

# **Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front**

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## ***Montanans Applaud Efforts to Protect Rocky Mountain Front Announce First Agreement with Energy Company to Retire Leases***

### **Questar Agrees to Donate Leases Along Front, Montanans Working with Additional Companies to Donate or Sell Leases**

GREAT FALLS, Mont. – A wide variety of Montanans, local officials, and federal agency staff today applauded legislation introduced by Senator Conrad Burns that would prevent any new leasing on federal public lands along Montana’s Rocky Mountain Front and announced that an agreement has been reached with one energy company to donate its Front leases; allowing those leases to be retired by returning them to the federal government.

The legislation introduced by Senator Burns on Tuesday (June 28, 2006) would accomplish two goals. First, it would prevent any new oil and gas leases from being offered on federal land along the Front. Second, while existing leases will not be affected, should the leases expire, or be traded, donated or purchased back then that area then would be off limits from any re-leasing.

The Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front is working with a number of energy companies to retire or donate the federal oil and natural gas leases that the businesses hold along the Front. One firm, Questar, already has agreed to donate its Front leases and other companies are expected to soon agree to donate or sell their Front leases on public lands.

“Retiring the leases is a home-grown idea initiated by Montanans that provides an innovative solution to help protect our Rocky Mountain Front,” said Roy Jacobs, a taxidermist from Choteau and member of the Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front, an organization of ranchers, hunters, anglers, outfitters, guides, local business owners, public officials, conservationists, and other Montanans who are working to protect the Front.

“Donating or acquiring the leases – along with federal legislation to protect the Front – will allow Montanans to keep the Rocky Mountain Front the way it is now; open and accessible for everyone to enjoy, while protecting the Front’s exceptional wildlife, recreation, and existing businesses,” continued Jacobs. “Montanans are proud of our more than 100 year tradition of protecting the Front and want to help pass on the area’s natural resources for future generations.”

The Questar leases cover 1,700 acres in the Blackleaf area of the Rocky Mountain Front. The Questar leases were donated to Trout Unlimited and will be retired pending successful passage of the Burns legislation.

The Blackfeet Tribe and Montanans, both locally and across the state, repeatedly have expressed their strong support for protecting the Front, whether through public comment periods, statewide polling, or repeated editorials in Montana newspapers. In recent years, Montana's congressional delegation, other elected leaders, and Bush administration officials have indicated support for solutions that would retire the leases on the Front.

Montanans and federal agencies also applauded the effort to protect the Rocky Mountain Front.

"Senator Burns' proposal to continue the current policy of no new drilling on the Rocky Mountain Front is a real positive step for our community," said Choteau Mayor Dan Clark. "By bringing closure to the divisive issue of oil and gas development along the Front this bill would add a level of certainty and clarity to our economic development planning. Now Choteau can come together and work on a vision of its future by design rather than default."

Don Smurthwaite, a spokesperson for the Bureau of Land Management in Montana told the Helena Independent Record: "Overall, this is good news," and that it would result in a "win-win situation."

Recognizing the openness of the Bush Administration and Montana's congressional delegation to innovative private agreements, the Coalition started negotiating with the energy companies more than six months ago. Trout Unlimited also played a role in negotiating with several energy companies and the Questar leases were donated to TU and will be retired pending successful passage of the Burns legislation.

Analysis of the Front has shown that the region contains little energy – only a few minutes worth of oil – and an effort last summer to drill a wildcat natural gas well on Flesher Pass just south of the Front resulted in 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.

While the Questar's lease is only one of several existing federal leases along the Front, the Coalition hopes that the Questar agreement will serve as a model for similar buy-out or donation agreements with the remaining leaseholders there. A number of additional Front lease holders have been contacted and negotiations are serious and ongoing.

The Burns legislation would help ensure that areas covered by donated or retired leases along the Front cannot be re-leased in the future. The Montanans noted that they are asking Congress simply to continue the current federal government policy of not allowing new leasing along the Front. Similar congressional action to withdraw an area from new leasing has been established in other areas of the country.

Approximately 106,000 federal acres are 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.

The lease buyout agreement in no way diminishes the rights of such 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.

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. So far, the Wyss Foundation has expressed a willingness to finance the Montanans' project. Wyss has worked with concerned Montanans along with oil and gas experts for more than six months to help conclude the partnership agreements with some of the energy companies.

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. Wyss is located in Durango, Colorado and Washington, D.C. 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.

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