

Wyoming Range gains protection from further energy development

A 'green' victory

By JEFF GEARINO - Southwest Wyoming bureau | Posted: Tuesday, December 29, 2009 12:15 am |



Cattle line out across a pasture on a Sublette County ranch beneath the snow-covered peaks of the Wyoming Range near Daniel earlier this month. The mountain range is protected from further energy development under the Wyoming Range Legacy Act of 2009. (Mark Gocke/Star-Tribune correspondent)

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- * **What happened in 2009:** Congress passed the Wyoming Range Legacy Act to protect 1.2 million acres of the Wyoming Range from future energy development.
- * **Where things stand:** In August, the Bureau of Land Management rescinded nearly two dozen leases on the range's eastern slope under the new law.
- * **Coming in 2010:** Bridger-Teton National Forest officials will decide whether to issue or rescind 31 leases that are located on another 20,900 acres within the mountain range.

GREEN RIVER -- The late U.S. Sen. Craig Thomas worked tirelessly in the last years of his life championing a bill to put portions of the Wyoming Range off-limits to future oil and gas leasing.

The legacy of Thomas -- who drafted the Wyoming Range legislation in 2006 and pushed for the bill until his death from leukemia in 2007 -- was finally realized this year.

Originally introduced in 2007 by Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., Thomas' replacement in the Senate, the Wyoming Range Legacy Act spent 18 months in Congress until its passage in March.

The passage was spurred by a grassroots coalition of area residents, conservationists, sportsmen, union labor officials, church organizations and others.

The Wyoming Range Legacy Act provides permanent protection from future oil and gas development for 1.2 million acres within the scenic Wyoming Range, located on the state's western flank within the Bridger-Teton National Forest.

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

The act also allows for conservation groups and individuals to buy and retire some 75,000 acres in the forest already leased for oil and gas development in the Wyoming Range, but only if the lease holders are willing to sell.

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

Under the Bridger-Teton's 1990 forest management plan, the Bureau of Land Management 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, labor groups and others.

Opponents argued the development of leases would damage important wildlife habitat and could destroy pristine forest lands. But industry officials contended that 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 appealed the leasing to the Interior Board of Land Appeals. The board issued a halt on all of the leases 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 August, the BLM rescinded nearly two dozen leases on the range's eastern slope under the new law.

Agency officials said the BLM would not accept the pending bids on 23 oil and gas lease parcels within the 23,757 acres in the Wyoming Range.

BLM State Director Don Simpson made the announcement at a rain-soaked celebration Aug. 23 in Lincoln County that was attended by more than 100 supporters and Gov. Dave Freudenthal. The governor joined Barrasso in a lauding state and federal officials and the grassroots coalition for the collaborative effort to protect the Wyoming Range.

An additional 31 oil and gas leases within the withdrawal area of the range are currently suspended. Bridger-Teton officials are working on a supplemental environmental impact statement that will address whether to issue or rescind those 31 leases that are located on another 20,900 acres within the mountain range.

The Wyoming Range Legacy Act was one of more than 150 measures in a public lands bill that also protected nearly 2 million acres in nine states as designated wilderness areas.

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