



Energy: Hunters and Anglers Need to Get Involved! *by David Stalling*

In mid October, as hunters headed for the mountains in pursuit of elk and deer, and anglers enjoyed some of the best trout fishing of the year, Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer hosted a symposium in Bozeman on the energy future of the West. The meeting—attended by the governor’s of Wyoming, Utah, Oregon and Washington—was likely, and understandably, the last thing on the minds of hunters and anglers on these crisp fall days. Nevertheless, the discussions at the symposium could very well determine the fate of the wild places we hunt and fish.

Governor Schweitzer deserves credit for bringing western leaders together to figure out how to meet our energy needs without sacrificing our wildlife and wild places. Unfortunately, the meeting was dominated by industry with much of the same-old talk about how to streamline and expedite the extraction of gas, oil and coal.

Ongoing federal efforts to expedite energy development on public lands have turned traditional multiple-use management on its head by seemingly elevating oil and gas exploration to a dominant position over fish, wildlife, and water resources. As a result, gas and oil development is occurring at an unprecedented rate throughout the West, affecting tens of millions of acres, in some of the wildest places—with the best hunting and fishing—in the United States.

Recent federal energy legislation, for example, emphasizes gas and oil development over fish and wildlife, exempts the industry from portions of the clean water and clean air acts, and streamlines environmental safeguards to expedite the extraction of fossil fuels. There have already been significant impacts to fisheries in Montana’s Powder River Basin, and to mule deer in the Upper Green River Valley of Wyoming. Extensive coal bed methane development is proposed within the Valle Vidal in New Mexico, home to the state’s largest elk herd and one of the last strongholds for the rare Rio Grande cutthroat trout. A push has been underway to drill for gas within the Rocky Mountain Front, in Montana, and atop the Roan Plateau in Colorado, some of the premier hunting areas in the nation. And in Utah, gas and oil development threatens to displace mule deer habitat and impact fisheries in places like the Books Cliffs, Diamond Fork and Strawberry Lake. The cumulative effects of these policies and this development will almost certainly have significant impacts on fish, wildlife, water and hunting and fishing.

Governor Schweitzer himself emphasized the importance of “clean coal.” The technology should more aptly be called “less dirty coal” technology, as the process still releases sulfur dioxide, carbon dioxide, hydrogen sulfide, solid waste and other pollutants, and requires vast amounts of water. At the symposium, in response to a question, Richard Opper, director of the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, said calling it clean coal “may be overselling it.” The Governor is to be commended for seeking alternative and less harmful ways of producing energy, but Montanans and others throughout the West need to make sure that we don’t trade one damaging practice for another, without fully examining the consequences to water, fish and wildlife.

Not a single wildlife or fish biologist or hunter or angler made it into the agenda speaking on behalf of and representing our interests. The closest to such discussion came when Wyoming Governor Freudenthal talked about hunting, and said, “I want my son and grandson to hunt elk; I don’t plan to preside over the destruction of my state.” He talked about a tax he placed on the gas and oil industry for a fund that restores crucial wildlife and fish habitat degraded by energy development. Governor Freudenthal’s proposal bears close scrutiny, a great idea for Montana, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico.

Better yet, hunters and anglers would be wise to ensure that we don’t allow our states’ urge to produce energy, and get rich quick, to disturb the long-term productive capacity of *our* lands and waters.

We all use gas, oil and other energy, and support energy development done right, in the appropriate places, with minimal impact to fish, wildlife and hunting and fishing. We support Governor Schweitzer’s efforts to find new ways of meeting our energy needs. But the answer doesn’t lie solely in our state’s coal reserves: we need to pursue more balanced, prudent and conservative policies that emphasize energy conservation and alternative and renewable sources of energy such as wind and solar: that would be the cleanest, quickest most efficient means of meeting our energy needs while protecting *our* wildlife rich landscapes and the *our* hunting and fishing heritage.

Hunters and anglers need to get involved. If we don’t, the next time you hike over that last hill in anticipation of seeing a band of antelope or a bull elk – you may see a drilling rig instead.

Let our leaders know that we care about our wildlife and wild places. The places we hunt and fish depend on it.

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