

Greater Little Mountain Area

An Important Resource to Wyoming Sportsmen & Families

Summary:

Little Mountain, has become the latest casualty in the rush to lease and develop the public's lands in southwest Wyoming. These lands are a valuable resource, playing a vital role in maintaining the state's outdoor heritage and economic diversity. This unique area supports abundant and diverse wildlife and fisheries, wide variety of recreational opportunities for local and statewide residents, and supports a growing tourism economy. Energy development in this sensitive ecosystem has the potential to erode the current multiple-use base of these lands.

Area Description:

Little Mountain is located in southwestern Wyoming, about 30 miles south of the town of Rock Springs. Elevation ranges from 6,040 feet at Flaming Gorge Reservoir to 9,060 feet at the top of Little Mountain. The Little Mountain area supports thriving populations of elk and mule deer and is considered by many to be one of the best hunting spots in Wyoming. Hunt Areas 112 for antelope, 31 for elk, and 102 for deer are all limited quota. In addition to healthy sage-grouse populations, this high desert ecosystem also includes streams that provide great trout fisheries for the sensitive Colorado River cutthroat trout.

One of The Threat:

Leasing and energy development, to a minimal degree, has occurred on both federal and state lands in the area. In addition, a two-well exploratory drilling project was approved by the BLM for drilling in the summer of 2008. Governor Freudenthal has publicly voiced his concern about impacts to recreation, critical wildlife habitat, sensitive species, and air and water quality. The approval for the exploratory wells and seismic exploration was met with disapproval from the Governor because "the pressure to expand from two wells seems inevitable." According to the Wyoming State Geological Survey, the field will likely be characterized by closely spaced wells at 10- or even 5-acre spacing. The proposed well pads and construction of associated pipelines and roads, as well as the increase in noise, water and air pollution will independently and cumulatively impact a wide range of species. The increased human activity, from truck traffic to the presence of machinery and workers, will also likely result in wildlife conflicts – ranging from possibly changing movement patterns to poaching. "Any energy development, whether limited or broad, in the Little Mountain area is going to stir up a perfect storm of wildlife, environmental, recreational and social issues," stated the Governor.



Background photo courtesy of Wyoming Game & Fish Department

What's at Stake:

Since 1990, Little Mountain area has benefited from more than \$2 million in habitat restoration projects funded by various private groups (Bowhunters of Wyoming, National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, permittees/grazing board, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Sweetwater Wildlife Association, Trout Unlimited, Western Wyoming Mule Deer Foundation), state (Wyoming Game & Fish Department) and federal agencies (Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation). Local hunters, anglers, teachers, boy scouts, and wildlife enthusiasts have participated with on-the-ground habitat projects and monitoring efforts.

A thriving elk herd is found in the Little Mountain area, providing the most sought after elk tags in the state for trophy quality elk. In fact, a person has only about a 6% chance of drawing an elk license for this area. Energy development in this area would bring new roads, which would reduce cover security for the elk, increase elk vulnerability, and decrease trophy size elk. Furthermore, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) has been petitioned three times to designate the Colorado River cutthroat trout as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Partly because of habitat restoration efforts in these watersheds, which would be compromised by development activity, the USFWS has thus far declined to list the species.

What Can Be Done:

Sportsmen and women who use this area want to make sure that development on these lands occur responsibly so that the unique qualities of these important wildlife resources are intact for future generations. However, impacts can be minimized with proper planning and moderate measures proposed by Sportsmen for Responsible Energy Development. In addition, sportsmen want to make sure that the remaining parcels of land, which have thus far not been leased, remain free from development activities. A loose coalition of sportsmen and women, faith-based organizations, and blue-collar workers has formed in anticipation of extensive development threatening the Little Mountain area.

Sportsman in the Spotlight:

Joshua Coursey is an avid sportsman and the local chapter chairman of the Mule Deer Foundation. As a successful local businessman, he appreciates the benefits that energy development has brought to his community in southwestern Wyoming. To compliment this, Coursey states that what needs to be discussed is “the level of accountability, how exploration occurs on public lands, and the impacts it holds for future generations.” In a recent letter to the local newspaper editor, Josh wrote, “***This issue is one of great emotion and passion, as it should be, for it revolves around an area that many of us hold to be serene and very dear to our hearts.***” Coursey has hunted the area for over 20 years and hopes to continue to enjoy the area with his family and friends, and pass on to his children the opportunity to harvest the trophy mule deer that the area is famous for.