

Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front

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Momentum Builds to Protect Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, Company that Originally Proposed Blackleaf Area Drilling Agrees to Retire Its Front Leases

Coalition Working with Additional Companies to Donate or Sell Front Leases As Montanans Continue to Express Support for Protecting Front

GREAT FALLS, Mont. – Efforts to protect Montana's Rocky Mountain Front gained momentum today as the Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front announced that a second energy company, Startech, has agreed to sell its federal mineral leases along the Front. The leases controlled by Calgary-based Startech, when joined with Questar (which already has agreed to donate its Front leases) cover all federal mineral leases in the Front's Blackleaf area, which Startech was planning to drill when the Bush Administration temporarily halted those plans two years ago.

"This comes as tremendous news to all of us who have been working over the years to see the Front remain in its natural and wild condition," said Front outfitter Chuck Blixrud, owner of the Seven Lazy P Guest Ranch outside of Choteau. "My wife Sharon and I sincerely thank Senators Max Baucus and Conrad Burns for their efforts, and the exploration companies for their foresight and openness to a new kind of economic solution that will protect the Front for our grandchildren."

Today's announcement comes several weeks after U.S. Senator Conrad Burns introduced legislation that would prevent any new oil and gas leases from being offered on federal land along the Front. While existing leases would not be affected, should those leases expire or be retired, then that area would be off limits to future re-leasing. The legislation has been approved by the Senate Appropriations Committee as part of the Interior Appropriations bill. Both the Startech and Questar leases will be retired pending successful passage of the Burns legislation.

The Burns legislation simply continues the current federal government policy of not allowing new leasing along the Front. Similar congressional action to withdraw areas from new leasing has been established in other parts of the country.

The lease buyout agreement in no way diminishes the rights of private property or private mineral owners within the Blackleaf area. Private and state mineral owners remain free to develop, hold, or sell their mineral rights as they see fit.

Startech has agreed to a privately funded buyout of its leases by the Coalition. Startech's leases cover a total of 23,310 acres but only the 8,460 portion that contains federal mineral rights will be retired. The rest will be returned to the state or private mineral right owners. The Questar

leases cover 1,700 federal acres in the Blackleaf area of the Rocky Mountain Front and are being donated to Trout Unlimited.

“The sale and retirement of the leases in the Blackleaf area is a crucial step towards maintaining the current condition of critical wildlife habitat along the Front,” said Fairfield-area farm owner Tony Porcarelli, a member of the Coalition who previously traveled to Washington, D.C. to support protection for the Front. “To have the grizzly bear still roaming out onto the prairie is a testament to the wildness of the Front and proof that the nearly century long effort on the part of Montana sportsmen and women to protect the area hasn’t lost any momentum.”

Startech and Questar together had controlled all federal mineral leases in the Blackleaf area of the Rocky Mountain Front west of Choteau, Montana; an area that was proposed for new drilling two years ago. That effort was suspended by the Bush Administration in the fall of 2004 after significant public opposition. The Administration then said it was open to creative solutions to protect the Front and its important wildlife and recreation values.

During the past several weeks a wide variety of Montanans, local officials, the Blackfeet Tribe, federal agency staff, and five major Montana newspapers have applauded the Burns legislation and efforts to protect the Front from future leasing and drilling. A statewide poll conducted by a well-known Republican polling firm, Public Opinion Strategies, shows strong support (60 percent) among Montanans for retiring or donating energy leases on public lands along the Front.

The Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front -- recognizing the openness of the Bush Administration and Montana’s congressional delegation to innovative private agreements to protect the Front – started negotiating with energy companies and other leaseholders more than six months ago.

“This is very good news indeed,” said Gene Sents, retired teacher, mule packer and guide from Choteau. “Obviously, these energy companies understand that there is little energy to be found in the Front, and it is not worth their while to fight for drilling this spectacular scenic area of such tremendous wildlife habitat. There is a century-long tradition to conserve the Front, and some continually-involved local people have been working to protect it for three decades. This action has broad support from landowners, hunters, anglers, and other recreationists across Montana who want to protect the Front for future generations.”

Analysis of the Front has shown that the region contains minimal energy – with only enough oil to meet the nation’s demand for a few minutes – and an effort in the summer of 2005 to drill a wildcat natural gas well on Flesher Pass just south of the Front resulted in total failure. The Flesher Pass dry well, which is in the same geological formation as the Front, cost \$10 million and went 16,000 feet deep. Despite these efforts, Suncor Energy of Canada found no natural gas and decided to plug the well and not drill the second planned well there.

The Coalition believes that the Questar and Startech agreements will serve as a model for similar buy-out or donation agreements with the remaining leaseholders in the Front’s Badger-Two Medicine area, and Montanans will continue to work with additional energy companies to retire or donate their federal oil and natural gas leases that are held along the Front.

Approximately 106,000 acres of federal land remain under lease for energy development on the Rocky Mountain Front, involving some 17 leaseholders on about 50 leases. Most of these leases are concentrated in the Badger-Two Medicine, a largely roadless part of the Lewis and Clark National Forest that is held sacred by the Blackfeet Nation.

Startech, for now, has said that the cost and details of its agreement to sell the Front leases is proprietary information.

Early in the process, the Coalition recognized that the financial requirements of a voluntary buy-out could be beyond the immediate reach of grassroots citizens, and it contacted a number of private foundations and institutions to seek financial support. The Wyss Foundation was the first to express a willingness to finance the Montanans' project.

The Wyss Foundation is a private, charitable foundation dedicated to land conservation in the Northern Rockies and has supported various land and wildlife conservation efforts in Montana for the last six years. In 2005, the Foundation also launched a scholarship program at the University of Montana for Master's degree students pursuing careers in land conservation and management in the U.S. Intermountain West. The Wyss Foundation is located in Durango, Colorado and Washington, D.C.

[**Note:** More Front information – statistics, background, media-ready maps, measure of public support, and more – can be found at: <http://www.savethefront.org/issues/agreement.php>. Print-ready photos are available upon request.]