

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

October 5, 2006      Contacts:      Stoney Burk, Choteau businessman, 406-466-5755

### ***Montanans Celebrate Second Anniversary of Bush Administration Decision To Temporarily Halt Plans for Drilling the Rocky Mountain Front***

### **Coalition Urges Congress to ‘Finish the Job,’ Pass Legislation to Protect Front This Year**

GREAT FALLS, Mont. – Montanans today hailed the Bush Administration’s decision two years ago this week that temporarily halted plans to drill the Rocky Mountain Front and the Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front called on Congress to ‘finish the job’ and pass legislation that would prevent any new oil and gas leases from being offered on federal land along the Front.

When the Bush Administration announced the no-drill decision in October 2004, it said that the overwhelming public support for the protecting Front made the Administration open to creative solutions to protect the Front and its important wildlife and recreation.

“This legislation is as important as the process that saved The Bob Marshall Wilderness, Glacier National Park, Yellowstone and the other few magnificent and historic landscapes for us, our children, grandchildren and our national heritage. It’s an irreplaceable natural resource” said Stoney Burk, a member of the Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front, an organization of ranchers, hunters, anglers, outfitters, guides, local business owners, Blackfeet Tribal members, public officials, conservationists, and other Montanans working to protect the Front.

The Coalition -- recognizing the openness of the Bush Administration and Montana’s congressional delegation to innovative private agreements to protect the Front – has started negotiating with energy companies and other leaseholders. So far, two energy companies, Questar and Startech, have announced that they will donate or sell their Front federal mineral leases; which cover all federal mineral leases in the Front’s Blackleaf area – an area that Startech was planning to drill when the Bush Administration temporarily halted those plans two years ago.

The Front legislation now before Congress has been approved by the Senate Appropriations Committee as part of the Interior Appropriations bill but further action is required for the Interior bill to become law. Both the Startech and Questar leases will be retired pending successful passage of the Front legislation.

While Congress has adjourned temporarily for the federal elections, it will return for a ‘lame duck’ session later this year. The Coalition urged Congress to pass the Front legislation this year, noting that the bill would die should Congress finish the session and adjourn without

passing it. The process then would have to start all over again in 2007 jeopardizing the extensive efforts by many Montanans to protect the Front.

Montanans across the board consistently have expressed their desire to protect the Front. A 2006 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. In public comments to the BLM, 93 percent of Montanans opposed drilling along the Front (fall 2004) and a similar number urged the Forest Service to support traditional recreation and travel along the Front (fall 2005). In 2004, a statewide poll question conducted as part of a Lee Newspaper poll showed that by more than 2-to-1 Montanans supported protecting the Front by swapping out the energy leases there in exchange for leases in less sensitive areas.

The Front 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. Also, the Coalition lease buyout agreements in no way diminish 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.

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.