



NEWS

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Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Move to Conserve Wildlife along Rocky Mountain Front

(BILLINGS, Mont.) -- The Interior Department today announced two decisions that will help ensure the conservation of wildlife in northwestern Montana. The Bureau of Land Management will indefinitely stop work on an environmental impact statement that could allow oil and gas development in the Blackleaf area along the Rocky Mountain Front. Meanwhile, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is launching an effort to establish a voluntary, incentive-based easement program to conserve wildlife on private land in the same general area.

The BLM announcement means the Blackleaf area will not be developed in the foreseeable future. BLM will likely redirect funding earmarked for the Blackleaf EIS project to another planning project, the West HiLine EIS/Resource Management Plan.

"Clearly, development along the Front is a complex issue," said Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Land and Minerals Management Rebecca Watson. "President Bush has met with hunters and anglers and told them there are some places that should not be developed in order to protect wildlife. The Rocky Mountain Front is important for wildlife and is of great interest to the hunting community. There is very little existing development in this area and we need to step back and look at the issue on a landscape level to be sure we conserve our resources in a balanced way."

Robert Model, president of the Boone & Crockett Club, supported the decision. "Postponing development along the Front until a range-wide management plan can be carefully revised makes good sense for the preservation of the wildlife in this area," he said. "Deer, elk, grizzly bears -- they all will be impacted by energy exploration in the area. It is vital to the habitat that the BLM look at not only the Blackleaf, but the surrounding areas that these animals depend on for survival. The Bush Administration is making a good decision here for the protection and conservation of wildlife and I support it."

The National Environmental Policy Act requires federal agencies to complete an EIS before taking any action that could significantly affect the environment. Watson said that halting work on the EIS would allow more time for all involved parties to explore alternatives that

would resolve the complex issues associated with energy development in the Blackleaf area.

Stopping the EIS process for Blackleaf also would allow the BLM to concentrate on other planning efforts in Montana that ultimately would be more beneficial in meeting the energy needs of the nation.

Marty Ott, BLM's state director for Montana and the Dakotas, said that the area covered in the West HiLine has about 850 authorized oil and gas and natural gas leases, so it is more efficient for BLM to concentrate its resources on that project. Also, October 1 begins the new federal fiscal year, and it's a logical time to reassess the agency's workload and priorities.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposal would examine the potential for purchasing conservation easements, from willing sellers whose lands provide important habitat for fish and wildlife species on the Front.

"The Service and private landowners are finding common ground in Montana," Service Director Steve Williams said. "Together, we realize that protecting important fish and wildlife habitat and maintaining working ranches go hand in hand. Conservation easements are an effective, proven approach to accomplishing both of these objectives."

The Service has successfully used its conservation easement program to work cooperatively with private landowners to conserve nearly 60,000 acres in the Blackfoot and Centennial Valleys of western Montana. This approach enjoys broad support from hunters, anglers, landowners, and Montana's congressional delegation. The Rocky Mountain Front has long been recognized as one of the nation's most significant wildlife areas, and expansion of the Service's conservation easement program there would provide an important means by which to conserve the Front's outstanding resources.

The Rocky Mountain Front is situated at the intersection of the western edge of the Northern Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains. Diverse habitat types such as mid-grass prairie, foothills prairie, montane forest and alpine tundra occur in close proximity to one another, resulting in a rich mix of animals and plants. Nearly every wildlife species described by Lewis and Clark in 1806, with the exception of free roaming bison, still exists on the Front in relatively stable or increasing numbers.

Under the proposed program, the Service would seek to purchase conservation easements from willing participants within a geographic area lying west of Highway 89 and north of Highway 200 to the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements between landowners and government agencies (or qualified conservation organizations) that restrict the type and amount of development that may take place on a property in the future. Service easements typically prohibit subdivision and development activities but generally allow for continued agricultural use. No fee title or outright purchase of private land would occur under this proposed conservation effort.

Beginning in November 2004, the Service will conduct an environmental assessment (EA) to analyze the potential impacts of a conservation easement program on the Front. A key initial

phase of the EA is the scoping phase, during which the Service will work with county commissioners, the state of Montana, conservation organizations, landowners, and other individuals to collect additional information about wildlife and wildlife habitat along the Front and the potential impacts of a conservation easement program. Following scoping, the Service will complete the EA, the outcome of which will determine whether the Service should proceed with the proposed conservation easement program.