

O P I N I O N

# Work to safeguard the Bridger-Teton

The Bridger-Teton is widely recognized as the crown jewel of America's national forests. As the forest's former supervisor, I can say with confidence and affection that the Bridger-Teton has it all: magnificent and world-renowned wildlife, breathtaking scenery and outstanding recreational opportunities. It is a wild, backcountry forest. There is no other forest as rich in these attributes. For those of us who live in communities adjacent to the Bridger-Teton, working together to safeguard the forest from new oil and gas development should be our highest priority.

As many of you have heard, Plains Exploration & Production Company has proposed a 136-well drilling project in the Greater Yellowstone Area's Upper Hoback Basin, just south of Bondurant. We can't stand by and let this happen.

As forest supervisor for more than a decade, I heard over and over the resounding public sentiment that new oil and gas development on the Bridger-Teton is not acceptable. This is not because people are opposed to oil and gas development, but that other natural resource values are more important. Many of the most vocal supporters of the Wyoming Range Legacy Act were labor union members from Rock Springs and Green River who have hunted and fished and camped for generations in the southern part of the forest. Even oil and gas field workers spoke up for the Legacy Act and said not every place should be developed. Some places — like the Bridger-Teton — are too special and too valuable to risk damaging or losing forever.

The Forest Service can do a lot to set parameters for development and to establish measures to protect wildlife, wildlife habitat and access to recreation. But as we've learned repeatedly from other oil and gas projects in Wyoming, even with the best technology and the most innovative practices, there is no way to avoid changing the character of the landscape. This does not mean the Forest Service shouldn't impose the highest standards — it can and should. And it is important that the public participates in helping the Forest Service craft the best development alternative that mitigates the impacts as

much as possible.

But for many of us, myself included, a mitigated development project is not the ultimate solution.

I do not believe the impacts from gas development, especially the full-field development PXP is proposing, can ever be mitigated well enough to maintain the extraordinary wildlife, scenic and recreational values that we currently have on the Bridger-Teton. Drilling in the Hoback is simply not compatible with the wild, backcountry niche of the Bridger-Teton.

As far as I'm concerned, the only way to avoid destroying this niche is to avoid development altogether in this very, very special place. The crux, unfortunately, is that the Forest Service cannot easily deny development once leases have been issued. Because PXP has valid leases — leases that were issued in the early to mid-1990s — the best way to protect the Hoback

is to convince the company to agree to donate or sell these leases. Because all of PXP's leases are within the protected boundary of the Wyoming Range Legacy Act, once retired, the area could never be leased again.

I am advocating that if the company does not donate the leases outright, that interested organizations and individuals pool their money to buy the leases from PXP. I would ask PXP to be reasonable in thinking about a price for those leases so a buyout is feasible.

My experience with representatives of PXP is that they have been good to deal with and I am hopeful they will be open to a fair price. A fair price and a good-faith assessment of what is at stake for the Bridger-Teton and for American citizens is what our crown jewel national forest deserves.

To learn more about the project, please visit the Citizens for the Wyoming Range website at [www.wyomingrange.org](http://www.wyomingrange.org). Together, we can safeguard the Bridger-Teton, but it's going to take all of us working together. I urge you to get involved.

*Kniffy Hamilton was the forest supervisor of the Bridger-Teton National Forest from 1999-2010.*

**GUEST SHOT**  
*Kniffy Hamilton*



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