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BLM MINERAL LEASING

CUTTING OUT LANDOWNERS



MEAD GRUVER, ASSOCIATED PRESS

An oil well is seen east of Casper, Wyoming, in 2021.

Proposal to end notifications, limit comment period alarms ranchers

TEAL DAVIS
High Country News

Joe and Nancy Rankin’s ranch, just north of Douglas, Wyoming, has been in the family for 80 years. As Joe Rankin manages the ranch, he keeps track of any oil drilling underneath their land. But, due to a controversial federal proposal, his ability to influence or even comment on such operations may soon evaporate. His property and others nearby are already impacted by drilling.

“Some spots in my area right now look like a spaghetti bowl from all the pipelines that are going through,” Rankin said.

Tracking drilling, for Rankin,

also means managing environmental consequences and personal headaches. Leaks from abandoned or “orphaned” wells affect his cattle and cause bovine health issues, he said. At one point during a blizzard, his herd ended up stranded in a ditch where developers were trying to build a pipeline. Another time, he found Bureau of Land Management officials driving across his pasture and had to convince them that they should not be there.

Rankin’s property is a “split estate,” meaning that he and many of his neighbors do not own the rights to the minerals

underneath their ranches. The mineral rights — which are owned, in this case, by the BLM and leased to interested oil and gas companies — are separate from surface rights to the ranch’s grass, soil and buildings. And mineral rights are dominant over surface property rights, meaning that the companies that acquire them often have the ability to access surface property and house equipment there, even if the landowner objects.

Historically, the public has been given a total of 90 days to weigh in on any leasing of

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DAVID KORZILIUS, BLM/FlickrCC

A drill rig in Converse County.

MONTANA SCHOOL FUNDING

Draft bills could add \$200M to budget

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The work of Montana’s School Funding Interim Commission is complete after members voted last week to approve a final report including several draft bills, which if passed would add more than \$200 million to the education budget in Montana starting next summer.

The bill drafts, which will be considered during the upcoming 2027 Legislature, include appropriations for millions toward special education, at-risk youth, school facilities and English language learners, among other priorities, with some being one-time funds.

The commission didn’t, however, propose how the state should redesign and simplify the existing complicated funding formula, which was a hope many had for the commission to achieve.

A commission-funded study found there was a \$433 million difference in guaranteed state funding for districts and the total budget needed for Montana schools to be successful.

For districts who are able to levy their tax base to get their funding to 100%, the study found there was still a \$213 million shortfall.

If all the proposed appropriations in the commission’s bill drafts pass as they are outlined currently, there will be an estimated \$215 million influx of funds in the first fiscal year after the legislative session and nearly \$300 million in the fiscal year after that.

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New USFS rules could boost OMVs

‘Unnecessary regulations’ to be eliminated in rewrite

BILLINGS GAZETTE

The Forest Service sent conservation groups scrambling for the second time this week, announcing on Friday an intent to rewrite its Travel Management Rule to eliminate “unnecessary regulations on the use of off-road vehicles on public lands.”

The agency is responsible for administering more than 380,000 miles of road and 165,000 miles of trails.

“Public lands are for public use, yet for too long, Forest Service regulations have stood in the way of public recreation access,” Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Stephen A. Vaden said in a press release. “With this step, USDA begins the process of ensuring the public can access their forests and USDA can better manage the lands with which the public has entrusted it.”

The announcement came only days after the agency announced its plan to repeal the 2001 Roadless Rule. The rule “established broad prohibitions on road construction, road reconstruction, and timber harvesting within inventoried roadless areas on National Forest System lands,” according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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