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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hunters, Anglers Ask Congress to Support Front Legislation

Thirty hunting and fishing groups, representing thousands of sportsmen from across the state, sent a letter to the U.S. Congress asking for support of pending legislation that would protect Montana's Rocky Mountain Front from future mineral leasing.

GREAT FALLS, Mont. – More than 30 hunting and fishing groups, from Libby to Billings, have sent an open letter to Congress asking for full support of pending legislation that would protect federal lands along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front. The language, which is within the Interior Appropriations bill, would withdraw federal lands along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front from future natural gas and oil leasing. The language would not affect current leases or bordering state or private lands.

The legislation, introduced by Senator Conrad Burns and supported by Senator Max Baucus, is the culmination of years of work by a diverse coalition of Montanans working together to protect the Front.

“The local folks on the Front have been working to craft a solution for years,” said Chris Marchion, member of the Anaconda Sportsmen's Club, one of the groups who signed the letter. “This legislation came out of that hard work. To have it die now would be an insult to those who spent countless hours working on this.”

In October of 2004 the Bush Administration temporarily halted plans to drill for natural gas in the Blackleaf area of the Rocky Mountain Front. This gave local citizens more time to develop solutions to protect the area. In a press release, then Assistant Secretary of the Interior Rebecca Watson stated that “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.” She continued, “the Rocky Mountain Front is important for wildlife and is of great interest to the hunting community.” Since then, two energy companies, Questar and Startech, have voluntarily donated or shown strong interest in selling their existing leases along the Front.

“The Front is a significant source of clean water for this area, and one of the last strongholds for pure strains of Westslope cutthroat Trout,” said David Stalling of Trout Unlimited. “This legislation will not only protect the Front from speculative natural gas exploration but will help protect the entire Missouri River watershed.”

In the letter, the groups remind Congressional members that the effort to protect the Front is “a nonpartisan, homegrown” effort and part of a 100-year tradition of conservation on the Front.

“This letter and the legislation it supports is part of a natural progression in a nearly 100 year tradition of hunters and anglers working to protect the area for what it is – an unmatched piece of critical wildlife

habitat,” said Nathan Birkeland of Montana Wildlife Federation. “This legislation came from the ground up and so it was easy for our organization to support this kind of homegrown, win-win solution.”

The language will accomplish the following:

- Prevent any new leasing for oil, gas, or hard rock mining on U.S. Forest Service land within the Rocky Mountain District of the Lewis and Clark National Forest and contiguous parcels controlled by the Bureau of Land Management. The two major areas affected by this law will be the Badger-Two Medicine and Blackleaf Canyon.
- Existing leases will not be affected, but if they expire, are traded, donated or purchased back either by the Government or a third-party group, the area will become exempt from re-leasing.

In the letter the groups state that they support responsible energy development on public lands but go on to say that there are some places that should not be developed in order to protect wildlife. “We respectfully submit,” the groups write, “that the Rocky Mountain Front is one of these places.”