECT 'FRONT'

Senator's Rocky Mtn. Front Drilling Ban Headed To Bush

December 12, 2006

(Washington, D.C.) – The Rocky Mountain Front will be protected from new oil and gas drilling permits forever, thanks to legislation passed by Montana Senator Max Baucus.

"This is a major, major victory for Montana. We've been working to pass meaningful protections for the Rocky Mountain Front for 30 years," said Baucus, who often hikes up Ear Mountain in the Front. "Thirty years from now, our kids and grandchildren will thank us. An awful lot of people worked on this and I want to thank each and every one of them." Baucus, as the highest-ranking Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, was a lead negotiator on legislation to extend expiring tax credits. The bill was the last piece of legislation this Congress will pass, and therefore the last opportunity to pass meaningful protections for the Front.

"It wasn't easy," Baucus said. "But we finally got it done."

Baucus used his seat at the table to include language that will make permanent a 1997 moratorium on new oil and gas leases on the Front and make it easier to retire existing leases. The bill passed the Senate late Friday and is now headed to President Bush for his expected signature.

"The Front is a crowning jewel for Montana and the country," Baucus said. "Some places should be off limits, and the Front is one of them. The Rocky Mountain Front will be protected forever. Our children's children will be able to hunt, fish, hike and camp there – just like we do today. I'm extremely proud."

The outright ban on new leases will also allow a coalition of non-profit groups to purchase existing leases from oil and gas companies and retire them without fear that the federal government would turn around and reissue the leases in the future.

Baucus' provision also includes an incentive for lease-holding energy companies to sell their leases. The provision provides a tax holiday – equal to 25 percent of the capital gain received by the seller – for sales of leases to non profit groups that agree to retire the leases. This provision applies to 60 current leases on the Front.

A coalition of sportsmen and women, conservationists, ranchers, and elected officials has been working to retire leases on the Front. Baucus thanked the many groups who pushed for the drilling ban, including The Wilderness Society, the Montana Wilderness Association, Montana Trout Unlimited, the Montana Wildlife Federation, Friends of the Rocky Mountain Front, the Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front, and the Blackfeet Nation.

"This was a team effort," Baucus said. "We all can be very proud of working together." The Front contains little in the way of proven oil and gas reserves, but is rich in wildlife habitat – including grizzly, elk, and bighorn sheep -- and is home to world-class hunting, fishing, and recreation opportunities, Baucus said.

The area is also considered sacred by the Blackfeet Indian Tribe.

In 1997, Lewis and Clark Forest Supervisor Gloria Flora withdrew 365,000 acres of federal land in the Front from new oil and gas leasing activities -- based in large part upon overwhelming public support for protecting the Front. But in many parts of the Front, oil and gas leases exist that pre-date the 1997 decision.

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