

Background: The Thompson Divide Coalition

The Thompson Divide Coalition (TDC or the Coalition) was formed to secure permanent protection from oil and gas development of the **federal lands** in the Thompson Divide Area including the Thompson Creek, Fourmile Creek, and Threemile Creek watersheds, as well as portions of the Muddy Basin, Coal Basin and the headwaters of East Divide Creek.

TDC is a broad-based coalition of local ranchers, farmers, hunters, fishermen, recreationalists, conservationists, and community leaders. The Coalition is unified by concern about impacts oil and gas development may have on the area's social, environmental, and economic values. Coalition members live, work, and recreate in the area—many depend on use of these federal lands for their livelihood. The Coalition has more 120 members. More than 600 people have signed petitions in support of TDC's ultimate goal. Founding members of the Coalition include:

North Thompson Cattlemen's Association
Andy Taylor, Mt. Sopris Nordic Council
Bill and Marj Fales, Cold Mountain Ranch
Chuck Ogilby, Avalanche Ranch
Dorothea Farris and Dave Roberts, West Elk Loop Scenic Byway Committee
Jason Sewell, Sewell Ranch
Sue Rodgers, Crystal River Ranch
Judy Fox-Perry, Thompson Creek Landowner
Jock Jacober, Fourmile Landowner
Brook Le Van, Sustainable Settings
Sloan Shoemaker, Wilderness Workshop
Clare Bastable, Western Conservation Foundation
Sharon Clarke, Chad Rudow and Sarah Johnson, Roaring Fork Conservancy
Ken Neubecker, Trout Unlimited
Martha Cochran and Suzanne Stephens, Aspen Valley Land Trust
Steve Smith, The Wilderness Society
Bruce Gordon and Jane Pargiter, EcoFlight
Rose Ann Sullivan, Pitkin County Environmental Health and Natural Resources Dept.
Bill and Ellen Hunt, Thompson Creek Landowners
Mary Ellen Denomy, Garfield County resident / Independent Oil and Gas Accountant
Branden Cohen, True Nature

The Coalition has resolutions of support from:

Town of Carbondale
Crystal Valley Environmental Protection Association
Aspen Valley Land Trust
Pitkin County
City of Aspen
City of Glenwood Springs
West Elk Loop Scenic and Historic Byway

Values at Stake

The area prioritized by TDC is part of a 122,000-acre roadless complex that links the Grand and Battlement Mesas with the Elk Mountains. The prioritized area includes nine inventoried roadless areas: Thompson Creek, Assignment Ridge, East Divide/Fourmile Park, Clear Fork, Huntsman Ridge, Tomahawk, McClure, Turner Creek, and East Willow. This landscape represents the largest swath of unprotected roadless areas in the State. It represents a rich and diverse swath of mid-elevation forestland that deserves protection.

These federal lands provide important habitat for a variety of plant and wildlife species. The area has been recognized by Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) as high value habitat for a variety of species. It is part of an important big game migration corridor and provides key wildlife security for species such as deer, elk, bear, moose, and lynx. The entire area is important elk calving habitat, summer range, and provides summer solitude for big game as well as critical winter range in lower elevations. Viable populations of Colorado River cutthroat trout (recognized as a Species of Special Concern by CDOW) can be found in two forks of Thompson Creek. The streams also sustain rare wetland shrub communities.

Much of the Thompson Divide area overlaps with famed hunting Unit 43—renowned as one of the best hunting units in the State. Hunting opportunities in the area provide sustainable and significant revenue for the local economy. Angling opportunities are similarly abundant.

In addition the area provides clean water for agricultural operations and important summer range for local ranchers with federal grazing permits. Clean water flowing out of the area prioritized by TDC provides domestic water for residents of the Fourmile and Threemile drainages. The water from Thompson Creek also supports organic farming. There are more than 35 different ranching operations using this federal land for summer range. Due to the significant loss of grazable acreage within allotments in the East Divide Creek area from road and pad construction associated with oil and gas development, there is growing concern among livestock operators grazing in the Thompson Divide area that oil and gas development will marginalize their operations. The North Thompson Cattlemen's Association endorsed the Coalition's efforts and the Cattlemen are working closely with TDC to achieve permanent protection for the area.

The Thompson Divide area is exceptionally popular among recreationalists. Thompson Creek is a well known sport climbing destination, Coal Basin is popular with ice climbers, cross country and backcountry skiers, snowmobilers, and mountain bikers. Spring Gulch is a locally revered Nordic ski area. The landscape is also popular with mountain bikers, equestrians and hikers. It is used for backcountry skiing snowmobile travel, and even after-work dog walks. Remote sections of the area provide opportunities for solitude and primitive unconfined recreation.

While the oil and gas industry is an important source of income for the regional economy, TDC members believe the Thompson Divide area is more valuable in its current state. Coalition members believe that area's rural and agricultural heritage stands in the balance as oil and gas development migrates nearer. Operations in western portions of Garfield County have been marginalized by industrial oil and gas development. If we don't act quickly to protect a few of the remaining farming and ranching operations in this portion of the County, we stand to lose them forever. Such a loss would be significant economically and culturally.

TDC members also understand the valuable economic contributions of recreationalists and sportsman to the local economy. These contributions are largely dependent on undeveloped landscapes. According to the Outdoor Industry Foundation, outdoor recreation contributes over \$10 billion annually to the Colorado economy, supports 107,000 jobs, and generates nearly \$500 million in annual tax revenue. It produces \$7.6 billion annually in retail sales and services across Colorado, accounting for 4% of gross State product. The Colorado Department of Wildlife reported that hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing contributed \$1.5 billion to the Colorado economy in 2002. Data shows that hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing now pumps \$3 billion into Colorado's economy annually and supports 33,000 jobs. These values stand in the balance. TDC members believe the area is more valuable in its current undeveloped state.

Status of Leases

The prioritized area totals 211,500 acres. Of this, approximately 105,000 acres have been leased for oil and gas development. There are 81 leases on this landscape, 41 of which were let within inventoried roadless areas after implementation of the 2001 Roadless Rule. Most of the leases were issued by the BLM at competitive auctions and have 10-year terms.

The majority of leases in the prioritized area are not under production. Because of geography, resource occurrence potential, and a lack of infrastructure, most of these leases have not been developed. However, the area we intend to protect does overlap with two units: the Wolf Creek Unit and the Willow Creek Unit. The Wolf Creek Unit is used predominantly for storage of natural gas. There are currently 10 pads and 10 wells in the unit along with associated infrastructure. There are two shut-in wells in the Willow Creek Unit, but neither is currently producing. While unitization, existing pads, wells, and infrastructure certainly add a level of complexity to achievement of our goal, none of these are insurmountable obstacles.

Although leases are generally granted for 10-year terms, leaseholders may extend terms by undertaking development. Therefore, the fact that a lease is due to expire soon does not mean the threat of drilling diminishes; on the contrary, the incentive to drill and extend a lease term may increase the threat of development. Once a company begins producing gas from a lease, it can hold it "by production" indefinitely.

Who Holds the Leases?

Leases in the Thompson Divide area are held by a number of different companies including, but not limited to:

- WillSource
- QEP Uinta Basin, Inc.
- SG Interests
- Windsor Castle Springs
- Encana
- PXP Piceance, LLC
- Chevron
- Falcon Seaboard
- Gunnison Energy
- Delta Petroleum
- Marathon Oil
- RT Duncan
- Source Gas

Why Now?

This is the ideal time to start a community dialog about how to protect this area from future development. A new administration in Washington, new oil and gas rules at the state level and a temporary economic slump have slowed the boom. These realities have provided a little time to contemplate the protection of this special landscape. Of course, this period is unlikely to last long. Rising gas prices, new technology and companies' desire to extend their lease terms are likely to elevate the pressure to drill in this area in coming months and years. Now is the time to act if we want to protect this magnificent slice of western Colorado.

Thompson Divide Coalition Contacts

Dorothea Farris, Scenic Byway	h. 970 963-9505	c. 970 948-9470
Ken Neubecker, Trout Unlimited	h. 970 963-3051	c. 970 376-1918
Jock Jacober, Fourmile Resident	h. 970 384-2758	c. 970 319-8962