



Montana Wildlife Federation

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— June/July 2006 Newsletter —

Cultivating Solutions for the Front

The word "lobbyist" these days tends to conjure up images of unscrupulous fat cats in thousand dollar suits treating elected officials to dinner, lavish trips or private box seats at sporting events. Rarely are these purveyors of special interests referred to as "rugged conservationists."

But when a group of Montana hunters and anglers flew to Washington DC in April to lobby our Congressional Delegation for the protection of Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, a Gannett News Service journalist dubbed them just that – "an ad hoc group of rugged conservationists..."

"We went to DC to make it clear that local folks who hunt and fish along the Front want it permanently protected," said Roy Jacobs, a taxidermist from Choteau and co-founding member of *Friends of the Rocky Mountain Front*, a group of Front citizens lead by MWF member Gene Sentz. "We may not be smooth operators," Jacobs continued, "but we know the issues inside and out and we make a pretty persuasive argument for protecting the Front."

Jacobs went along with MWF members John Borgreen of the Great Falls, Russell Country Sportsmen and Tony Porcarelli of Fairfield. They were accompanied by MWF Executive Director Craig Sharpe.

The group met face to face with Senator Max Baucus, Undersecretary for the United States Department of Agriculture Mark Rey, and Chief of the Forest Service Dale Bosworth. They also met with the Legislative Assistant for Senator Conrad Burns and the Deputy Chief of Staff for Representative Denny Rehberg.

"Our core message was simple: to keep the Front the way it is today will take action on the part of our congressional delegation. And they were very receptive, especially Senators Burns and Baucus," said Porcarelli. The trip was the result of increased efforts on the part of local hunters and anglers to rally support for protecting the Front.

In March more than 400 Montana hunters and anglers signed a letter that was sent to the state's congressional delegation asking them to protect fish and wildlife and fishing and hunting along the Rocky Mountain Front.

"We represent a large group of people who tend to work under the radar when it comes to citizen activism," said Borgreen. "But sometimes you just have to speak a little louder and we've decided to take it straight to our congressional delegation by asking them to help find a solution that will protect this landscape. Ultimately it's up to them"

What's the threat?

"It's still natural gas exploration," said Sharpe. "Even though energy industry insiders are willing to admit there isn't enough natural gas to make any real profit along the Front, there is still a select group of folks holding out hope for a cash cow." Sharpe pointed out that the Bush administration acknowledged the significance of the area as critical wildlife habitat which, he says, "they wouldn't have done if there were proven reserves of a profitable size being eyed by the energy industry."

He notes the surprising turn of events in October of 2004 when the Department of Interior announced that it would be shelving plans to drill in the BLM's Blindhorse Outstanding Natural Area (ONA) located 25 miles northwest of Choteau.

Then Assistant Secretary of the Interior Rebecca Watson stated, "President Bush has met with hunters and anglers and told them there are some places that should not be developed in order to protect wildlife." Watson continued, "The Rocky Mountain Front is important to wildlife and is of great interest to the hunting community." She acknowledged that the current administration had heard the concerns of hunters and anglers. "We listen when they talk to us," she added.

So Now What?

The Dept. of Interior suspended efforts to drill the Front in part to give stake holders more time to come up with solutions that would protect the area. The first step in the process needs to be a buyout, swap, or trade of natural gas lease interests on public lands along the Front so that the controversy over drilling can be put to rest once and for all.

When polled, Montanans strongly support a lease swap or buy-out. A state-wide poll in 2004 demonstrated that Montanans, by more than 2-to-1, support swapping out the energy leases.

While finding some kind of solution to end all natural gas exploration on public lands would be a watershed moment for the conservation of the Rocky Mountain Front, it is only the beginning. The next and maybe most difficult step will be to get Congress, under the leadership of Montana's congressional delegation, to find a way to protect the area from natural gas exploration once and for all.

"In reality, our efforts are just a natural progression in what has been a nearly 100 year tradition of hunters and anglers working to protect the area for what it is – an unmatched piece of critical wildlife habitat," said Sharpe. "But what needs to happen right now, today, is rugged conservationists everywhere need to contact their congressional delegation and let them know that they fully support permanently protecting the area for the next generation to enjoy."

If you have any questions, or would like to know more about the issue before you contact our Congressional Delegation, contact MWF at 800-517-7256 or email nbirkeland@mtwf.org.

