

Forest proposes to cancel leases on Wyoming Range

## Feds reverse drilling decision

By MATT JOYCE - Associated Press writer | Posted: Friday, January 29, 2010 12:00 am |



A doe mule deer stands alert on her winter range near Pinedale against the backdrop of the snow-covered Wyoming Range recently. The Bridger-Teton National Forest on Thursday proposed restricting oil and gas leasing on 70 square miles of the Wyoming Range. (Mark Gocke/Star-Tribune correspondent)

CHEYENNE -- The Bridger-Teton National Forest on Thursday proposed restricting oil and gas leasing on 70 square miles of the Wyoming Range, the latest development in a five-year debate over drilling in the mountains.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management offered oil and gas leases on the land in 2005 and 2006, prompting appeals by environmentalists to the federal Interior Board of Land Appeals.

The appeals board sent the contested leases back to the Forest Service and BLM for reconsideration of the environmental effects of the leasing.

That led to a new environmental study by Bridger-Teton and its preference to restrict leasing -- a decision applauded by environmentalists and some sportsmen but criticized by the oil and gas industry Thursday. The public has 45 days to comment on the draft before Bridger-Teton Forest Supervisor Kniffy Hamilton makes a final decision.

"The no leasing alternative avoids impacts to the Canada lynx and precludes contributing to cumulative impacts to air quality and mule deer," Hamilton said in a prepared statement.

The contested leases weren't covered by Congress' passage last year of the Wyoming Range Legacy Act, which prohibited new mineral leasing on 1.2 million acres of the Wyoming Range.

Bridger-Teton's environmental study covered 24,000 acres that included 23 leases rescinded by the BLM last August. Energy companies are appealing that decision. The study also covered an adjacent 21,000 acres of land that's home to 12 suspended leases.

Bruce Hinchey, president of the Petroleum Association of Wyoming, contended there are no Canada lynx in Wyoming, and therefore the cats shouldn't be an issue. A Bridger-Teton spokeswoman confirmed the cats are not present in the forest. However, the federal government has designated land in Wyoming as critical habitat for threatened species.

Hinchey also argued the industry complies with state and federal air quality rules. Companies operating in Bridger-Teton National Forest have proven they can drill and produce responsibly.

"Exxon has gone in there and done a great job of taking care of the environment and doing reclamation work, whatever is necessary to meet all the needs or demands of the Forest Service," he said.

The Wyoming Outdoor Council, which led protests against the leases, cheered Thursday's development.

"I think it's a testament to the good work of all the citizens of Wyoming who were concerned and wanted to safeguard this place for their kids and grandkids, and we're grateful for what looks to be a great outcome," said Lisa McGee, a lawyer for the council.

On the Web

Bridger-Teton environmental study:

[http://www.fs.fed.us/nepa/project\\_content.php?project=24734](http://www.fs.fed.us/nepa/project_content.php?project=24734)