



INSPIRING AMERICANS TO PROTECT WILDLIFE FOR OUR CHILDREN'S FUTURE.

# Fact Sheet



## Otter Creek

### Protecting the last best place for wildlife in the *Powder River Basin*



There is a special place in Montana where few people have been but where life is abundant. Where bald eagles soar over migrating elk, mule deer and pronghorn antelope. Where mountain lions and black bears roam over tens of thousands of acres, through ponderosa pine forests and sagebrush prairies that stretch as far as the eye can see.

This place is the Otter Creek valley. Located in the heart of Powder River Basin, a region in northeastern Wyoming and southeastern Montana, the valley supports a diverse and abundant wildlife population. But with over 40% of US coal production occurring in the region<sup>1</sup>, wildlife habitat is under increasing stress from development.<sup>2</sup>

The abundant and diverse wildlife in this region have taken refuge in a landscape that is becoming increasingly industrialized. The valley is now threatened by a proposal to develop one of the largest coal mines in the nation, which would forever change one of the last best places for wildlife.

### THE OTTER CREEK REGION - HO'HO'NAH'SHI'E (SHALEY ROCK EARTH COUNTRY)



Otter Creek Region, Montana  
Photo credit: Ecoflight - [www.ecoflight.org](http://www.ecoflight.org)

The Otter Creek area encompasses a variety of intact ecosystems that contain bountiful resources and picturesque scenery. The region is characterized by prairie mountains covered in ponderosa pine and grass covered rolling hills separated by broad river and creek valleys. The terrain and vegetation offer premium rangeland for wildlife and livestock. Adjacent to the valley is the half-million acre Custer National Forest. The region's diverse ecosystems provide habitat for a wide variety of wildlife. Big game species common to the area include elk, mule deer, white tailed deer and pronghorn antelope. Other inhabitants include coyotes, raccoons, badgers, skunks, porcupines and many other small mammals. Black bear and mountain lion also range through the valley. Wildlife surveys indicate that more than 250 species of birds occur in the area.<sup>3</sup>

The namesake of the valley, Otter Creek, originates near the Montana-Wyoming border and meanders slowly through the valley in a general north-south direction before reaching the confluence with the Tongue River. Otter Creek is home to over 20 fish species. The Tongue River is an amazing prairie river - home to many native fish species - which joins with the mighty Yellowstone River near Miles City, MT.<sup>4</sup>

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## SOUTHEASTERN MONTANA - COAL COLONY FOR ASIA?

This amazing refuge for wildlife is now targeted for the development of one of the largest coal mines in the nation. In 2010, against unprecedented public opposition from thousands of Montanans, the Montana State Land Board leased its half of the minerals in the Otter Creek Valley to Arch Coal, Inc., the second largest U.S. coal mining company. In total, Arch paid \$160 million to lease 18,000 Otter Creek acres containing 1.4 billion tons of coal from the State of Montana and Great Northern Properties.<sup>5</sup> The State of Montana received \$86 million or around 15 cents per ton, the minimum rate set by the State Land Board. Arch Coal bought a public resource at rock bottom prices at the expense of taxpayers and future generations.

All efforts by coal companies like Arch Coal to develop new mines in the Powder River Basin will serve an export market to Asia.<sup>6</sup> Coal demand in the United States is declining at a rapid pace due to less expensive natural gas, wind and solar energy and increased energy efficiency.<sup>7</sup> The truth is that coal cannot compete so coal companies are scrambling to find a market for their dirty coal. Montana is in the crosshairs.

### WHAT HAPPENS IF OTTER CREEK GETS DEVELOPED?

If the Otter Creek mine is developed, the wildlife and ecological resources of this extraordinary place in the Powder River Basin will be seriously harmed. Wildlife will be displaced and populations will decrease. The precious aquifers will be destroyed and can never be reclaimed.

Environmental impacts of coal mining include: erosion and runoff; fugitive dust; acid mine drainage; noise and light pollution; introduction and spread of noxious and invasive weeds; modification, fragmentation and reduction of habitat; direct mortality of plants and animals; air pollution; and exposure to contaminants. The coal mine site is just the center of the web. There will be construction of access roads and support facilities in this largely undisturbed landscape. The noise and activity will disturb normal wildlife behavior such as feeding, migration and reproduction.<sup>8</sup>

Steve Running, a University of Montana professor of forest ecology and member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change calculates that the burning of Otter Creek coal would result in about 2.5 billion tons of carbon dioxide emissions over the life of the mine. That's 50 times Montana's annual emissions. With an estimated mine life of 40 years, Running believes if this mine gets built, it is game over for the climate.<sup>9</sup>



Black Thunder Coal Mine, Wyoming  
Photo credit: Ecoflight - [www.ecoflight.org](http://www.ecoflight.org)

**FIGHTING FOR THE LAST BEST PLACE IN THE POWDER RIVER BASIN**

NWF and our allies gather on the steps of the Montana State Capitol in Helena, MT to protest the leasing of the Otter Creek coal tracts by the Montana State Land Board Photo credit - [www.meic.org](http://www.meic.org)

The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) has fought to protect Otter Creek for years. With our allies – tribes, ranchers, conservation groups and hunters – we fought to stop the Montana State Land Board from leasing the coal tracts at Otter Creek. Although the Land Board leased the coal, we generated unprecedented opposition to the lease.

When the State Land Board granted the permit, we filed a lawsuit claiming that the Board gave control of the state's coal to Arch Coal before taking into account the effects on Otter Creek and Tongue River valleys, such as water quality, air quality, aquifer destruction, wildlife, cultural resources, and farms and ranches.

The threat that this mine poses to our communities, wildlife, and climate can be avoided. Currently, the National Wildlife Federation, along with local and national partners, is fighting to protect Otter Creek from destruction and to protect the last best place for wildlife in the Powder River Basin.

**Working in partnership with tribal leaders, sportsmen, and landowners, NWF is committed to protecting this valley for future generations of people and wildlife.**

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> United States Energy Information Administration - Annual Coal Report, Released November 8, 2012 - <http://www.eia.gov/coal/annual/>, accessed 11/27/12.

<sup>2</sup> Sportsmen for Responsible Energy Development, Hunting and Fishing Imperiled - The Powder River Basin - <http://sfred.org/media-center/featured-reports/hunting-and-fishing-imperiled/montana/the-powder-river-basin/>

<sup>3</sup> Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management. Otter Creek Profile (1982)

<sup>4</sup> Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks - Tongue River - <http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/habitat/fish/futureFisheries/tongueRiver.html>

<sup>5</sup> Billings Gazette, "Land Board Approves Otter Creek Lease," March 18, 2010, [http://billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/montana/land-board-approves-otter-creek-coal-lease/article\\_fddc750c-32b3-11df-83df-001cc4c03286.html](http://billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/montana/land-board-approves-otter-creek-coal-lease/article_fddc750c-32b3-11df-83df-001cc4c03286.html)

<sup>6</sup> Billings Gazette, "Coal export plans compete with ranches," September 21, 2012, [http://missoulian.com/news/state-and-regional/coal-exports-compete-with-ranches-in-eastern-montana/article\\_0e4fbb80-0442-11e2-80b5-0019bb2963f4.html](http://missoulian.com/news/state-and-regional/coal-exports-compete-with-ranches-in-eastern-montana/article_0e4fbb80-0442-11e2-80b5-0019bb2963f4.html)

<sup>7</sup> Washington Post, "The demise of coal-fired power plants," by Steven Mufson, November 23, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/the-demise-of-coal-fired-power-plants/2012/11/21/e7ca1e6e-fdda-11e1-b153-218509a954e1\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/the-demise-of-coal-fired-power-plants/2012/11/21/e7ca1e6e-fdda-11e1-b153-218509a954e1_story.html)

<sup>8</sup> From Cradle to Grave: The Environmental Impacts from Coal Mining, Clean Air Task Force, (June 2001) <http://www.catf.us/resources/publications/>

<sup>9</sup> Missoulian, "Running tells Land Board members burning Otter Creek coal will add to warming" (December 8, 2009) [http://missoulian.com/news/local/article\\_b090d5d8-e478-11de-a101-001cc4c002e0.html](http://missoulian.com/news/local/article_b090d5d8-e478-11de-a101-001cc4c002e0.html)