



Here on the upper reaches of Dupuyer Creek, ranchers Tom and Carolyn Salansky have watched many neighbors sell conservation easements to survive, or sell out fully to amenity and conservation buyers rather than to other ranchers. Tom hints at what is at risk: "I'm on my own. A person running a place like this for someone else is not going to have the same commitment to stewardship as if he or she owned it. They'll go home to town at quitting time. I'm here. I'm home."

The Front Line

Saving Montana from Montanans. Words & photos by Dave Skinner.

Fifty years ago, the Wilderness Act was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Included in the original act was the Bob Marshall Wilderness, which today remains a point of local pride and appreciation, part of a long Montana history of conservation, not just on federal lands, but on state and private lands.

The Wilderness Act's premise that special places should be kept as they are had wide cachet in 1964. It was generally expected that outstanding natural areas would be preserved for the future with the rest dedicated to long-term, multiple-use management.

Well, it didn't happen that way, did it? In

Montana, as elsewhere, enough is never enough for wilderness advocates pulling on the one-way wilderness ratchet. Voter support for new wilderness designations in Montana tanked, so for 30 years now, no new Montana wilderness has been designated.

Greens both inside and outside government then turned to other avenues to reduce or remove land uses they dislike—appeals, litigation, administrative fiat, bureaucratic delay, endangered species, conservation easements, even national monument designations under the Antiquities Act. The strategy is to block land uses in hopes the land users (and most critically, their votes) go away.

Has the strategy worked? Ask any former logger, former miner, former cowboy, or former average-Joe weekend-jant national forest or BLM visitor, all of whom probably turn to something else—someplace else—as their work or play these days.

One of many Montana places where this strategy of obstruction has been "successful" is the foothills, folds and jagged vertical scarps of the Rocky Mountain Front. Generally between Marias and Rogers passes west of U.S. Highway 89, this is where the high Great Plains literally smash against mighty mountains. It is a visually stunning landscape, of amazing beauty and—at the wrong

time—amazing viciousness.

Yet, for 150 years, closely-knit communities of ranchers and farmers have quietly gone about making their lives. It's a place like no other, inhabited by folks like none other—but for how much longer?

The Thirty Years War

Today, on the Rocky Mountain Ranger District (RMRD) of the Lewis and Clark National Forest (LCNF), some 365,000 acres are not yet congressional wilderness. One major reason: The district is famed worldwide, not just as scenery, but also as one of the finest representations of the Rocky Mountain Overthrust Belt, a geology rich in petroleum—and producing petroleum playas—stretching from northern Alberta, Canada, to New Mexico. Because Congress can't—or at least probably won't—designate an oil field as wilderness, environmentalists and their bureaucratic allies conducted an all-out guerrilla war against oil.

One small example: One well permit, three miles from a U.S. highway on supposedly available Forest Service lands. After 32 years, including personal interference from none other than Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt himself, the leaseholder is now in federal court, suing for permission to drill. No well, no discovery, right?

Another tactic: Prevent the first step—rights leasing. In 1997, then-Forest Supervisor Gloria Flora imposed a controversial 10-year ban on oil and gas leasing on all 365,000 multiple-use acres of the RMRD. Even better, in 2006, as Flora's ban neared expiration, U.S. Sens. Max Baucus (D-MT) and Conrad Burns (R-MT) passed a “bipartisan” bill into law. Not only did Flora's temporary leasing ban become law, but existing leases were bought out.

Finally, the 1957-vintage Blackleaf Canyon gas field, despite producing 20-25 million cubic feet a day in gas and \$300,000 a year in tax revenues for Teton County, was shut down by the Baucus-Burns bill.

With oil apparently killed off, the LCNF under supervisor Spike Thompson moved on to “travel management.” When litigation concluded in early 2011, the end result was more “elimination” than “management.” Public motorized trail use and winter snowmobiling in the popular Badger-Two Medicine was totally banned, and only 16 miles of single-track motorcycle trail remains open on the other 290,000 acres of Front. Overall, only a minimal network of atrociously

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maintained main roads remains for general public travel and use. With the general recreating public now sent packing, what remains? Oh, a few grazers.

In fall 2011, environmentalists took their next step, prevailing on Sen. Baucus to introduce wilderness legislation for all the non-wilderness Forest Service and BLM holdings on the Front (405,000 acres). The Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act (RMFHA, currently S-364) was reintroduced in the current Congress by Sen. Baucus shortly before he became ambassador to China.

Grassroots Or Astroturf?

One indicator of good legislation is broad support by those who will have to live with it. Judging by letters to the editor count and press coverage, it appears the Heritage Act is widely supported, but *RANGE* found otherwise. As Augusta artist and area native Linda Tippetts puts it, “Our voices aren't being heard.” Well, *RANGE* gave a listen, and got an earful.

Almost all “public” support for the Heritage Act comes from the so-called Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front (Coalition), which seems to have no stand-alone existence. Its phone number is actually that of the Montana Wilderness Association's Choteau branch office. Many Coalition promotional emails originate from Jennifer Ferenstein, an employee of the national Wilderness Society (and former board chairman of the Sierra Club). Even more revealing, *Fairfield Sun-Times* editor and publisher Darryl Flowers tells *RANGE*: “The Coalition website is currently registered anonymously. But in 2011, my research found the website was registered to Gloria Flora.”

Remember, Flora's leasing ban made her nationally famous, a rising star in Bill Clinton's Forest Service. However, when Flora moved on to supervise the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest in Nevada, she

almost single-handedly reignited the Sagebrush Rebellion at Jarbidge—over a road to an outhouse.

With Al Gore in a tight race with George W. Bush, Flora then “resigned” and hit the progressive speaking-tour circuit, claiming persecution for simply doing her job. Today, among other things, Flora keeps busy as a public lands fellow at the Post Carbon Institute and runs Sustainable Obtainable Solutions, an environmental nonprofit group that has, surprise surprise, endorsed the Heritage Act.

Astroturf? You bet. The Coalition is classic political Astroturf—mostly half-truths and deceptive spin poured down the slack gullets of lazy “professional” journalists for the public to swallow later. Don't think so? Well, let's begin with how the Coalition is trying to pitch RMFHA to the agricultural community: a “focus on noxious weeds” on 405,000 acres.

Show Us The Money

Paul Wick is a planner and weed coordinator for Teton County, where nearly every fence gate is decorated with “Zero Spread” signage. Wick is all for increased funding, but points out the bill calls only for annual (and fickle) congressional appropriations. Even with mandated money (which Wick speculates would kill the legislation outright as “pork”), Wick notes the LCNF presently lacks a formal weed management plan. To Wick, planning is an “absolutely necessary” first step in enabling managers to “start somewhere and set priorities.”

Outfitter Ernie Barker's family has run Triple J Ranch behind Gibson Dam for 37 years. Years spent riding and guiding convinced Barker that “weed management is critical on the Front.” But, like Wick, Barker read the bill and concludes, “the weed money promised is not at all guaranteed.”

Locked In, Or Out?

The Coalition also claims, “[RMFHA] will lock in existing motorized uses.” But Joe Dellwo, Teton County Commissioner, points out, “Access for multiple use is already the most restrictive it has ever been”—not just for play, but necessary work.

Forest grazing permittee Tom Salansky, who ranches with wife, Carolyn, 20 miles off pavement west of Dupuyer, explains: “To fix fence on my four-wheeler, I can't just jump on and go for a five-minute splice job. I have to go personally to Choteau, two hours at

least, to have the district ranger, and *only* the district ranger, sign my permit. I have to specify the date, the time I start, the time I stop, and keep a copy with me at all times. It's a pain in the butt."

Commissioner Dellwo taps on the real reason Heritage Act supporters want to "lock in" current access permanently through law: "Reality is, there will be no more public input into travel management if RMFHA passes." Just days after *RANGE* visited, the LCNF announced that it is initiating a forest plan revision, which allows revisiting the travel management issue—at least in theory.

It's Not Wilderness—Honest!

Because new wilderness is unpopular in Montana, the Heritage Act would designate 67,000 acres (already managed to preserve "characteristics") as wilderness additions, and 208,000 acres of Conservation Management Area. How is a CMA different from wilderness? Nobody knows for sure, as none have ever been created. But Augusta rancher and beekeeper Ross Geise doesn't expect much conservation or management to result. He points out environmentalists "use the same words, with a different meaning."

Barker admits he might support CMA-only legislation if the weed program was more than lip service, but opposes new wilderness additions in no small part because such "will affect at least three grazing permittees with cattle on the Front in terms of how they will be managed in the future." Through firsthand experience with his guests, Barker knows that "a good share of the general public is very suspect and critical if livestock are grazing on wilderness lands," much more so than if cows are grazing on multiple-use lands.

S-364 reads, a CMA is for preserving the "recreational, scenic, historical, cultural, fish, wildlife, roadless, and ecological values." Unsurprisingly, grazing doesn't rate as a value to be preserved. It would still be permitted, but only "if established on the date of enactment," as "the secretary determines appropriate"—with the same "House Report" language that governs grazing in big-W wilderness.

Public Input?

The Coalition claims RMFHA was created using public input, but Commissioner Dellwo differs. He tells *RANGE* that local elected officials specifically requested on two separate occasions that any legislation provide for

a three-mile buffer between designated wilderness and private property.

In the past 25 years, the region has seen epic forest fires start from wilderness or other restricted Forest Service ground, then blow up and escape. These fires not only damaged or gravely threatened private property inholdings within the forested Front, but some burned clear across the Front until they ran out of fuel. Despite "input" based on demonstrable public safety and property concerns, Dellwo notes, "the Deep Creek



proposed wilderness butts right up against private property."

Even the fires that burnt "short" have upset many. Jim Anderson of Choteau especially won't ride his horses into the 2007 Fool/Ahorn burn on the North Fork of the Teton. "It's burnt to a crisp even now and the dead trees are extremely hazardous."

Nobody Home

RMFHA supporters have been trying to present the bill as a "homegrown compromise," but Dellwo differs, "The compromise is between factions of the wilderness organizations." Conrad farmer Ken Johnson observes that proponents are "not having to make any changes themselves, or give up anything. There are no real compromises or concessions in the Heritage bill."

As for homegrown, two of the three Choteau-based outfitting business supporters are under common ownership. Aside from those, the nearest business supporter actually in sight of the Front is a landscape/nature photographer in East Glacier. Tellingly, not one single storefront business in any of the small farming and ranching communities along the Front has endorsed the Heritage Act.

But Everybody Wants Wilderness

Finally, the Coalition has strived mightily to create an impression that the Heritage Act is a "made in Montana plan" supported by "Montanans from all walks of life"—even paying for a poll that proves it. But even in

"Gateway to the Wilderness" Augusta, Linda Tippetts and Ross Geise agree the level of opposition is more than 70 percent. Joe Dellwo estimates Teton County as a whole is "95 percent against the Heritage Act," with local support coming at best from "a small group, but very vocal."

Handwriting On The Wall

At press time, the Govtrack.us website gives RMFHA a 20 percent chance of final passage. As for a House companion bill, perhaps from Steve Daines, Montana Republican congressman and candidate for U.S. Senate, Ross Geise says, "I wish Steve Daines would take a position." But Daines has not.

However, legislation may be rendered moot with a unilateral Antiquities Act national monument designation by President Barack Obama. As he said in his 2014 State of the Union speech, "I'll use my authority to protect more of our pristine federal lands."

In early May, the *Salt Lake Tribune* studied the issue, settling on 12 places "most likely" for designation. Unsurprisingly, three of the 12 were in Utah. And, yep, listed is the Rocky Mountain Front—which also ranks as one of the Wilderness Society's top seven wilderness priorities.

Will Obama, or won't Obama? *Tribune* reporter Thomas Burr pried this clue out of Congressman and Center For Biological Diversity board member Raul Grijalva (D-AZ), "I don't know if he'll do any now before the midterm [elections], but after that I think you'll see the preparations in earnest." Grijalva got it wrong. President Obama declared the half-million-acre Organ Mountains Desert Peaks National Monument in New Mexico on May 21, 2014.

Needless to say, those *RANGE* spoke with are concerned about a monument designation on top of their opposition to the Heritage Act. But *RANGE* also took the opportunity to ask Coalition member, rancher, and Heritage Act endorsee Karl Rappold if he would support a monument designation. Rappold terminated the discussion. ■

While working harvest in Montana's Golden Triangle, within sight and smell of these particular mountains, Dave Skinner got hooked by Montana's "Front" country and its people. He now gets his fix as often as possible.



Anything Else?

Wilderness isn't the only issue on the Front. Words & photo by Dave Skinner.

The Class War

For many locals, opposition to the Heritage Act is based not just on economics, but philosophy as well. At many meetings through the years, Carolyn Salansky has heard comments she finds unsettling:

"When environmentalists talk about the importance of this area, they emphasize we have every animal here that ever lived here—except the buffalo. Oh, like the buffalo the Prairie Foundation is putting in Phillips and Valley County? Those?"

There were more hints over time, she says: "I remember a statement that the overall goal of various conservation efforts was to 'transform this area.' Not just that, but on a field trip, one woman turned to me and said 'you shouldn't be living here' just like that. What do these people think they're saving, and who are they saving it from?"

Linda Tippetts refers to her late father, "who raised six kids on 160 acres at Sun River, which took a lot of smarts. I believe man and nature are symbiotic." Therefore, she is uncomfortable with the "untrammelled by man" and "visitor that does not remain" language in the 1964 Wilderness Act: "The premise that man is separate from nature is completely fallacious."

Tippetts feels "there's a definite 'class' aspect to wilderness, an elitism." As an area native, she'd gotten to know the Bob Marshall and other backcountry thanks to generous friends willing to share their pack strings. But she is firm on the point that not everyone has such friends, or the cash substitute.

Jim Anderson, an avid hunter and horse-

man, also appreciates wilderness, but opposes more. Like Tippetts, Anderson expresses similar concern for average Joes. "Deep Creek behind David Letterman's ranch is some of the best hunting still available to the general public who don't have pack strings."

Another Front

Oddly enough, The Nature Conservancy is not part of the Coalition promoting the Heritage Act. TNC came into the region in 1979, buying and converting the Circle 8 dude ranch into what is now the 18,000-acre Pine Butte Swamp preserve and guest camp. That was only a beginning. TNC reports it has 182,000 acres under conservation easement on the Front. But that's not all...a 2014 Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks environmental assessment regarding the addition of another half-section to the Blackleaf WMA (held for sale by the Conservation Fund) notes, "state, federal, and non-profit organizations have protected over 300,000 acres, through fee title acquisitions or conservation easements, along the Rocky Mountain Front from State Highway 200 north to Dupuyer, Mont.," and, apparently, on Blackfeet Reservation fee lands.

Today Carolyn Salansky observes: "We're surrounded by easements. I see this all being closed, to the point where there won't be any ranches this side of Highway 89."

Oil Still Burns

While oil and gas production on the federal

Visitors to the Front find themselves mostly alone with God's country and critters. So meeting this two-vanload tour group on the Boone & Crockett's Roosevelt Ranch interpretive trail was like encountering a herd of some rare, endangered species. A few questions from those buckling on their bear-spray canisters and arranging their spotless LL Bean gear revealed they were guests at The Nature Conservancy's Pine Butte Guest Ranch, which was hosting a Spring Naturalist's Tour at \$1,550 per week per person. (The following week was birding, at \$2,550 a pop.) Not discussed, but quickly discerned, was the fact that unpaid attendance (and eavesdropping) was not welcome.

Front is dead for now, the issue lives on. "People need to realize the gas they put in their cars comes from something other than the pump," warns Ross Geise. Obviously, the Teton County commissioners miss their royalties from the Blackleaf field, and no farmer or rancher RANGE spoke with is happy about four-buck diesel.

Expensive fuel fundamentally changed the way Jim Anderson does business. "We're still getting the visitors, but they don't spend the same way," he explains. "Before the 2008 price spike, visitors would fill up across the street for \$50, then come over and spend \$50 in my gift shop. Now they fill up for \$100. What does that leave me?" Anderson still offers gift-shop items, but has diversified into firearms, hunting gear, espresso and used vehicles.

"The premise that man is separate from nature is completely fallacious."

Fairfield Sun-Times editor and publisher Darryl Flowers is known statewide for being Montana's only "general interest" reporter competently covering petroleum issues, with both a

weekly energy report and occasional features.

Flowers is a second-generation newspaperman (from the printing-press side, not newsroom) from Jackson, Tenn., a place that had to economically reinvent itself.

"I get chest pains when I see downtowns with empty buildings," Flowers explains, pointing out that as the Malting Barley Capital of the World, Fairfield's economic stability utterly depends on the reliable irrigation made possible by Gibson Dam on the Sun River and the Greenfields system. With more than a hint of sarcasm, he inquires, "Can you imagine getting all that through environmentalists today?"

The obvious but untapped potential of

(Continued on page 20)

ANYTHING ELSE? (Cont'd from p.19)

Overthrust petroleum, especially with new directional drilling and fracturing methods, is a topic Flowers pursues with horrified fascination. "Books could be written about what's being done to deny economic activity in Montana," and he may do just that.

The Bureaucrats

The Coalition lists a depressingly high number of retired government-agency employees as supporters. Of note is former Forest Service chief Mike Dombeck, famed for guiding the so-called Roadless Initiative set-aside of 58 million acres of Forest Service holdings into de-facto wilderness. His successor as chief, Dale Bosworth, is also a Heritage Act endorsee—which helps explain in part why National Forest trends away from productive use changed so little during the Bush administration.

Tellingly, five former LCNF supervisors endorse the Heritage Act, most notably Gloria Flora. Also listed is Leslie "Spike" Thompson, who oversaw the travel "management" process that Heritage proponents now seek to "lock in" through law.

No matter who these public servants thought they worked for during their careers, is there any doubt who they work against today?

Not The Whole Story

After exploring the Sun River Slope Canal ditch road, *RANGE* caught farmer Fred Ginther moving water on his place above Augusta. From water, the kibitzing shifted to the Heritage Act, and Ginther was off to the races expressing his unhappiness. Asked why his name hadn't turned up on a letter to the newspaper, he answered: "Why bother, they won't print it anyway."

Darryl Flowers explains why Ginther may feel how he does about Montana's intrepid press corps: "I published a letter opposing the Heritage Act in the *Sun-Times*. Soon after, the author showed me her letter in the *Great Falls Tribune*. It was edited so heavily, her meaning was completely reversed from what she'd intended."

Why might that be? A hint comes from the blog of Tom Kotynski, retired *Great Falls Tribune* associate editor. A 2008 entry describing a hike to Muddy Creek Falls (behind the now-closed Blackleaf gas field) reads, "The old well pipe is a stark reminder to what could happen to this area without vigilance." ■