



MEMORANDUM

TO: Montana Wildlife Federation
FROM: Lori Weigel & Karoline McGrail / New Bridge Strategy
DATE: August 8, 2024
RE: Montana Survey Shows Voters Prioritize Recreation and Conservation of Public Lands; Majority Support for BLM Rule on Oil and Gas

A recent survey of 500 voters throughout Montana¹ demonstrates strong support for key elements of the updated Bureau of Land Management rule regarding oil and gas leasing. Even after hearing opposing arguments, voters consistently agree with supporters’ arguments in favor of the updated rule. While they believe that energy development can coexist with protection of natural areas in the state in general, when it comes to public lands they place a much higher priority on wildlife, water, and recreation uses of the land over leasing lands for oil and gas development.

Specifically, the survey found that:

- **Montanans overwhelmingly support four specific elements within the new oil and gas rule tested, with intense support on most policies.** Survey respondents were provided with a brief explanation of what this process includes and the fact that new rule had been announced to ensure they all had the same starting information: “As you may know, oil and gas companies can buy leases to drill for oil and gas on national public lands now or in the future. Those leases can then limit other uses, such as grazing, hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation. The Bureau of Land Management recently announced updated rules regarding this leasing process.” The following table shows the percentage of voters that support each element.

	% Total Support	% Strongly Support
Require oil and gas companies, rather than Montana taxpayers, to pay for the clean-up of public lands after their drilling is finished	96%	91%
Increase the royalty fees paid by companies which drill for oil and gas on public lands to be the same as what the state of Montana’s fees are on the state lands	84%	58%
Place conservation of certain lands near rivers and streams or with threatened wildlife as an important use of the land on par with oil and gas drilling	77%	53%
Prioritize oil and gas companies leasing in areas where there is high likelihood to actually produce oil and gas	69%	38%

¹ New Bridge Strategy conducted a survey among N=500 voters throughout Montana from July 15-21, 2024. Interviews were conducted through live telephone interviews to both landlines and cell phones as well as online. The margin of error associated with the statewide sample overall is $\pm 4.38\%$: Margin of error will vary for sub-groups based on the number of interviews conducted.

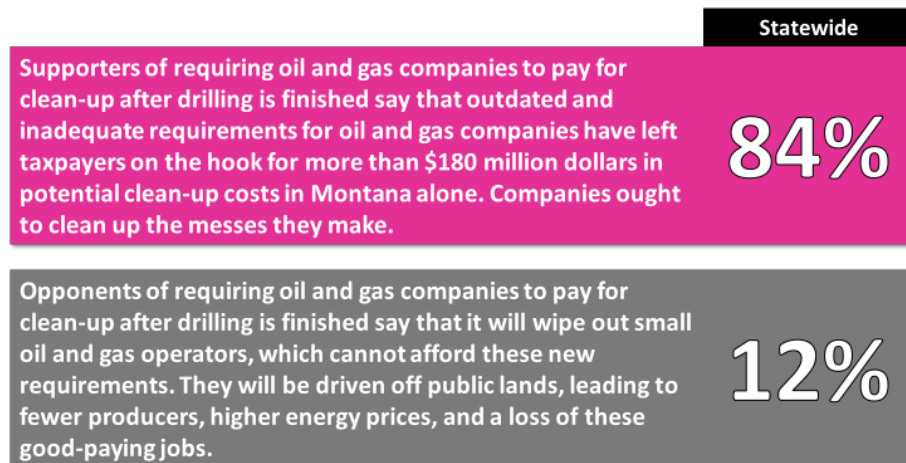
Opposition is quite minimal for each of these policies as well, not exceeding 30 percent.

Support is broad-based and widespread, extending across demographic sub-groups. Notably, it also extends across party lines with the exception that Democrats are more mixed on prioritizing leasing in areas where there is high likelihood to actually produce oil or gas given that this explicitly calls for new production on some public lands as seen below.

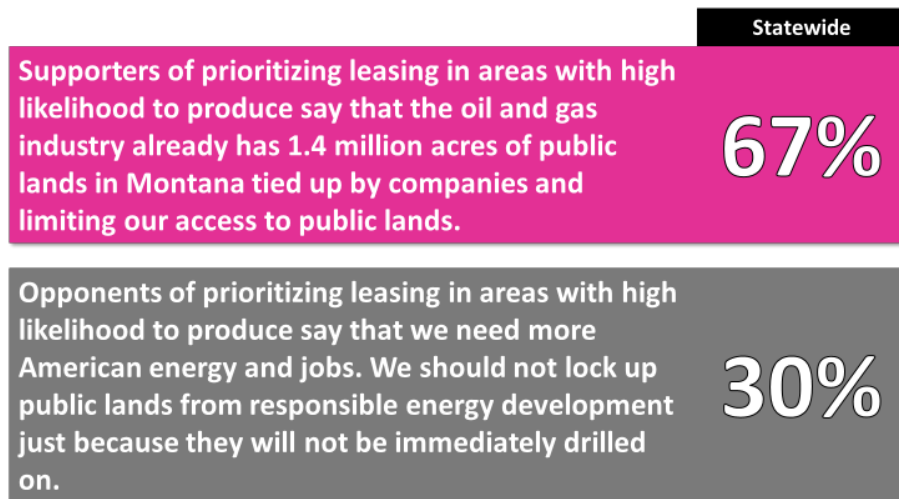
<i>Ranked by % Total Support</i>			
	GOP	IND	DEM
Require oil and gas companies, rather than Montana taxpayers, to pay for the clean-up of public lands after their drilling is finished	96%	95%	100%
Increase the royalty fees paid by companies which drill for oil and gas on public lands to be the same as what the state of Montana's fees are on the state lands	79%	84%	90%
Place conservation of certain lands near rivers and streams or with threatened wildlife as an important use of the land on par with oil and gas drilling	68%	81%	84%
Prioritize oil and gas companies leasing in areas where there is high likelihood to actually produce oil and gas	92%	64%	46%

- Montana voters consistently side with those advocating in support of key elements of the new rule, rather than with opponents.** Survey respondents were presented with pairs of statements, one articulating an argument in support of the rule and one in opposition and asked which one came closer to their opinion.

By a stunning 72-point margin, Montanans side with a statement advocating for tougher requirements on oil and gas companies to ensure sites are remediated.



More than twice as many Montanans side with supporters of prioritizing leasing in areas with high likelihood to produce oil and gas over a statement from opponents.



Montana voters reinforced their views over the course of the survey. As one Republican woman in Flathead County explained her view, “Use the lease land already in play. Make sure oil and gas that leases land is the responsible party for clean-up.” Or as an independent man in Madison County stressed that we “need to protect Montana’s prime wildlife and wild lands...Industries of all sorts should be responsible for their activities and reliance on taxpayer dollars should not be necessary.”

- **Overall, Montanans across party lines agree that “the updated rule regarding oil and gas on public lands is a common-sense change.”** Fifty-five percent of voters statewide agree with the characterization of the new rule as “common-sense,” while just 34 percent disagree. Agreement is highest with Republicans (60 percent agree it is a common-sense change), and extends to independents (52 percent) and Democrats (54 percent) in the Treasure State.
- **Moreover, the vast majority of voters say that Montana can have energy development while protecting wildlife and the most sensitive natural area.** Voters were asked which of the following statements come closer to what they think, and nearly three times as many believe that both have a role in Montana.

72% *We can have energy development in Montana while also protecting the most sensitive wildlife habitat, forests, open spaces and streams.*

24% *We need to choose between energy development in Montana and protecting the most sensitive wildlife habitat, forests, open spaces and streams.*

- **When asked to prioritize attributes and potential benefits of public lands though, Montana voters place conservation and recreation uses far above energy development.** Montanans are nearly three times as likely to say that it is an “extremely” or “very important” use of public lands as wildlife habitat or ensuring these lands help to keep air and water clean as say the same about public lands being leased for oil and gas development. Four-in-five also say that recreation uses of public lands are extremely or very important to them, as seen in the following graph:

	Statewide	
	Extremely Important	Ext/Very Important
Providing a place for wildlife to live	67%	90%
Helping to keep air and water clean	60%	90%
Providing a place to hunt and fish	51%	82%
Providing a place for recreation	46%	81%
Providing jobs	32%	70%
Providing land for grazing	28%	62%
Providing land to be leased for oil and gas development	13%	33%

In Summary: Montana voters overwhelmingly support key elements of the updated BLM rule regarding oil and gas leasing, with each element tested receiving majority support from voters overall. That support withstands a simulation of pro- and con- statements. Voters in the state believe that energy development can coexist with protection of natural areas in general, but when it comes to prioritizing uses of public lands, they overwhelmingly place the importance on wildlife habitat, water, recreation and hunting and fishing over oil and gas development.