

Unchecked Energy Development and the Future of Hunting Across the West



OUTDOORS
HUNTERS & ANGLERS

As Westerners we are blessed to have access to expansive public lands and wildlife that support our outdoor pursuits and sporting heritage. Mule deer, pronghorn, and elk roam these lands in abundance and provide ample hunting opportunities. Much of this wildlife habitat is overseen by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which is tasked with managing 245 million acres of surface land and an additional 700 million acres of the subsurface estate that contains minerals, oil, and gas. The BLM is required to manage the land for multiple use, which can include energy development, grazing, conservation and recreation. Its mission statement is very clear: the agency must “sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.”

Unfortunately the BLM’s recent prioritization of energy development above all other uses – a doctrine known as “energy dominance” – threatens the survival of wildlife and our sporting traditions. Did you know that across the West, millions of acres of public lands are currently leased for oil and gas drilling? In 2017 alone, almost double the amount of land was offered for lease (more than 11 million acres) than the next-highest year in the previous decade. Additionally, the BLM is currently preparing long-term management plans for millions of acres across the West. Unfortunately, the administration is skewing these plans toward development and opening up millions of more acres to leasing and drilling, which means that western communities, in particular those that rely on hunting and fishing revenues, could be dealing with the negative consequences of “energy dominance” for years to come.

In 2017 alone, more than 11 million acres of land were offered for lease.

THOSE STATISTICS INCLUDE MANY PLACES THAT ARE SPECIAL TO SPORTSMEN AND WOMEN. A FEW EXAMPLES:

In the last few years, the BLM has twice proposed leasing in an area once thought sacred: the Ruby Mountains in Nevada, which are home to world-class hunting and fishing and the most important big-game migration corridor in Nevada. In 2017, the BLM offered up 50,000 acres between Harrison Pass and Lamoille Canyon. After thousands of sportsmen and other conservationists spoke up, the leases were deferred. Last year, anonymous oil and gas speculators tried for a second time to lease more than 88,000 acres in the Rubies but were rebuffed by another outpouring of protest.

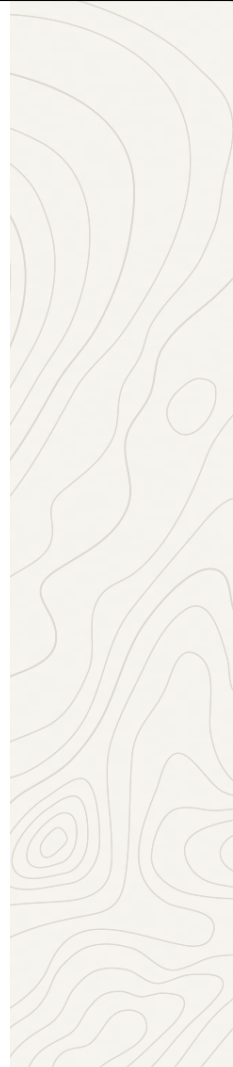




Or consider North Park, which is sometimes called the “Serengeti of Colorado.” The area is filled with moose, elk and mule deer fueling a thriving hunting economy which supports local communities. But oil and gas development in North Park is proceeding at a pace that is far too aggressive and threatens numerous valuable resources. The sporting community is very concerned because of recent severe winters - which forced thousands of animals to the valley floor, exactly where the oil and gas development takes place and where much more is proposed under the latest lease sales.

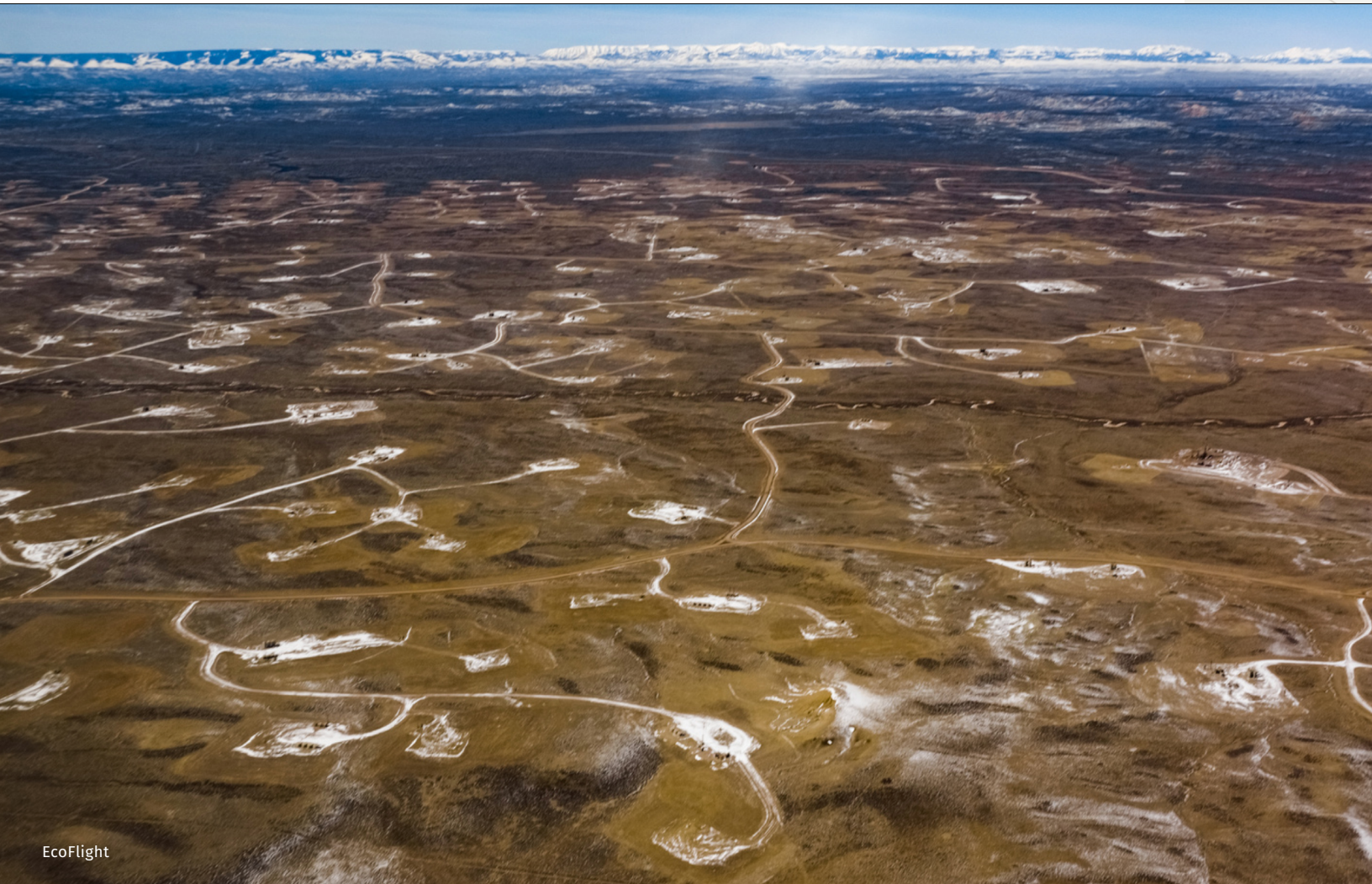
Perhaps there is no better poster child for energy development run amok than the Jonah oil and gas field in south-central Wyoming. Beginning in the 1990s, oil and gas companies drilled wells in 21,000 acres of BLM land south of Pinedale. Over the past 20 years, production ramped up and there are now several thousand wells in this relatively small area with thousands of new wells still being proposed. This unchecked energy development has had a devastating impact on wildlife, particularly on sage grouse, pronghorn and mule deer. In fact, a recent [report](#) showed mule deer populations declined by 35%, because of the energy development and those declines led to a 45% reduction in deer harvest rates. This is not an acceptable scenario for hunters and wildlife and we cannot let it happen again.

Currently, 90% of lands managed by the BLM are open to oil & gas development. The problem is that once lands are leased to oil and gas companies, the BLM does not prioritize or manage them for hunting, fishing or other kinds of outdoor recreation. So where does this leave hunters and their ability to hunt when all is said and done? If these lands are developed, the likelihood of harm to wildlife and our sporting heritage vastly increases.



We all know we need oil and gas but it's reasonable to ask where and how we obtain it and how it will impact other uses of the land. It's also reasonable to ask that only a certain percentage of the lands be developed and that certain lands - such as those that contain sensitive and valuable habitat - be avoided altogether. Without prudent land management, hunters, anglers and other recreationists - and the economies that rely on them - stand to lose. It also begins a troubling cycle: if fish and game opportunities are diminished, fewer people will hunt and fish and then the very wildlife management agencies that derive most of their operating costs from license revenues will have less resources to manage and care for the wildlife that needs them most.

Currently, 90% of lands managed by the BLM are open to oil & gas development.



EcoFlight

Jonah Field, Wyoming

The Importance of Hunting to the Rural Economies

Hunting is a huge economic driver that shouldn't be underestimated. Nationally, hunting generates \$27 billion in consumer spending every year. And hunting and fishing-related businesses employ 438,000 people across the country.

Hunting and fishing is especially important in sustaining the rural economies of the West, where it contributes nearly \$6.5 billion to the outdoor recreation economy. From hotel stays and groceries to outfitters and gear purchases, hunters and anglers pour hundreds of millions of dollars into rural economies during hunting season, often accounting for more than half of the annual revenue for some small communities.

Consider the town of Lewistown, Montana with a population just under 6,000 people. Surrounded by some of the finest hunting areas in the world, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks measured more than 25,000 elk hunter days in 2015 in this region. Those visits contributed more to the Lewistown economy than any other [economic sector](#). Retail, food and accommodation services, along with hunting and fishing related jobs, accounted for a quarter of Lewistown's employment opportunities, which grew at an annual rate of 9% in 2016. How the BLM manages public lands can have a dramatic impact on these economies. Rampant oil and gas leasing that ignores wildlife values and leads to irresponsible development threatens sporting traditions, outdoor recreation economies and rural communities throughout the West.



Paul Kemper



Planning for the future of our public lands

Currently the Bureau of Land Management is developing Resource Management Plans (RMPs) for many of its regional offices in the West. These plans will determine how the land will be managed for the next 20 years. Below we highlight RMPs that cover three premier western sporting landscapes. The Lewistown and Uncompahgre plans have been finalized, and they miss the mark for balancing wildlife and resource development. The Rock Springs draft plan has yet to be released. When it is released, as this report explains, it is critical that sportsmen and women speak up to ensure the managers make prudent and sustainable decisions about land management.

Elk, deer, pronghorn and bighorn sheep hunting help generate \$4 million annually for the local economy.

Lewistown Resource Management Plan in Montana

The Lewistown region contains 628,500 acres of spectacular BLM land along the Missouri River in central Montana. The land supports some of the best wildlife habitat in the country and some of the finest big game hunting in the world. Elk, deer, pronghorn and bighorn sheep hunting helps generate [\\$4 million annually](#) for the local economy.

The intact river-to-prairie ecosystem, which includes sagebrush and cottonwood draws, provides large tracts of undeveloped land for wildlife to seek food and shelter. Unfortunately, the recently released [RMP](#) would allow oil and gas leasing and development on 91% [of the BLM lands in the field office](#). This includes leasing and possible development in famed areas in and near the Missouri Breaks units such as 410, 411, and 700, which take several points to draw and consistently produce abundant six point bull elk and quality mule deer bucks.

Under the new Lewistown RMP, only lands previously withdrawn from leasing and 1,900 acres of Wilderness Study Areas are closed to leasing. While BLM purports to protect wildlife with various stipulations, the only highly protective stipulations (No-Surface Occupancy) for big game are in crucial winter range and bighorn lambing habitat. This leaves migration corridors, winter range, calving areas and much more open to development. While we certainly do not advocate for closing down the entire planning area to leasing, the BLM should be more restrictive in areas that are worth protecting from the potential harms of development. For example, the planning area contains hundreds of thousands of acres of prime undeveloped habitat around the Charles M. Russel National Wildlife Refuge and the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. The lands in and around the refuge and monument contain premier habitat for big game, and provide the necessary security for wildlife to thrive.

The planning area is also home to pristine areas such as Chain Buttes, Horse Camp Trail, and Dovetail Creek which contain some of the most productive big game habitat in North America, and as a result, some of the best hunting in the world. The BLM has made available all of these lands for oil and gas leasing despite receiving hundreds of comments from community members who warned that widespread energy development would threaten wildlife migration corridors, winter range and hunting opportunities. Is it too much to ask the bureau to recognize some of these areas are too valuable to be leased and developed?



Rachelle Schrute, Bozeman, MT

Rachelle Schrute says her experience bowhunting in the Lewiston RMP area last fall was a truly magical experience. “It’s completely changed the way I think about elk and the way I think about the land.”

Schrute, who grew up hunting and fishing all over Montana, usually hunts with a rifle but a friend encouraged her to come along on a traditional bow hunt. “We were hunkered down calling to this bull elk, having an intimate connection with him and the land. He came over the ridge and got louder and louder – he got so close - it was just life-changing.” She says although there was no harvest, she considers the hunt to have been very successful. “The whole experience on the pristine land - with rolling hills and amber waves of grasses—it has made me realize I need to do more for conservation of these very special places in Montana.”

Schrute is the mother of two teenagers, who also hunt and fish. She said she’s very concerned about any plans that might degrade hunting areas so that future generations wouldn’t be able to enjoy them. “It would be heartbreaking if my kids couldn’t have the same experiences I’ve had.”

Schrute says her experience hiking, hunting and camping on the land near Lewistown has made her realize how important it is for sportsmen and women like herself to become educated on conservation and land management issues.



Rachelle Schrute

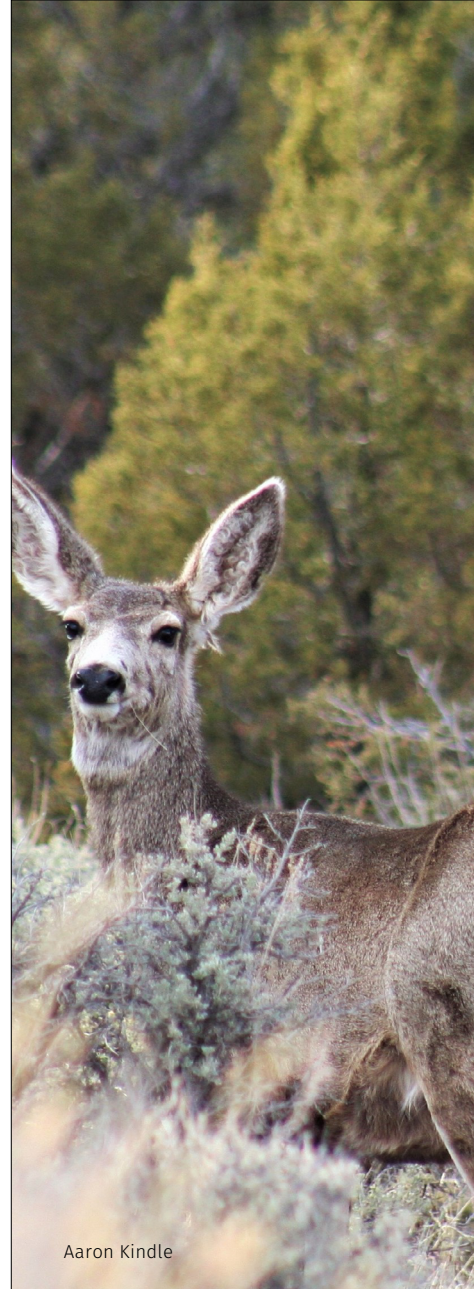
Uncompahgre Resource Management Plan in Colorado

The landscape encompassed by the BLM's Uncompahgre Field Office offers some of the finest hunting opportunities in Colorado. From the wild trout waters of the Gunnison River to the outstanding elk and deer habitat in the high country on the flanks of the West Elk Wilderness to the outstanding turkey hunting found on the Uncompahgre plateau, it is no stretch to say this landscape is a true sporting gem. The Uncompahgre contains some of Colorado's premier hunting units for big game as well as turkey. Big game/turkey units 521, 53, 52, 411, 62, 64, and 63 all occupy parts of the field office boundaries. Unit 62, the largest big game unit in the Uncompahgre, ranked 6th in total elk harvest and 8th in total mule deer harvest for the State of Colorado in the latest harvest estimates compiled in 2018 while, nearly all the big game units in the area are considered quality big game units.

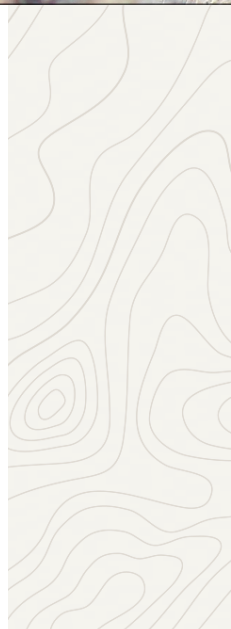
Delta and Montrose County, which are in the heart of the Uncompahgre Field Office, saw over 105,000 hunter days in 2017 helping to fuel a [\\$3.5 billion outdoor recreation economy](#) in the region.

In April 2020, the BLM released its final Resource Management Plan that was drastically different from a draft plan released in 2016. The 2020 release represented the end of public involvement in the planning process. Prior to the release of the 2016 plan, local communities, governments and the State of Colorado worked diligently with other stakeholders and the BLM to ensure sufficient measures were in place to protect water supplies, air quality, wildlife habitat, and the recreation economy: hunting alone generates more than \$14 million locally.

The release of the 2020 plan was a signal to these stakeholders that BLM was not planning on taking the 2016 efforts into account, but was instead favoring oil and gas leasing over other uses. While closing only 44,220 acres to oil and gas leasing, the proposed Uncompahgre Resource Management Plan declares 871,810 acres open for leasing. The new plan has also reduced restrictions to oil and gas leasing and failed to put in place sufficient stipulations to protect ungulate populations and meet state population objectives. The plan does not guarantee reduced



Aaron Kindle



infrastructure and road density in big game severe winter range, winter range, winter concentration areas, production areas and migration corridors which are necessary to protect big game populations. Instead, the current plan only limits access to these areas during certain times of the year, and requires the applicant to develop a mitigation plan in consultation with the Colorado Department of Natural Resources. The result of insufficient protections could be significant habitat loss, fragmentation and reduced access to public lands. Winter range and migration corridors could also be severely compromised.

The BLM's insistence on leasing and development in the North Fork Valley is a powerful example of BLM's focus on oil and gas development to the detriment of local interests. Recent lease sales have garnered heavy opposition from the local community, the state, and other stakeholders due to the potential impacts to water resources such as the Paonia Reservoir and the North Fork of the Gunnison river, roadless lands with wilderness qualities, and wildlife such as mule deer and elk. Given these concerns, the BLM agreed to defer leases in North Fork until the Uncompahgre plan revision. However, the final plan rejected a citizen proposed plan to protect the area from energy development, so it is unlikely the deferrals will stand and the area will remain open to oil and gas leasing and future development.



Aaron Kindle

Over 105,000 hunter days in 2017 helped fuel a \$35 billion outdoor recreation economy in the region.

Adam Gall, Hotchkiss, CO

Adam Gall and his wife Ana, own Timber to Table Guide Service in western Colorado. They offer elk and mule deer hunts on the Uncompahgre Plateau and specialize in teaching hunters how to process their own meat. They are also huge public lands advocates because of the role those lands play in supporting wildlife and sporting traditions.

Gall says he's concerned about the Uncompahgre RMP and what it will mean for the BLM lands which provide critical winter range for elk and deer. "A lot of people don't understand that what really dictates mule deer and elk populations is the quality of their winter range. If the health of the winter range is degraded - if they don't have quality forage and the space they need - those herds will be negatively impacted and animals will die."

Gall says the disruption caused by oil and gas leasing could have devastating impacts on winter range. "If that land gets subdivided with roads and constant traffic, that's just another layer of crap that the animals have to deal with. Oil and gas has its place but it's absolutely imperative for planners to take into account where wildlife congregate and where the migration corridors run well before leases are put out there. These animals need to have unimpeded corridors or their numbers will decline."

Gall believes it's important for everyone who enjoys these public lands to speak up in favor of common-sense plans that will conserve wildlife habitat and hunting traditions.



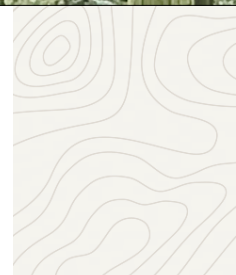
Adam Gall

Rock Springs Resource Management Plan in Wyoming

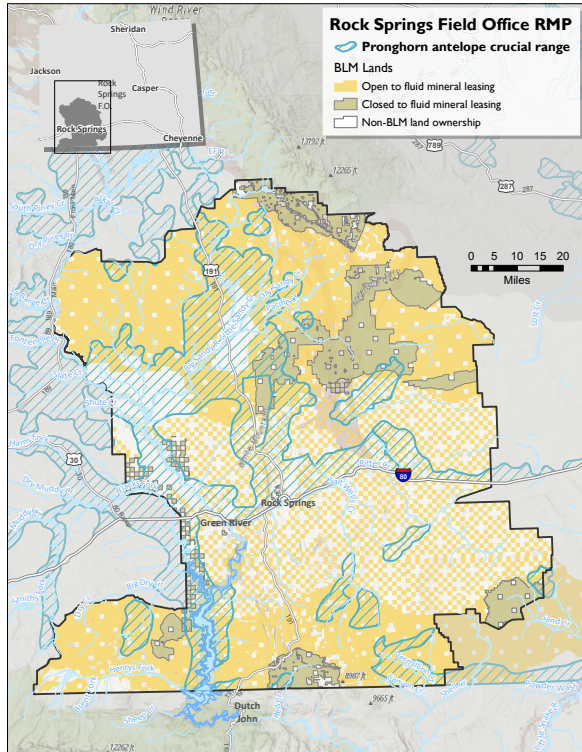
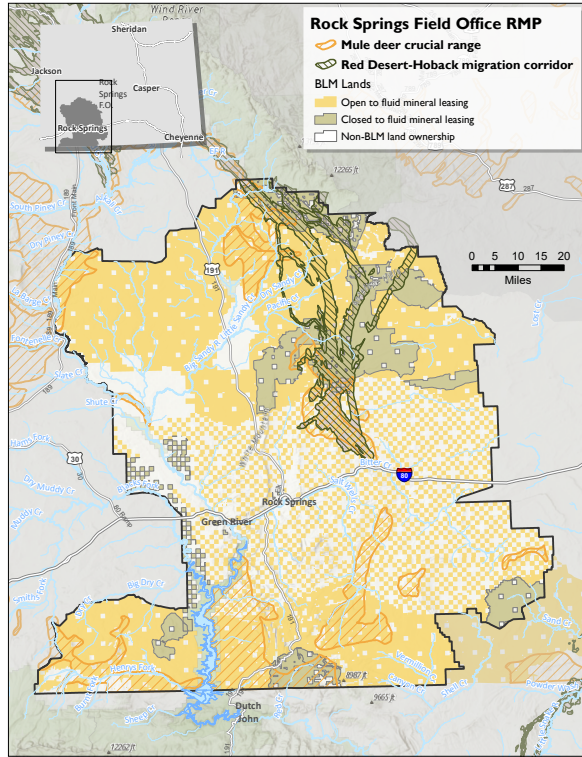
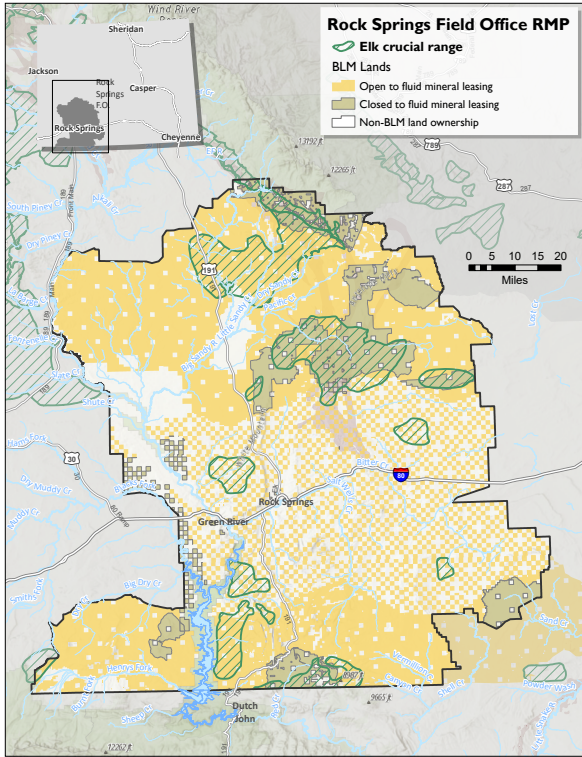
The Rock Springs Field Office is one of the largest and most significant field offices in the country. Situated in southwest Wyoming and boasting over 3.5 million acres of rugged wild lands and high desert, this area is a unique mix of forests, scrub, and sage lands. These lands are filled with elk, deer and pronghorn.

The Rock Springs landscape offers some of the most sought-after hunting tags in Wyoming - and indeed the country - and enjoys exceptional success rates for big game hunters. The area also holds sections of the largest ungulate migrations in the U.S. including the famed "Red Desert to Hoback" mule deer migration corridor. The wildlife values are so great in the area that local sportsmen and women formed the [Greater Little Mountain Coalition](#) to protect key areas in the southern core of the field office and have pumped millions of dollars and thousands of hours to restore and protect key areas. Hunting and fishing in this area generates \$14.2 million per year for the local economy. The Rock Springs area is also rich in fossil fuels and considered a high value oil play, which requires extremely thoughtful development in order to retain the areas strong hunting and angling traditions.

The Rocks Springs Field Office is expected to release its Draft Resource Management Plan in 2020. Once the BLM releases the draft, the public will have the opportunity to provide feedback to ensure appropriate protections for the area. It is imperative that managers follow recommendations of the sporting community and provide appropriate protections and stipulations, including sparing some places from leasing and development altogether.



Big Game Habitat and Energy Leasing in the Rock Springs RMP



Crucial range describes any seasonal range or habitat component (often winter or winter/yearlong range in Wyoming) which has been documented as the determining factor in a population's ability to maintain itself at a certain level (theoretically at or above the Wyoming Game and Fish Department population objective).

“My dad was a minimalist when it came to camping. We never used a tent but instead slept on World War II era bed rolls with wool blankets piled on top,” says Craig Thompson with a chuckle when he recounts how he and his father and brother would hunt near Rock Springs back in the 1960s. “The memory of waking up in the frosty desert, waiting for the sun to rise so we could begin our hunt, that is something I’ll cherish for the rest of my life.”

Thompson moved to Rock Springs, Wyoming when he was a child because his father worked in the oil and gas industry. “When we moved here, my father warned me not to let the land get into my blood or I’d never leave. He was right. Although I left Wyoming for school, I ultimately felt the magnetic pull to come back. There’s something about the land here that defies description.”

Thompson’s deep knowledge of the land, water and wildlife that surrounds the Rock Springs area, comes not just from his experience as a hunter and angler. He’s also professor emeritus of environmental science and engineering at Western Wyoming Community College and for decades has taken students out to monitor sage grouse leks.

Over the years as oil and gas development has ramped up, he’s noticed a definite decrease in wildlife populations. “We’ve seen the disappearance of sage grouse from two different leks that we’ve studied. Wildlife migration problems have also developed as the oil and gas roads lace back and forth disrupting wildlife habitat,” says Thompson. “When I was 25 years old, it was common to go for a drive in the evening and count 80 deer. Now you’re lucky if you see seven. Often you’ll see none.”

Thompson knows that energy development isn’t the only reason deer populations are dwindling, but is very concerned about the new Rock Springs Resource



Craig Thompson

Management Plan that is about to be released. He says unfortunately, the public has not been allowed to be very involved with the crafting of the plan so he is nervous that decisions will be made by people in Washington, D.C. and not in Rock Springs.

He's particularly worried that if too much oil and gas development is allowed under the plan, it will have a negative impact on the economy. "Hunting and fishing are a giant part of our economy. If you come here during hunting season, you see license plates from all over the country. Those hunters spend a tremendous amount of money. Locals too. They buy 4-wheel drive pickups that fuel the economy."

Thompson is urging his fellow sportsmen and women to resist land management decisions that aren't right for Wyoming. "We're still a democracy. Ordinary citizens can still influence the outcome of these plans if they speak up. We all live here because the land got a hold of us. If we want to preserve our values and pass them onto our kids, we must resist BLM decisions that are inconsistent with those values and not science-based."



Aaron Kindle

What would responsible development look like?

Responsible energy development exhibits a few main characteristics. First, the most valuable and sensitive wildlife habitat must be avoided altogether. Even with provisions designed to minimize impacts, developing everywhere is not sustainable and will result in loss of hunting opportunities. There must be areas where wildlife is completely secure and can seek refuge from development activities. There must also be secure and healthy lands protected in between habitat types so wildlife can move throughout their life histories. Known as migration corridors, these areas should be carefully studied and managed, and when science dictates, closed to leasing and development.

Second, development infrastructure should be consolidated to the smallest footprint possible and nearest to other existing pipelines, roads, facilities, etc. And leasing should only occur where there's a reasonable likelihood that production will actually commence during the lease term.

At the end of 2017, nearly 26 million acres of federal land were [under lease for oil and gas development](#) but less than half were actually producing. Why? Most of those lands have virtually no chance of ever producing oil and gas. But because they're leased, other protective designations are prohibited and once any development activities begin, other uses are often restricted in these areas. It's just common sense to lease and develop in high potential areas using the smallest footprint and avoiding the most valuable habitat.

Unfortunately, there are several areas such as the White River area in Colorado where these standards have not been followed resulting in a reduction in hunting opportunity. The Resource Management Plan for the area admits a 30% reduction in big game herds over the 20 year life of the plan. And, as previously mentioned, in the Pinedale Field Office in Wyoming mule deer herds have been reduced by 35% due, in large part, to rampant energy development.

These intense development scenarios are unsustainable, crippling to hunting in the area and the businesses that rely on hunters, and will eventually result in too much lost opportunity to be acceptable to the sporting community. These outcomes must be avoided in other areas to conserve our sporting heritage.

At the end of 2017, nearly 26 million acres of federal land were under lease for oil and gas development but less than half were actually producing. Why?

There is a right way and a wrong way to develop energy resources on public lands. Unfortunately, we've seen some bad examples in the past that have resulted in lost opportunity and diminished wildlife. Fortunately, by following a few common sense practices we can maintain our sporting heritage and develop the energy resources our country relies on.

Where do we go from here?

Hunting isn't what it used to be. From technology improvements and housing developments to drought and disease along with ever increasing energy development on public lands, the stressors are many. Hunters now have an obligation to be more engaged than ever to ensure the future of our traditions on public lands, especially where managers have decided to severely increase energy leasing and development in high value hunting areas. With the same desire that you meticulously plan and execute your hunting strategies, you must also monitor development plans and activities and then engage with decision makers to convey your intimate knowledge of the landscapes, the wildlife, and the changes you've seen. Without this implicit engagement these areas have the potential to slip away from our sporting dreams and go by the way of places like the Jonah Field in Wyoming.



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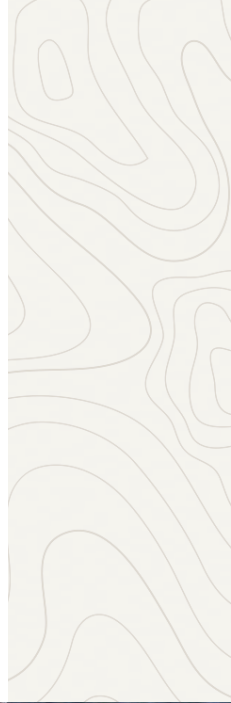


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4 WAYS HUNTERS CAN GET ENGAGED

1. Get to know your local wildlife professionals such as game wardens and biologists. Many of them are hunters too, and all around good folks. They can help provide more information that you can use to provide important feedback to land managers.
2. [Join a sporting conservation organization](#). Not only do you dues help fund conservation but you will also receive communications and updates about relevant conservation items and campaigns.
3. Learn about the laws, rules, and regulations that guide management of your favorite hunting areas and provide comments and input when managers provide the opportunity to do so. RMP's are so critical because they guide what and where can occur on landscapes for decades. But it's not too late to engage once the plan is done. You can lend your voice to specific oil and gas projects proposed for the wrong place. Here is a link to find information on oil and gas leasing and what will be offered in any particular lease sale. <https://www.blm.gov/programs/energy-and-minerals/oil-and-gas/leasing>
4. Get your fellow hunters engaged. Host a get-together where you share the basics of what is happening and what's at stake and provide them with information that helps them get more engaged. Or just spread the word when you're interacting with any community members. And, tell your stories. Everyone loves good hunting stories and they maintain the spirit of these important landscapes and the wildlife that rely on them.

Our sporting future depends on healthy landscapes and abundant game species and other wildlife. We need to convey our field-tested knowledge to our neighbors and friends, and most importantly to land managers and decision makers. By doing so we ensure the values and our traditions are part of the conversations that shape the future of these lands.



Acknowledgements:

This report was authored by Aaron Kindle, director of sporting advocacy at the National Wildlife Federation, and Mary Jo Brooks, communications manager for public lands at the National Wildlife Federation. Special thanks to Mary Greene, Tracy Stone-Manning and David Willms for contributing to this report. For more information email kindlea@nwf.org or brooksm@nwf.org



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