



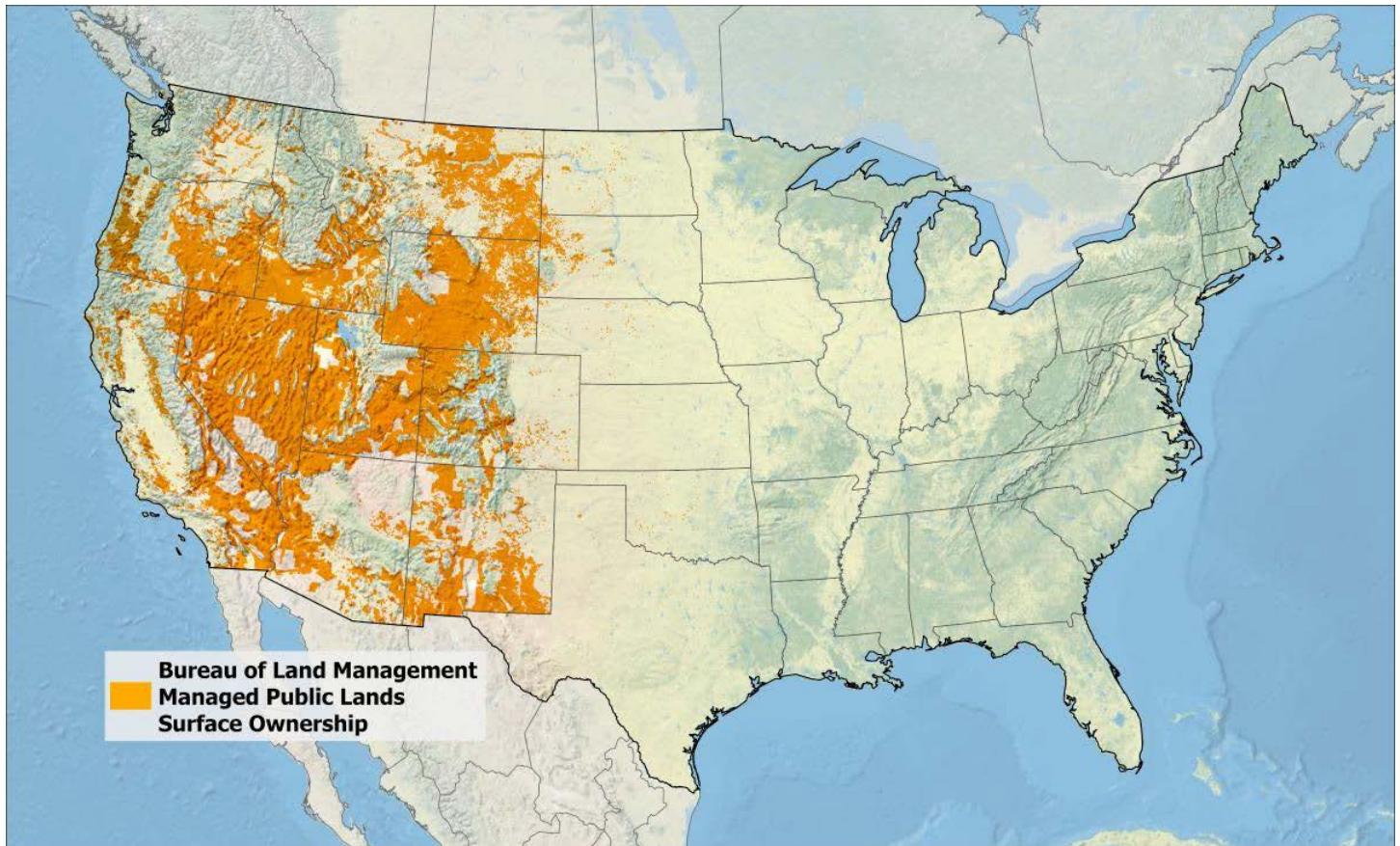
# Little Potential for Development, High Potential for Harm

How Speculative Leasing for Oil and Gas Threatens Public Lands, Waters, Fish and  
Wildlife

National Wildlife Federation, Rocky Mountain Wild, and Trout Unlimited

June 13, 2022

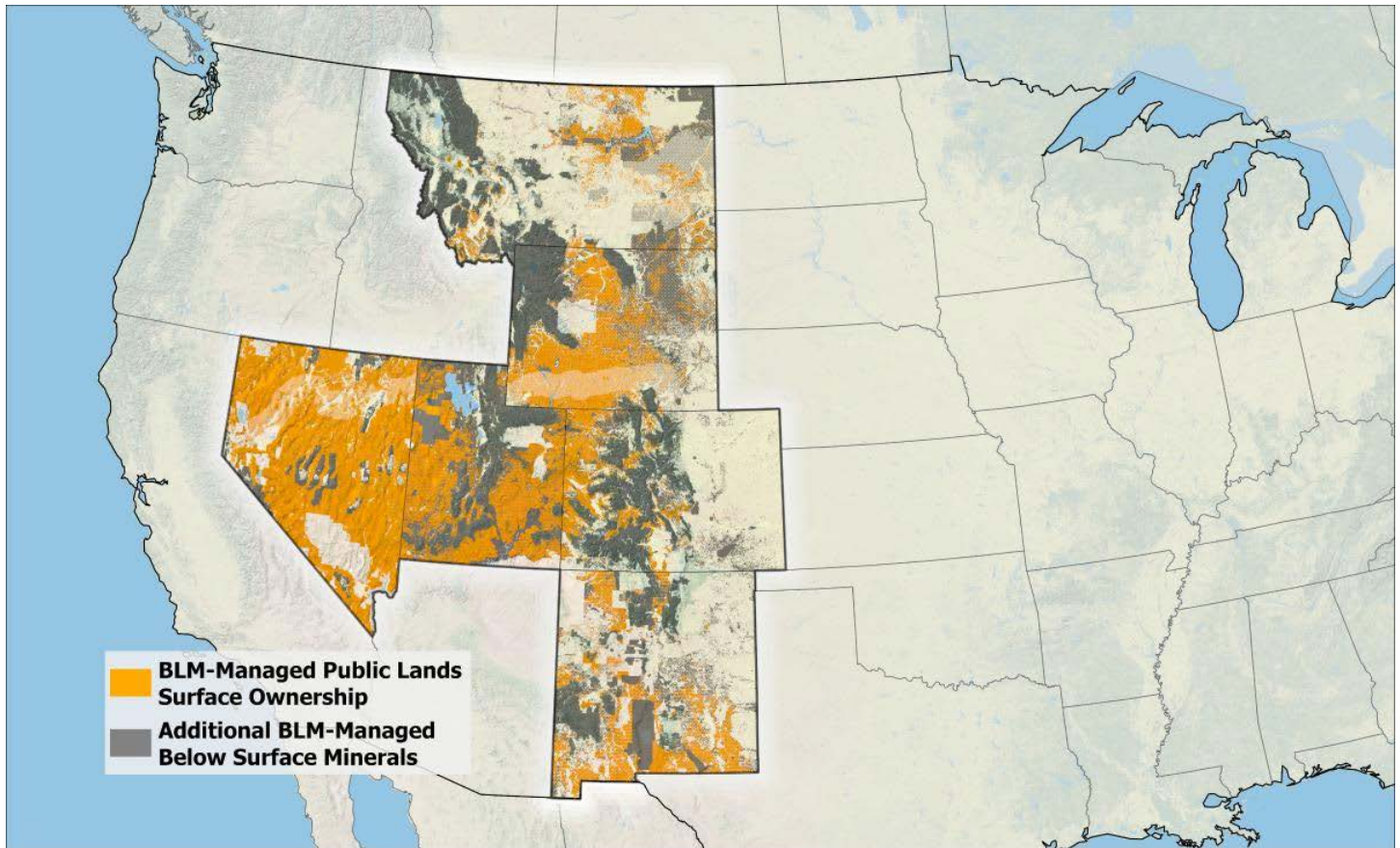
How did we get here?



The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) oversees 245 million acres of federal public lands across the western United States – an area nearly the size of Texas and California put together.

*Click the button to the right to learn more.*





Along with these 245 million acres of public lands, BLM also manages an additional 700 million acres of the nation's below-surface minerals.

BLM is tasked with managing all of these lands to protect and maintain the multiple uses and resources they offer. Resource extraction is supposed to be balanced with wildlife conservation, grazing, outdoor recreation, and cultural and historic resource preservation.

However, oil and gas development – even where public lands have little to no potential for drilling – has long been prioritized on BLM lands.



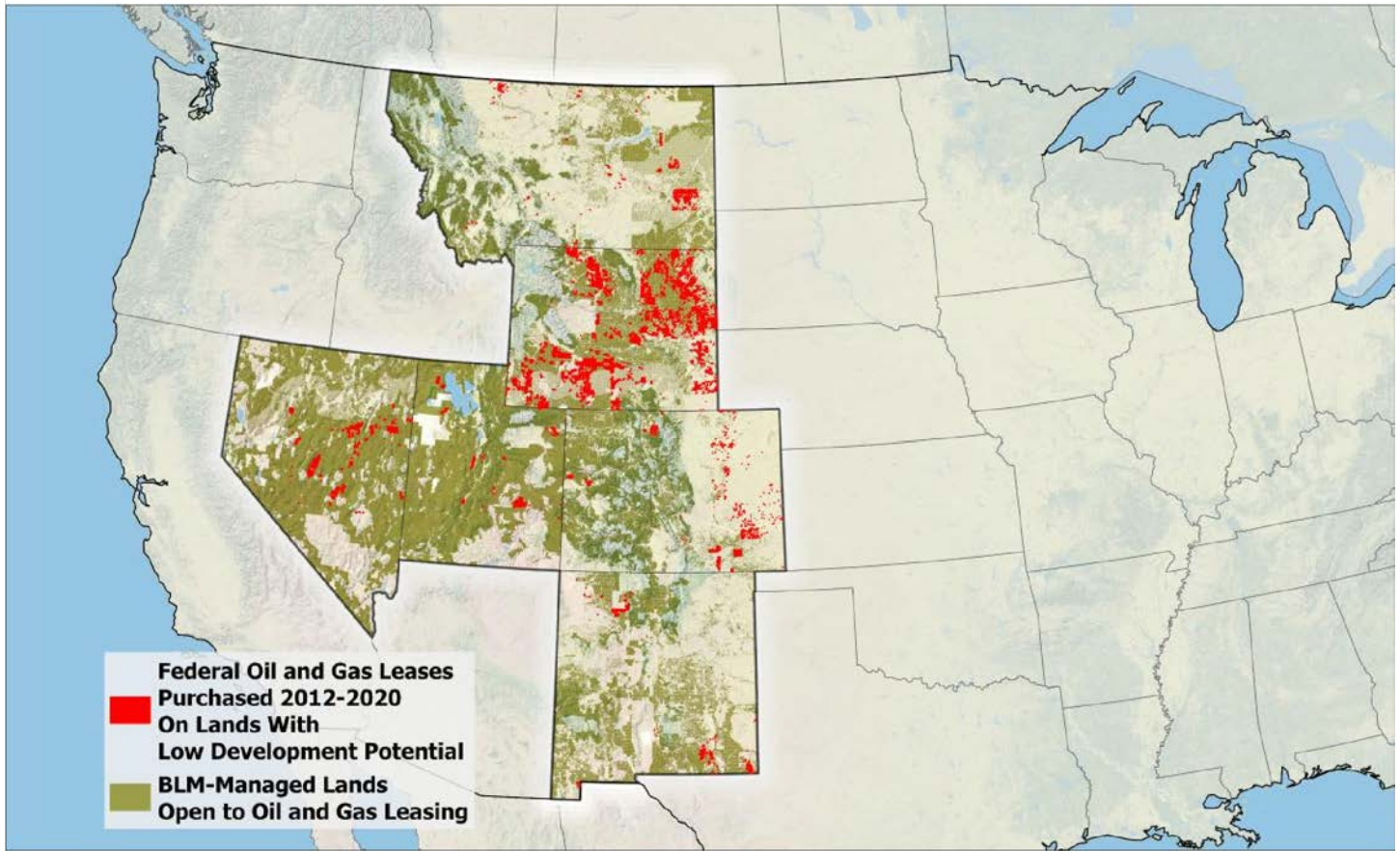
Before drilling for oil and gas can even occur, there are two pivotal stages in the process: **planning**, where BLM determines whether public lands should be *opened* for development, and then **leasing**, where the agency determines whether public lands should be *offered* for development.





At the planning stage, BLM has historically chosen to open public lands to oil and gas development.

As a result, more than 90 percent of BLM-managed public lands are currently open to leasing, even though the vast majority have low or no potential for oil and gas development.



Historically at the leasing stage, BLM doesn't even look at the potential of nominated lands to actually produce oil or gas when deciding where to offer lands for lease.

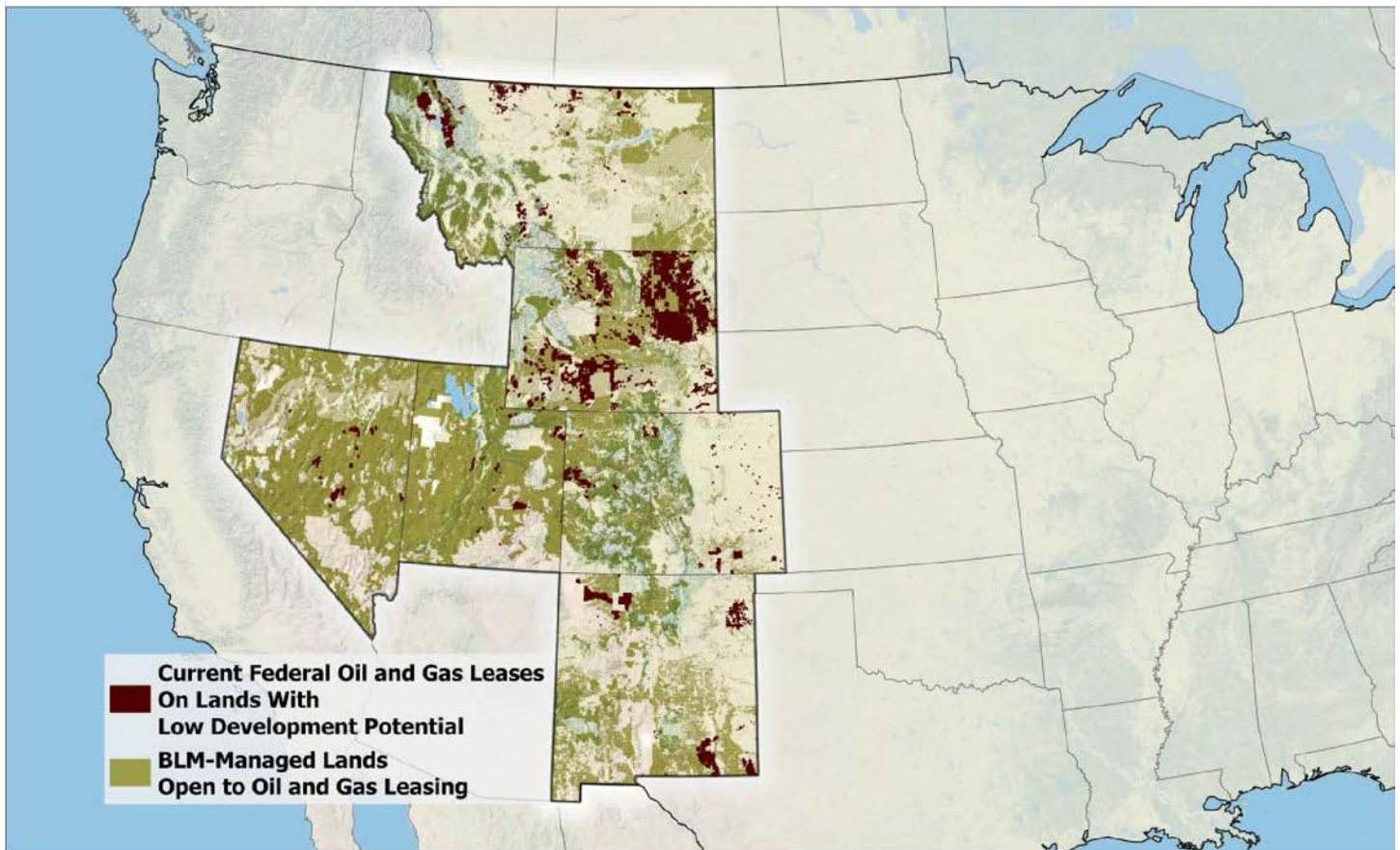
Between 2012 and 2020, the oil and gas industry leased nearly 5 million acres of our public lands that have little potential for oil and gas development. Unfortunately, this leasing occurred in valuable fish and wildlife habitat as well.





BLM's current policies actually encourage speculation on public lands that have low or no drilling potential. Under these policies, any member of the public can nominate – for free and anonymously – any parcel of public land for leasing. Then they can purchase leases at auction for just \$2.00 an acre, and buy leases that don't sell at auction for even less through a leasing practice known as noncompetitive leasing.

These outdated policies enable land speculators to cheaply nominate, obtain, and hold leases even if they make no effort to actually develop them.



Leasing on lands with little or no drilling potential puts our public lands at risk, because any leases – even those that aren’t developed – can make it difficult for BLM to manage public lands for their other, more valuable uses such as conservation and recreation.





## What's at Risk?

**55%** of federal oil and gas leases sold since 2012 are on lands with little to no potential for oil and gas development and production.

The number of leases on low development potential lands – which generate minimal revenues for taxpayers but pose significant risks to sensitive landscapes – is increasing. This is consistent with BLM’s statement that the “most attractive federal lands” for oil and gas have already been leased, and those that have not been leased have lower potential for oil and gas development.



Since 2012,  
**60%** of federal oil and gas leases sold  
for the minimum bid of \$2/acre  
were on public lands with little  
to no potential for oil and gas  
development and production.

BLM is supposed to manage our public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. But leasing lands with low potential for oil and gas development not only conflicts with that mission, it also diverts agency resources away from other conservation and recreation management priorities. Leases sold for the decades-old minimum bid of \$2 per acre are primarily sold on lands with low development potential. Further, these leases generate 41 times less revenue for the American public – you and me – than leases sold for high bids.

OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS,  
LEASES ON PUBLIC LANDS WITH  
LITTLE TO NO OIL AND GAS DEVELOPMENT  
POTENTIAL HAVE MADE UP...

**66%** OF LEASES SOLD  
NONCOMPETITIVELY

But the wasteful policies don't stop there. Over the past decade, speculative leases on lands with low or no development potential also made up two-thirds of the leases sold noncompetitively – a wasteful leasing practice that rarely results in development but prevents our public lands from being adequately managed for the more valuable resources they offer, like important fish and wildlife habitat.





Perhaps most troubling is the fact that lands with little to no development potential frequently have much greater value for conservation that goes unprioritized.

For example, there are currently 5.1 million acres of important greater sage-grouse habitat, 1.8 million acres of sensitive big game habitat, and more than 1 million acres of native trout watersheds all tied up in federal oil and gas leases on lands with little or no potential for oil and gas development.



## Places at Risk

Sensitive landscapes across the West have been put at risk by leases that have been issued on public lands possessing little to no drilling potential. These same lands are home to many important fish and wildlife species. Keep scrolling to learn more about the iconic places threatened by irresponsible oil and gas leasing.

## Ruby Mountains, Nevada

*The Ruby Mountains stretch across some 80 miles of southern Nevada, reaching elevations over 11,000 feet and providing a home to a multitude of fish and wildlife, including one of the largest mule deer herds in the state.*



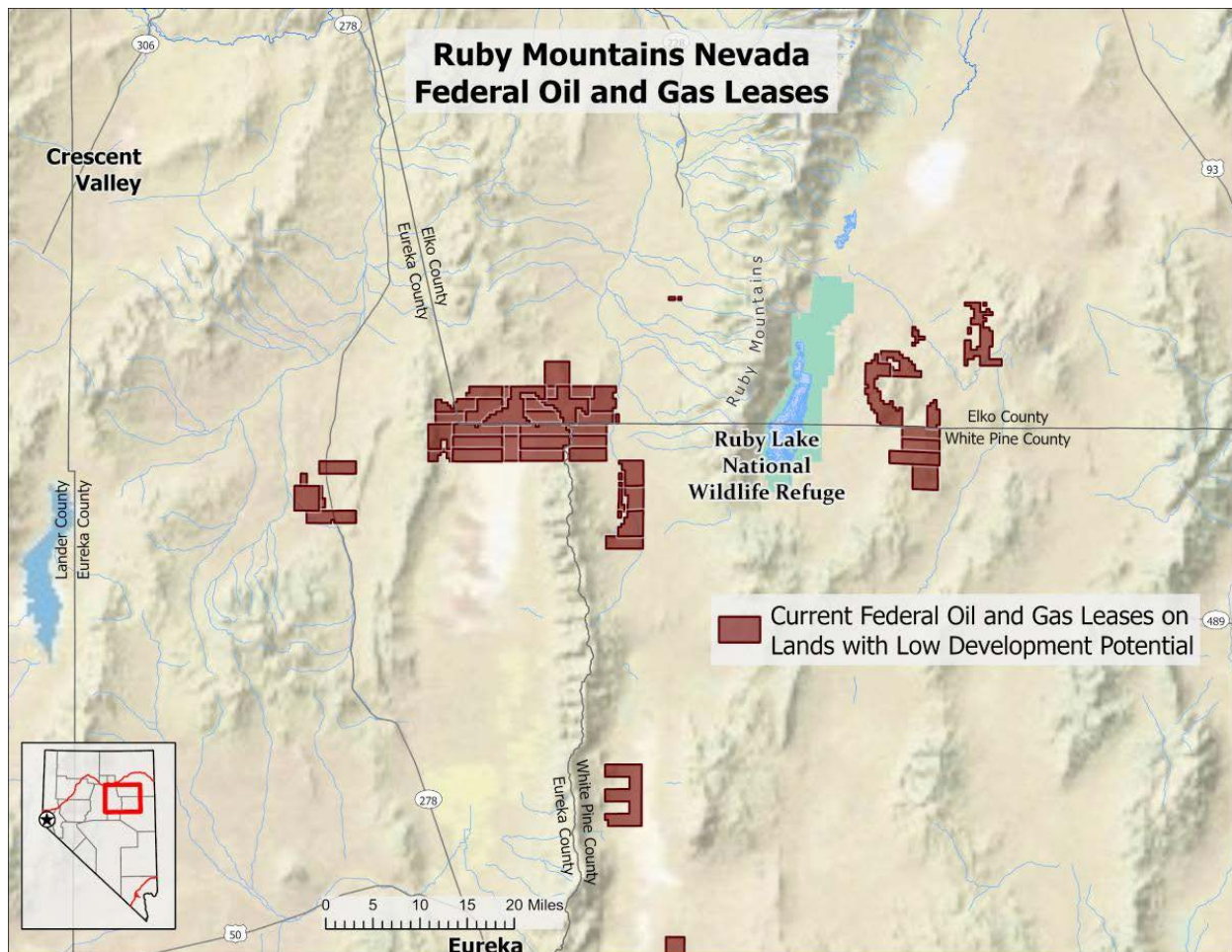


The Ruby Mountains rise out of the arid basin and range country that defines Northern Nevada. This is Duka Doya – Shoshone for “snow capped” – and it is the ancestral homeland of the Te-Moak band of Western Shoshone. The stunning proportion of these mountains among this desert landscape gave them the nickname the Swiss Alps of America.

The snow melt from these rugged mountains feeds cold, clear streams and the springs that make the adjacent Ruby Marshes home to trout and millions of migrating waterfowl who come to the Ruby Mountain National Wildlife Refuge for respite along the Pacific Flyway. Far above the valley floor, the Ruby Mountains are home to abundant wildlife including sage grouse, bighorn sheep, and the state’s largest mule deer herd. Those ready to trek to the area will find world class hunting and fishing.

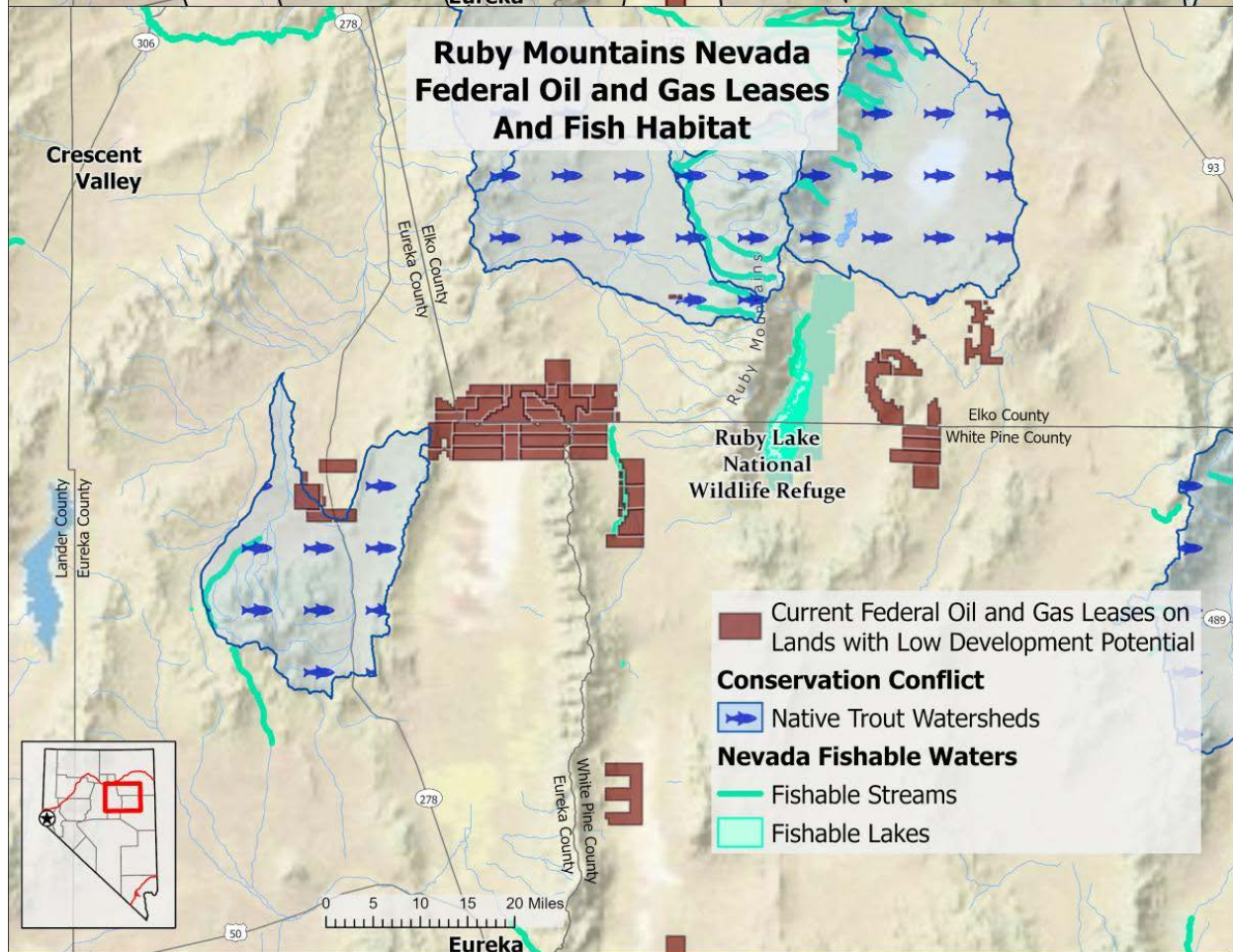
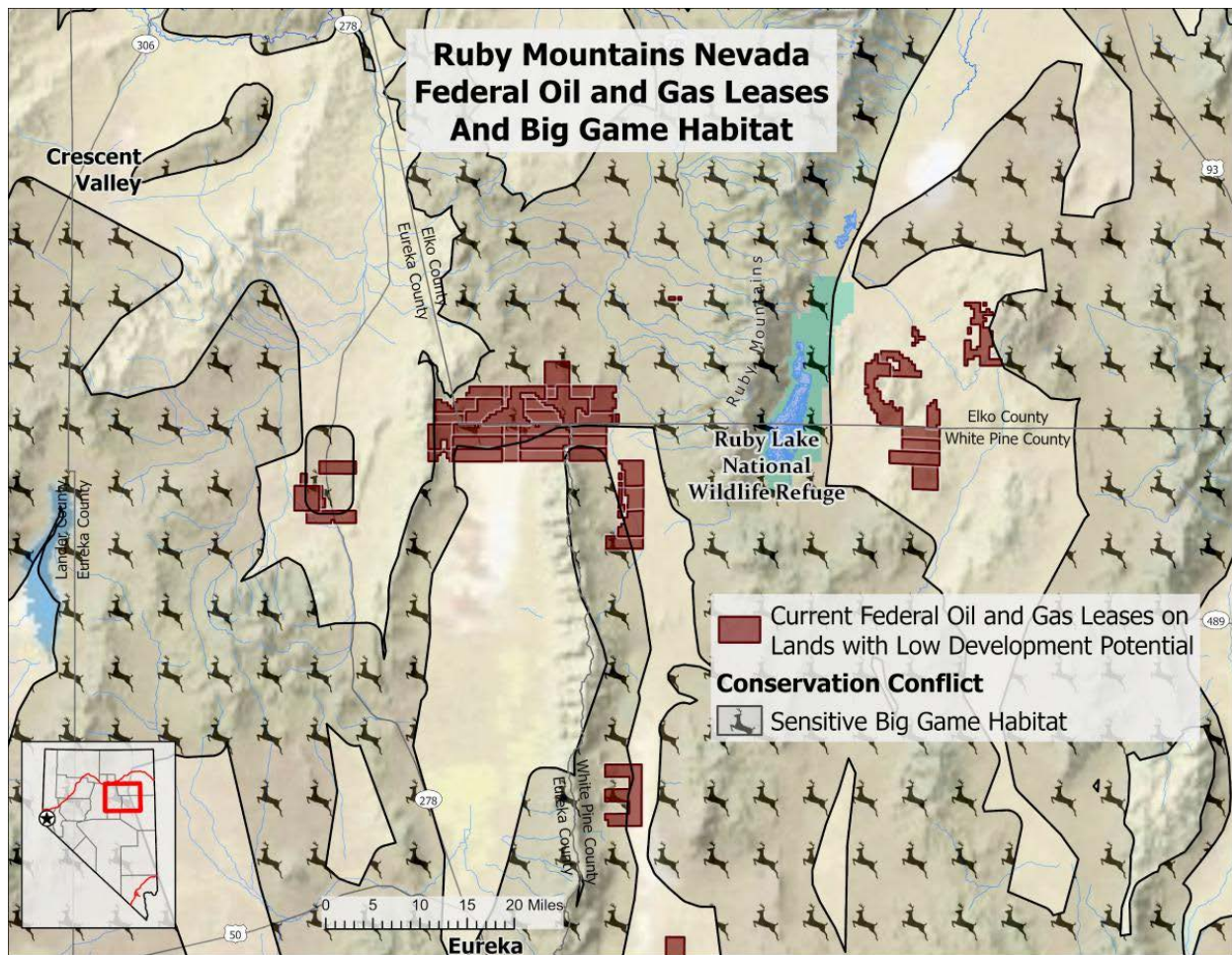
Oil and gas development is not compatible with this critical landscape. The value of the Ruby Mountains is in its water, fish, and

wildlife – not under the ground. The potential for meaningful energy development in the Rubies is extremely low, and yet there are currently more than 105,000 acres of leases along the southern portion of the Ruby Mountains on lands with low or no potential for oil and gas development, nearly all of which have been sold since 2012 and are putting this treasured landscape at unnecessary risk. Recent nominations from industry for leasing in the region were met with public outcry from the nearby communities and Tribal governments who cherish this unique ecosystem.

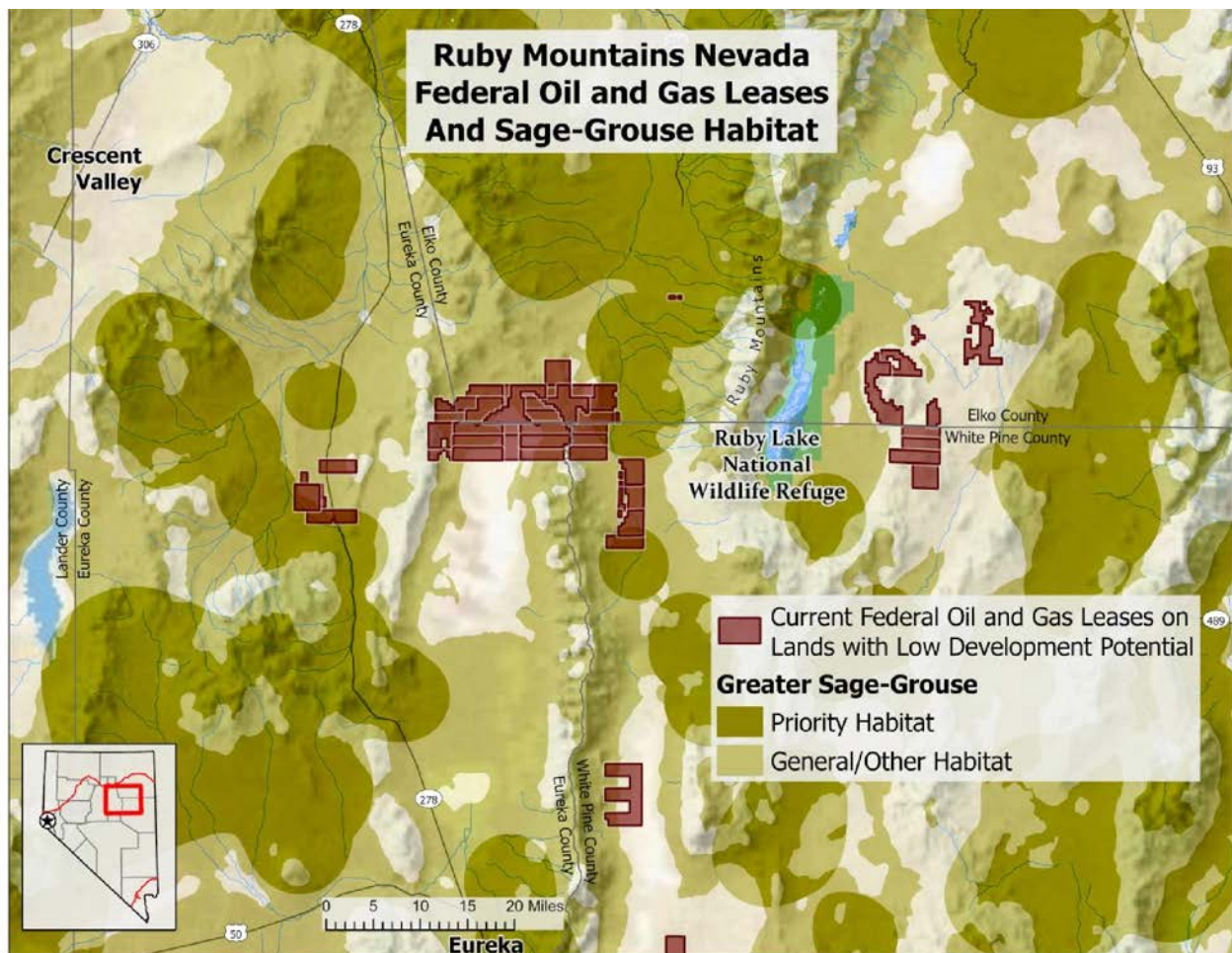


These maps show where oil and gas leases are currently threatening the iconic Ruby Mountains landscape. *Click the button on the right* to see where leases are putting important habitat for big game, native trout and coldwater fish, and greater sage-grouse at unnecessary risk.









## Seedskadee National Wildlife Refuge, Wyoming

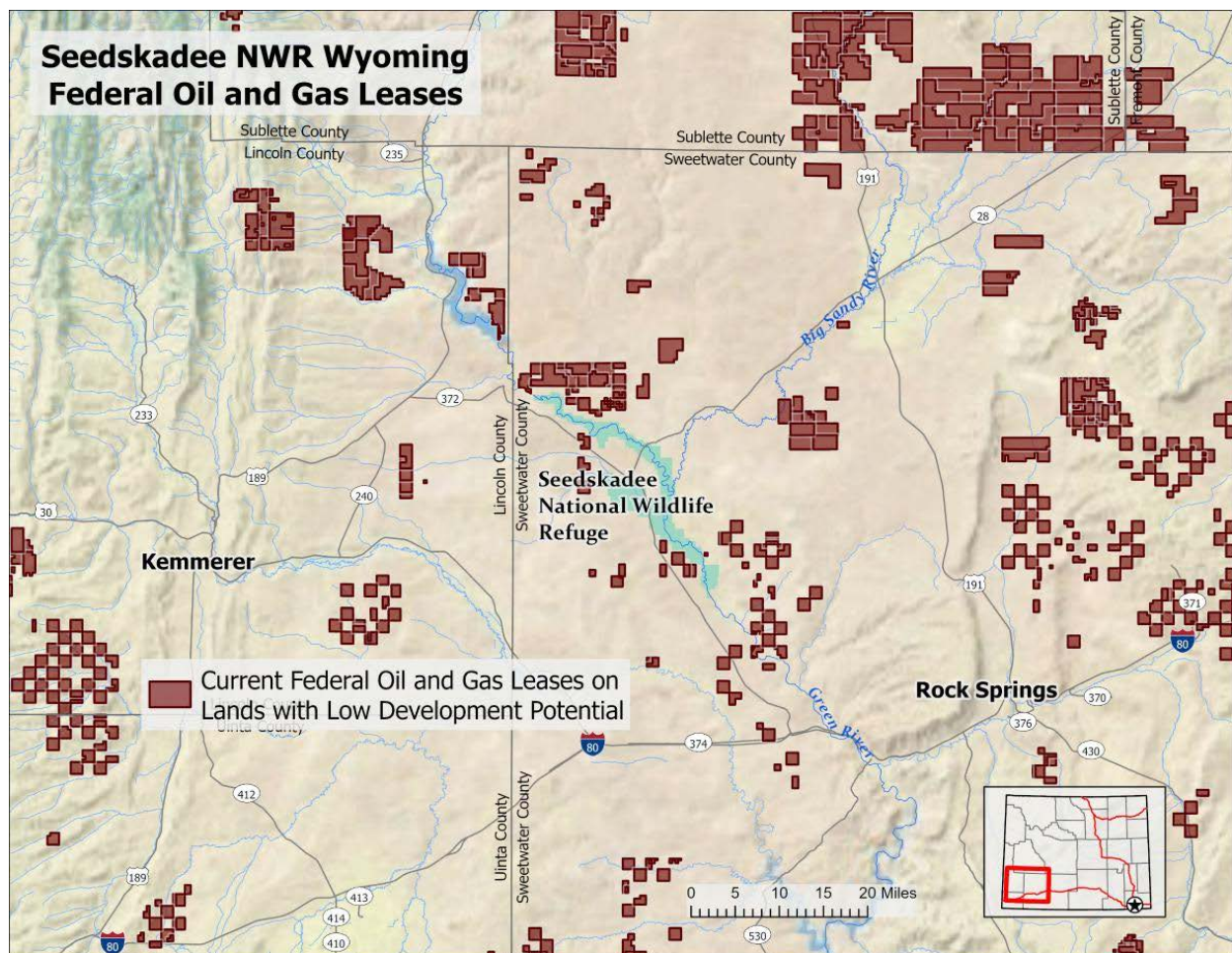
*Translated from the Shoshone word “Sisk-a-dee-agie,” which means river of the prairie hen or sage grouse, Wyoming’s Seedskadee National Wildlife Refuge is a remote haven for wildlife, fish, and birds that can be found around every riverbend.*



Among the high desert plains of southwest Wyoming sits a 27,000-acre oasis for over 300 species of wildlife. Not for the faint-of-heart angler, as winds and mosquitoes test the patience of many, Seedskadee National Wildlife Refuge is truly a wild place. The refuge runs along 36 miles of the Green River that rainbow and cutthroat trout, as well as kokanee salmon, call home. If you can make it through the elements, you'll be retelling your epic tales of angling and wildlife viewing on Seedskadee for years to come.

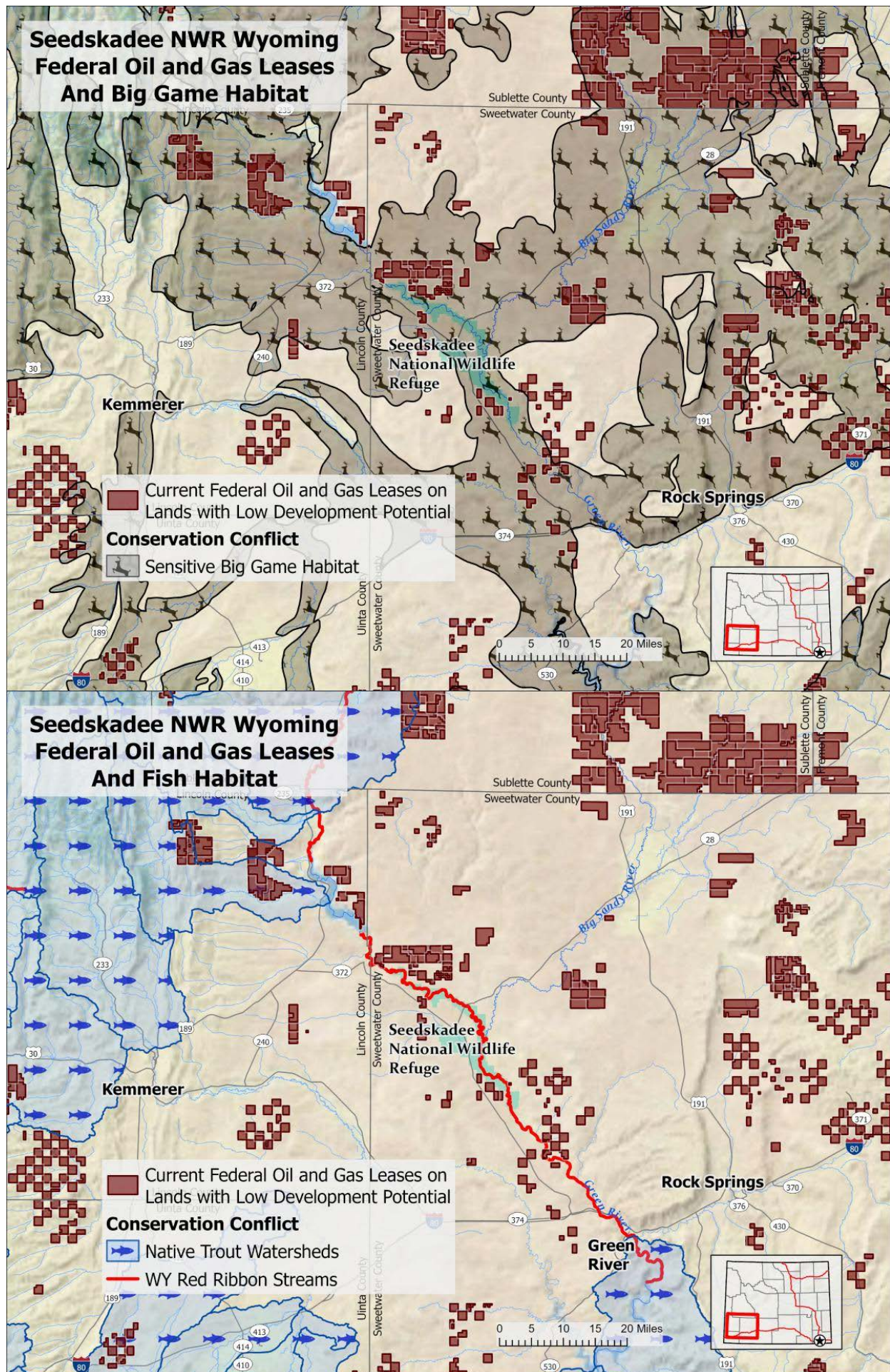
However, balancing stewardship and recreation with energy development is a demanding task in a state like Wyoming that has it all. Just around Seedskadee, there are currently 287 leases on lands with little to no potential for oil and gas development, covering over 361,000 acres. More than 227,000 acres of these leases have been sold within the past decade alone. The closer these leases and other energy development get to Seedskadee National Wildlife Refuge's doorstep, the more fragile the health of this incredible place becomes.



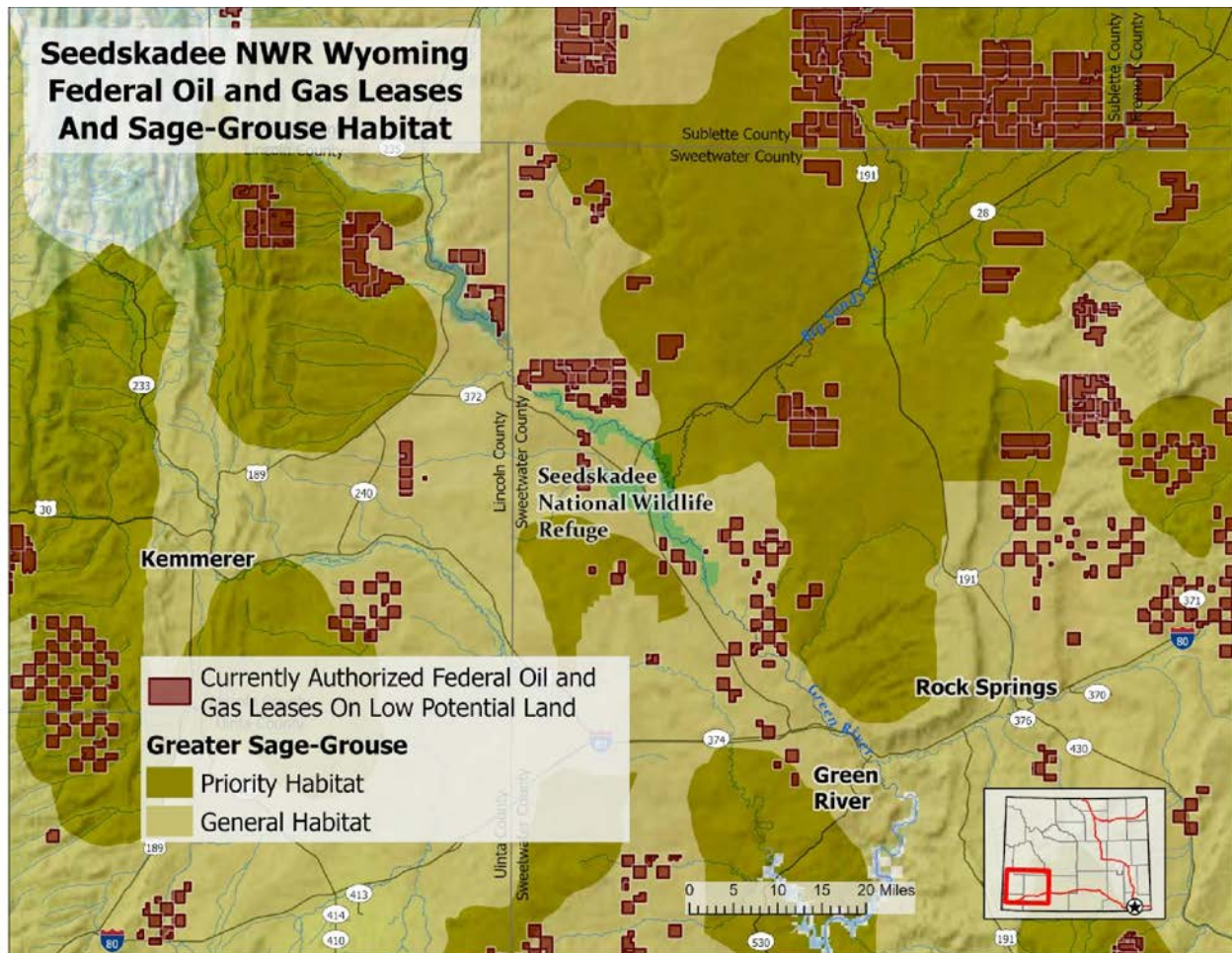


These maps show where oil and gas leases are currently threatening this dynamic wildlife haven. ***Click the button on the right*** to see where leases surrounding Seedskadee National Wildlife Refuge are putting important habitat for big game, native trout and coldwater fish, and greater sage-grouse at unnecessary risk.









## North Park, Colorado

*Colorado's North Park region offers expansive access to public lands to hunt, fish, hike, and take in wildlife.*



The North Park region of Colorado is sometimes called the “Serengeti of Colorado” because it is filled with abundant wildlife, including moose, elk, mule deer and so much more. The high-elevation valley stretches between the snow-capped peaks of the Park Range, the Medicine Bow and Rabbit Ears mountains and contains numerous creeks and streams which form the headwaters of the North Platte River. The North Platte flows north out of Jackson County into Wyoming.

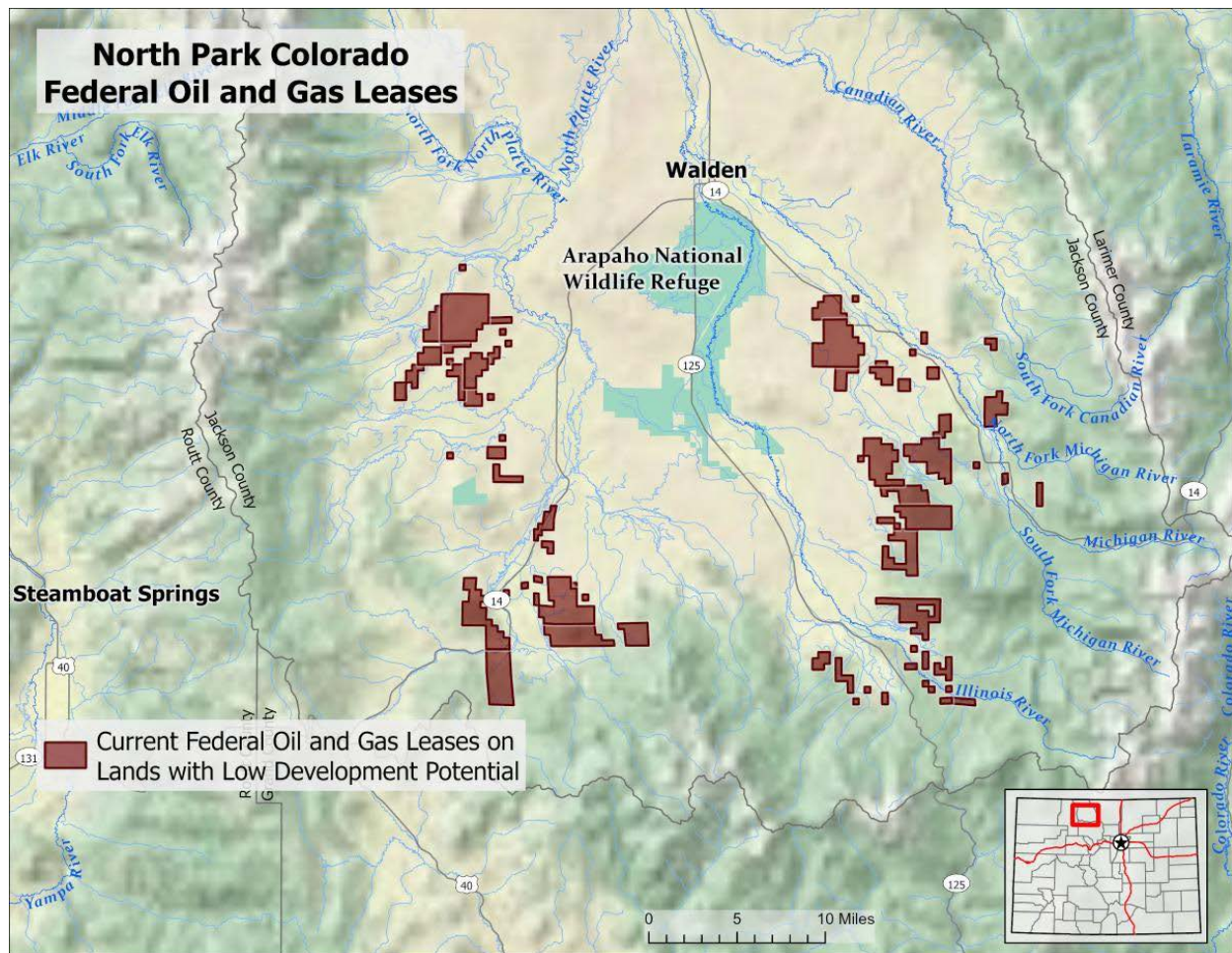




Anglers can have great success fishing for brook, rainbow, cutthroat and brown trout. The hunting, fishing, camping, hiking and wildlife watching in North Park is some of the best in Colorado and helps fuel a robust outdoor recreation economy for local communities. In fact, hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation account for almost half of Jackson County's economic activity.

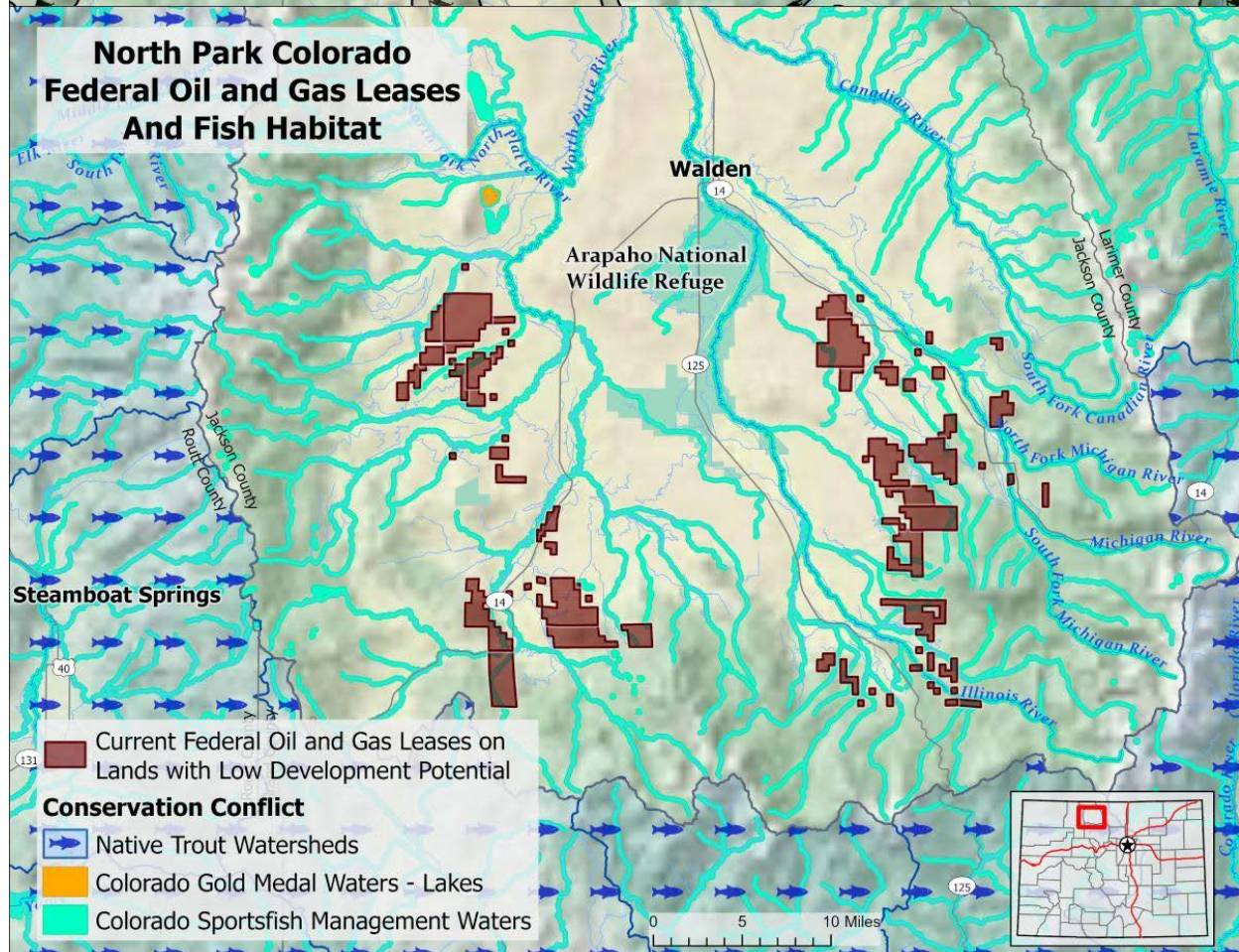
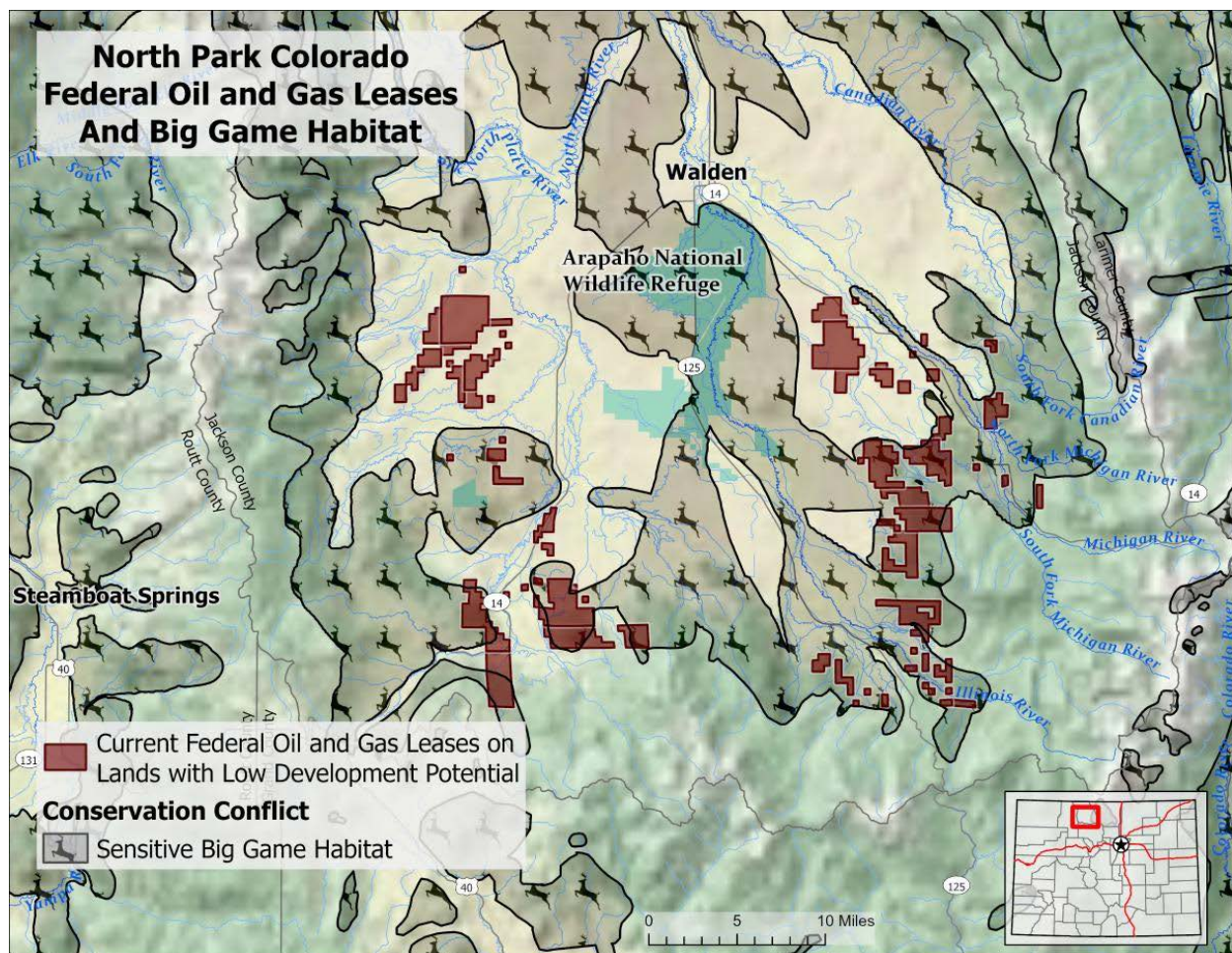
There are currently more than 29,000 acres of oil and gas leases in North Park on lands that have little chance of actually recovering any oil or gas, including 15,000 acres that have been auctioned off over the past decade alone. Ending the practice of speculative leasing could help expand opportunities for conservation and recreation for all who enjoy this wildlife mecca.



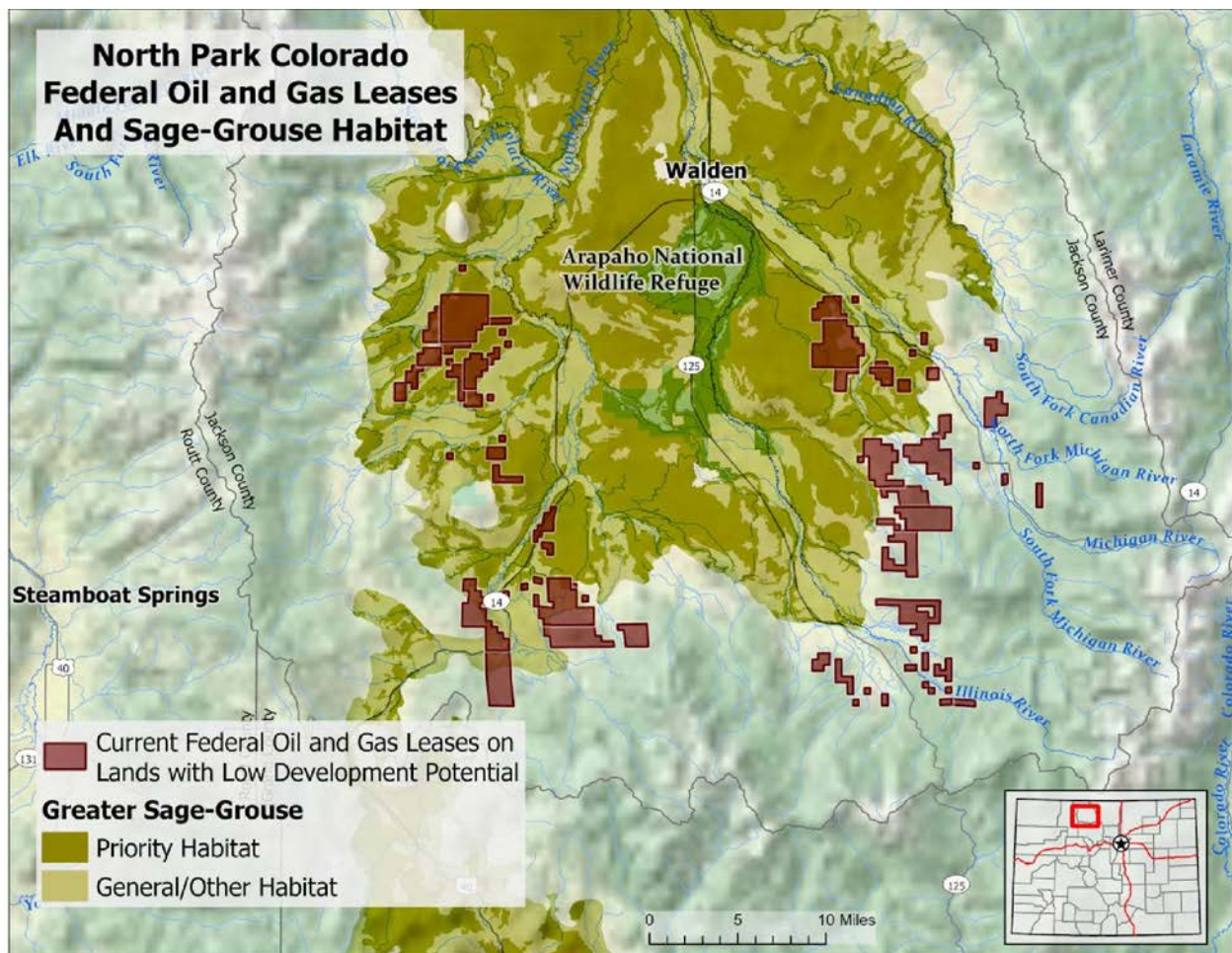


These maps show where oil and gas leases are currently threatening the idyllic North Park landscape. *Click the button on the right* to see where wasteful leasing is putting important habitat for big game, native trout and coldwater fish, and greater sage-grouse at unnecessary risk.









## San Pedro Parks Wilderness and Rio Puerco, New Mexico

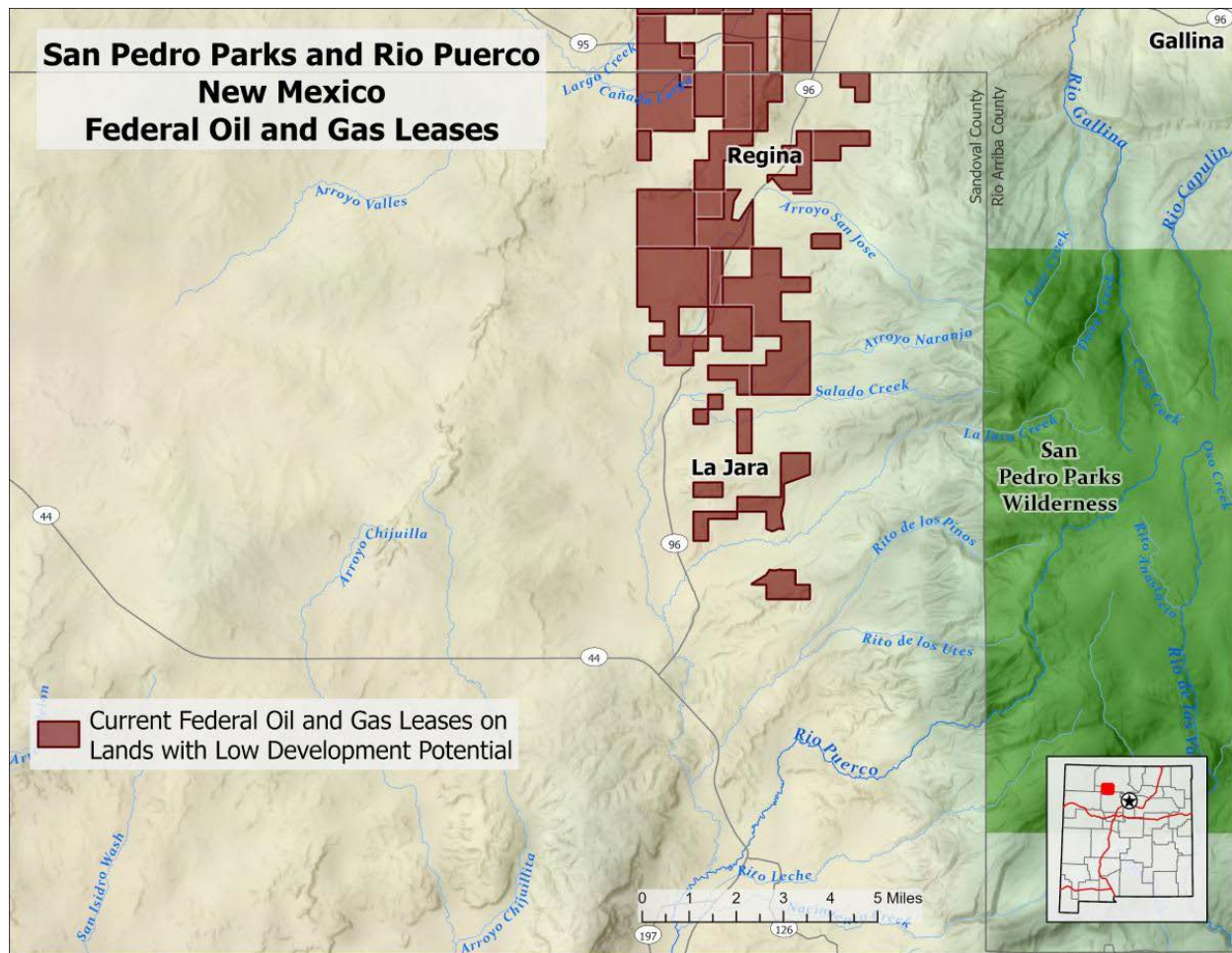
*Tucked inside New Mexico's Santa Fe National Forest lies the San Pedro Parks Wilderness and Rio Puerco watershed. The area is home to abundant fish and wildlife, and is an important watershed threatened by oil and gas development.*



The San Pedro Parks Wilderness area is located on the western edge of the Santa Fe National Forest in New Mexico and encompasses the Rio Puerco watershed. It is home to a diverse array of wildlife including elk, deer, bear, mountain lion, and wild turkey. Anglers flock to the region to catch brown trout and Rio Grande cutthroat trout. The wilderness is known for its large grassy meadows ringed by 10,000 foot mountains. The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail crosses through the wilderness, making it a mecca for backpackers in the summer and cross-country skiers in winter.

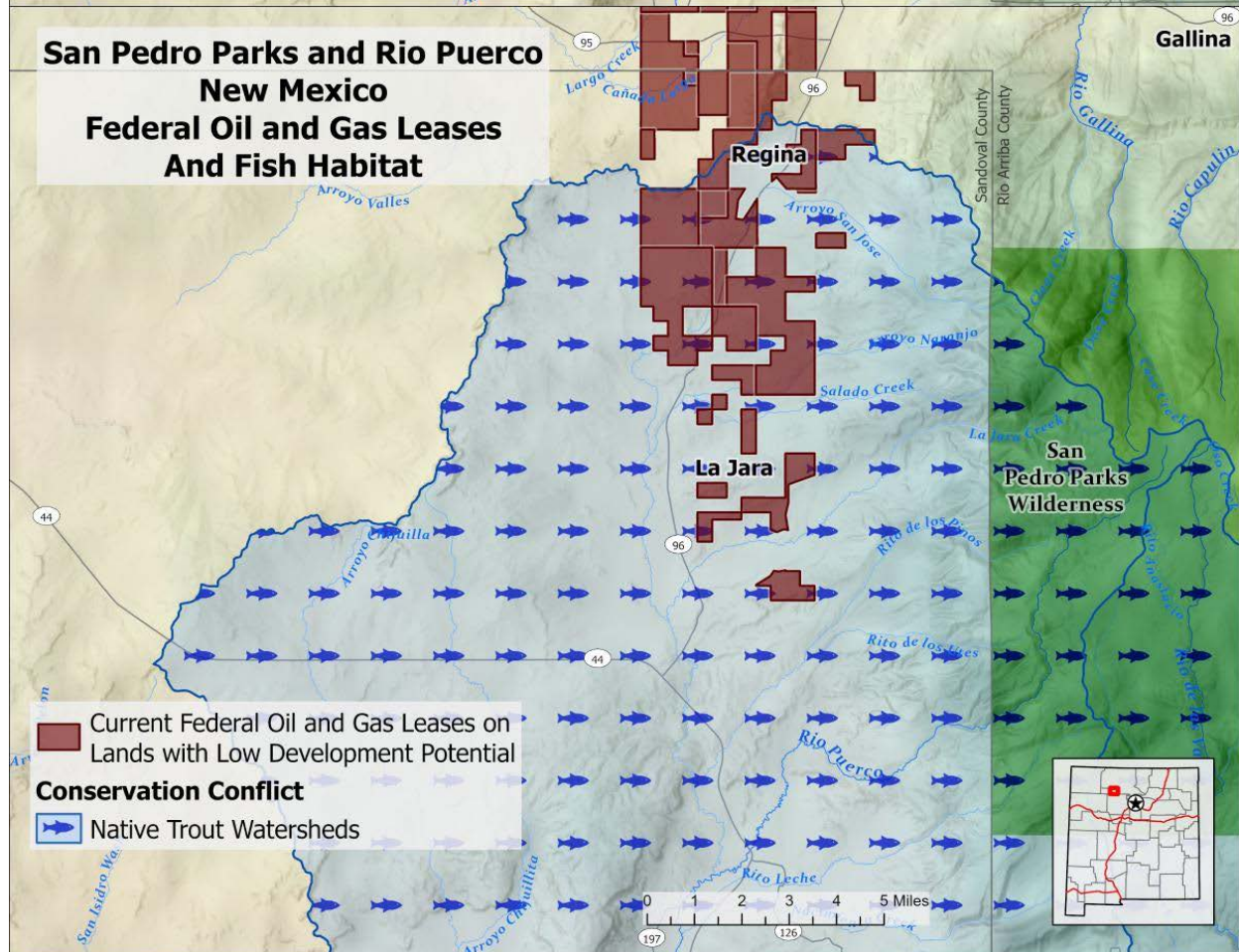
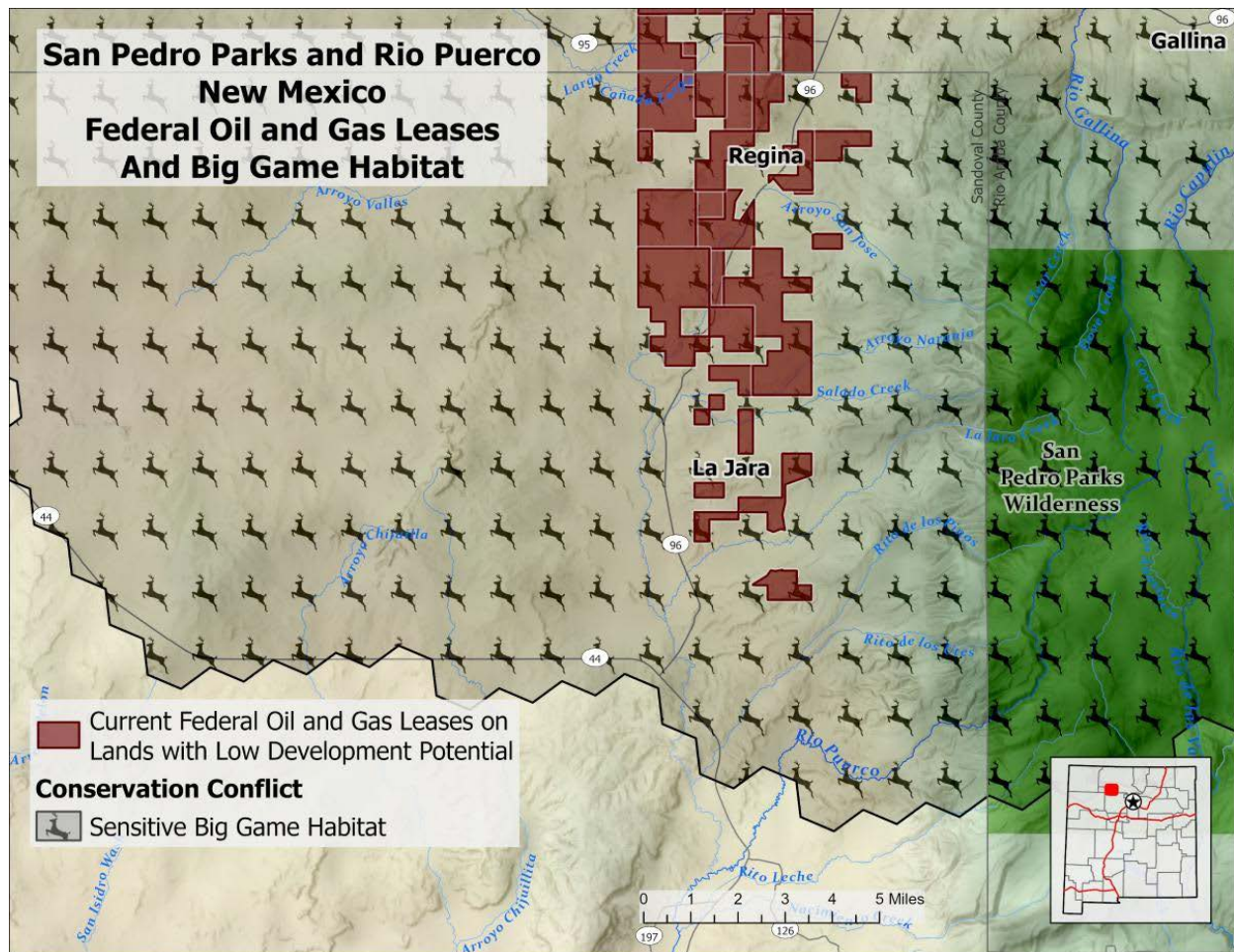
The Rio Puerco, a tributary to the Rio Grande River, is an important watershed and should not be considered for oil and gas development, which would not only threaten wildlife but drinking water supplies for downstream communities. Some 9,700 acres are currently leased for energy development, despite the fact that there is little potential of finding oil and gas in the area.





These maps show where oil and gas leases are currently threatening this incredible landscape. ***Click the button on the right*** to see where wasteful leasing is putting important habitat for big game and native trout and coldwater fish at unnecessary risk.







## Tendoy Mountains, Montana

*A small mountain range in Beaverhead County, Montana, the Tendoy's high cliffs, steep ledges, and windswept ridges are home to a myriad of fish and wildlife.*



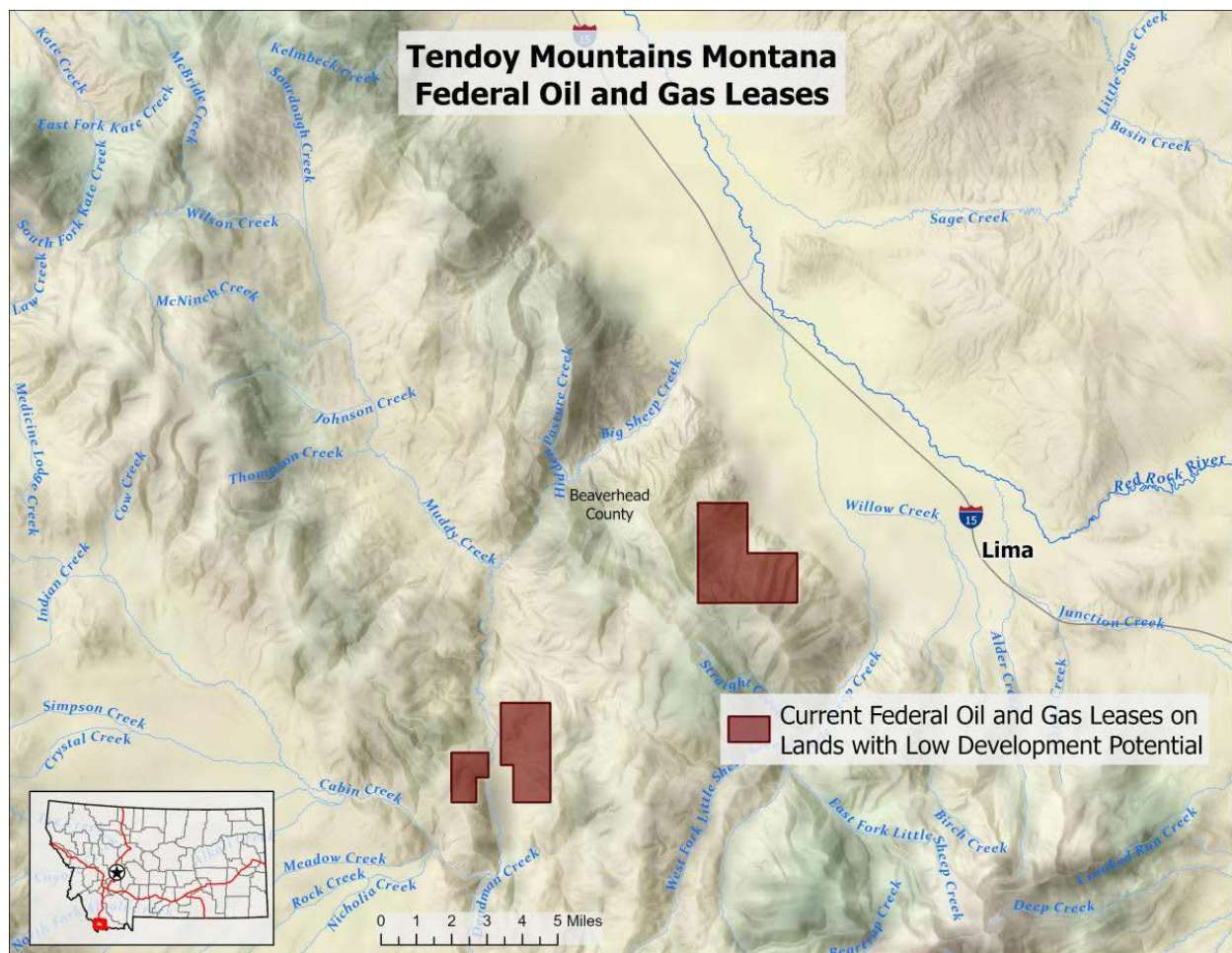
The Tendoy Mountains in Beaverhead County, Montana are a small, remote range near the Idaho border where elk, moose, mule deer and mountain goats roam and where bighorn sheep were recently reintroduced. High cliffs, steep ledges, and windswept ridges tower over the nearby grasslands and sagebrush. The Red Rock River flows on the eastern edge and is filled with cutthroat and rainbow trout. You can also find Arctic grayling in the area — a beautiful species of fish with a sail-like fin and colorful markings that is a species whose abundance in native habitat is of known conservation concern in Montana.



The wildlife and recreation opportunities are abundant in this watershed. According to a recent report from the Montana Wildlife Federation and the University of Montana, hunting and angling in Beaverhead County generates over \$167 million each year, creating more than 1,400 jobs.

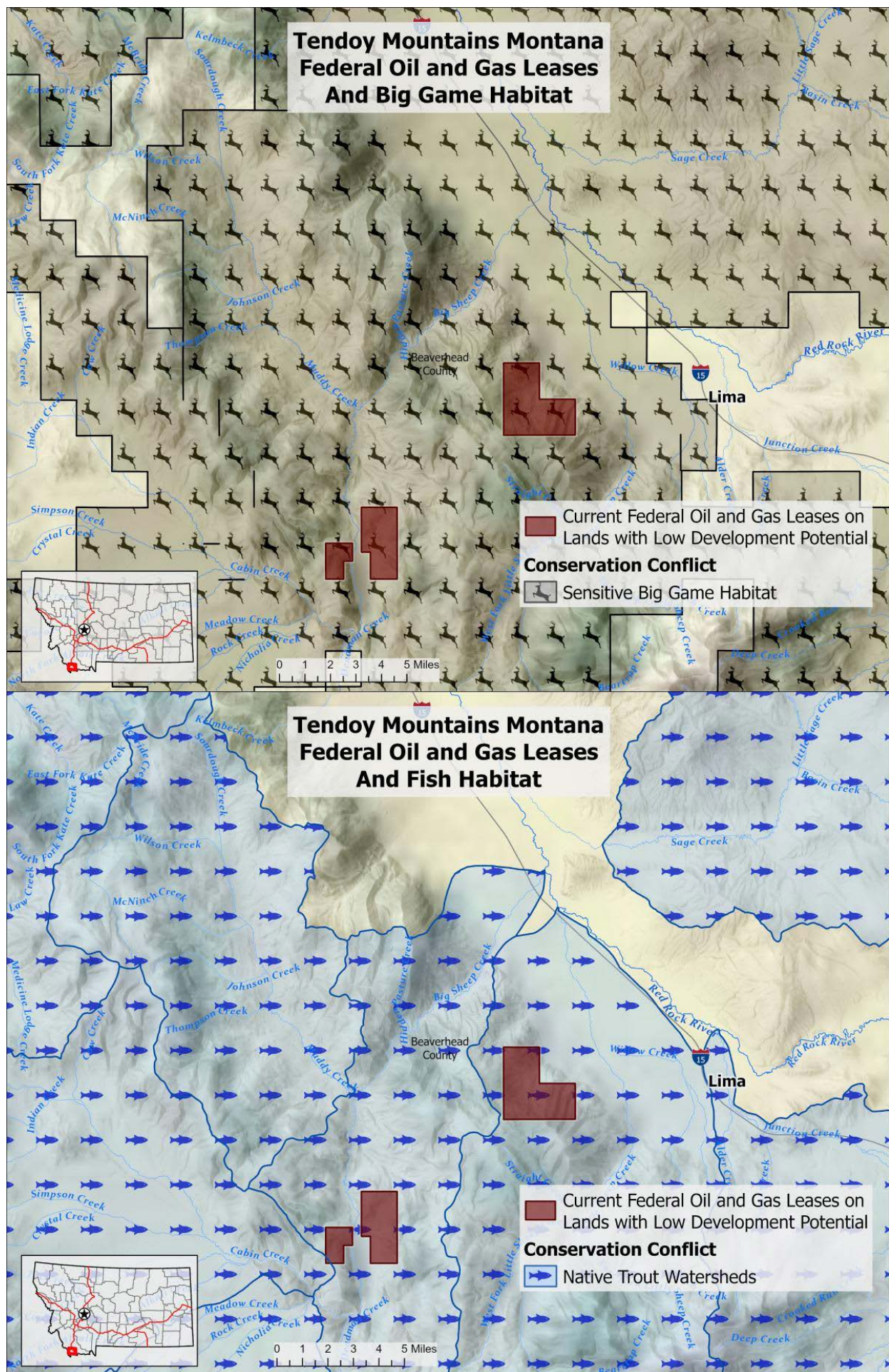
Unfortunately, there are currently more than 3,500 acres of oil and gas leases in this area, despite the fact that there is little or no potential for developing these lands for oil or gas. It's a waste of taxpayer money to administer these leases that will never generate revenue. It would be far more fiscally responsible to manage these lands for conservation and recreation, which bring direct economic benefits to the local communities.



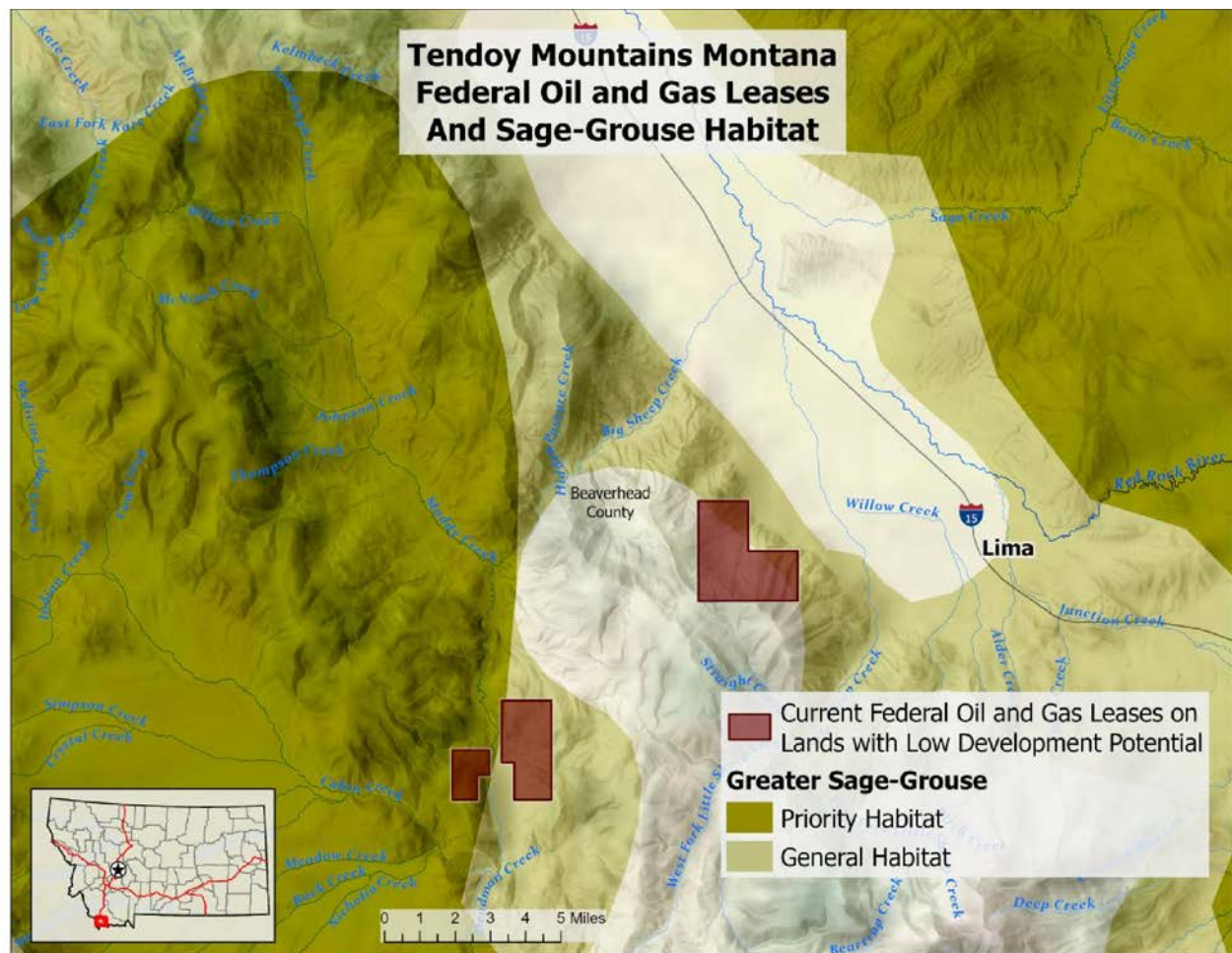


These maps show where oil and gas leases are currently threatening the sensitive Tendoy Mountains landscape. *Click the button on the right* to see where wasteful leasing is putting important habitat for big game, native trout and coldwater fish, and greater sage-grouse at unnecessary risk.











## What do we need now?

### Policy recommendations for protecting our public lands, waters, fish, and wildlife

It is clear that speculative leasing can be harmful to our public lands, water, wildlife, and communities. Our treasured landscapes must be safeguarded from the wasteful practice of leasing lands with little to no potential for oil and gas development, to allow for better management of the valuable wildlife habitat, recreation opportunities, and cultural and historic resources they do offer.

Consistent with recommendations in the Interior Department's recent report, the BLM has made the decision to exclude many parcels that have little potential for oil and gas development from its June 2022 lease sales. But to fix this problem for good, BLM must



not only regularly assess oil and gas potential on public lands, but also use that information at the planning stage to inform which lands should be opened for development in order to reduce conflicts with fish and wildlife resources. Senator Cortez Masto (D-NV) and Representative Lee (D-NV) have both introduced the End Speculative Oil and Gas Leasing Act, legislation that would bring balance back to our public lands by making this change to the federal onshore oil and gas leasing program permanent.

The federal leasing system is antiquated and requires holistic reform through common-sense changes to the outdated policies that govern the program. In order to usher in a new era of responsible energy development, the Department of the Interior and Congress should act now to implement important policy changes aimed at preventing the speculative leasing practices that have plagued the federal leasing program for far too long. These changes are needed to conserve our public lands, waters and wildlife, improve transparency, and provide the public with a more fair return for the use of the resources that belong to all of us.



## Credits

Maps and Analysis

Rocky Mountain Wild, Trout  
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Bureau of Land  
Management, Esri, Montana  
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Nevada Department of  
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Utah Division of Wildlife  
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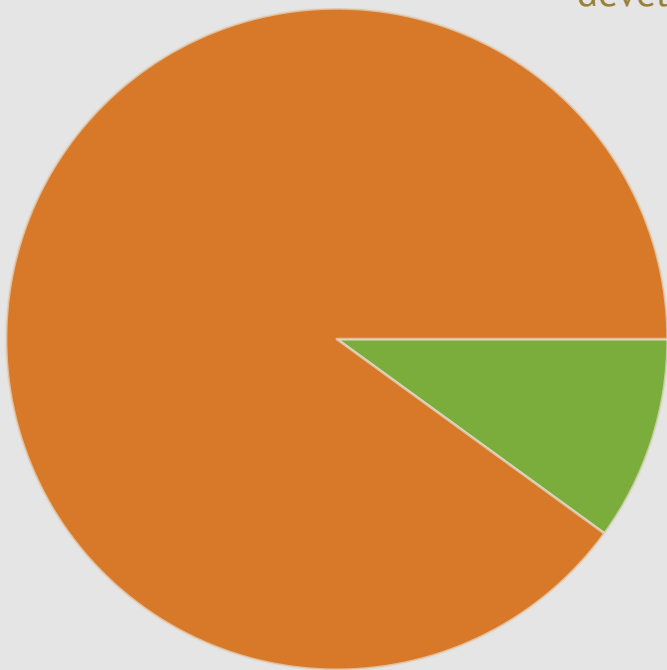
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# A few facts about oil & gas development on public lands

## LEASING

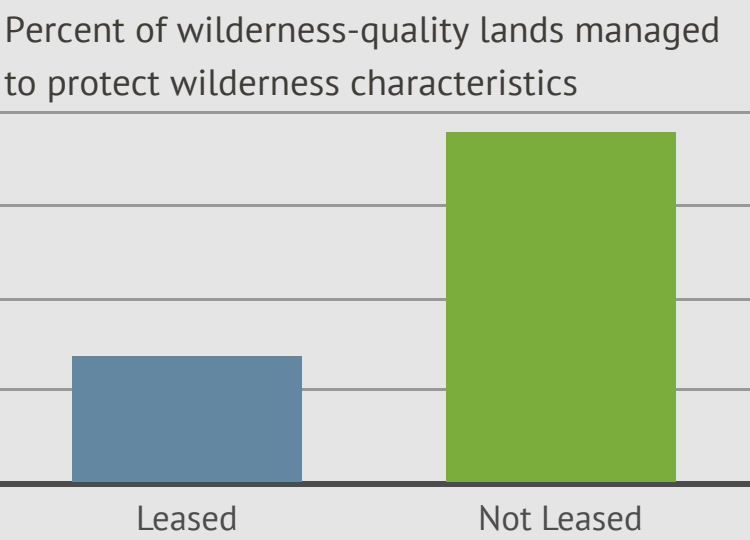
**25 million acres** of U.S. public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management, an area the size of Indiana, **are leased for oil and gas development.**<sup>1</sup>



**90%** of U.S. public lands managed by the BLM **are available for oil and gas leasing.**<sup>2</sup>

**10%** of U.S. public lands managed by the BLM **are protected for recreation, conservation, and wildlife.**<sup>2</sup>

Wilderness-quality lands are nearly **3 times less likely** to be managed to protect those characteristics if they are overlapped by oil and gas leases.<sup>3</sup>



## BONDING

Federal minimum bonding rate for single well <sup>4</sup>	\$10,000
Average cost to fully reclaim and plug a well <sup>5</sup>	\$76,000
Estimated number of federal orphan wells <sup>6</sup>	16,000
Estimated cost to fully reclaim all federal orphan wells	\$1.2 billion

## SPILLS

Oil and gas companies reported

**2,418 spills**

in Colorado, Wyoming, and New Mexico in 2021, **over 6 per day.**<sup>7</sup>


## REFERENCES

- [1. The Bureau of Land Management](#)
- [2. The Wilderness Society](#)
- [3. Center for Western Priorities](#)
- [4. Bureau of Land Management](#)
- [5. Environ. Sci. Technol. 2021, 55, 15, 10224–10230](#)
- [6. Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs](#)
- [7. Center for Western Priorities](#)

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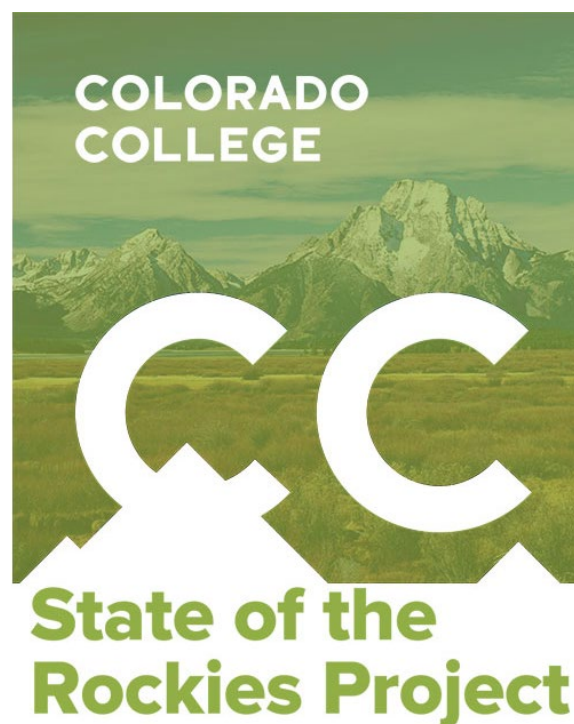
# State of the Rockies 2023 Poll Shows Widespread Support for Conservation

*Published on February 15, 2023*

By Alexa Gromko

Colorado College’s 13<sup>th</sup> annual State of the Rockies Project Conservation in the West Poll shows strong support for conservation policies among Westerners despite inflation, drought, water shortages, and overcrowding.





The poll, which surveyed the views of voters in eight Mountain West states, including Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, New Mexico, Montana, Nevada, Idaho, and Arizona, found that the majority (70 to 90 percent)

support conservation goals like protecting wildlife habitats and migration routes, ensuring healthier forests, preventing light pollution that blocks out stars, and safeguarding drinking water.

Eighty-two percent of Westerners support achieving a national goal of conserving 30 percent of land and inland waters in America, and 30 percent of ocean areas, by the year 2030. Support for that proposal is up nine percent since 2020 while opposition to the goal dropped by five percent during that time.

In order to further conservation, 84 percent of Westerners support presidents continuing to use their ability to designate existing public lands as national monuments to maintain public access and protect the land and wildlife for future generations.

Voters are more concerned than ever about issues that impact Western lifestyles, specifically as it relates to overcrowding in the Mountain West as more people move into the region. As a result, voters are concerned for their way of life, access to adequate drinking water, access to the outdoors, and protecting wildlife.

In Colorado, this is especially important to pollsters.

- 87% describe current shortage of water supplies as a problem
- 88% support requiring local governments to determine whether there is enough water available before approving new residential development projects

- 81% support providing financial incentives to homeowners and business to replace lawns and grassy areas with water-saving landscaping.

The level of concern about the scarcity of water is off the charts, with a majority labeling it a crisis. The Colorado River plays a central role in the water problem. In Colorado, 83 percent of voters believe the river is critical to the state's economy and 77 percent feel the Colorado River is in need of urgent action.

“This year voters in the West have a lot on their minds, but they are not willing to trade one priority for another,” says Katrina Miller-Stevens, director of the State of the Rockies Project and an associate professor at Colorado College. “High gas prices, increasing costs of living, and water shortage concerns are not enough to move Westerners to reconsider their consistent support for conservation policies or seek out short-sighted solutions that put land and water at risk. In fact, people in the West want to continue our progress to protect more outdoor spaces.”

Voters place more emphasis on preserving public land for conservation and recreation rather than drilling for fossil fuels. They also expressed a need to make sure America directs funding toward access to parks for people of color who've lacked access to the outdoors.

“Latino, Black and indigenous voters care strongly about protecting our environment. When we talk about conservation, we're talking about our health, the economy, and social justice,” says Maite Arce, president and CEO of Hispanic Access Foundation.

“Communities of color are impacted and suffer the most in these areas, especially from the Colorado River crisis. We must acknowledge environmental racism and inequality of access. This poll is confirmation that BIPOC communities are ready to be heard.”

The poll surveyed at least 400 registered voters in each of eight Western states for a total of 3,413-voter sample, which included an over-sample of Black and Native American voters. The survey was conducted between January 5-22, 2023, and the effective margin of error is +2.4%. The full survey and individual state surveys are available on the [State of the Rockies webpage](#).

CC's Miller-Stevens adds that the State of the Rockies Poll is a tool for the public to gauge citizen attitudes. The data is available to anyone who wants to use it. It is also integrated into classroom discussion on campus, with 13 years of visual comparison data on the website.



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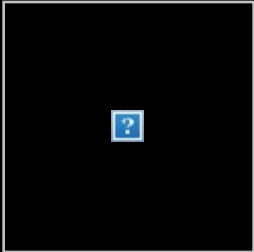
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