

# Forest leasing system broken

The federal minerals leasing system is broken. That should be apparent to anybody who has been following the saga of oil and gas leases in and around the Wyoming Range just south of Jackson. Recent decisions by federal land managers and agencies reveal a rigged system that has given industry a free hand at the expense of wildlife habitat, scenic vistas and recreation. Here's how the card game is played — with the deck stacked in industry's favor.

Years ago, the U.S. Forest Service made its first decision when it said it would lease public land in the area for oil and gas exploration and development. At the time, federal managers said they could not detail what impacts exploration and development might entail — impacts such as road construction, well pads, pipelines, thousands of truck trips and air and water pollution — so there was little opposition to what many thought might be an oil rig up an isolated draw, and the government started leasing some acreage.

When it auctioned some 44,000 acres near Merna, residents woke up, wary of the heavy hand industry had used nearby. Savvy citizens groups challenged that auction, saying the government didn't give proper attention to the disturbance development would cause. A federal appeals panel agreed, ruling that the Forest Service relied on outdated information and forcing it to reconsider. When the Bridger-Teton National Forest did reconsider — surprise — it discovered the area was too valuable in its natural state to develop. It now admits the 44,000 acres are too sensitive to lease and will repay successful bidders.

That same logic should govern a proposal by energy extraction company Plains Exploration and Production Company, or PXP, to develop a 136-well field in the nearby Noble Basin, located about a two-hour mountain bike ride from the 44,000 acres. Leases there were issued with the same outdated examination the Bridger-Teton wanted to use, but was prevented from using, on the Merna tract. But the Bridger-Teton says it can't reject the proposed PXP field, it can only modify it because the company holds valid leases. A fifth-grader playing this game of cards would know he or she was getting conned after the first hand. Clearly, the public hasn't been given an honest chance to weigh in on the future of the property it owns. The Forest Service should reject the PXP development on the grounds that leases were issued based on information that has since been proven flawed.

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