

## Oil and gas leasing battle continues

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An old homesteader's cabin sits under a lone tree beneath Little Mountain in Sweetwater County. Federal officials are offering several parcels for oil and gas leasing near Little Mountain that will be put up for sale at auction in August. (Jeff Gearino/Star-Tribune)

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GREEN RIVER -- Once again, conservationists are objecting to the Bureau of Land Management's plan to offer several parcels in the Little Mountain area in southwest Wyoming for oil and gas leasing.

The BLM will offer 48 parcels on approximately 43,000 acres across the state for oil and gas leasing during an auction Aug. 4 in Cheyenne.

The parcels include about 2,239 acres of land on greater Little Mountain, just east of the Flaming Gorge Reservoir.

Conservationists, hunters and others have been battling for several years over leasing in the Little Mountain area, located south of Rock Springs in southern Sweetwater County,

They believe the area is too valuable and too prized by local residents to allow oil and gas development. But industry representatives have long contended they are confident they can extract natural gas from the area without significant disturbance to wildlife and other resources.

Officials with a coalition of conservation groups and labor organizations said Wednesday the latest round of parcels up for BLM sale are again located within important wildlife habitats around Little Mountain.

They also noted the proposed parcels are located near areas that had past leases that were offered and then withdrawn by the BLM.

"Leasing this landscape for oil and gas development without recognizing the important recreational value or the hard work citizens have done to benefit wildlife habitat has the potential to significantly change the place we recreate in," said Joshua Coursey, Muley Fanatic Chapter chairman of the Sweetwater County Mule Deer Foundation.

"Why the push for leasing in these important habitats at the expense of our wildlife heritage?" Coursey said in a media release.

Officials with the Mule Deer Foundation, the Wyoming Wildlife Federation, Trout Unlimited, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership and the United Steel Workers Union said they are encouraging county residents to file formal protests on the lease offering by Monday.

Little Mountain was thrust into the energy fray in 2007 when the Oklahoma-based Devon Energy Co. announced plans to conduct a two-well exploratory drilling project near the mountain.

The loose coalition of labor, conservationists and some faith-based organizations formed at that time to span the project amid fears it could lead to full-scale development on the scenic mountain.

Gov. Dave Freudenthal also decried the drilling project and a follow-up seismic survey by the company in 2008.

The BLM has pulled parcels from Little Mountain leasing two times in the past few years. The BLM previously offered energy leases in this area in late-winter 2008 and in June, but withdrew those leases because of protests filed by hunters, anglers, local residents and others.

### **Overlapping parcels**

The Little Mountain area is prized among locals for its elk, antelope and mule deer hunting. The mountain contains prime habitat for wildlife, and streams and rivers that support many fish species, including sensitive Colorado River cutthroat trout populations.

Devon and other industry officials contend that with proper planning and the necessary resources, drilling on leases in the Greater Little Mountain area can be conducted in an environmentally sensitive manner without significant harm to wildlife.

They note the area's geology would make commercial development on the mountain a unique play that would not require nearly as many wells and well pads as the more intense development in the lucrative Jonah and Pinedale Anticline fields to the north.

Leases have already been sold in the Little Mountain area.

Devon has drilled one pilot natural gas well west of the mountain and has plans to drill another exploratory well at a nearby site this year.

The company is also completing extensive seismic surveys in the area later this summer.

Devon officials said in a tour of their well sites last fall that if more expansive drilling activity is undertaken, the underlying rock formations will be conducive to the use of horizontal drilling techniques.

Horizontal drilling allows for multiple wells to be drilled for a single well pad, thereby reducing the number of wells, roads and equipment needed.

Coalition officials said the parcels up for auction in August overlap with the governor's core sage grouse areas that were identified last year as areas that needed protection from development.

Officials said the parcels also include crucial ranges for mule deer and antelope identified by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

"The BLM's pattern of offering energy leases in the Little Mountain area -- the same area from which the BLM withdrew previous sale parcels because of wildlife concerns -- is confusing to the public and does not appear to meet BLM procedure regarding lease offerings in sensitive wildlife areas," said Monte Morlock, president of the Steel Workers Local 13214 in Rock Springs.

"We don't feel it's confusing to the public at all," BLM spokesman Roger Alexander said in a phone interview.

"We offer these parcels and put it out there to see if anybody has issues with the parcels we're offering ... and they can protest it based on their information and then we'll take that into consideration," Alexander said.

He said the agency routinely coordinates with the Game and Fish Department and the governor's office during its land use planning process, prior to offering any parcel for oil and gas leasing.

"During the process, we're definitely aware of the core sage grouse areas and sage grouse habitat outside the core areas as well," Alexander said.

"We assume that if the Game and Fish is OK with it, then it's OK to go forward with it even if it is located within one of the governor's sage grouse core areas."

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