

# Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## Montanans to BLM: Protect the Rocky Mountain Front

### *Detailed Analysis of More Than 49,000 Public Comments to Federal Agency Shows More Than 93 Percent of Montanans Reject Front Drilling Proposal*

Choteau, MT-- Montanans and Americans across the country overwhelmingly have urged the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to protect the Rocky Mountain Front and to keep oil and gas exploration activity off federal public lands along the Front.

One of America's most stunning landscapes, Montana's Rocky Mountain Front faces a new round of natural gas drilling proposals. This spring the BLM started the review process [Environmental Impact Statement] required for new drilling permits on several existing leases located on public lands in the Blackleaf area, right in the heart of Montana's Front.

The public enthusiastically responded and more than 49,000 Americans participated. A convincing majority, more than 93 percent of Montanans and 99 percent nation-wide, urged the BLM to protect the Front and halt the drilling proposal.

"From an economic perspective drilling on the Front makes no sense given the uniqueness of the land," said Mary Sexton, a Teton County Commissioner from Choteau. "A buy-out of the leases is the most sensible solution."

"Who are we to violate our trust to our children and future generations?," said Stoney Burk a Choteau attorney 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.

"The Rocky Mountain Front is a national treasure," continued Burk. "The people of Montana and all over our nation overwhelmingly recognize that this area is too spectacular to sacrifice for short term, speculative and obviously harmful activity. There are no more of these wild places in the lower 48."

In their comments to the BLM, the public cited a variety of issues, including:

- A clear majority think that roads and infrastructure related to natural gas development would have an irreversible impact on wildlife habitat and public hunting opportunities;
- Near universal agreement among Montanans and Americans that the Front should be protected and that energy development should not proceed;
- The importance of upholding the local tradition of protecting the Rocky Mountain Front by keeping the Front the way it is and protecting it for future generations;
- Many citizens stressed their concern that natural gas development would harm the clean water provide by the Front.

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“The landscape and animals cannot speak for themselves. We must,” noted Burk. “No dollars can replace this quiet beauty. Corporations could care less about the land or its inhabitants. The Front is home to the headwaters of the great Missouri and Mississippi Rivers and home to abundant wildlife and majestic beauty. We can’t let our greed destroy this heritage. We must keep the Front as it is.”

The energy corporation that proposed drilling -- Startech Energy Inc. and its parent company Thunder Energy, both from Alberta, Canada -- has publicly stated twice that only five to seven jobs would be created by its proposal to drill the public lands along the Front.

In addition to creating few jobs, drilling the public lands along Montana’s Rocky Mountain Front would produce little energy. A study released earlier this year used federal government data to demonstrate that the Blackleaf area of the Front contains less than a day’s worth of economically recoverable natural gas and 15 minutes of oil for the nation. The analysis also found the entire Front (federal lands) contains less than a week’s worth of natural gas and 20 minutes of oil.

Montanans who took the time to comment often were quite impassioned: “For years my family has enjoyed hiking and wildlife viewing in the very area where the leases are being considered,” wrote Hank Hudson from Clancy. “We spend money in the local communities and out of state guests frequently want to visit the Front. Please do not allow development, it would ruin the area for me, and I am one of the owners.”

It is not surprising that the overwhelming majority of responses supported maintaining and protecting the Rocky Mountain Front. For years Montanans have worked to preserve the wildlife and quiet grandeur of the Front:

- Newspapers across the state, including in Great Falls, Bozeman, Helena, Kalispel and Missoula, have editorialized in support of preserving the Rocky Mountain Front.
- Earlier this year 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.
- A 1998 statewide poll for the Great Falls Tribune also showed that, by 2-to-1, Montanans opposed any energy development of the Front.
- In 1997 the Forest Service received more than 2000 public comments, of which 80% supported the agency’s subsequent decision to prohibit oil and gas leasing on the Front for up to 15 years.
- In 1997 the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council passed a resolution opposing any energy development in the Badger-Two Medicine portion of the Front.

The BLM provided files of all public responses used for this analysis. The Montana Wildlife Federation and the Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front then hired a Missoula-based contractor – a former U.S. Forest Service employee with an extensive background in public comment analysis to conduct this study.

Attachment: (2) Analysis of Public Comments and Sample of Public Comments

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC COMMENTS CONCERNING  
THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN FRONT

September 15, 2004

The BLM provided 3 CDs containing 49,180 submissions. Of the total submissions, 49,064, or 99.76%, were against the proposed action or supported protecting the Rocky Mountain Front. Of the total submissions, 116, or 0.24%, were supportive of the proposed action. A total of 1,493 comments were submitted by Montanans, of which 1,392, or 93.23%, were against the proposed action or for the Rocky Mountain Front's protection, and 101 comments, or 6.73%, were in support of the proposed action. The following tables support these data.

<b>Number and percentage of all comments that support protection of the Front and/or oppose the proposed action.</b>	
Total comments submitted	49,180
Total opposed to proposed action	49,064
Percentage opposed to proposed action	99.76%
Total comments supporting proposed action	116
Percentage supporting proposed action	0.24%

<b>Number and percentage of all Montana comments that support protection of the Front and/or oppose the proposed action.</b>	
Total Montana comments submitted	1,493
Total Montana comments opposed to proposed action	1,392
Percentage Montana comments opposed to proposed action	93.23%
Total Montana comments supporting proposed action	101
Percentage Montana comments supporting proposed action	6.77%

Note: Of the 2,441 unique comments submitted, 2325, or 95.24%, were against the proposed action or supported protection of the Rocky Mountain Front, while 116, or 4.75%, were in support of the proposed action.

**Sample Public Comments on the Proposed  
Natural Gas Development of the Rocky Mountain Front**

September 15, 2004

For all of my 72 years, this beloved Rocky Mtn. Front has been my home and recreating place. The return from gas and oil exploration would be so minimal, as evidenced by research, compared to the destruction, pollution, spread of noxious weeds, and yes, the devaluation of private property in this area. -- Bonnie J. Crary, Choteau, MT

I love to bird hunt around Choteau. The scenery is fantastic. I have a little son who is one and a half. I'd really like him to hunt with me up by Choteau and to see the land and scenery like it is today. -- Jeff Williams, Helena, MT

This proposed drilling flies in the face of common sense and decency. How can the BLM justify drilling with such a high amount of opposition? -- Chris Bechtold, Choteau, MT

I'm a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Montanan who strongly opposes any development in this pristine area. It is up to us to be good stewards of the land today so future generations may also enjoy. Just say "no."  
--K Jane Phillips, Helena, MT

I am a lifelong Montana and Teton County resident. I am totally opposed to drilling on the Rocky Mountain Front. The area from MT [highway] 200 to U.S. [highway] 2 is priceless. No amount of oil or gas is worth developing this area..... Please put a stop to this development once and for all.  
--Roger Kelly, Choteau, MT

The Front has been important to our family and extended family in a recreational context for years. Of course, we are opposed to drilling activities on the Front. As you well know drilling does much damage to the Front by damaging and polluting pristine water sources and riparian areas.  
--Lois Nichol, Billings, MT

How short sighted even to consider ruining Blindhorse for only a couple days' worth of natural gas for our country! The possible pollution of our scarce water sources is enough of a danger to warrant saying NO to any drilling along the Front. Outfitters will lose their livelihoods when the game herds are depleted by 24-hour lights, noise and traffic. This damage will be permanent and cannot be reversed in our lifetime. -- Polly Burke, Choteau, MT

It is with disappointment that I write concerning wanton exploitation of the Rocky Mountain Front. With the deluge of letters in the past against such exploitation, it would seem that the message should have gotten through by this time. Add to this the numerous newspaper editorials protesting exploitation of the Rocky Mountain Front and one wonders why governmental agencies and Montana Congressional delegates have not received the clear message: we want NO development of the Rocky Mountain Front. -- Ernest Scherzer, Trout Creek, MT

