



Red Desert, Wyoming

PHOTO COURTESY BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION ALLIANCE



THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

Too Wild to Drill

Red Desert, Wyoming

What's at Stake?

The colorful rock spires, towering buttes, and sandy sagebrush country of Wyoming's 6 million-acre Red Desert have formed the imagery and character of America's Cowboy State. Stretching from the southern tip of the Wind River Range south to the signature rock pillars and hoodoos of Adobe Town, the greater Red Desert ecosystem contains an astonishing array of wildlife, scenery, human history, and wilderness.

Amidst the shifting sands of the Killpecker Dunes, the nation's largest active sand dune field, and the improbable seasonal wetlands of the Red Desert, a stunning array of wildlife quietly resides within this desert landscape. The Red Desert's Sublette antelope herd, approximately 50,000 strong, is the largest in the lower 48 states, with some of the herd making an incredible annual migration between the Yellowstone ecosystem and the Red Desert. The Desert also hosts the Steamboat Mountain elk herd, the nation's largest herd of rare desert elk. In all, over 350 species of animals roam the Red Desert. Cougars, mule deer, bobcats, badgers, burrowing owls, ferruginous hawks, northern harriers, sage grouse, golden eagles, and black bear can all be found in this captivating landscape.

The area also has a rich and often colorful human history. The Red Desert was home to Native Americans more than two thousand years before European settlers set foot upon the continent. Rock art panels and spiritual sites can still startle visitors with images and evidence of cultures that far precede the first European explorers. Many landmarks, such as Boar's Tusk, received their name from early Mormon pioneers or American trappers and mountain men

who used the buttes and spires as geological landmarks to find their way across this vast American wilderness. Old wagon wheel ruts still mark the path of westward expansion, as early American settlers caravanned across the continent on their way to the Oregon Territory. Adventuresome Pony Express riders followed similar routes across the slopes below well-known landmarks such as Oregon Buttes. In the Old West days of outlaws and bandits, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid made some of their famous hold-ups, hideouts and getaways in the Haystacks of Adobe Town. Later, bootleggers used the Haystacks to hide whiskey stills during the Prohibition years.

Adobe Town and what the BLM calls the "Jack Morrow Hills Area" are of particular importance to Wyoming's Red Desert. These separated areas provide unmatched scenic landscapes, biological diversity, wilderness hunting, and recreational opportunities, largely because much of the areas have remained remarkably intact despite the oil and gas development that has permanently changed the character of much of the Red Desert.

The BLM has identified seven Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) within the 620,000-acre Jack Morrow Hills Area of the Red Desert, the largest concentration of WSAs in Wyoming. Wyoming conservation groups and The Wilderness Society have recommended that these areas, as well as several other areas within the Red Desert, be designated as wilderness. Such designations would help ensure the Western character of Wyoming's Red Desert always remain a part of the American consciousness. ■

Protection Status

Attempts to permanently protect the Red Desert date back to 1898, when a group of local hunters sought to designate the area as a "winter game preserve." Another notable attempt came in 1935, when Wyoming Governor Leslie Miller proposed the designation of a "Western Trails National Park" that would have stretched from Missouri to Washington State. Unfortunately, these grand plans never came to fruition and many of the Red Desert's lands have been permanently altered by aggressive oil and gas drilling and the accompanying industrial

sprawl of roads, fences, and facilities.

The BLM in 1998 began to lease areas in the Jack Morrow Hills area of the Red Desert to oil companies. Today, as much as 50 percent of the area is leased. The lease sales are strongly opposed by the public. The last two draft management plans released by the BLM in 2000 and 2004 generated more than 80,000 public comments from concerned citizens, more than 95 percent of which supported closing the entire area to any oil and gas development. Unfortunately the final BLM management plan released in 2006 still allowed for oil

Protection Status, continued

and gas drilling in the Jack Morrow Hills area, and has received approximately 1,000 protests.

As Craig Thompson, a Wyoming native put it, “In spite of the law requiring that public lands be managed sustainably, the crushing pressure from Washington is hard for land managers to resist. The BLM now seems content to thoughtlessly break the magnificent Red Desert wilderness apart, partitioning

it into ever smaller chunks and rapidly eroding its tremendous renewable values through fragmentation – all for a final gasp of fossil fuels. I, for one, refuse to sell our children’s public lands birthright. Shall we leave them nothing but sprawling oil and gas development crisscrossing this once great desert landscape with no refuge for wildlife and no trace of how the desert used to be?” ■

Why is the Red Desert at Risk?

The final BLM Environmental Impact Statement assumed that 255 wells would be drilled in the Jack Morrow Hills area within the next twenty years. With no cap indicated in the BLM’s management plan, however, there is theoretically no limit on the number of oil and gas wells that could be drilled in the Jack Morrow Hills Area.

Adobe Town’s 200,000 wilderness-quality acres – and in fact the entire remainder of the Red Desert – are also become increasingly threatened from oil and gas leasing. Myopic energy bills and damaging executive orders that prioritize issuing oil and gas permits above other land management needs further cloud the Desert’s future. ■

Current Oil and Gas Development

The first oil and gas wells in Adobe Town’s Citizens’ Proposed Wilderness have been drilled, a venture the BLM refers to as the Desolation Flats Project; it will eventually grow to some 285 oil and gas wells across 50,000 acres of wilderness-quality lands. Meanwhile, seismic “thumper trucks” have rolled into Citizens’ Proposed Wilderness lands at the south end of Adobe Town, making the area’s National Park-quality lands among the most threatened in the nation.

According to the BLM, much of the Jack Morrow Hills area has a high likelihood of containing coal bed methane. With so many nearby areas already being drilled however, potential benefits from exploration seem inconsequential when weighed against devastating the habitat and aesthetic values of these last pristine pieces of the Red Desert.

The BLM has proposed to administratively close some key wildlife areas in the Jack Morrow Hills Area to future oil and gas leasing and drilling, but a significant amount of this area has active leases that still have 5 or more years before expiration, leaving a gaping loophole large enough to drive a drilling rig through.

None of the proposed management actions by the BLM will grant the Jack Morrow Hills Area the lasting protections it deserves. Designation of the wide-

“The BLM now seems content to thoughtlessly break the magnificent Red Desert wilderness apart, partitioning it into ever smaller chunks and rapidly eroding its tremendous renewable values...all for a final gasp of fossil fuels.”

— CRAIG THOMPSON, PROFESSOR, ROCK SPRINGS, WYOMING

open spaces that provide a sweeping landscape connecting the Wilderness Study Areas, as a National Conservation Area by law, would prohibit further mining and oil and gas activities but still allow hunting, grazing and other uses to continue.

Today, 94 percent – 17 million of the 18 million acres – of Wyoming’s public lands managed by the BLM are open to oil gas drilling. Unless we act now, the last wild area of Wyoming’s BLM lands will be lost to oil and gas development. ■

Where is the Red Desert?



Solution

The fate of the Red Desert will be decided in the challenging years ahead. Citizens of Wyoming and around the country should contact their congressional delegation and ask them to support a proposal that is being advocated by Wyoming Conservation groups and The Wilderness Society for the Jack Morrow Hills Area. The proposed legislation would designate 620,000 acres of the Red Desert's wild heart a National Conservation Area. The legislation calls for the trade and buyout of mineral leases within the proposed National Conservation Area, while allowing for hunting, grazing and small scale gold mining. The new Conservation Area would continue to be managed by the BLM as part of the National Landscape Conservation System. The National Conservation Area legislation is a common sense proposal that will

protect Wyoming's Western heritage.

Wyoming's political leadership, ranging from Democratic Governor Dave Freudenthal to Republican Senator Craig Thomas, has recognized the irreplaceable value of Adobe Town and the need to protect it. Citizens should contact the BLM and their representatives and ask that all Citizens' Proposed Wilderness Areas in and around Adobe Town be protected and incorporated into the existing Wilderness Study Area. ■

For More Information

- Bart Koehler, Wilderness Support Center, 970/247-8788
- Joy Owen, Friends of Red Desert, 307/332-3608
- Erik Molvar, Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, 307/742-7978
- Bruce Pendery or Lisa McGee, Wyoming Outdoor Council, 307/332-7031
- Mac Blewer, Friends of the Red Desert, 202/725-6378

TWS Research on Oil and Gas Issues:

A wealth of research focused on oil and gas development in the West and Alaska is available on The Wilderness Society's website at <http://Wilderness.org/Library/OilAndGas.cfm>