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— EDITORIAL —

Front Deserves Long-term Protection

By Chris Marchion

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Montana's Rocky Mountain Front is a wildlife treasure and renowned destination for hunters – and it's also a working landscape. This is a landscape where generations of ranchers have carved out a decent living while maintaining the area's unique ecological integrity. As a result it supports a wildlife diversity that is nearly unmatched any place in the U.S.

This is a landscape where outfitters and guides have access to vast tracks of roadless public lands rich with big game and high mountain streams filled with native trout. It is a landscape where public lands have ample access for a growing list of outdoor enthusiasts – hunters, anglers, horseback riders, birdwatchers, skiers, photographers, hikers, wildlife enthusiasts, snow-shoers, seekers of solitude and even Sunday drivers. The Rocky Mountain Front is also a place where humans have been, and continue to be, part and parcel of the biotic community. A place where people have not dominated, but have fit in with little discord. The Front is a landscape recognized by many as an area where the land and the community of life that depend on it have remained untrammled.

The Front is a living testament to the reality that people can preserve the integrity, maintain the stability, and celebrate the richness of a landscape they live, work and play in. While administrative boundaries and political land management designations carve landscapes up into chunks and blocks, the wildlife that move through the area with the seasons are guided by natural restraints that have evolved over centuries – ignoring the modern human idea of dividing things up according to political will.

The same may be said for the politics of conservation in the area. Democrat or Republican, left or right, most people agree that the Rocky Mountain Front is an area so unique in its history, ecological richness, and abundant outdoor recreation opportunities that it rises above the usual partisan politics that has crippled many good conservation measures.

Regardless of their political preference, for nearly 100 years it has been hunters who, with ranchers and other concerned citizens, have worked to protect and enhance public lands along the Rocky Mountain front. We know from experience that protecting these public lands while helping local communities find ways to sustain a good way of life, is the right thing to do.

Hunters understand all too well that opportunities for high quality backcountry hunting experiences are diminishing at an unacceptable rate. Because of the mix of public lands and well managed private ranch lands the Rocky Mountain Front remains a place where high quality hunting opportunities are abundant and accessible to the general public. We want to keep it that way.

Hunters and ranchers have a vested interest in seeing public lands in the area permanently protected for future generations to access and enjoy. We want it to remain that way. The character of public land in the area is of roadless, wild landscapes dominated by traditional recreational uses. The Front's value as a prime hunting destination with extensive public hunting opportunities is an essential component of a sustainable economic future for local families, Front communities, and all of Montana.

That's why hunters are working with ranchers to find common sense solutions that will protect the Front's wildlife, their habitat and as well the ranching heritage that sets this working landscape apart.

Montana's Rocky Mountain Front is increasingly becoming the flagship for both public and private land conservation efforts across the country. But there is a dark cloud hanging over the area – that of short-sighted, speculative natural gas exploration on the Front's public lands. This kind of shot in the dark development would be a great insult to the countless people who have done so much, for so long, to keep the Front the way it is.

Montana's congressional delegation needs to hear how valuable long-term protection of the Rocky Mountain Front is for wildlife, hunting and fishing. Let them know that the Rocky Mountain Front is a model of conservation worth protecting – an evolving legacy to be passed on to the next generation. Remind them that sustainable public land uses have proven to be a solid cornerstone of Montana's economy. Ask them to help by supporting common-sense solutions that will protect this landscape from any future harm.

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