



THE
WILDERNESS
— S O C I E T Y —

Too Wild to Drill

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America is home to millions and millions of acres of publicly owned land – shared by all Americans. These lands provide key habitat for diverse species of wildlife, fish and birds. They are where the streams and rivers that quench our thirst and water our crops originate. They are places that provide the energy resources that fuel society. They are the places we visit to hike, camp and escape the hustle and bustle of the modern electronic world.

There are many values to the roughly 640 million acres of federally-owned lands in the United States. This report is about the wildest lands that are most at risk. These lands are in danger of being valued only for the extractive resources under them while ignoring the overwhelming values of what’s above. These are the lands that are *Too Wild to Drill*.

Tipping the scales

For generations, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has encouraged and incentivized energy development on federal lands. This approach has led to an enormous imbalance in how the BLM governs the lands in its jurisdiction – more than 90% of the lands within its management plans are available to oil and gas leasing. This approach fails to balance the many uses of public land and other values that Americans desire. The BLM’s approach has led to some of the wildest places in America being threatened by oil and gas drilling.

Change is coming to the agency. Thanks to reforms started under then Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and now continued by Secretary Sally Jewell and BLM Director Neil Kornze, the agency is taking meaningful steps to modernize how western lands are managed.

Protecting a legacy of wilderness

America’s wildlands are world-renowned. The creation of the National Park System, about to celebrate its 100th anniversary, is a visionary

example of protecting and preserving American historic and wild places for future generations. From Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee to the giant redwoods in California, our national parks will continue to weave the stories of those who came before us with those who will explore these same lands in years to come.

In addition to our national parks and monuments, there are millions of acres of American wildlands managed by the BLM and the US Forest Service that still need to be protected for the future. Sagebrush steppes in the intermountain west provide habitat for sage-grouse, mule deer, elk, pronghorn antelope and hundreds of bird species. The Arctic tundra has an equally impressive diversity of wildlife, with everything from Arctic terns to polar bears spending some part of their lifecycle on the coastal plains.

These wildlands are also part of a booming recreation economy. Millions of people flock to wildlands to hike, camp, hunt, fish, bird-watch or participate in many other activities. They stay in nearby towns, eat at local restaurants and buy gear, licenses, supplies and gifts in local stores. Outdoor recreation adds more than \$646 billion to the U.S. economy every year. This economic driver employs millions of people as well – usually in the places closest to the protected wildlands that people are visiting.

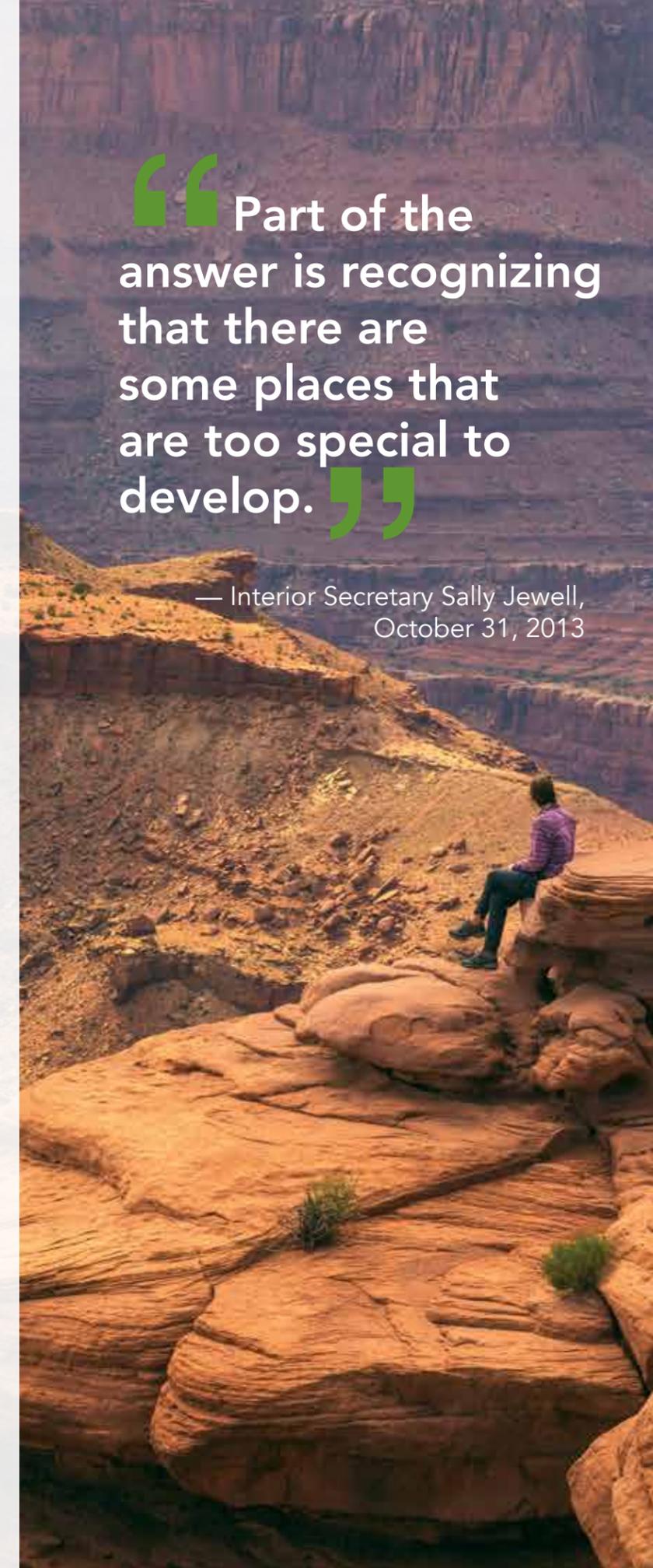
Protecting the landscapes featured in this report will build on the bedrock of conservation and preservation that has shaped American culture since the early 1900s. Modern management approaches and smarter guidelines could help land managers embrace a commitment to conservation. This commitment is needed to restore balance and update the lopsided and antiquated management of our lands.

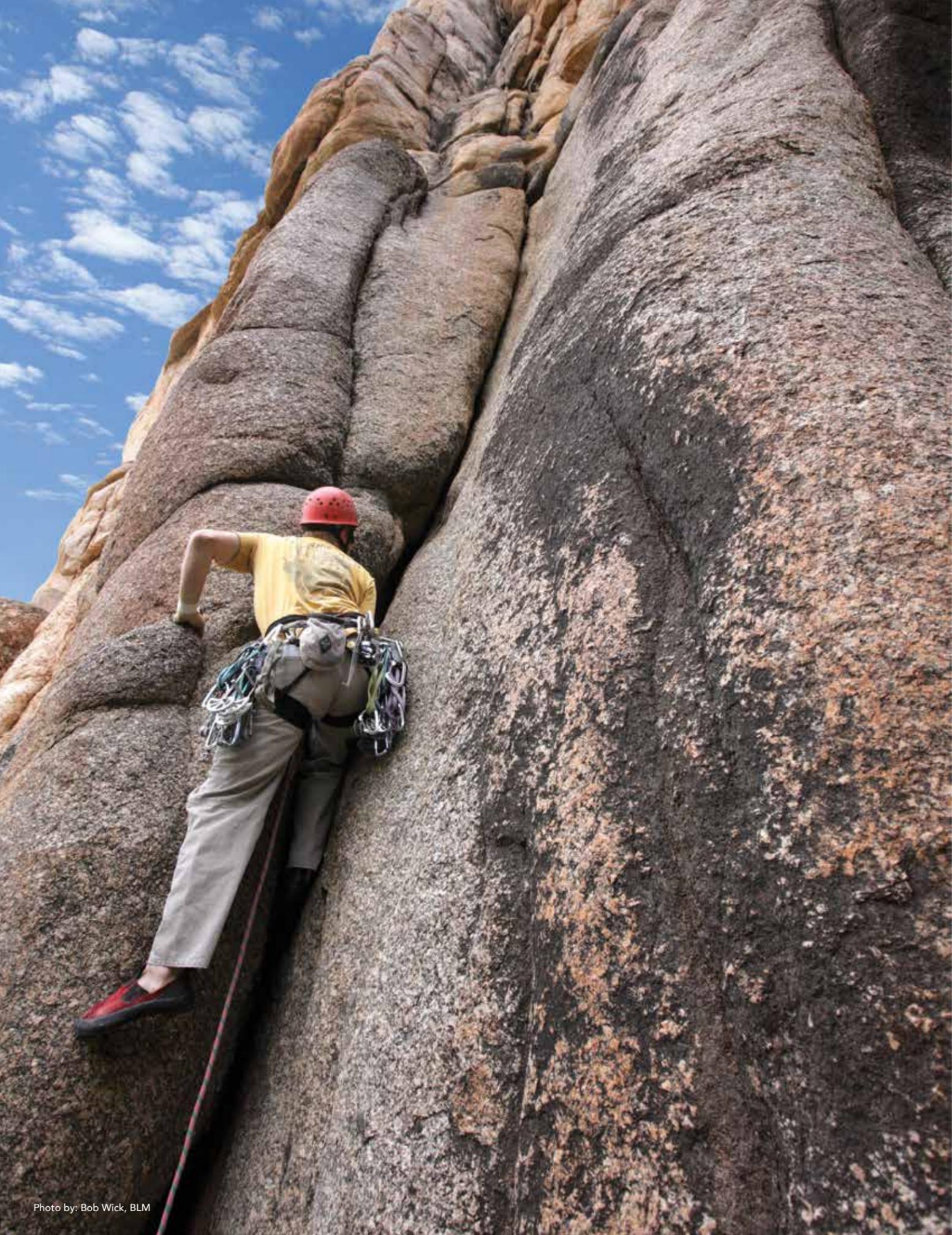
The best way to protect and conserve these places is for citizens to demand it – and public engagement can make a huge difference. Many places listed in previous *Too Wild to Drill* reports have been protected because citizens advocated for strong conservation.

Some places in America are simply *Too Wild to Drill* and there is a role for everyone to play in protecting these treasures.

“Part of the answer is recognizing that there are some places that are too special to develop.”

— Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, October 31, 2013





Successes

Since 1935, The Wilderness Society has worked to protect America's wildest landscapes for future generations. Here are some places that have been featured in previous editions of the *Too Wild to Drill* report that have been fully protected, thanks to the work of The Wilderness Society, our partners and people like you. The key to success is often local people speaking out about why it is important to protect local areas. Working together, we've protected millions of acres that were once threatened by oil and gas development including the Wyoming Range, the North Fork of the Flathead River drainage in Montana, and these examples:

Roan Plateau

Threatened by oil and gas drilling for years, Colorado's Roan Plateau has a better opportunity for protection thanks to an October 2014 legal settlement for the area. This is great news for the herds of elk and mule deer that call the plateau home, as well as the streams full of cutthroat trout.

In 2008 the area was opened to oil and gas leasing over the objections of The Wilderness Society and others. A 2012 court decision forced the Bureau of Land Management to reconsider the way it was managing the Roan but by then many leases had already been sold. It wasn't until 2014 that a settlement could be reached that would cancel some of the leases and give us a chance to come up with a better plan.

The Wilderness Society will continue working to make sure that the Roan Plateau stays off-limits to drilling in the future.

Rocky Mountain Front

Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, the border between the towering peaks of the Rocky Mountains and the idyllic northern prairie, was protected in late 2006 when Congress voted to set aside 500,000 acres of the Front from oil and gas leasing.

In addition, the area was part of a package of wilderness and other land protection bills passed by Congress in 2014. The newly protected 67,000 acres of wilderness and 208,000 acres of a Conservation Management Area stretches from the edge of the Bob Marshall and Scapegoat Wilderness areas to the rolling prairielands to the east.

The region is a mix of prairie, forest and tundra and stands among the country's most biologically diverse, hosting huge herds of bighorn sheep, migratory elk and mule deer. A coalition of ranchers, local community leaders and sportsmen teamed up with The Wilderness Society and other conservation groups to bring permanent protection to this popular area.

George Washington National Forest

Containing more than 2,000 miles of hiking trails and eight designated wilderness areas, Virginia's George Washington National Forest is definitely *Too Wild to Drill*. Fortunately, plans released by the Forest Service in late 2014 will prohibit new natural gas leases in the forest and keep drilling out of essential parts of this wild landscape.

Keeping gas drilling out of the wildest parts of the George Washington National Forest will protect the drinking water for the more than 8 million people that live between Washington, D.C. and Richmond, Virginia.



Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska

Photo by: Lincoln Else

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge stretches nearly 200 miles south from the Arctic Ocean, spanning a uniquely diverse range of wilderness landscapes and habitat. Of the 19 million acres included within the refuge, more than 7 million acres are congressionally designated wilderness, the highest degree of protection.

In January 2015, the Obama Administration announced that it was recommending the Coastal Plain and other portions of the Arctic refuge for wilderness designation – and that it would manage these areas to uphold their wild character. This recommendation is particularly important because the Arctic is experiencing impacts from climate change at twice the rate of the rest of the globe.

What's at Risk?

This vast refuge encompasses five distinct ecological regions – from coastal lagoons to windswept alpine tundra all the way to the tall spruce, birch and aspen trees of the northern boreal forest south of the Brooks Range. This varied habitat allows 42 fish species, 37 land mammals, eight marine mammals and more than 200 migratory and resident bird species to thrive – including the most diverse and stunning populations of wildlife in the Arctic.

North of the jagged peaks of the Brooks Range lies the refuge's Coastal Plain that encompasses 1.4 million acres of gently sloping tundra nestled between mountains and sea. The Coastal Plain is the biological heart of the refuge.

The cooling breezes and summer plants of the Coastal Plain provide irreplaceable habitat for the more than 120,000-animal porcupine caribou herd.

“To Gwich'in communities, this is not merely an environmental or conservation issue. Protecting the Coastal Plain of the refuge is about upholding our rights to continue our Native ways of life. ...Do we not have a moral obligation to future generations to do all we can to work toward leaving behind a more vibrant, thriving planet that will sustain human life?”

— Princess Daazhrai Johnson, Former Executive Director of the Gwich'in Steering Committee

The caribou journey hundreds of miles to give birth to their young on the ancient calving grounds of the Coastal Plain. There, calves gain nourishment from tundra plants, refuge from predators, and relief from hordes of midsummer mosquitoes. Typically, one-half to three-quarters or more of the Porcupine Caribou Herd's calves are born within this relatively small area each summer, making it an essential place for the herd's viability.

Included in the refuge boundary is a Marine Protected Area that encompasses coastal islands and lagoons where seals and whales, such as beluga, gray and bowhead, may be seen swimming by on their way to feeding areas. Sea ducks and other waterfowl are found in these lagoons with many migratory birds using both land and marine waters of the refuge. When days shorten and darkness begins to set in, whales and many birds migrate to other parts of the world while the Arctic's year-round residents, such as musk oxen, owls, mink and wolves remain behind. As winter envelopes the Coastal Plain, polar bears, which are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, dig into their dens, birth their cubs and nurse them until spring. The refuge's Coastal Plain includes the most important land denning habitat for polar bears along America's Arctic coast.

Threats to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Keeping such an amazing place pristine and protected seems like an obvious choice; yet, to some members of congress, the Arctic refuge is nothing more than a ripe oilfield waiting to be drilled.

In 2015 alone, more than a half-dozen bills to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to drilling have been introduced – some as standalone measures, and some that are tucked into much larger bills.

With comprehensive energy bills near the top of the congressional to-do list, there is a very real possibility that a provision to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge could sneak through.

Protecting the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

The only way to protect the Arctic refuge is to ensure that efforts to open it to drilling – even exploratory or so-called “safe” drilling – are stopped in their tracks.

The Obama Administration has done virtually everything it can to protect the refuge. The last line of defense may be the stroke of a veto pen.



Photo by: Hillebrand, flickr

On Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, in the heart of the Crown of the Continent, there is a sacred place called the Badger-Two Medicine. The name comes from Badger Creek and the Two Medicine River whose headwaters originate along the Continental Divide. The land of the Badger-Two Medicine and its pure unpolluted waters are at the forefront of a drilling controversy.

What's at Risk?

The 130,000-acre Badger-Two Medicine, managed by the Lewis and Clark National Forest, is part of a larger Traditional Cultural District that under the National Historic Preservation Act requires the Department of the Interior to consult with tribes regarding potential development. Bounded on the northwest by Glacier National Park, on the east by the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, and on the south by the Bob Marshall and Great Bear Wilderness, the Badger-Two Medicine is central to the Blackfeet Tribe's creation stories and their cultural identity. The Blackfeet call the Rocky Mountains running

through British Columbia, Alberta and Montana – the Backbone of the World – and the Badger is known as a place of prayer, fasting and vision questing. A holy place.

The Badger-Two Medicine is also home to grizzly bears and elk, and offers the best remaining habitat for the genetically-pure populations of westslope cutthroat trout along the Rocky Mountain Front. The grasslands, forests and rugged terrain provide secure habitat for wildlife, allowing long-term connectivity and secure migration routes for animals like wolverines. It's also a magnet for hikers, hunters and anglers who visit the Badger-Two Medicine to explore the confluence of peaks and plains, a hallmark of the Rocky Mountain Front.

Much of the Badger-Two Medicine area is roadless, and in 2009, in recognition of the high ecological values and cultural significance, the Forest Service closed nearly all of the area to motorized travel. This roadless forest is the source of the Two Medicine River, which then flows into the Tiber Reservoir, a major source of irrigation water for the state of Montana. Drilling in the area would harm this critical watershed, which is already feeling the stresses of climate change and dwindling snowpack.

Threats to Badger-Two Medicine

The threats facing the Badger-Two Medicine come from decades-old oil and gas leases. In 1981, the Department of the Interior under the Reagan administration began issuing leases in the Badger-Two Medicine without full environmental review and consulting the Blackfeet people, violating laws requiring that they do so. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s battles over the leases were fought in and out of courts, administrative offices and even in the halls of congress.

A 1997 moratorium on oil and gas leasing along the Rocky Mountain Front was followed by a 2006 law permanently withdrawing the Front's public lands (including the Badger-Two Medicine) from all new oil and gas leasing. By 2010, all but 18 of the old leases had been voluntarily relinquished by the leaseholders, but nearly 41,000 acres – all in the Badger-Two Medicine – still remain as a constant reminder of the area's vulnerability to drilling.

Now the threat to the Badger-Two Medicine has been awakened – the Solenex energy company,



Photo by: tonybynum.com

based in Louisiana, has filed a lawsuit claiming that the suspension of its original leases from 1981 must be lifted and the company allowed to drill. Solenex's Hall Creek lease lies in the heart of the Badger-Two Medicine and literally on the doorstep of Glacier National Park. All that separates the national park from the area that Solenex wants to develop is a two-lane highway. With climate change from fossil fuel use already melting away many of the national park's glaciers, allowing oil drilling to take place right next door is just adding insult to injury.

Protecting Badger-Two Medicine

Because the leases were improperly issued and violate key environmental laws such as the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered Species Act, the Department of the Interior has the legal authority and moral obligation to cancel the remaining federal oil and gas leases in the Badger-Two Medicine.

The people of the Blackfeet Nation are leading the charge in this effort and have the support of 19 tribes, including the Crow, Shoshone and Sioux, as well as the National Congress of American Indians. Jon Tester, Montana's senior senator, also supports the call to rid the Badger-Two Medicine of the leases. The Wilderness Society and other conservation groups, along with hunters, anglers and local community leaders, support the Blackfeet's request that Department of the Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack (who oversees the U.S. Forest Service) and the Obama Administration cancel the leases. Now is the time to protect the Badger-Two Medicine.

Badger-Two Medicine, Montana

“The Badger-Two Medicine for thousands of years has helped shape the identity of the Blackfeet people. This area has been utilized as a sanctuary for not only the wildlife, but also for our people to come together and realize their spirituality and to be in touch with their creator...These ancient lands are among the most revered landscapes in North America and it should not be sacrificed, for any price.”

– letter from Earl Old Person, Chief of the Blackfeet Nation of Montana to President Barack Obama, March 19, 2015

Desolation Canyon, Utah

Few areas outside of Utah's most well-known national parks look as perfectly Utah as Desolation Canyon. Rapids roar past red rock sandstone carved across millennia by the Green River through the rafters' paradise of Desolation Canyon. Cottonwood trees and wildlife populate the sandy beaches throughout the canyon. But the threat of drill rigs and well pads still threaten to mar this picture perfect part of Utah.

Will over 200 oil and gas wells ruin the quiet, rugged wilderness of Desolation Canyon? Or will it remain *Too Wild to Drill*?

What's at Risk?

Desolation Canyon is one of the premier rafting destinations in Utah – so vast and secluded that the Utah tourism website proudly exclaims: "Desolation and Gray Canyons are too extensive to be rafted in a single day."

Historical remnants abound throughout the Desolation Canyon area. American Indian petroglyphs and artifacts can still be found in the surrounding wildlands, and notorious outlaws Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid frequented the area to trade for horses during their criminal days.

Recreation is a key industry in Utah – bringing in more than \$12 billion in economic activity to the state and providing for more than 122,000 jobs. More than a dozen rafting guide services take people through Desolation Canyon, and hundreds more people take unguided trips through the canyon. All of these visits generate economic activity in the towns bordering Desolation Canyon – visits to restaurants, gear stores and the other businesses that cater to river runners before and after their trips.

But it's the lands of the Desolation Canyon region that are most at risk from oil and gas drilling. The area around Desolation Canyon has some of the most prized wilderness-quality lands in the lower 48 states that are still open to oil and gas drilling. There are an estimated 700,000 acres of wilderness-quality

lands in the area – lands so wild that they qualify for protection under the 1964 Wilderness Act.

Areas outside of the Desolation Canyon complex have already been heavily developed – making the need to protect this wild slice of Utah even more important.

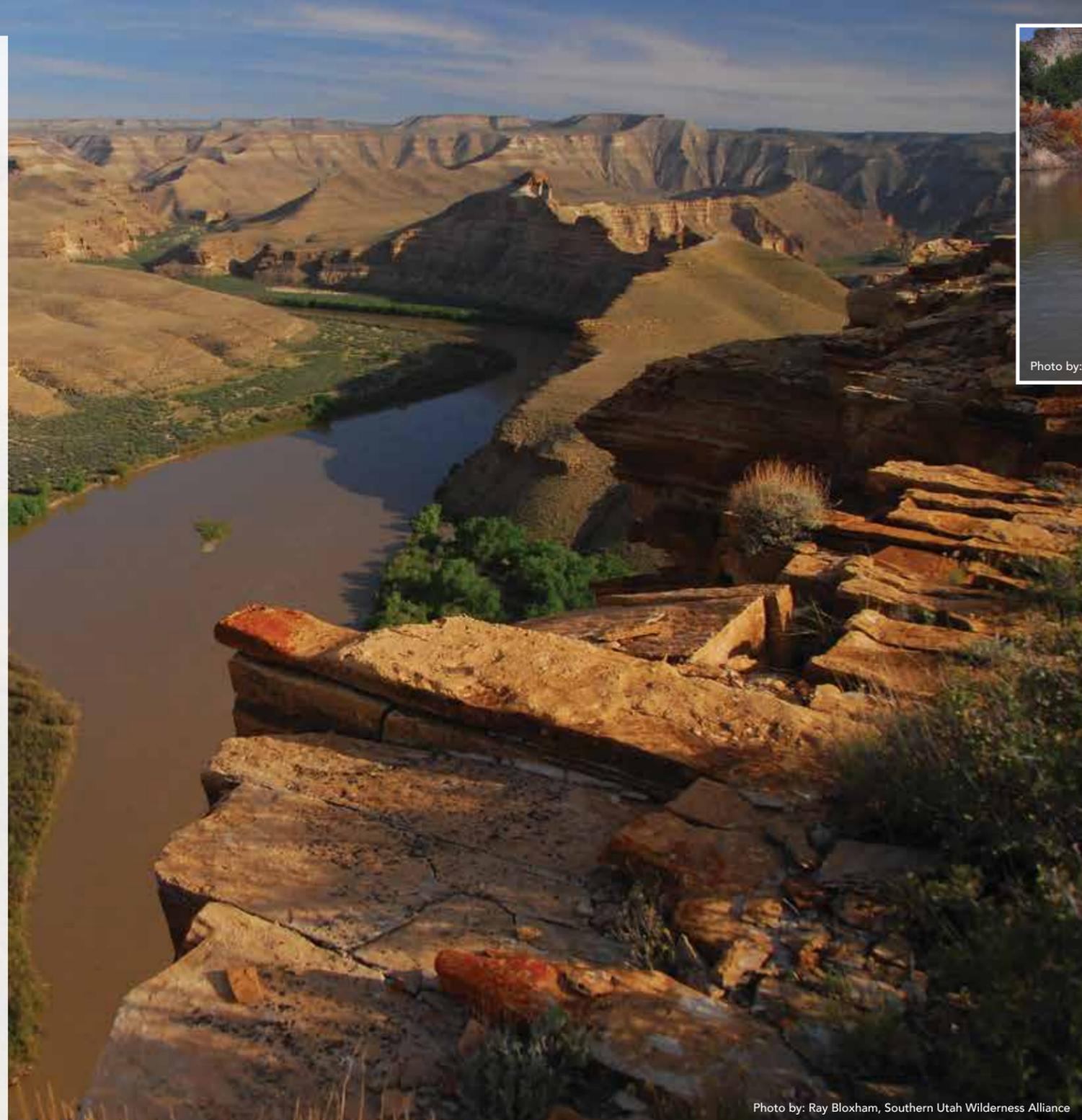


Photo by: Ray Bloxham, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance



Photo by: Ray Bloxham, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance

Threats to Desolation Canyon

In 2012, the BLM approved an oil and gas company's plans to develop the lands in and around the Desolation Canyon region. This plan allowed for more than 1,300 oil and gas wells – with more than 200 around the wildest parts of the Desolation Canyon area.

Sprawling development surrounding Desolation Canyon would fragment the wilderness-quality lands in the area – leaving islands of remote wilderness between pipelines, wellheads and access roads across previously untouched areas.

Pollution would also threaten Desolation Canyon. Smog and other air pollution already run rampant throughout eastern Utah, especially in the winter. Additional development would only make these problems worse, threaten the health of local communities and degrade the wild experiences of the rafters and other visitors to Desolation Canyon.

Protecting Desolation Canyon

There are several options for protecting the wilderness, cultural resources and amazing recreational experiences of Desolation Canyon.

The most straightforward would be for the BLM to prevent drilling on the 200 wells around the wildest parts of Desolation Canyon. This is clearly within the BLM's authority and would show that the agency truly does have a commitment to conservation even if it didn't achieve it in its 2012 decision.

The court system could also help. The Wilderness Society is part of a legal challenge to the BLM's drilling plan in court, and a favorable ruling could mean that Desolation Canyon will be protected from oil and gas drilling, but only legislation can protect this place forever.

Thompson Divide, Colorado



Photo by: Peter Hart

One of Colorado's crown jewels, the Thompson Divide in the White River National Forest is a sublimely wild slice of the American west. Encompassing nearly 220,000 acres of mountain peaks, clear trout streams, abundant wildlife and endless Aspen groves, the Thompson Divide is definitely *Too Wild to Drill*.

Unfortunately, 25 leases were illegally granted more than a decade ago, and oil and gas drilling now threatens Thompson Divide.

Despite broad community support from the area's residents, ranchers, hunters and anglers for protecting this area, these leases – and the fate of the Thompson Divide – remain in limbo.

What's at Risk?

Hikers, campers, hunters and anglers flock to the Thompson Divide from across the country for wildlife and a remote back-country experience. Even President Theodore Roosevelt trod the trails through the Thompson Divide back in 1905, calling it "a great, wild country ... where the mountains crowded together in chain, peak, and tableland; all of the higher ones wrapped in an unrent shroud of snow."

The Thompson Divide is critical to the local economy, providing nearly 300 jobs in the hunting,

fishing, grazing and outdoor recreation industries and contributing \$30 million to the region's economy every year. Whether hiking or biking, climbing, hitting the Nordic ski area outside of Carbondale or snowmobiling the Sunlight to Powderhorn trail, there is something for practically every type of outdoor enthusiast in the Thompson Divide.

Wildlife is abundant in the region. Elk, black bear, bighorn sheep and even rare Canada lynx can be found in the Thompson Divide's valleys and sub-alpine meadows. Rare birds also make their way through the area, including the rarely seen black swift and speedy peregrine falcon.

All of that wildlife is a huge draw for hunters from across the nation. The Thompson Divide is part of one of the most sought-after hunting permits in the state of Colorado, with just three hunting areas accounting for 20,000 hunting licenses. Anglers flock to Thompson Divide to fish for native cutthroat trout in the cold mountain streams that feed the gold-medal Roaring Fork River.

Cattle ranching is also important in the area and could be negatively impacted by leasing. Nearly three dozen grazing allotments provide crucial summer forage for local cattle herds. Those grazing areas don't just benefit cows though. Throughout the cold months, elk and mule deer come down from the mountains to winter retreat in the area.

Threats to the Thompson Divide

In 2003, the Bush administration sold a set of 25 oil and gas leases in the Thompson Divide. These leases were sold for the statutory minimum – \$2 an acre – and the BLM has acknowledged that they were issued without the legally required environmental review or protection for roadless areas.

If the leases are allowed to be developed, substantial and irreversible changes will impact the Thompson Divide. Pipelines and access roads would dissect the land, disrupting the wildlife and cattle. Nearby landowners and towns would have little recourse to stop or mitigate the new industrial activities and associated noise and pollution that would move in next door.

Protecting the Thompson Divide

There are multiple efforts underway to protect the Thompson Divide. At the federal level, the U.S. Forest Service, which manages most of the area, released a management plan that prevents *future* leasing in large portions of the Thompson Divide for the next 20 years – but it doesn't protect the entire area nor stop development on *existing* oil and gas leases.

The BLM, which oversees the 25 illegally issued leases, is reviewing those leases, and could ultimately void them, modify their terms or leave

them in place. The local community has spoken out strongly in favor of voiding the leases.

Currently, the BLM's efforts, as well as several community-led initiatives to find solutions for the Thompson Divide, are being considered. The BLM could decide to cancel the illegally issued leases as part of its current reevaluation. Other plans would involve action from congress. Legislation to permanently withdraw lands in the Thompson Divide from future leasing and allow the existing leases to be retired or bought out was introduced in the last congress and members of Colorado's delegation are working on reintroducing the bill this year.

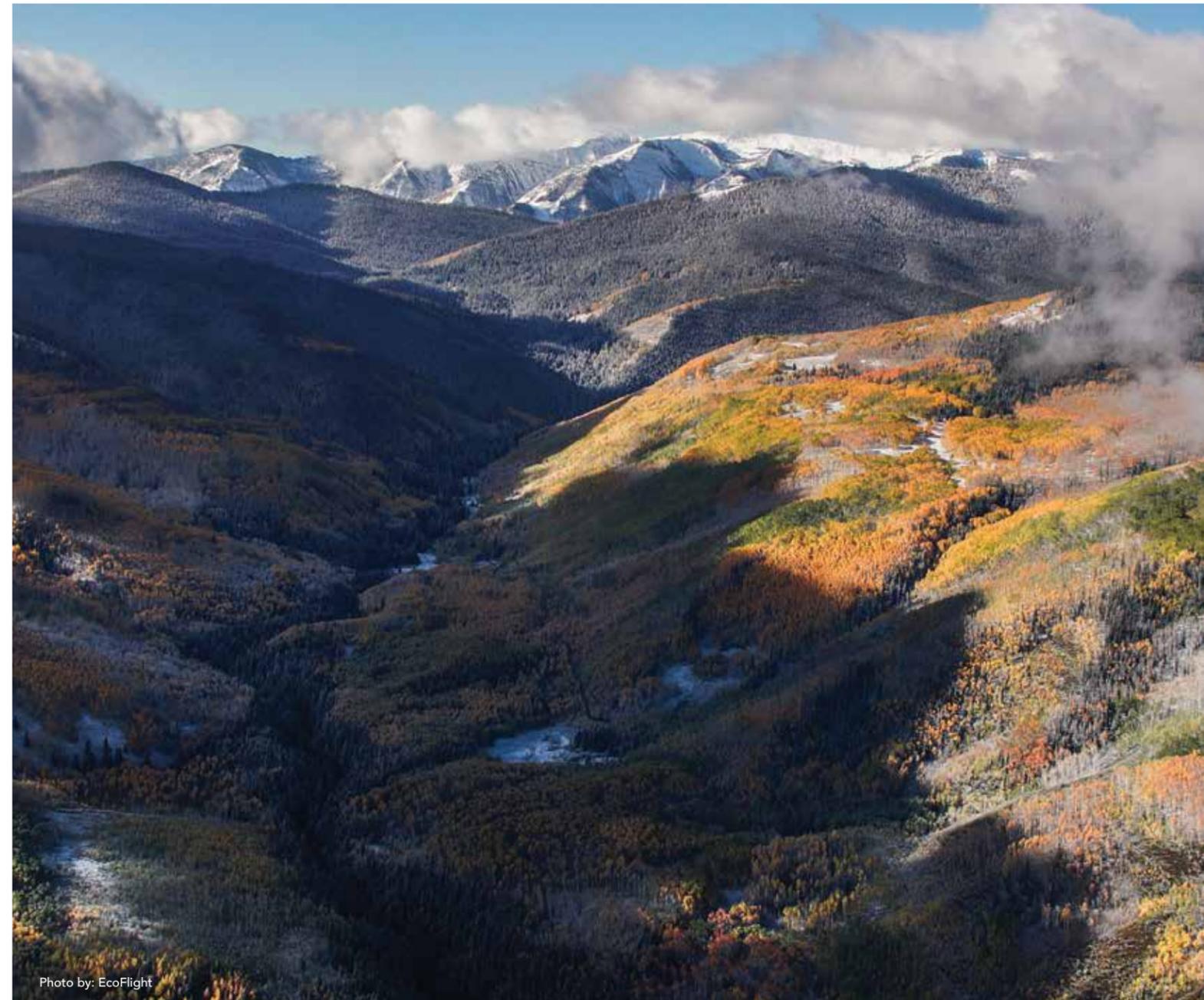


Photo by: EcoFlight

Bears Ears, Utah

Significant cultural resources, forested plateaus, narrow slot canyons and grand vistas are just a few of the hallmarks of the Bears Ears region of southeast Utah. Named for the two buttes that rise up from the Elk Ridge plateau, Bears Ears is a region rich with Native American cultural sites, wildlife habitat and amazing recreation opportunities.

However, the threat of oil and gas drilling, potash, tar sands and uranium mining loom over this region – one of the most significant, unprotected cultural landscapes in the nation.

What's at Risk

Cultural resources and outdoor recreation are two of the biggest draws of the area. Home to more than 100,000 cultural and historic sites, many of them still undisturbed, Bears Ears contains irreplaceable Ice Age hunting camps and cliff dwellings, prehistoric villages and rock art panels of ancestral Puebloan peoples.

For Native American tribes, the region is vital to the cultural and ceremonial lives of their people as a place for hunting and collecting traditional foods and medicines. This place remains vibrant and alive as a center of subsistence, spirituality, healing and contemplation for tribes of the Colorado Plateau.

For the outdoor enthusiast, the opportunities are endless in the Bears Ears region. Rock climbers can test their skills on world-class pitches along Indian Creek and Harts Draw. Hikers experience unparalleled solitude throughout the region, exploring the towering red rock of Hammond, Woodenshoe and Fish and Owl Canyons. Rafting on the San Juan and Colorado Rivers in the region offers everything from mild to wild, with chances to view desert bighorn sheep along the way.

For shutterbugs, the region is packed with amazing views, both vast and intimate. The Valley of the Gods in the southeastern part of the area hosts a number of diverse photo opportunities of striking red rock monoliths. Grand Gulch and Fish and Owl canyons feature steep, sheer cliffs, loaded with archeological sites. The overlooks of the San Juan River feature mesmerizing world-class views.



Threats to Bears Ears

Despite the wealth of cultural resources and recreation opportunities, extractive industries are pushing to exploit Bears Ears region. Now, oil and gas development, uranium and tar sands mining, looting of cultural sites, careless visitation and irresponsible off-road vehicle use all threaten to destroy the area.

Oil and gas companies are pressing to explore the region, and leases have previously been sold in Lockhart Basin, on the doorstep of Canyonlands National Park. Drilling in these areas would seriously degrade these landscapes, while impairing neighboring Canyonlands National Park with increased heavy truck traffic, dust, noise and air pollution. Light pollution associated with

new development also threatens the region's night skies – which are currently some of the darkest in the lower 48 states.

Without permanent protections for the area, the region could fall victim to the dirty mining required to extract the even dirtier tar sands oil from the ground.

Protecting Bears Ears

Given the variety of cultural values and spectacular wilderness in the Bears Ears region, it is clear that the area needs permanent protection. A total of 24 tribes so far, including Navajo, Hopi, Ute, Hualapai, Zuni and other Pueblo tribes all support permanently protecting the 1.9 million acres of the Bears Ears region. Many tribes have also passed resolutions for permanent protection of the region and have urged

the Obama Administration to consider the region for monument designation.

The tribes have proposed that the region be permanently protected for its rich cultural and natural values, and many have cited their individual tribal interests and ties to the region. Preserving the cultural and historic sites and wilderness values of Bears Ears, as well as ensuring access for traditional activities like ceremonies and collection, are key goals in protecting the area. Tribes are unique and key stakeholders in the process of protection, and have asserted their strong interest in cooperating in the management of the lands of the region.

Efforts are being made to craft legislation to protect the region, but if a legislative solution can't be found, a national monument proclamation by the president will ensure that these valued treasures are protected forever.

Grand Junction, Colorado

Colorado's western slope near Grand Junction is an absolute treasure trove of canyon complexes. From the banks of the Dolores River to the hoodoo-filled South Shale Ridge, there is no shortage of diversity in the region's landscapes.

Unfortunately, the BLM is poised to finalize management decisions that will leave a looming threat of oil and gas drilling and unchecked off-road vehicle use through some of the wildest areas.

What's at Risk?

The Grand Junction area is an outdoor enthusiast's dream – if you can do it outside, you can do it around Grand Junction. Hiker? Check out Bangs Canyon, just miles from downtown Grand Junction, where the only crowds you'll find on the Unaweep trail through the canyon are the bighorn sheep that frequent the area. Biker? The mountain biking mecca of Fruita is home to miles of trails – some of the best in the nation. Angler? Get ready to chase native Colorado River cutthroat trout in Carr Creek, near Brush Mountain. Birder? Head to Granite Creek and keep your eyes peeled and binoculars ready to spot Mexican spotted owls, western burrowing owls, southwest willow flycatchers, whooping cranes and even peregrine falcons and bald eagles. Just like taking in the scenery? The area is rich with wide open vistas and wildlife.

Research and exploration by The Wilderness Society and other citizen-scientists have identified more than 400,000 acres of wilderness caliber lands through out the region. These include areas with unparalleled solitude in addition to stunning recreation opportunities. They are also key habitat for wildlife – elk, mule deer, black bears and many different migratory birds.

These are just a few examples of the incredible wealth of opportunities in the Grand Junction area. But while the opportunities to enjoy the outdoors are bountiful, so are the threats to these experiences.

Threats to Grand Junction

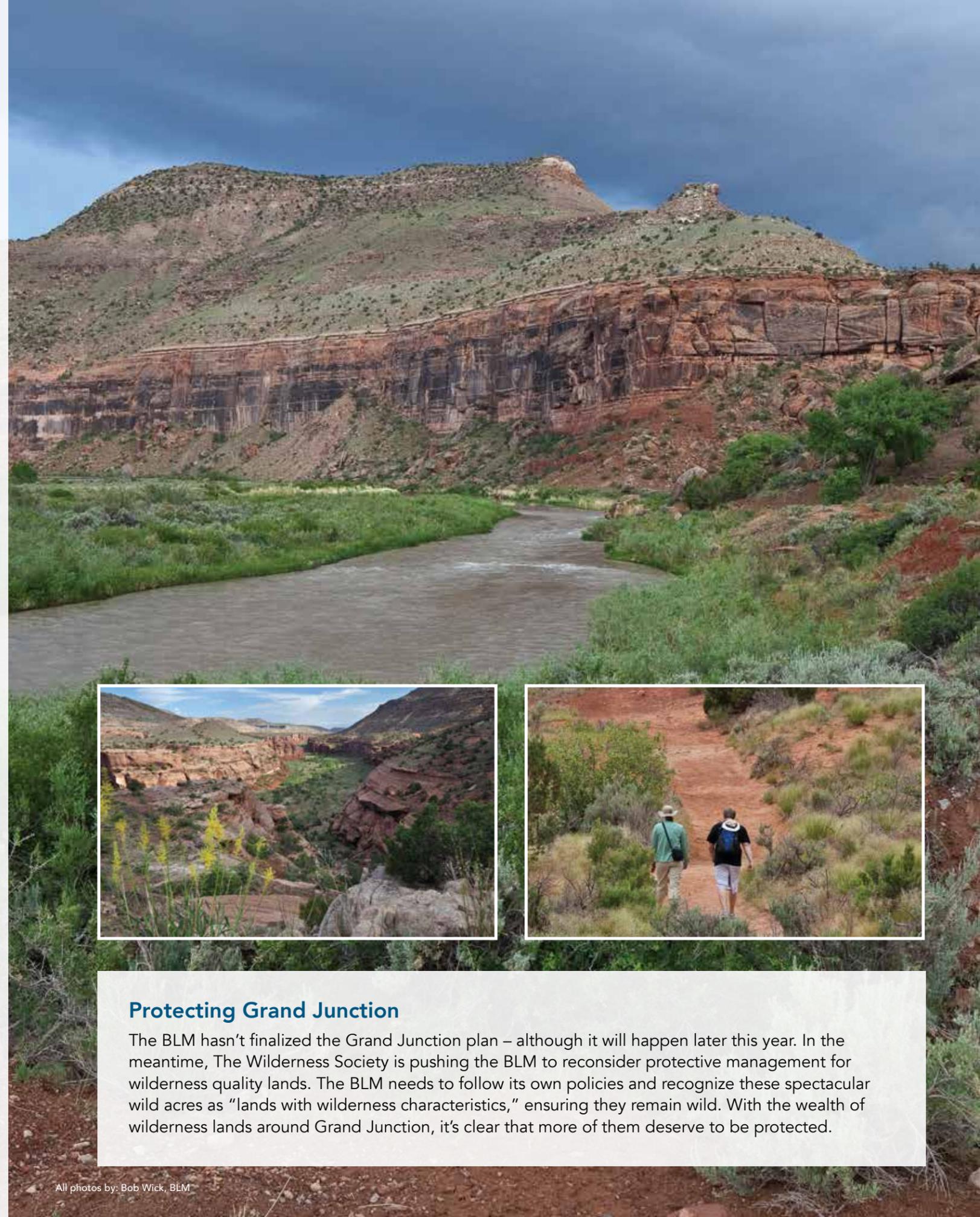
With so many opportunities to get away from it all around Grand Junction, it's hard to imagine that industrialization could threaten such a collection of wild landscapes. Unfortunately, oil and gas drilling and motorized vehicle use already threaten the peace and quiet of the region.

In April 2015 a proposed Resource Management Plan from the BLM for the Grand Junction region, including areas like Bangs Canyon, Book Cliffs, Kings Canyon, Carr Creek and many other wild places, was put forward. Disappointingly, this plan left many wilderness-quality lands open to potential oil and gas leasing and off-road vehicle use, which would seriously degrade trails and wildlife habitat. Equally disappointing, the BLM failed to acknowledge the hundreds of thousands of acres of wilderness-quality lands identified by citizens.

The BLM's plan would only protect 44,000 acres of the "lands with wilderness characteristics" (the agency's term for wilderness-quality lands), while making nearly a million acres available to oil and gas leasing.

Leaving so much land open to development and exploitation threatens many of the landscapes listed above. Kings Canyon, with its cliffs that rise 1,000 feet above the Little Dolores River like the parapets of an enormous castle, could see its wild qualities destroyed underneath ATV tires and heavy oil trucks.

The overall plan lacks a commitment to conservation that the BLM must make in order to protect wild places like those in the Grand Junction region. Oil and gas drilling in some of these places would destroy the peace and quiet, disturb birds and wildlife, and cause air pollution in some of Colorado's wildest landscapes.



Protecting Grand Junction

The BLM hasn't finalized the Grand Junction plan – although it will happen later this year. In the meantime, The Wilderness Society is pushing the BLM to reconsider protective management for wilderness quality lands. The BLM needs to follow its own policies and recognize these spectacular wild acres as "lands with wilderness characteristics," ensuring they remain wild. With the wealth of wilderness lands around Grand Junction, it's clear that more of them deserve to be protected.

A Commitment to Conservation

For generations, the Bureau of Land Management held a single-minded approach to managing the 245 million acres under its purview. Despite a legal obligation to manage its lands for multiple uses, like recreation, wildness, wildlife habitat and other values, the BLM management almost always defers to energy interests – specifically by making 90% of its lands available for polluting energy sources like drilling for oil and natural gas, as well as mining coal.

A commitment to conservation means ensuring a balanced approach to energy development and conservation on federal lands. Guiding energy development – both fossil fuels and renewable energy like wind and solar – to places with fewer conflicts and protecting areas that are better suited for other uses should be the goal.

Energy development often industrializes the landscape and converts it to a single use. When the BLM approves energy development it needs to demonstrate its commitment to conservation too, protecting natural and recreational values with administrative designations and updated policies that move our country forward on a smarter path. By taking a landscape-level approach that protects watersheds and wildlife habitat, the agency can better balance energy development and conservation of our public lands.

During the past few decades the public expectation of how public lands should be managed has changed and more people are looking to public lands for recreation or wildlife values. Recent surveys have also shown broad support for modernizing outdated policies and guidelines that fail to recognize the many values of our land. It is time for the BLM to catch up with the public's desires.

Smarter leasing plans have begun to be implemented in some BLM field office, decisions, and now it is time for the agency as a whole to embrace the concept.

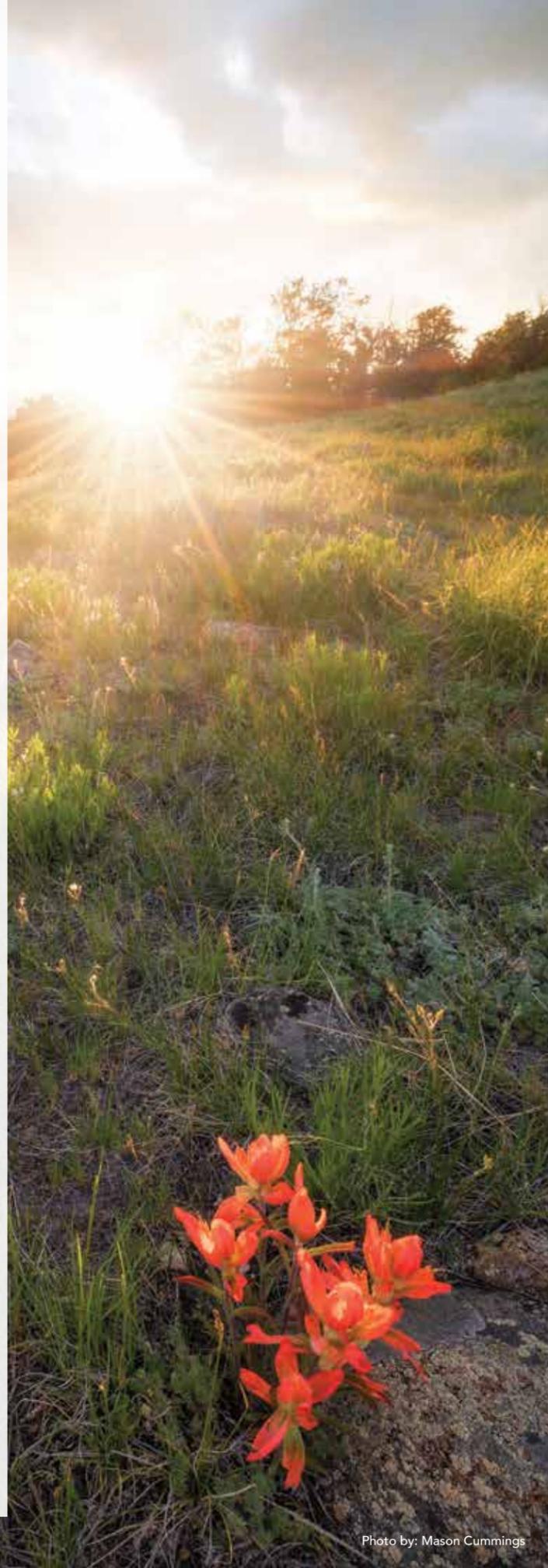


Photo by: Mason Cummings

How the BLM Can Commit to Conservation

South Park – Colorado: A great opportunity for the BLM to demonstrate a commitment to conservation is in Colorado's South Park area. This area, part of eastern Colorado's Royal Gorge Field Office, is less than two hours from downtown Denver, nestled in the mountains of the Front Range.

The BLM is in the beginning stages of developing a new Resource Management Plan for the field office, and as part of that process the agency is considering a Master Leasing Plan for the South Park area. A Master Leasing Plan is the right approach to ensure South Park has a guided plan for leasing, drilling, and most importantly, conservation, which will govern the activities in the area.

Showing a commitment to conservation in South Park must include closing some areas to oil and gas leasing as part of a balanced management plan. The public lands surrounding the James Mark Jones State Wildlife Area have important wilderness character and wildlife habitat and should be protected from oil and gas development. Places such as Reinecker Ridge provide abundant opportunities for backpacking, wildlife viewing, horseback riding, snowshoeing and photography in the backyard of a thriving metro area.

The BLM should also commit to conserving the way of life for Park County residents. The local community is working together to advocate for a Master Leasing Plan that protects their water, land and heritage for future generations, and this is an important opportunity for the BLM to make sure that happens.

Examples of Committing to Conservation

National Petroleum Reserve – Alaska: On the western side of Alaska's Arctic lies the National Petroleum Reserve – Alaska (NPR-A). While the name makes it sound like one big oilfield, it is a large wild place – at 23 million acres it is ten times the size of Yellowstone National Park.

In 2012 the Department of Interior announced its plan for managing the NPR-A. The legislation that

created the NPR-A called for "Special Areas" to be protected, areas important for caribou migrations and waterfowl nesting areas. The BLM issued a landscape-level plan that protected 11 million acres of key wildlife and waterfowl habitat, while making more than 70 percent of the economically recoverable oil and gas reserves available to leasing. The BLM's plan conserved critical areas like the bird nesting mecca of Teshekpuk Lake, and habitat for thousands of migrating caribou.

This kind of smart planning and balance is a perfect example of committing to conservation and should be replicated across the nation – not just in Alaska.

Dinosaur Trail: In March 2015, one of the first Master Leasing Plans was put in place by the BLM in northwest Colorado's White River Field Office. This Master Leasing Plan covered the area south of Dinosaur National Monument, and will protect more than 140,000 acres of "Lands with Wilderness Characteristics" so that they stay pristine. These acres are home to imperiled sage-grouse, pronghorn antelope and herds of mule deer that have been threatened by oil and gas development.

For some of the areas that are open to leasing, the BLM is committing to "phased leasing" – ensuring any drilling in the area is done gradually to reduce the possibility of air pollution and disturbance to wildlife and wildlands.

The Dinosaur Trail MLP is another example of the BLM showing what a strategic commitment to conservation looks like in practice.



Photo by: Ron Hunter

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