

Here's a roundup of current issues regarding the national forest that surrounds Jackson Hole: Check www.jhalliance.org for updates.

Management Plan Revision Update

In early April, the U.S. Forest Service approved a new planning rule that was supposed to give Bridger-Teton officials the direction they needed to formally resume the B-T's on-again, off-again management plan revision. That process began in 2005 but has been stalled for more than a year. (The Bridger-Teton is currently operating under a plan finalized in 1990 that made 1.9 million acres – more than half of the entire forest – open to new oil and gas leasing.) In July, two different suits were filed in federal court to block the Forest Service from implementing the new rule. The conservation groups involved say it would remove vital protections for fish, wildlife and other resources. Since then, the B-T's plan revision process has remained in limbo, but that may soon change. Regional Forester Harv Forsgren is supposed to decide this fall if Bridger-Teton officials can do an end run by using the 1982 Planning Rule to make amendments to the current management plan.



Cottonwood Creek was a nice camping spot last summer. *Photo by Lloyd Dorsey*

Gold Mining on Cottonwood Creek

Bridger-Teton officials have okayed a test gold-mining operation on Cottonwood Creek in the Gros Ventre drainage. Maverick Exploration intends to dig 12 trenches within a 5-acre area this summer and next to determine the feasibility of extracting precious metals. (Their plan is to dig the trenches one at a time, sieve the dirt, and run the finest material through a dry, electrostatic process. Each trench is supposed to be reclaimed and revegetated before proceeding to the next one.) Should the site prove commercially viable, they could then seek to expand operations to more than 340 adjacent acres. Forest officials said an 1872 mining law made it difficult for them to deny the test trenches, which they allowed via a “categorical exclusion” – a project considered too small to merit environmental review under the National Environmental Policy Act.

Path of the Pronghorn “official”

At the Conservation Alliance's Party for the Pronghorn on May 31, Bridger-Teton National Forest Supervisor Kniffy Hamilton signed an amendment to the 1990 forest management plan officially designating the Teton pronghorn herd's migration corridor as an area to be protected. Calling the act “one of the highlights of my whole career,” Hamilton said it would allow for continued successful pronghorn migration through Forest Service lands. The legally binding amendment won't change many current activities in the corridor, but it's designed to make sure future activities won't hinder the migration.

For some 6,000 years, antelope have used a 90-mile-long crucial artery between the herd's winter range in Sublette County and summer range in Grand Teton National Park. But several places along the path make passage difficult. Rivers, trees and steep cliffs pinch the route down to just meters wide at some points, increasing the pronghorns' exposure to predators. Even worse, human development has caused additional bottlenecks. Oil and gas wells, roads, houses, fences – all make a dangerous journey even more perilous. Designation of the “Path of the Pronghorn” is a major step forward for conservationists, federal land managers and state wildlife agencies' efforts to permanently protect the pronghorn and their ancient route.

Grazing in the Gros Ventre

Bridger-Teton officials are trying to determine if allowing new fences and a corral to be built at a grazing allotment in the Gros Ventre would impede the movement of wildlife.

For the first time in seven years, the Upper Gros Ventre grazing allotment was restocked with 550 cow/calf pairs last summer. The cattle routinely wandered outside the allotment and forest officials asked for range improvements to prevent this. District Ranger Dale Deiter has decided to perform an environmental assessment on the allotment holder's proposal to put two new fences on the allotment, and build a permanent corral near the confluence of Slate Creek and the Gros Ventre River. The corral and a 12-acre holding pasture would be used at the beginning and end of each grazing season to transfer the cattle off and onto trucks. The cows and calves would then be trailed between the corral and the allotment. The Alliance is concerned that trailing cattle will compete with wildlife for forage, and that the structures could impede the movement of pronghorn during their spring migration. Contact District Ranger Dale Deiter at (307) 739-5410, to comment or ask questions.

Forest HQ to stay in Jackson

In March, forest officials pledged to keep the Bridger-Teton supervisor's office somewhere in Jackson. They also said they'd continue to try to sell some or all of the headquarter's current 15-acre site on North Cache to pay for new facilities. Intermountain Regional Forester Harv Forsgren said the community's strong objections to a plan to move the supervisor's office to Pinedale or Star Valley played a key role in his decision to keep the office in Jackson. No decision has been made so far on how much land at the current site will be sold, and how office, storage and employee housing issues will be resolved.



A 4-wheeler pulls out of the Gros Ventre River. *Photo by Franz Camenzind*

Motorized Travel Plan getting closer

There are currently no restrictions on motorized travel on more than 255,000 acres of the northern part of the Bridger-Teton. And, according to the Forest Service, ATV use on public lands has increased seven-fold in the past 20 years. This has led to disturbed wildlife, degraded habitat and miles of user-created trails.

The draft environmental impact statement and maps for a plan to fix these problems is available at www.fs.fed.us/r4/btnf/projects/travelrevision/index.shtml. (Public comments on the draft plan were due Aug. 4.) Any of the plan's alternatives will be an improvement on the existing use of motorized vehicles in the forest. All of them include seasonal road closures, and varying compromises between wildlife and recreation. The government's initial preferred alternative is Alternative D, which would keep many of the trails most popular with motorized-vehicle users but would impose some seasonal limits. The Conservation Alliance asked for implementation of Alternative B, with additional requests for closure of specific spurs or trails within wilderness study areas. The final EIS is expected this fall, with implementation in 2009. At that time, any motorized travel off designated trails will be illegal and subject to fines. The plan is for the maps to be updated annually to address changing wildlife or trail reconstruction issues. ■

Here's an overview of energy-related items affecting the southern Greater Yellowstone ecosystem, including the Upper Green River Valley, where many of Jackson Hole's wildlife spend the winter. Visit www.jhalliance.org to keep posted. (Thanks to the Harder Foundation for supporting our work.)

Protecting the Wyoming Range

This past summer, a bill to protect the Wyoming Range of the Bridger-Teton National Forest was included in the Omnibus Public Land Management Act (S. 3213) and introduced on the U.S. Senate floor. Sen. John Barrasso first introduced the Wyoming Range Legacy Act of 2007 last fall. If passed, the legislation would prohibit future oil and gas leasing on the Wyoming Range. Based on work begun by the late U.S. Sen. Craig Thomas, it would also allow buybacks of exploration and development rights already sold to energy companies, which could be an option to avert the proposed developments discussed below. The full Senate must vote on the Omnibus Act before it passes to the House of Representatives. Please contact Wyoming's congressional delegation to voice your support for this legislation:

U.S. Sen. Mike Enzi

Email via: <http://enzi.senate.gov/public>

U.S. Sen. John Barrasso

Email via: <http://barrasso.senate.gov/public>

U.S. Rep. Barbara Cubin

Email via:

http://www.house.gov/cubin/zip_auth.shtml

Visit www.wyomingrange.org for more details on efforts to protect the Wyoming Range.

Hoback Wells

The draft environmental impact statement on Plains Exploration and Production Company's plan to drill up to 136 natural gas wells near Bondurant at the north end of the Wyoming Range is expected out in November. The Eagle Prospect and Noble Basin Master Development Plan proposes building 17 well pads, 29 miles of roads, and gas lines and facilities on 22 square miles of forest. The location is currently recognized as a roadless area, as a critical birthing area for mule deer, and as habitat for elk and moose.

Plains had originally proposed drilling three exploratory wells in 2005. The EIS for that project generated about 19,000 public comments; almost all opposed it. Last year, the company withdrew that proposal and presented plans for full field development instead.

Keep an eye on www.jhalliance.org for information about how you can comment on the new draft EIS this fall.



Pronghorn winter near a gas well outside Pinedale. Photo by Franz Camenzind

More Wyoming Range threats

Despite admitting that one energy company had an undue influence on the process, Bridger-Teton officials decided this summer to continue a NEPA analysis on 44,700 acres of contested oil and gas leases in the Wyoming Range of the forest west of Merna around Horse and Beaver creeks.

These leases have been suspended since 2006, when the federal Interior Board of Land Appeals ruled that an earlier National Environmental Policy Act analysis didn't adequately consider impacts to wildlife and the environment.

Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal blasted forest officials in April for allowing Stanley Energy, one of the aspiring lessees, to participate in meetings between Forest Service personnel and an outside contractor hired on the company's recommendation to write the supplemental environmental impact statement. (Under NEPA, companies that might benefit from an EIS are barred from such discussions.)

Although B-T officials have since terminated their "memorandum of understanding" with Stanley Energy, and to alleviate the public's concerns have published notes from planning meetings that company representatives attended, they are nevertheless proceeding with the draft SEIS, which is expected in September.

Pinedale Resource Management Plan

The final environmental analysis for this Bureau of Land Management plan should be available on Aug. 22 at www.blm.gov/rmp/wy/pinedale/documents.html. The plan will set the course for managing more than a million acres of public land in the Upper Green River Valley southeast of Jackson Hole for the next 10 to 15 years. (The draft EIS was released in February of 2007 and generated more than 100,000 letters, most of which cited concerns about energy development.) After it's posted, the final EIS will be subject to a 30-day review and appeal period. To find out more, visit www.uppergreen.org.

Pinedale Anticline

The Bureau of Land Management has released its revised plan for expanded drilling on the Pinedale Anticline project area southeast of Jackson Hole. The proposal calls for 4,400 more wells, almost nine times the number currently in place, likely drilled at a rate of up to 232 wells per year. This would substantially expand the impacts beyond what was authorized in the original plan in 2000. Also, in a precedent-setting move, the operators propose to drill year-round and no longer be subject to well-established, seasonal drilling protections for big game and sage grouse.

While this proposal contains some good measures to limit industry's footprint, unless enforceable mitigation measures are strengthened, this ramped-up drilling in the Pinedale Anticline will harm northwest Wyoming's quality of life, clean water and air, exceptional vistas and extraordinary wildlife. Please contact the BLM today and let them know that a slower pace of development and stronger enforcements are paramount for finding real balance on the Anticline. Write to: Caleb Hiner, Project Manager, Bureau of Land Management, Pinedale Field Office, P.O. Box 768, Pinedale, WY 82941.

Air quality concerns

The close proximity to Jackson Hole of energy development on the Pinedale Anticline threatens our valley's air quality and migrating wildlife. Five times this past winter alone, Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality officials issued ozone warnings for Sublette County (just southeast of Teton County), reporting that levels of the toxic gas reached a point that could pose a threat to children, the elderly or those with respiratory ailments. They attributed the cause mostly to energy development on the Pinedale Anticline and Jonah fields.

In March and again in July, a group of health professionals, business people and concerned citizens sent letters to BLM State Director Robert Bennett, Gov. Dave Freudenthal, the Centers for Disease Control, EPA Regional Director Robbie Roberts, Wyoming Dept. of Health Director Dr. Brent Sherard, and the CEOs of Shell, Ultra, Encana, Questar and BP Amoco asking for a comprehensive health impact assessment in conjunction with the Pinedale Anticline analysis discussed above.

The Environmental Protection Agency gave the Anticline plan its lowest possible environmental rating, citing public health concerns about elevated ozone levels, documented groundwater contamination, and decreased visibility in the Wind River Range due to air pollution. None of these are adequately addressed in the plan. ■