

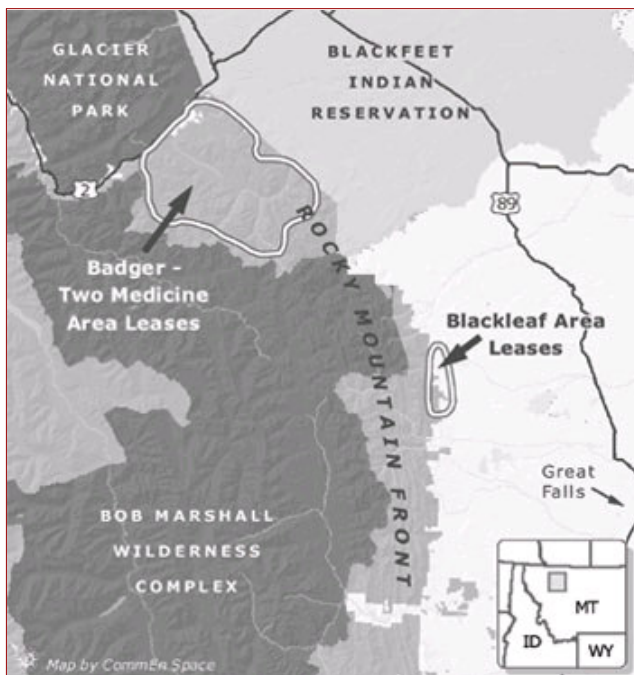
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8. PUBLIC LANDS: Conservationists celebrate protections for Mont.'s Rocky Mountain Front

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

Among the many 11th-hour actions by the lame-duck 109th Congress last week was passage of a tax extender bill that contained an amendment to prevent federal lands agencies from issuing new permits for drilling or hardrock mining along the Rocky Mountain Front in Montana. The provision, slipped into H.R. 6408 by Montana Sen. Max Baucus (D), would permanently extend a 1997 moratorium on oil and gas leases for federal lands stretching over 100 miles from Glacier National Park toward the state capital in Helena.

The measure is nearly identical to language that was put into the agencies' appropriations bill by Sen. Conrad Burns (R), who recently lost his bid for re-election.



This map shows existing leaseholds in the Rocky Mountain Front. Click on the map for a full-color, more-detailed map of the area. Map courtesy of the Wilderness Society.

said.

The Rocky Mountain Front was described by the Wilderness Society in its recent "Too Wild to Drill" report as "an integral part of the Crown of the Continent, one of North America's largest and most intact ecosystems, spanning the Bob Marshall Wilderness, Glacier National Parks and Canada's Waterton National Park. In the north, the Front includes the 200-square mile Badger-Two Medicine, a portion of the Lewis and Clark National Forest held sacred by the Blackfeet Tribe."

A last bastion of wildlife habitat in the lower 48 states, the Front retains nearly its entire native species, with the exception of free-ranging bison. It boasts the nation's largest bighorn sheep herds and second-largest herds of elk, according to the report. Other threatened and endangered species as lynx, wolves and wolverines are also found on the Front, along with mule deer, pronghorn, mountain goats, badgers and mountain lions.

Land Letter senior reporter Dan Berman contributed to this story

The action, a result of a bipartisan compromise among local conservationists and some major leaseholders, was hailed this week as an important step in ensuring protections for up to 400,000 acres in the Lewis and Clark National Forest and a smaller section of Bureau of Land Management properties.

"It's almost like a miracle we got this done," said Gene Sentz, a retired teacher and sometime mule packer from nearby Choteau, Mont. "This was a very important step, but we still have a long ways to go."

Sentz told *Land Letter* this week that he and fellow conservationists with the Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front will be "cautiously celebrating" over the weekend. "I still want to see it signed by the president."

Though specific to prohibiting new leases, the measure also sets the stage for possible retirement of some 60 existing leases in the area, covering 106,00 acres, Sentz said. "There are lawyers and a foundation waiting in the wings to help the coalition buy out these leases," he said, pointing to two recent transactions in which oil companies either sold or donated their leases to environmental organizations for retirement.

In June, Questar Corp. announced it would donate drilling leases for 1,691 acres in the area to Trout Unlimited ([E&ENews PM](#), June 28). Then in August, Startech Energy said it would sell its leases on 23,310 acres to the coalition, with financial assistance from the Wyss Foundation. No financial details of the transaction were made available.

Chris Mehls, spokesman for the Wilderness Society, which advised the local groups during the process of promoting legislation and negotiating the deals, suggested that these arrangements could set a standard for permanent protections for the Front. "Hopefully, now we'll get interest from other groups" for raising funds to purchase existing leases, Mehls