

# FRONTLINE

Working to protect public lands and wildlife since 1967

## A Western Wonderland

How do we ensure good stewardship of the Bighorn Basin?

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A Rare Place:  
A Personal  
Perspective



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Come Celebrate  
with Tom Bell





# Message from the Director

Laurie Milford, executive director

## Plotting a Course for Change



**IN 2008 THE OUTDOOR COUNCIL SET OUT TO ENGAGE IN THE TRANSITION OF PRESIDENTIAL ADMINISTRATIONS, NO MATTER WHO WON THE RACE. Our goal was to influence the U.S.**

Department of Agriculture, the Department of the Interior, and the EPA to right some of the wrongs of the previous eight years. Specifically, we wanted to emphasize the importance of regulating energy development more carefully in Wyoming.

When Barack Obama was elected, the staff and I knew his administration would come in with the intention of improving the way public lands are managed, so we worked hard, immediately, to help direct some of that energy toward Wyoming. We've seen the benefits of this work in recent months. The Department of Interior is planning to reform the way it manages oil and gas drilling on public lands. The EPA is re-evaluating outdated standards to better protect our clean rivers and streams and the air we breathe. And the Forest Service has indicated it intends to cancel the contested and widely unpopular 44,000 acres of oil and gas leases in the Wyoming Range. **All of these actions will improve environmental conditions in Wyoming for years to come.**

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar has promised some commonsense changes for oil and gas leasing that should help bring balance and accountability back to the program. Interior will now consider more carefully each specific piece of land offered before it is leased (this is especially important for areas that have not been drilled previously) and will encourage greater public participation in the process. What does this mean for Wyoming? It means more weight given to the implications of development for wildlife, air and water quality, and other values such as hunting and camping. In other words, the BLM will be less likely to lease an area like Johnny Behind the Rocks, a special recreation spot southeast of Lander where people walk their dogs, ride horses, mountain bike, hike, and run. A place like Johnny has great aesthetic, social, and economic value, and the BLM will be

required to give these kinds of values more credence under the proposed reforms.

The EPA, meanwhile, revisited scores of environmental regulations during Obama's first year in office. The feds critiqued Wyoming's plan to meet the federal Regional Haze Rule. The EPA is going back to the basics (in this case, science) with the Clean Air Act.

In November, the EPA also sent a series of letters to Wyoming adopting the Council's long-held assertion that the Department of Environmental Quality's policies for managing polluted coalbed methane water violate the Clean Water Act. And in January the EPA dusted off its national ozone standards, proposing a primary standard in the range of 60 to 70 parts per billion. This is the range recommended by an independent panel of medical experts back in 2007 as adequate to protect our health, before the previous president tossed it out.

The Forest Service has announced it has reconsidered its 2005 decision to lease more than 44,000 acres in the Wyoming Range for drilling, and is indicating it intends to cancel the leases. This decision, once finalized, would be in line with the wishes of many Wyomingites who have worked for more than four years to protect the Wyoming Range from industrialization. Some of the diverse supporters who have worked together to protect the range include Gov. Dave Freudenthal, ranchers, hunters and anglers, labor unions, outdoor enthusiasts, the state's two Republican senators, and conservation groups.

Program director Bruce Pendery and I traveled to Washington, D.C., in December to encourage all of these measures with senior administration officials and the Wyoming delegation. We also promoted these steps in coordinated actions throughout the year. Did our work influence the agencies? I believe so. When it comes to public lands and energy development, Wyoming matters to the nation. And in a state with such a small population, **an energetic and informed group can make a difference.** With each agency we presented specific solutions that I believe contributed to exceptional outcomes. Your membership made that possible.

Yours,  
Laurie

## Wyoming Outdoor Council

Established in 1967, the Wyoming Outdoor Council is the state's oldest statewide conservation organization. Our mission is to protect Wyoming's environment and quality of life for future generations. Our publications come out quarterly and are a benefit of membership.

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# Seeking Balance for the Bighorn Basin

A dedicated sportsman, even at age 9, the Outdoor Council's Nathan Maxon happily goes fishing with two broken arms.

BY CHRIS MERRILL

ONE OF WYOMING'S MOST REMARKABLE geological oddities can be found in the Bighorn Basin about 10 miles north of Cody, as the peregrine flies.

Heart Mountain, named by the Crow Indians, rises up from the floor of the basin with a cap of limestone more than 350 million years old. This cap sits atop a base of Willwood soil about 300 million years younger.

Scientists have debated for more than a century about how, exactly, a Paleozoic peak ended up atop an Eocene rise out on the north-central Wyoming plains.

"I just love the history of it," said Hap Ridgway, who has a ranch in Sunlight Basin. "To me it's a pretty compelling story. It's older rock on top of younger rock. That mountain is out in the middle of the Bighorn Basin, where it (seems like it) shouldn't be."

Mr. Ridgway is one of dozens of area residents who recently attended meetings hosted by the Outdoor Council on the topic of managing public lands in the Bighorn

Basin. To him and others, Heart Mountain is just one of many priceless treasures in the area.

**Unlike Heart Mountain, most of the Bighorn Basin's special places** such as McCullough Peaks, the Bighorn Front, Buffalo Creek, Sheep Mountain, the Owl Creek Front, the Absaroka and Beartooth fronts, and the colorful "15-mile" badlands area, **haven't yet been afforded any protections.**

This is one of the reasons Ridgway and other residents are engaging in an ongoing process to revamp the way public lands will be managed in the basin for the next 15 to 20 years.

"In all of these planning efforts I see an environmental voice saying, 'let's think about quality of life as we do all this planning,'" Ridgway said. "This voice has been underheard and undervalued for a long time."

Ridgway, like many folks in the area, said he is not "anti-energy," but he would like to see the federal government sufficiently address quality-of-life issues—such as air and water pollution, and socioeconomic

impacts—when it considers the pace of potential energy development in the basin.

"We ought to not get into a boom-bust thing," he said. "Long-term economic growth cannot be detached from the environment and quality of life. The two things have to be balanced."

As for Heart Mountain: Geologists now believe its limestone cap likely started its journey more than 40 million years ago, about 40 miles away, in what today is Yellowstone National Park.

One of the more evocative theories put forth over the years was that the rock layer was launched out of Yellowstone in a spectacular, mega-volcanic explosion, and it came to rest in the basin where we find it today.

The generally accepted theory nowadays is that the limestone slid the entire distance, as part of the largest known on-land rockslide.

The exact circumstances that led to the slide—and whether the event was slow or catastrophic—are still matters of discussion.

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## Western wonderland

Wyoming's Bighorn Basin is almost completely surrounded by mountains.

The jagged Absaroka and Beartooth ranges are to the west, the tall, rounded Bighorns are to the east and northeast, the Pryor Mountains to the north, and the Owl Creek and Bridger ranges form its southern border.

**The basin is celebrated for its world-class wildlife, rich history and geology, undulating plains, clean rivers and streams, colorful badlands, and stark, Western beauty.**

The basin's western edge is home to some of the most vital and thriving wildlife habitats in the world, and is part of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

The federal government owns and manages more than half of the surface land in the Bighorn Basin, and nearly three-quarters of the mineral estate.

The Bureau of Land Management is currently in the process of developing a new resource management plan for the basin, the overarching document that will guide land use decision-making for the agency for at least 15 to 20 years.

The updated plan will govern the management of about 3.2 million acres of BLM land and approximately 4.2 million acres of federal mineral estate.

This will be the first time a single plan will be written for the entire basin. In the past land management in the basin has been guided by smaller plans, each covering just a section of the landscape.

**“Long-term economic growth cannot be detached from the environment and quality of life. The two things have to be balanced.”**

—Hap Ridgway

Because of the magnitude and importance of this updated, single plan, the Outdoor Council has created a team to engage in the revision process as government officials move from the drafting stage to the final document.

Nathan Maxon, the Council's energy and public lands fellow, Jamie Wolf, its outreach coordinator, and Bruce Pendery, program director, are spearheading the organization's efforts to ensure that special places in the basin are protected from industrialization, and that the federal government hears and heeds locals' voices throughout the plan's drafting process.

## Local input

The Council's outreach coordinator, Jamie Wolf, grew up in Worland, in the Bighorn Basin.

The access she had as a child to the basin's canyons, creeks, open spaces, and wild badlands helped shape her values. And, she said, her outdoors experiences will always be an important part of the person she is.



**Jamie Wolf, right, the Council's outreach coordinator, camping in the Bighorn Basin at the age of 7.**

“Growing up, I loved all the backcountry dirt roads and day trips,” she said. “Just getting out for a hike, taking your dog, camping and backpacking, climbing a hill and reading a good book, playing made-up games with my brother and sister—and of course going fishing with my dad.”

Wolf hopes future generations will have the same kinds of opportunities that she had to explore and enjoy the basin, so they too can reap the lifelong benefits of an outdoor lifestyle—a lifestyle that is in many ways the foundation of Wyoming's heritage, she said.

Although basins in Wyoming tend to be less celebrated, in general, than the mountain ranges that bound them, they contain some of the state's most important winter and year-round wildlife habitats, water resources, and recreational landscapes.

The Council plans to highlight these values and others as it engages in the Bighorn Basin plan revision process, Wolf said.

## Cautionary tale

Approximately 40 percent of the BLM land in the Bighorn Basin is already leased for oil and gas, with about 212,000 acres of those leases currently producing hydrocarbons.

“Most of the foreseeable development is going to happen in the center of the basin, according to the BLM's analysis,” Nathan Maxon said.

Most of the center of the basin has at least some potential for oil and gas development, according to the BLM, while areas around the periphery of the basin have very low potential for oil and gas.

Maxon and Wolf have already hosted meetings in Cody, Powell, and Worland, with about 15 to 20 people attending each gathering.

Most of the locals who have participated so far have articulated concerns for wildlife, spoken of the importance of maintaining open spaces, and aired misgivings about some of the existing oil fields in the basin, some of which are producing and releasing polluted water.

For many who have attended the meetings, the recent explosion of drilling in the Jonah and Pinedale Anticline natural gas fields in

Sublette County has served as a cautionary tale for how *not* to manage oil and gas development.

“People tell us they don’t want to see a ‘Pinedale’ happen in the Bighorn Basin,” Maxon said.

## Planning in a ‘wildlife paradise’

Among the special places and crucial wildlife areas that locals and the Council have identified as too important to drill are the Beartooth Front, the Owl Creek Basin, the Bighorn Front from Ten Sleep north to Lovell, the locally treasured 15-mile badlands area, McCullough Peaks, and Sheep Mountain.

“For example, the southwesternmost portion of the basin is a wildlife paradise,” Maxon said. “It’s a pretty important hunting area. It’s full of crucial winter range for moose, bighorn sheep, elk, deer—bears and wolves are there too. It’s all un-leased, and we’d like to see it set aside for its crucial wildlife values.”

**Maxon—who is a Wyoming native and an avid hunter, angler, and climber—said the Council wants to ensure the BLM recognizes the importance of preserving recreational values as it draws up its new plan.**


Caleb Hiner is coordinating the BLM’s Bighorn Basin management plan revision. He said the concerns most commonly expressed by the public about the plan have to do with (1) where and how mining and oil and gas development should be allowed; (2) how open space will be managed; (3) which lands should have special designations with specialized management; (4) how local traditions can be retained; and (5) how local economies that rely on BLM-administered lands will be sustained.

“The BLM seeks to provide a balance between consumptive and non-consumptive uses,” Hiner said.

This new RMP will also be consistent with the BLM’s recently issued guidance on addressing sage-grouse habitat in Wyoming, Hiner said.

This suggests that the BLM could show some deference to the state of Wyoming in its new plan and include protections for sage-grouse core habitat areas as identified by Gov. Dave Freudenthal’s sage-grouse task force.

In the meantime, the Council will continue to engage with locals and decision-makers in an effort to ensure that the new plan for the Bighorn Basin values cultural and historical resources, big game winter ranges, wide-open spaces, hiking, fishing, hunting and camping opportunities, at least as much as it does energy development and other industrial activities.

We believe a balanced approach to land management requires as much. 



Ken Driese

## Three other ongoing and upcoming RMP revisions:

- **Lander**—currently in the drafting phase, 2.5 million acres.
- **Buffalo**—currently in the drafting phase, 800,000 acres.
- **Rock Springs**—scoping process will likely begin in 2010.

# Playing his part for Wyoming

PROFESSIONAL GUITARIST AND SONGWRITER TONY GILKYSON, although based in Los Angeles, has been fishing and exploring Wyoming for nearly four decades.

**“I discovered Wyoming through my father’s love of fishing and my mother’s love of the outdoors,” Gilkyson said. “Since I was young, Wyoming has inspired hope in my life and it continues to give so much to me. I can’t always be there, but I go to Wyoming every day, one way or another.”**



By hosting a benefit concert for the Wyoming Outdoor Council in Los Angeles, Tony raised the profile of the Council, along with important revenue, and spread the word about the work yet to be done to safeguard Wyoming’s heritage.

“If you love the Wyoming landscape, you lay yourself open to the pain of watching it be transformed by energy development. I understand the need for good jobs for the people of Wyoming, but the same people also deserve great places where they can go to connect with the natural world. **Wyoming is a miracle.** It is one of the best places on earth. It constantly reminds me of our solemn responsibility to be good stewards of this land, so the miracle will live on in the future.”

## Wyoming needs you!

Please join or renew your membership today.



## There have been many evenings

when I have the birds and the dogs headed safely back home, and I look around with the sun setting over the Absarokas, and see only the smallest trace of human presence. In those moments I realize how increasingly rare a place the Bighorn Basin is. Its high desert stark beauty may escape many, but the longer I live here, the more I treasure it. We're lucky to be surrounded by huge chunks of mainly intact public land. The Bighorn Basin has largely been spared the impact of development, which makes it all that much more important to protect. We are thankful that there are organizations like the Council working to preserve it.

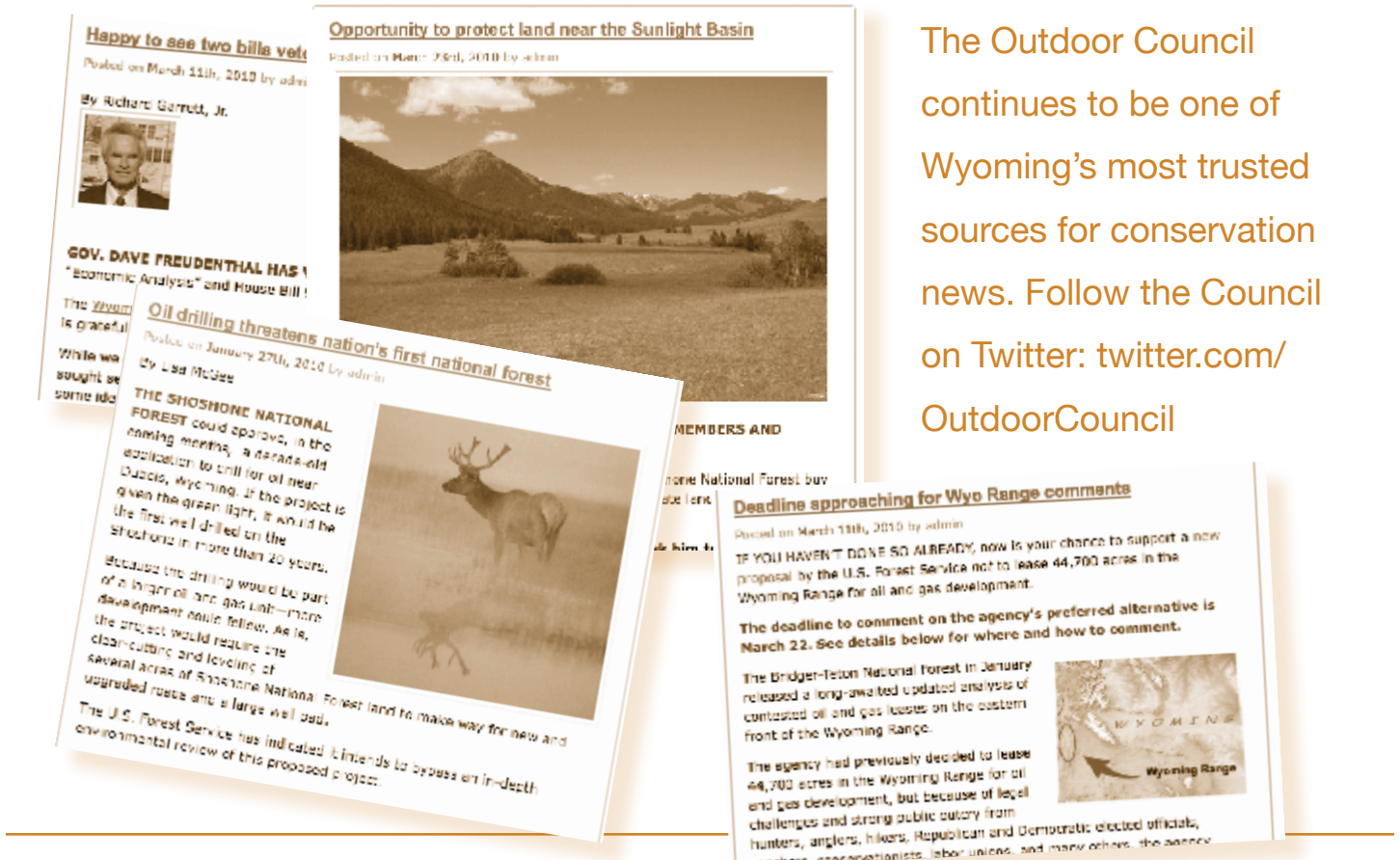
—Chris Pfister, Meeteetse



# Have you been missing out?

Don't forget to visit the Wyoming Outdoor Council blog for important up-to-the-minute information about Wyoming's landscapes, air, water, and wildlife: [www.wyomingoutdoorcouncil.org/blog/](http://www.wyomingoutdoorcouncil.org/blog/)

The Outdoor Council continues to be one of Wyoming's most trusted sources for conservation news. Follow the Council on Twitter: [twitter.com/OutdoorCouncil](https://twitter.com/OutdoorCouncil)



Mark Harvey

## Come Celebrate Council Founder Tom Bell!

Everyone is invited to celebrate with Tom Bell, founder of both the Outdoor Council and *High Country News*.

The party will be from 5 - 8 p.m., on Friday, April 30, at the Noble Hotel in Lander, co-hosted by the Wyoming Outdoor Council and *High Country News*.

Tom Bell was born in Wyoming on April 12, 1924. He grew up on a ranch outside of Lander, and is one of this state's original conservation leaders.

Please stop by to honor Tom and celebrate his lifelong commitment to making Wyoming and the world a better place.





# Wyoming Outdoor Council

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## Get Outdoors with the Outdoor Council!

Join us as we explore and celebrate the open spaces and wild places that make us proud to call Wyoming our home. Here are the outdoor events planned for 2010.

### Ferris Mountains Field Trip

**Saturday, May 22, and Sunday, May 23**

WE'LL RENDEZVOUS at Muddy Gap and set up camp along the base of the mountains. Activities will include birding, day hikes, evening wildlife viewing, and general exploration of this remote area with unique opportunities for scenic splendor and solitude. You'll have a chance to experience a variety of beautiful and varied landscapes that include rugged mountains, mixed forest, sagebrush, shrublands, lush riparian areas, and sand dunes. Stay tuned for more details.

### Workday with the Wyoming Conservation Corps

**Saturday, June 26**

ROLL UP YOUR SLEEVES and join the Council and the Wyoming Conservation Corps in South Pass City to help with historical site restoration, trail maintenance, and other work, followed by a camp-cooked dinner around the fire.

If you're having a good time, you are welcome to put up a tent and stay the night.

There will be a cap of 25 participants, first-come, first-served, so please let Jamie know as soon as you can commit.

### Backpacking and Birding In the Beartooth/Absaroka Fronts

**Saturday, July 24, and Sunday, July 25**

VENTURE INTO THE BEARTOOTH FRONT for a weekend of birding and backpacking. There will be a family-friendly option for those who wish to take a shorter, less strenuous version of the route, which will allow for looping back to the trailhead or stopping to camp at an earlier destination point. Alternatively, you can choose to embark on the full course and camp with us on Saturday night, before heading back the next morning.

### Ride the Red

**Saturday, August 28**

JOIN US on our semi-annual mountain bike tour of the Red Desert. This is a casual, accessible ride. Enjoy the opportunity to experience one of the last intact high-desert ecosystems in North America.

### River Restoration with the Laramie Rivers Conservation District

**Saturday, September 11**

WE WILL VOLUNTEER with the Laramie Rivers Conservation District to cut willows and restore river habitat.

### Wyoming Outdoor Council Annual Picnic, Casper

**Friday, September 17**

WE HOPE TO SEE YOU at our annual picnic! Come mingle with new and old faces of the Outdoor Council, celebrate our successes, and embrace our current and upcoming challenges.



Details and updates:

[wyomingoutdoorcouncil.org/html/act/act.shtml](http://wyomingoutdoorcouncil.org/html/act/act.shtml)

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