

## **Residents: Curb oil drilling**

**Comments gathered at workshop raise concerns over wildlife, air quality.**

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Community members asked Forest Service personnel to protect the Bridger-Teton National Forest from motorized recreation and oil and gas drilling in dozens of comments gathered from a workshop Nov. 27.

More than 100 people attended a meeting at Jackson Hole High School to help officials develop a new forest management plan for the Bridger-Teton. The plan, due out in September 2008, will guide forest officials as they make land management decisions on issues such as oil and gas development, recreation and the identification of roadless areas.

People who filled out comment forms at the workshop were overwhelmingly opposed to oil and gas development, whether they focused on a specific area, such as the Wyoming Range, or the entire Bridger-Teton.

Forest planner Rick Fox, who organized the meeting, cautioned that the comments should not be considered a random sampling that can be used to determine what people in Wyoming or even in Jackson want. Further, he said the comments gathered by Forest Service personnel would be used to alert planning officials to potential problems and issues, not as a vote.

"We can't draw any inferences about what the population believes," he said.

Jackson resident Sandy Shuptrine, a former Teton County commissioner, said that the Wyoming Range, in particular, is most appropriate for wildlife, watershed and recreational use, but said the rest of the forest needs protection, too. "... Development on most, if not all, of the BTNF is not suitable due to wildlife, water quality, recreational, and air quality ... values that are affected negatively by the industrial nature of development," she said.

Jackson resident Armond Acri pointed to oil and gas development on the Jonah Field and the Pinedale Anticline as proof that such development should be limited in the forest.

"Air quality in the Green River Valley has deteriorated, and the mule deer population is down," he said. "Postpone any new leases until Jonah/Pinedale are reclaimed or winding down. Most of the Wyoming Range is not suitable for new leases. Existing leases are acceptable."

Jackson resident Barry Reiswig agreed with Acri that the Bureau of Land Management hasn't taken good care of the Green River Valley. "Given the lousy job the BLM is doing in protecting winter range, it appears exclusion is the only option," he said, adding, "Forest lands that are roadless need to be protected."

This anti-drilling sentiment echoes conservation groups' assertions that areas of pristine backcountry such as the Wyoming Range should remain free of oil and gas development. According to conservationists, the Bureau of Land Management has already failed to protect environmental concerns at a number of sites, including 3,000 wells in the Upper Green River Valley where scientists have raised concerns over wildlife and air quality.

There are currently 1.9 million acres available for oil and gas drilling in the Bridger-Teton, 200,000 of which have already been leased to the oil and gas industry. The Bureau of Land Management plans 118,000 new energy wells across the country, with more than 50,000 in Wyoming alone.

When commenting about recreation, people at the meeting tended to focus on specific locations and specific concerns. Comments were also more evenly split between those who wanted less motorized recreation in the forest and those who felt there were not enough opportunities for snowmobilers, motorcyclists and ATV users.

The forest plan revision comes as Bridger-Teton officials are developing guidelines for the trail systems in Hoback Basin, Granite Creek, Munger Mountain, Mosquito Creek, Phillips Ridge, Gros Ventre area, Shadow Mountain and the Blackrock-Togwotee Pass area.

Valley resident Chuck Herz urged forest officials to prohibit off-road vehicles on the pronghorn migration route from the Upper Green River Valley to Grand Teton National Park.

"Keep ATVs off these bottlenecks," Herz said. "Really, [I would] argue for very vigorous and aggressive management and enforcement to preserve the migration route."

In the Togwotee Pass area, motorized use is hurting prime wildlife habitat, Pegi Sobey said.

"I participated in collecting lynx data and saw firsthand the tracks of motorized vehicles in 'closed' critical winter range areas," Sobey said.

In contrast, Alpine resident Bob Hatton said he would prefer to see more opportunities for off-road motorized vehicles, specifically a trail between the Gros Ventre and Green River Lake. "It is already a snowmobile route and should cause no real problems with surrounding wilderness areas," he said.

Fox, who focuses on crafting a new forest plan, said the meetings have helped planners identify problems in the forest. Further, he said the suggestions wouldn't go unnoticed.

"Kniffy [Hamilton, Bridger-Teton forest supervisor] has demonstrated her responsiveness to social values in some of her previous decisions," he said. "This is very important to her, to hear what the people are saying and suggesting solutions."