

# The Wyoming Range – May 2009

**Goals of this fact sheet:** To help interested individuals:

- Familiarize themselves with the Wyoming Range's unique natural resources
- Understand the legislative processes leading to the passage of the Wyoming Range Legacy Act
- Engage in future public planning decisions affecting the Wyoming Range

## Overview

Stretching south from Jackson for over 150 miles, the Wyoming Range encompasses over 700,000 acres of land, or one third of the entire Bridger-Teton National Forest. Valued for its lush meadows, clear trout streams, forested mosaic and a granite core that includes the 11,363-foot Wyoming Peak, this mountain range has long been a favorite weekend escape for local outdoor enthusiasts. It provides abundant habitat for wildlife as the southern arm of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, which is considered to be the largest intact ecosystem in the contiguous United States.

These mountains support impressive populations of big game, including one of the largest herds of mule deer in North America, the largest Shiras Moose sub-herd in the state, and over 10% of all elk in Wyoming. Other diverse fauna live here including the black bear, mountain lion, pine martin, grey owl, and bald eagle, as well as threatened or endangered species such as peregrine falcons, whooping cranes, and lynx. Impressive and consistent numbers of



trophy game animals, especially mule deer, have fueled an outfitter/guide economy at the flanks of the Wyoming Range for decades. Similarly, the presence of three out of four native cutthroat trout species within the state draws fishermen seeking Wyoming's "cutt-slam." There are ample opportunities for hiking, backpacking, mountain biking, horseback riding, hunting, fishing, four-wheeling, snowmobiling, and skiing. NOLS courses spend 1,000 user days annually in this area on backpacking expeditions during the summer and skiing courses during the winter.

As the energy industry has expanded across the Rocky Mountains, interest in potential reservoirs beneath the Wyoming Range has increased significantly. This interest culminated in

July 2004, when the Bureau of Land Management nominated approximately 175,000 acres in the heart of the range for oil and gas development. This decision was met with considerable public opposition. NOLS, along with area outfitters and businesses linked to tourism industry, protested the sale, as it would adversely affect their operations. Numerous hunting, fishing, and conservation organizations joined forces launching a coordinated effort to stop the lease sale and prevent any future energy extraction from the Wyoming Range.

## Oil & Gas Interest

The energy sector is the largest industry in Wyoming. The state government relies on revenue generated from the taxation of extractive energy industries for 80% of its annual budget. New technologies developed for extracting gas has made previously inaccessible fields suddenly viable, and development has fueled an energy boom since the late 1990's.

The Wyoming Range itself lies within the Overthrust Belt, a vast geological formation containing potentially large amounts of natural gas. In 2004, the U.S. Geological Survey estimated that a mean oil potential of 5 million barrels, a mean natural gas potential of 1.5 trillion cubic feet, and a mean natural gas liquids potential of 60 million barrels are technically recoverable under the Wyoming Range proper. (Notably, this is down from 1995 USGS estimates, which anticipated a mean potential of 8.8 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 331 million barrels of oil.)

The high energy potential in the area led to speculation by oil and gas companies. These companies nominated

several parcels to be made available for development through the Bureau of Land Management, leading to the offering of 175,000 acres mentioned above.

## Legislative Action

Responding to the significant public backlash after its initial offering, the Bureau of Land Management reduced its initial offering from 131,000 acres to 44,720 acres in September of that same year. However, the remaining 44,720 acres still presented a problem for NOLS and other outfitters, as they were located in a key summer and winter operating area and key trophy mule deer hunting grounds. Shortly before the lease sale, conservation and sportsmen groups filed protests with the BLM. According to BLM protocol, when a protest is filed the lease sale will still proceed, and the merits of the protest are considered after the sale. If a protest is upheld, the lease is revoked and funds are returned to the high bidder. In this case, the protests were denied and then appealed to the Interior Board of Land Appeals. In 2006, the IBLA ruled in favor of the protesting parties, having determined that the leases had been improperly issued. The IBLA remanded the leases back to the Forest Service and the BLM, ordering the agencies to conduct environmental analyses before finalizing the leases.

In 2006 and 2007, two independent conservation-minded organizations formed and began working toward the same goal on parallel tracks. Citizens for the Wyoming Range, founded by Gary Amerine and other outfitters, consisted of a grassroots coalition of local citizens concerned about development in their local mountains. Sportsmen for the Wyoming Range, spearheaded by Trout Unlimited, organized numerous sporting, fishing, and hunting groups with a coordinated message. Both groups were focused on the passage of a federal act that would permanently remove the Wyoming Range from any future oil and gas leasing decisions.

Wyoming's U.S. Senator Craig Thomas was receptive to the legislation, and his office began to draft a bill that was in harmony with the two groups' desires. Shortly before he was to introduce the act, however, Senator Thomas succumbed to leukemia at the age of 74. His vacant Senate seat was replaced, via appointment, by Senator John Barrasso.

To honor the legacy of his predecessor, Sen. Barrasso pledged to see the legislation through, and in October 2007 he introduced The Wyoming Range Legacy Act. This bill proposed to withdraw the entire 1.2 million acres of National Forest that included the Wyoming Range from future oil and gas leasing, while preserving existing, valid leases within the boundary. The bill also opened the door for leaseholders to donate their interests back to the Forest Service or to sell them to private parties.

17 months later the Wyoming Range Legacy Act, as part of a package of over 160 public lands bills, successfully negotiated the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress. President Obama signed the act into law on March 30, 2009.

## Timeline

- Jul. 2004 – Numerous conservation groups meet in Pinedale to discuss the pending lease sale of 175,000 acres in the Wyoming Range. Attending this meeting were NOLS, The Wilderness Society, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, the Wyoming Outdoor Council, the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, and others.
- Aug. 2004 – The groups coordinate a public open house in Jackson, designed to provide a forum for citizens to register their concerns with the BLM and the National Forest Service.
- Sep. 2004 – The BLM and NFS revise the proposed lease sale, reducing it from the original 175,000 acres to 44,700 acres. These remaining acres, however, are in the heart of several outfitters' operating areas, including NOLS.
- Jan. 2005 – A year-long outreach campaign ensues, consisting of numerous public meetings, media outreach, and grassroots organizing efforts. Trout Unlimited and NOLS cosponsor open houses across Western Wyoming. Craig Thomas visits Pinedale and Lander, and Wyoming's Governor Dave Freudenthal announces his support to protect the Wyoming Range.
- Dec. 2005 – Leasing of 44,000 acres begins.
- Apr. 2006 – As the leasing process proceeds, Conservation groups, including the recently founded Citizens Protecting the Wyoming Range, engage in public outreach, media outreach, and the lobbying of

elected officials. The leases are protested, and then appealed, by two groups of advocates. One group consists of Wyoming Outdoor Council, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, The Wilderness Society, and Wyoming Wildlife Federation. The second consists of Trout Unlimited, NOLS, Grey's River Trophies, and nine additional outfitters.

- Aug. 2006 – Trout Unlimited, in conjunction with a private consulting firm, founds the Sportsmen for the Wyoming Range and signs up dozens of hunting and fishing organizations. They launch the new network with a media tour in January and February of 2007.
- Jan. 2007 – Governor Dave Freudenthal (D) and former state Senate President Grant Larson (R) co-host the Wyoming Range reception at the state Capitol. Numerous state legislators sign on to the campaign. NOLS and TU recruit dozens of businesses to support the initiative.
- Jul. 2006 – The Interior Board of Lands Appeals issues a decision on the appealed leases, and grants a stay, ordering the BLM and NFS to do further environmental analyses before making a final decision on leasing.
- Apr. 2007 – Statewide support continues to build, with the Wyoming Travel and Tourism Board, the Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, the Wyoming AFL-CIO, and several others adding their voices of support to the chorus.
- Oct. 2007 – U.S. Senator John Barrasso (R-WY), who has been recently appointed to replace the late Senator Craig Thomas, sponsors legislation, the Wyoming Range Legacy Act, and U.S. Senator Mike Enzi (R-WY) co-sponsors.
- Mar. 2009 – On March 25, 2009, The Wyoming Range Legacy Act, now a subtitle of the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, passes congress.
- Mar. 2009 – On March 30, 2009, President Obama signs the act into law.

### **Administrative Activity**

For Wyoming Range Legacy Act advocates, signing the bill into law was a major stepping stone along the path that will likely culminate in lasting protection for the mountain range. A significant caveat in the bill's language preserves the rights of companies with existing, valid lease rights inside the withdrawal boundary. There are, in fact, almost 150,000 acres of already-leased land deep within the Wyoming Range that could still be developed. Sportsmen and conservation groups are working with private sponsors to provide the funds necessary to buy out these remaining valid leases. Additionally, the Bridger-Teton National Forest has initiated an Environmental Impact Study on the 44,720 acres of improperly leased parcels.

Wyoming Range Legacy Act advocates will be actively involved in the Environmental Impact Study, hoping to secure administrative decisions that will reinforce the spirit of the legislation. Possible alternatives being considered range from approving all leases as they were originally issued, to cancelling all the leases outright and returning funds to the energy companies. The final decision made by the Forest Service will be based significantly on feedback and letters from the public.

Lastly, the Bridger-Teton National Forest is poised to begin a forest-wide planning process that will ultimately produce a Forest Management Plan to guide resource management decisions for the next 15 years. This Forest Management Plan will dictate where new motorized roads may be established, where oil and gas development is permissible, where new Wilderness areas should be designated, and how much logging is allowable along with many other resource issues. Public participation is an important part of the planning process, and the Bridger-Teton will shape their document based to a large extent on public opinion. There are many opportunities for members of the public to engage in forest management planning.

### **Air Quality**

The ongoing boom in the west could be having significant impacts on lands downwind from active oil and gas fields. Two of the largest natural gas fields in the U.S. are in the Upper Green River Valley between the Wyoming and Wind River Ranges. This development is contributing to unusually high ozone levels in the valley during cold winter months. The situation has persisted for three years, compelling Wyoming Governor Dave Freudenthal to submit a recommendation to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency stating that the agency should designate the

area as an ozone nonattainment area in March 2009. Among other ramifications, nonattainment designation requires entities to reduce air pollution from existing sources.

Several aspects of oil and gas field development release pollution into the air. The most significant single source of pollution can be traced to the large diesel rigs that are used to drill wells two to three miles under the valley floor. During natural gas extraction, “fugitive” gas leaks out of wells, compressors and pipelines, adding pollutants to the air throughout their lifetime. During the finishing process of natural gas wells, excess gas is burned, or “flared.” Prevailing winds can transport these industrial pollutants, including nitrous oxide, carbon monoxide, and sulfur oxide, for thousands of miles.

## Lesson Plans

1. *Mock Public Meeting:* An excellent way to learn how the U.S. Forest Service operates and how the public plays a role is to set up a mock public meeting in which each individual represents a different stakeholder to understand the multiple uses and interests that must be considered when managing public lands. Students can each represent a rancher, a hunter, a climber, an oil and gas industry executive, an ATV enthusiast, a hiker, a fisherman, or a U.S. Forest Service professional. Each individual has a vested interest in a particular land use; the challenge is to come up with a plan that balances all interests at present and in the future.
2. *Land Use Activity:* Rig a spider web between two trees with p-cord from your pack. Every open space represents available plots of land for travel. Each member of the group must travel to a new destination by slipping through an open section of the spider’s web without touching its boundary line. Each section is open to two participants. Each time a student touches an open space’s boundary line, the group must choose to close one travel area for resource extraction.

For anyone to be successful in this exercise, everyone must be successful. When conducting this exercise, consider that the number of times that squares are open to travel will change depending on to the number of people you have in your group and the number of squares in the spider web. Also consider telling the students they are in charge of monitoring the usage of the squares and telling you when they touched, the group becomes accountable for their actions creating less of an “us against them” mentality.

### Debriefing Questions:

- 1) What was the hardest part about this activity?
  - 2) What sacrifices did you have to make for your group to be successful?
  - 3) How easy is it to sacrifice a piece of land when you feel it is necessary for your success?
  - 4) Are some places too valuable to sacrifice? Which squares were protected for travel?
  - 5) How would your success be hindered if someone else was deciding what plots of land are closed?
  - 6) How does oil drilling impact NOLS’ ability to travel and educate?
3. *Facilitated Writing Seminar:* Teach a writing workshop in which students develop comments for submission to the Bridger Teton National Forest. Begin by initiating a discussion about the values that could be included in individual comments. Steer the discussion into areas that will be most useful to the Bridger Teton National Forest, such as which areas should remain primitive and why, or which areas should be open to motorized recreation. Conclude the discussion by facilitating a group writing exercise.

Written comments should be in the form of a business letter. Send comments either to the NOLS Public Policy office, where they will be submitted to the NFS in a timely fashion, ensuring they are included in the public record. Or, you can send your comments directly to the Bridger Teton National Forest.

NOLS Public Policy  
National Outdoor Leadership School  
284 Lincoln Rd.  
Lander, WY 82520

Bridger Teton National Forest  
United States Forest Service  
P.O. Box 1888  
Jackson, WY 83001

## Transference

After the course, if students and instructors are compelled to learn more about issues affecting the Wyoming Range or would like to participate in Forest Service planning processes, there are numerous resources available online. Below are links to several useful websites that offer opportunities for further study and engagement.

To contact state and federal policy makers and express your desires for future management of the Wyoming Range and the Bridger-Teton National Forest:

U.S.F.S. Bridger-Teton: [www.fs.fed.us/btnf](http://www.fs.fed.us/btnf)

E.P.A.: [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov)

U.S. BLM: [www.blm.gov](http://www.blm.gov)

U.S. Fish & Wildlife: [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov)

Wyoming Game & Fish: <http://gf.state.wy.us/>

Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality: <http://deq.state.wy.us/>

To explore the campaigns that worked to bring the Wyoming Range Legacy Act to fruition:

- **Citizens Protecting the Wyoming Range** - a group of local landowners, outfitters, business owners and ranchers. <http://www.wyomingrange.org>  
*"Citizens Protecting the Wyoming Range does not oppose the energy development in Sublette County, particularly when every effort is expended to mitigate its adverse environmental and socio-economic impacts. But we believe development has its limits. With so much development already happening nearby on BLM, state, and private lands in the Upper Green River Valley, it just doesn't make sense to expand it onto the national forest of the Wyoming Range. Our ultimate goal is to have legislation introduced in Congress to permanently protect the Wyoming Range from energy development"*
- **Sportsmen for the Wyoming Range** – an organization of sportsmen and outdoors groups from around Wyoming, including NOLS. <http://wyomingrangesportsmen.org>  
*"We need the oil and gas industry in the state of Wyoming. Yet we also need a place where we can play. We think there are certain areas such as the Wyoming Range that ought to remain off limits. We support legislation that would halt oil and gas development in the Wyoming Range."*

Conservation and Sportsmen organizations active on the Wyoming Range:

- The Wilderness Society – <http://wilderness.org/>
- Wyoming Outdoor Council – <http://www.wyomingoutdoorcouncil.org/>
- Greater Yellowstone Coalition – [www.greateryellowstone.org](http://www.greateryellowstone.org)
- Trout Unlimited – [www.tu.org](http://www.tu.org)
- Wyoming Wildlife Federation – [www.wyomingwildlife.org](http://www.wyomingwildlife.org)

Subscribe to "NOLS Wildlands Announcements," the bimonthly newsletter for NOLS Alumni interested in following the latest stewardship efforts of the NOLS Public Policy Department. The sign up page can be found at the NOLS website. Visit <http://www.nols.edu/alumni/contact/listservices.php> to subscribe.

You can also contact the Public Policy team at NOLS: Aaron Bannon, Wilderness Advocacy Coordinator, [aaron\\_bannon@nols.edu](mailto:aaron_bannon@nols.edu), (307) 335-2312 or Jen Lamb, Public Policy Director, [jen\\_lamb@nols.edu](mailto:jen_lamb@nols.edu).

## Sources

- Bosse, Scott. 2005. "Personal Interview November 2005." The Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Bozeman, Montana
- Mitchell, John G. 2005. "Tapping the Rockies." *National Geographic*. July 2005
- Upper Green River Valley Coalition, "What Should be Done to Confront Our Air Quality Problems"
- The Wilderness Society, "The Wyoming Range: Wyoming's Hidden Gem."
- Sublette, County Commission News website, "Ozone Non-attainment," March 12, 2009. <http://sublettewyo.wordpress.com/2009/03/12/ozone-non-attainment-area/>
- USGS stats