

# BLM rescinds leases

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By JEFF GEARINO  
Southwest Wyoming bureau

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GREEN RIVER -- The Bureau of Land Management will rescind nearly two dozen leases on the eastern slope of the Wyoming Range under a new law championed by the late Sen. Craig Thomas, federal officials announced Monday.

BLM officials said the agency will not accept pending bids on 23 oil and gas lease parcels on 23,757 acres in the state's namesake mountain range located in the Bridger-Teton National Forest in western Wyoming.

The acreage had originally been leased to a host of oil and gas companies by the Bridger-Teton for energy development in 2005 and 2006. But the leases were contested shortly thereafter by conservationists and other groups, and their status had been in question for several years.

The BLM reviewed the bids and determined not to issue the leases in light of the Wyoming Range Legacy Act, federal officials said. The act was originally crafted by Thomas and was signed into law this spring.

The bill prohibits any future oil and gas leasing, mining patents or geothermal leasing within an approximately 100-mile-long stretch of the Wyoming Range.

Bridger-Teton officials are working on a supplemental environmental impact statement that will address whether to issue or rescind leases on another 20,900 acres within the mountain range.

BLM Wyoming State Director Don Simpson made the announcement at a rain-soaked celebration Sunday afternoon in Lincoln County. More than 100 people, including Gov. Dave Freudenthal, attended the salute to the passage of the Wyoming Range Legacy Act.

Freudenthal lauded state and federal officials and a grassroots coalition of Wyoming citizens for their collaborative effort to protect the scenic Wyoming Range.

"This is a great day for the Wyoming Range and for the hunters, anglers, hikers and many others who came together in their commitment to set this special place aside so our kids and grandkids can enjoy it long after we are all gone," the governor said in a media release issued Sunday afternoon.

The Wyoming Range is home to elk, antelope and trophy herds of mule deer. The range supports three separate subspecies of cutthroat trout and is also home to the state's largest herd of moose.

Freudenthal said that in 2004, when 170,000 acres were up for lease in the Wyoming Range, "we knew that the steep slopes, the streams and the crucial wildlife habitat was no place" for drilling rigs.

"Had we not acted then -- hunters, fishermen, hikers, governors and senators -- I dare say that the Wyoming Range might look a little different today and a lot different tomorrow," he said.

Simpson, of the BLM, agreed. "When we work together, good things happen for the people of Wyoming," he said.

Conservationists also applauded the "unexpected" announcement on Monday.

"This is a huge deal," Wyoming Outdoor Council spokeswoman Lisa McGee said. "This is a really positive step toward accomplishing what we all want to accomplish, which is the cancellation of all remaining leases."

The governor joined Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., conservationists, sportsmen, federal officials, area residents and others at Jenny and Gary Amerine's remote hunting camp near the Grey's River for Sunday's celebration.

The landmark bill withdraws 1.2 million acres of public land in the mountain range from future mineral leasing.

The legislation was originally drafted by Thomas in 2006 in response to growing concerns about mineral and

energy development. The oil and gas industry opposed the measure, but Thomas pushed for the Wyoming Range legislation until his death from leukemia in 2007.

The legislation was introduced by Barrasso and was signed into law in March by President Barack Obama as part of the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009.

### **Buying back leases**

Under the Bridger-Teton's 1990 forest plan, the BLM sold leases for possible oil and gas development on the eastern slope of the Wyoming Range from December 2005 until April 2006.

The Forest Service was originally going to lease 175,000 acres for development, but scaled that number back to 44,700 acres after protests from area residents, conservationists, sportsmen and labor groups, among others.

Opponents argued the development of the leases would damage important wildlife habitat and could destroy pristine forest lands.

But industry officials said drilling could be conducted in the range in an environmentally sensitive manner without significant harm to wildlife and other resources.

The leasing process was halted altogether in the summer of 2006 while several conservation organizations, including the Wyoming Outdoor Council and the Wilderness Society, appealed the leasing to the Interior Board of Land Appeals.

The board issued a halt on all of the leases already handed out by the BLM, which totaled 23,757 acres, and said the Forest Service's environmental analysis of the leases was out of date.

In addition to prohibiting oil and gas leasing, the bill also established a process by which groups or individuals interested in conservation could buy back leases and retire them permanently, if the lease-holders were willing to sell.

But oil and gas producers are skeptical about producers being able to come to an agreement as to what the leases are worth, especially when exploratory wells are prohibited from being drilled.

There has been past drilling in the area. There are roughly 16 wells located on Forest Service lands that were drilled in the early 1980s that supply natural gas to the Shute Creek gas processing plant in eastern Lincoln County.

Simpson said an additional 31 oil and gas leases within the Wyoming Range Legacy Act withdrawal area remain suspended.

He said 12 of the leases are subject to an Interior Board of Land Appeals remand to the BLM for further review, pending the release of the Forest Service's supplemental environmental impact statement.

The BLM handles administration of oil and gas leasing for the Forest Service.

*Contact southwest Wyoming bureau reporter Jeff Gearino at 307-875-5359 or gearino@tribcsp.com.*