

BLM cuts energy leasing in Wyoming Range

*By Cory Hatch, Jackson Hole, Wyo.
August 24, 2009*

Thousands of acres that had been leased to energy companies in the Wyoming Range will be off limits to oil and gas drilling, the BLM announced Sunday.

During a rain-soaked ceremony at an outfitter's camp, Bureau of Land Management State Director Don Simpson said the agency will not be issuing the 23 leases on 24,000 acres that conservationists have fought to protect in Bridger-Teton National Forest west of Merna.

Simpson did not elaborate on the BLM's decision.

Dustin Child, an outfitter whose camp is in the Wyoming Range, said he was happy with the decision.

"It's great," he said. "It gives me great hope. We've probably won the battle."

The announcement was made during an event celebrating passage of the Wyoming Range Legacy Act, which protects 1.2 million acres from drilling.

The event was attended by Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal, U.S. Sen. John Barrasso, conservationists and hunting outfitters.

Energy companies had purchased leases for energy extraction on the land but the BLM had delayed issuing them while the Interior Board of Land Appeals considered conservationists' challenge. An additional 20,000 acres are also part of that challenge and the Forest Service is expected to address that land next month after completing an air quality analysis as part of an environmental study.

Tom Reed, a spokesman for Trout Unlimited, said the BLM's move is a sign that the Obama administration is listening to sportsmen and Wyoming residents who want to protect the range, valued for its unspoiled wildness.

"It's a great step," Reed said. "We want to see the other half of that taken off the board."