

Published Jackson Hole News and Guide, September 30, 2009  
Guest editorial

The article on the BLM decision regarding 24,000 Wyoming Range is both timely and important. The BLM is congratulated for making an excellent decision. The next step is for the Forest Service to make their leasing decision on the rest of the adjacent acreage, a 20,000 acre portion in the Bridger-Teton National Forest's Wyoming Range. Stop Drilling-Save the Bridger-Teton (SDSBT), a citizen group believes they should find as did BLM. With that result, the entire 44,720 acres will remain rich in wildlife and recreational opportunities, and undeveloped as the Wyoming Range Legacy Act intended.

But the broader battle to protect the Upper B-T/Wyoming Range, also included in the Legacy Act, and more generally in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE), is far from over. One example is that just north of the 44,720 acre parcel, near Bondurant, is another 22,000 acres currently named the Eagle Prospect/Noble Basin. (EP/NB) The drilling proposal in 2004 was 1 well pad and 3 wells (the South Rim Unit and Eagle Prospect drill site) the expanded EP/NB plan include 17 well pads and 136 wells for starters. This drilling proposal drives further into the Wyoming Range. The proposed well pad is located in undeveloped B-T lands 32 miles from Grand Teton National Park.

SDSBT has made the case that the B-T in general and any designated leasing acreage in it, like the 44,720 acres and the Eagle Prospect/Noble Basin area, are inappropriate for energy development. There are many substantive social, environmental, habitat and economic reasons for this. But most fundamentally, it is flawed policy to allow heavily polluting industrial activities to spread into pristine areas and undercut current viable economic and environmental values and activities. That is why the Wyoming Range Legacy Act was passed. SDSBT asks why is it necessary to extend drilling into the recreational areas of the Upper B-T when among the Pinedale Anticline, the Jonah Field and the La Barge producing areas alone there are ample opportunities to develop Wyoming gas?

First, pollution doesn't respect county lines or National Park boundaries. Second, deep drilling for natural gas requires vast quantities of water from rivers, creeks, and aquifers; the water in, under and near the EP/NB have never been analyzed for quality and quantity, nor uses by ranchers, homeowners, and wildlife. Excessive water demand for drilling will also result in large quantities of produced salty, chemical-laden water that will potentially have a negative impact on the Upper Hoback River, the spawning ground for native cutthroat trout. Water wells in the Anticline have been contaminated with cancer-causing chemicals. The industry says these problems cannot occur in a new area, but indeed they will. The Powder River Basin, Pinedale Anticline and Jonah Fields are rife not only with water pollution problems, but with the much better publicized air pollution problems, in particular, ozone levels that already exceed air pollution health standards.

If these drilling proposals are not stopped permanently, the consequences of going forward with development in the Upper B-T includes road building and industrial infrastructure to support drilling. This will not only fragment established migratory corridors for large game that moves from the Gros Ventres to the Wyoming Range but also threatens recreational, ranching and community life.

And if these risks were not enough, the proposed EP/NB Development Plan would use a procedural technique designed to speed up oil and gas development if exploration is successful. On one hand, the "Plan" concept is good because it requires disclosure of overall development intent. On the other, any future development will use "categorical exclusion" from environmental review, thus giving the company expansion rights without any future environmental accountability.

Such a liberal industrial use of the Upper B-T when its health is already threatened and weakened from years of drought and beetle-killed trees (with the accompanying increased fire potential) is neither a desirable fate for the Upper B-T or nearby communities, nor does it bode well for the wildlife or the air and water quality. One spark from a pipe weld and the whole forest could burn uncontrollably.

So here we are 5 years down the road. Despite protests, citizen action resulting in the passage of the Wyoming Range Legacy Act the prospect of creating an industrial corridor the likes of which has never been seen in the Upper B-T, looms. If these two areas still open to drilling are in fact drilled, what is next? The leases in Cliff Creek and the GrosVentre's may be next!

We live on a carbon-based planet. It is not a surprise that carbon-based fuels are widespread, but that does not mean that oil, gas, or coal-bed methane should be developed everywhere, anywhere and all the time without discretion. Reason must prevail.

Leaseholders should donate their leases to conservation and move on. If they decline, then the Forest Service and BLM should find the ways and means to fix the overall problem, including directing future energy exploration and development only to the areas in Wyoming where it already exists. SDSBT's views are widely supported as was evident by the tens of thousands of unfavorable comments on the proposed drilling. Everyone should let B-T officials in Jackson, BLM officials in Cheyenne and the Secretaries of both the Department of Interior and Department of Agriculture in Washington, DC, know that they do not want drilling in the Upper Bridger-Teton National Forest

Linda J. Cooper, Spokesperson

SDSBT

sdsbt@wyoming.com

www.sdsbt.org

September 4, 2009