'No leasing' is best decision for Wyo Range

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By Tom Reed

The U.S. Forest Service recently did something that deserves applause: it agreed with thousands of sportsmen that a portion of the Wyoming Range should stay wild and rangey and free.

The agency released its long-awaited Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement on whether some 44,700 acres of mountain and forest should be leased -- and potentially drilled -- by energy companies. In its DSEIS, the agency highlighted its preferred alternative: no. No leasing of the aspen- and sagebrush- and willow- and lodgepole pine-cloaked flanks of our national forest. No leasing of trophy mule deer, Shiras moose, bighorn sheep and elk habitat. No leasing of Colorado River cutthroat, brook and rainbow trout streams. No leasing.

Music to the ears of thousands of sportsmen and women who fought so long and so hard to keep the drill rigs out of Horse Creek and Beaver Creek, to keep drill rigs away from places where we like to camp in the summer and hunt in the fall and snowmachine in the winter. Drill rigs have their place. That place isn’t in the Wyoming Range.

The 44,700 acres on the northeastern gateway to the Wyoming Range represents one of the last question marks after last year’s landmark passage of Sen. John Barrasso’s Wyoming Range Legacy Act. That act, which protected nearly all of the Wyoming Range for future generations of Wyomingites who like to hunt, fish and camp, left the question of the area around Horse Creek to the agency.

First offered for lease in 2005, this critical wildlife and fisheries habitat has been ground zero for a movement to protect the Wyoming Range from the extraction industries. In a pattern that all too often shadows our federal agencies, sales and protests followed. One gas company stepped forward with a grandiose scheme to scrape the ground industrial-style: well pads that leveled 50 acres at a shot and dozens of wells per pad. Sportsmen and others stepped forward and said no, we don’t want our national forest to look like West Texas or East L.A. Drilling here would be akin to littering your front yard with junker cars while your backyard was pristine, lush and well-groomed.

The sportsmen started talking to one another. A group with a singular purpose -- keep the Wyoming Range as it is -- was formed. Groups such as Trout Unlimited, the Wyoming Game Warden’s Association, the Wyoming Outfitter and Guides Association, the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership and the Wyoming Wildlife Federation saw common ground. Sportsmen for the Wyoming Range became the driving force behind legislation that would ensure that our kids have a place to hunt and fish and their kids have a place to hunt and fish. Wild country that harbors some of the state’s very best should stay wild, a true legacy for our children. The legislation passed and was signed by the president last March, and yet the first chip tossed into the game was still in play -- the northern gateway to the range.

Now the U.S. Forest Service has taken an important step to making sure that gateway remains open for access to great fishing and hunting. If the decision of no leasing remains in place, the northeastern slopes of the Wyoming Range, from Horse Mountain to McDougal Gap, will remain just as they are. Years from now, a fisherman trying to catch a pure Colorado River cutthroat trout from Cottonwood Creek to fill out her Cutt Slam will have much to be thankful for. Thirty, 40, 50 years in the future when a snowmachiner turns his machine to the west from the Horse Creek parking lot, he’ll have Sens. John Barrasso, Mike Enzi and Craig Thomas to thank for the wild, rig-free ride. He’ll also have the U.S. Forest Service to thank. Which is exactly what we all should be doing today -- thanking the agency.

A comment period for expressing concerns, support or your thanks on the USFS decision of no leasing will remain open until mid-March. Send your comments in support of the forest’s no leasing option to: Carole “Kniffy” Hamilton, Forest Supervisor, P. O. Box 1888, Jackson, WY 83001. Electronic comments can be sent to: comments-intermtn-bridger-teton@fs.fed.us (subject line should specify “Oil and Gas Leasing, Wyoming Range”).

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