

Hopeful news on contested leases

Nearly 45,000 acres of prime wildlife habitat in the Wyoming Range may soon be free from the threat of energy development.

In late January, Bridger-Teton officials released a long-awaited draft supplemental analysis of leasing proposed for the areas marked in purple on the map at right. This study was done because in 2006, after the Bureau of Land Management had already begun leasing parcels in the area, the federal Interior Board of Land Appeals ruled that an earlier National Environmental Policy Act analysis didn't adequately consider the potential impacts of development on air quality and Canada lynx. In effect, the leases in these areas and any accompanying exploratory development have been on hold pending the results of this latest study of their potential impacts.

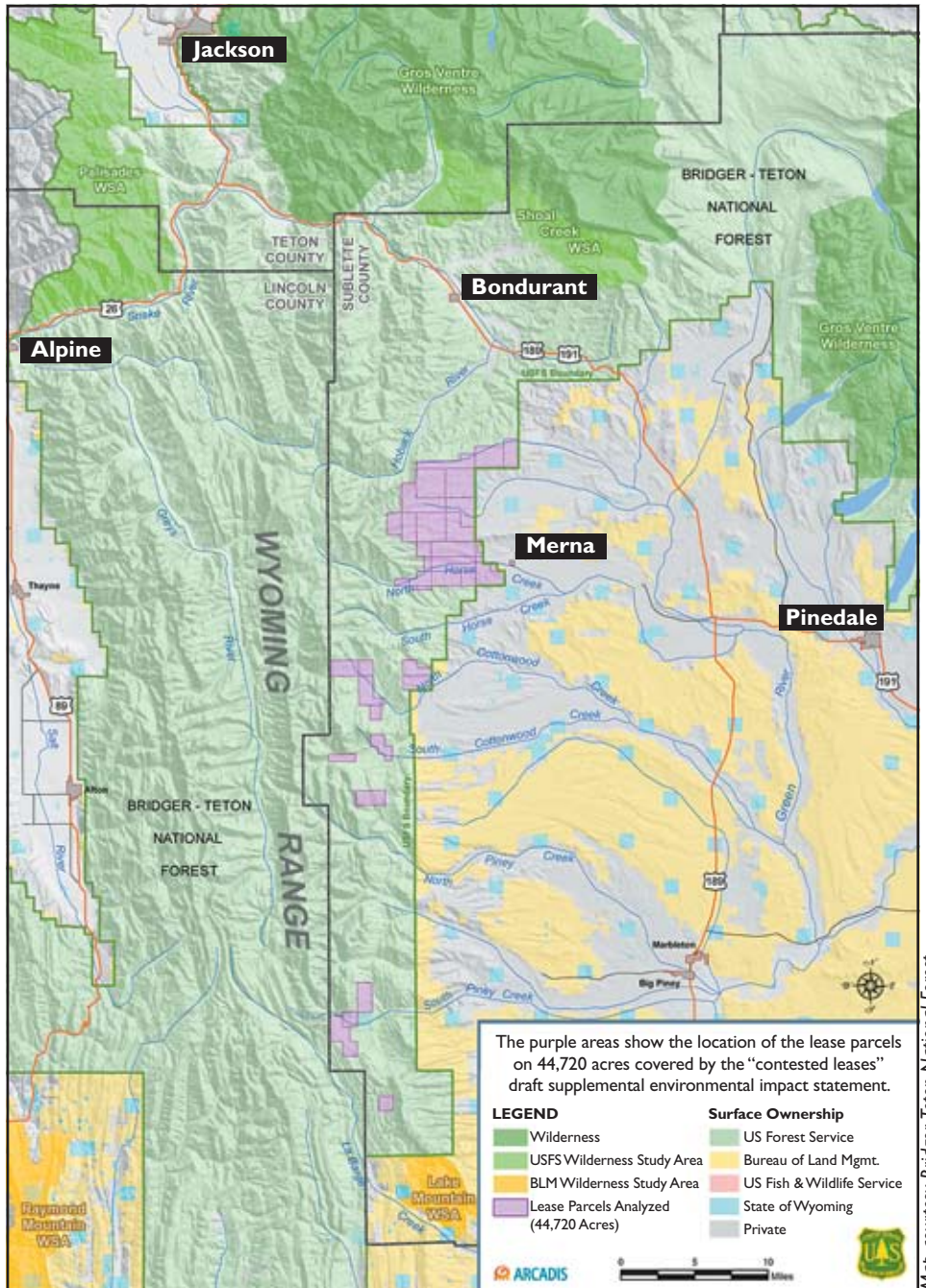
The good news is that the B-T's preferred alternative "would provide for no leasing" and "no opportunity for exploration and/or development in the areas covered by the 44,720 acre parcels." This "No Action" alternative further states that the contested "leases under suspension would be cancelled and leases under protest not awarded." Even better, since this area was included in the Wyoming Range Legacy Act's lease withdrawal area, if the preferred alternative ends up being final, then no wells will ever be allowed there. ■

What you can do to help

Wyoming is one of the nation's major oil and gas producers, but some places are just too important for wildlife and too valuable for other uses – like outfitting and recreation – to risk losing.

Please show your support of the B-T's "No Action" alternative by mailing your comments by March 22 to: Bridger-Teton National Forest, Forest Supervisor Kniffy Hamilton, P.O. Box 1888, Jackson, WY 83001. Or email them to comments-intermtn-bridger-teton@fs.fed.us.

The draft analysis is available via www.fs.fed.us/nepa/nepa_projects?forest=110403.



"Hoback Wells"

How does energy development on the Wyoming Range and beyond affect Jackson Hole? Some wildlife that summer in our valley spend time during other months in this area, and our airsheds are also at risk from pollution. There are more than 9,700 existing wells – with some 10,000 more proposed – in and around Sublette County. All of them have direct and cumulative impacts on water and air quality and on wildlife that extend far beyond their footprints.

Meanwhile, the B-T's analysis of the "Hoback Wells" plan for up to 136 wells south of Bondurant is now expected out this summer. Please check www.jhalliance.org/allianceaction.htm for updates.

Fate of Bridger-Teton parcel in town still up in the air

Jackson Hole is surrounded by 3.4 million acres of Bridger-Teton National Forest, 96,000 acres of Grand Teton National Park, and about 25,000 acres of the National Elk Refuge. Yet one of our hottest issues is the proposed sale of up to just 11 acres of public land on North Cache – a prime real estate area in the Town of Jackson.

Bridger-Teton officials say that attempts to find alternative funding to replace old facilities and provide more housing for their employees have failed, and that they need to sell part of the B-T's 15-acre administrative site to raise the money. Why is this a big deal? Because the Alliance and others believe that selling public lands to fund the operational needs of the agency responsible for those lands is shortsighted and wrong. Besides, the current market for property, even in Jackson Hole, also indicates that this proposed sale is not the wisest step to take at this time.

Since we're also concerned about the intensity and types of development that could end up at Jackson's north gateway, and the potential impacts on wildlife at the B-T's Nelson Drive and Cottonwood sites, where officials plan to relocate some facilities and employee housing, the Alliance has advocated for the least amount of land to be sold on North Cache, with administrative offices and employee housing to be located on the remaining acreage there, rather than at the east edge of Jackson and in the Snake River Canyon in prime wildlife habitat. Our detailed comments are available via www.jhalliance.org/library.htm#comments.

Bridger-Teton officials are expected to make a decision on the environmental assessment regarding the proposed sale this spring. (The EA is available by clicking on the "conveyance" links under the 2009 NEPA Documents heading at www.fs.fed.us/r4/btnf/projects.)

The Alliance has been working with the B-T and many citizens and groups to try to figure out how to raise the needed money without sacrificing our public lands. If you'd like to be included in these discussions, please contact Louise Lasley at (307) 733-9417 or Louise@jhalliance.org.

New national forest planning rule in the works

For several years now, court battles have taken place regarding federal rules governing revisions of national forest management plans. However, in December, the National Forest Service published a notice of its intent to begin analyzing the environmental consequences associated with a new land management planning rule. Hopefully, this process will result in a new plan that will remove uncertainties about how to approach forest planning – uncertainties that have stalled revisions to the Bridger-Teton's 20-year-old management plan (see next item). The deadline for scoping comments was Feb. 16; we'll keep you posted on opportunities for future public input at www.jhalliance.org.

B-T releases five-year monitoring report

A document that should prove useful if and when the Bridger-Teton ever resumes its long-range management plan revision process was recently posted at www.fs.fed.us/r4/btnf/news/forest_plan_revision/5yr.shtml. The result of years of research as well as extensive public input, the report describes "current conditions" on the B-T and assesses tons of ecological, social and economic information pertaining to the forest. Check it out when you get a chance.

Jackson Hole Airport update

The Jackson Hole Airport continues to expand its development footprint while a study regarding renewing its existing lease with Grand Teton National Park plus a comprehensive safety audit are now not expected to be released until later this summer. The preferred alternative in the lease extension environmental impact statement was for a 20-year extension; we had requested that the EIS be delayed until the completion of the safety audit and that an alternative that extended the lease for 10 years instead of 20 be included in the analysis. The safety audit is still in the works, according to airport manager Ray Bishop.

Park Service takes another stab at winter use plan

This past fall, the National Park Service instituted a temporary plan regulating the use of snowmobiles and snowcoaches in Yellowstone National Park through the 2010-2011 winter season. Now the NPS has two years to come up with a permanent plan, and they want your help.

In the decade since its first environmental study on winter use in the park in 2000, the NPS has received some 647,000 public comments on several proposed plans, which have run the gamut from completely banning snowmobiles to allowing up to 950 of them a day. Legal challenges mired most of them. The current temporary plan allows up to 318 best-available-technology guided snowmobiles and 78 snowcoaches per day. It also allows motorized oversnow travel on Sylvan Pass unless weather conditions make that unsafe.

Meanwhile, the Park Service has begun the National Environmental Policy Act process of asking for comments to determine the scope of studies for the new winter use plan that will take effect when the temporary one ends. Given that Yellowstone's own biologists have determined that excessive snowmobile use is detrimental to the park's wildlife and habitat, this is yet another chance for people to tell the NPS what they think should be studied in the new environmental analysis and to share their concerns. Scoping comments are due by March 30. Visit www.nps.gov/yell/parkmgmt/participate.htm for details on how you can comment. Questions? Contact Louise Lasley, Alliance public lands director, at (307) 733-9417 or Louise@jhalliance.org.

Wildlife updates

Jackson Hole is known for its abundant and diverse wildlife species, and its citizens are known for recognizing the importance of doing what it takes to ensure their continued presence here. The Alliance has joined numerous organizations and individuals including the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Defenders of Wildlife, the National Wildlife Refuge Association, Wyoming Outdoor Council, the Sierra Club and others in taking that step of last resort to protect some of these species. We have joined in litigation that argues for policies that will make sure grizzly bears, wolves, lynx, wolverine and healthy herds of elk can be found in Jackson Hole in the future. Each of these species is the subject of separate cases that will determine how they are managed and how successfully they can occupy the habitat they need to persevere. There have been no rulings on any of these cases, but we'll keep you posted at www.jhalliance.org. ■