



## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Montana Wildlife Federation  
**FROM:** Lori Weigel & Karoline McGrail / New Bridge Strategy  
**DATE:** August 8, 2024  
**RE:** Montana Survey Shows Voters Statewide and in Southwest Montana Support Strong BLM Plans to Conserve Sagebrush Habitat

---

A recent survey of 500 voters throughout Montana and a total of 300 voters in the Southwestern portion of the state<sup>1</sup> demonstrates that voters embrace strong plans to protect sagebrush habitat that would limit new energy development in areas with little potential to produce oil and gas. Instead, they overwhelmingly say that the Bureau of Land Management should continue Trump Administration's action to restrict leasing on national public lands in Southwestern Montana's Beaverhead County and along the Big Hole and Beaverhead Rivers. They would like to see BLM place the health of rivers and the fish in them as one of the top priorities.

Specifically, the survey found that:

- **There is overwhelming support for the stronger options proposed by the Bureau of Land Management for managing sagebrush habitat on public lands in Southwestern Montana.** Survey respondents were provided with a brief explanation of one option to manage these public lands.

*"In March, BLM released a draft plan with several options for managing sagebrush habitats on public lands across Montana. One of the stronger options would ensure continued recreation such as hunting, camping and off-road vehicle use, ensure grazing for local ranchers, but limit new energy development in areas with little potential to produce oil and gas, such as in Southwestern Montana's Beaverhead County and Big Hole River valley."*

An overwhelming 88 percent of voters in Southwestern Montana and 82 percent statewide indicate support for this option. In fact, support is very intense with 71 percent of those in Southwestern Montana and 61 percent statewide offering up "strong" support. Opposition is minimal, as seen in the graph on the following page.

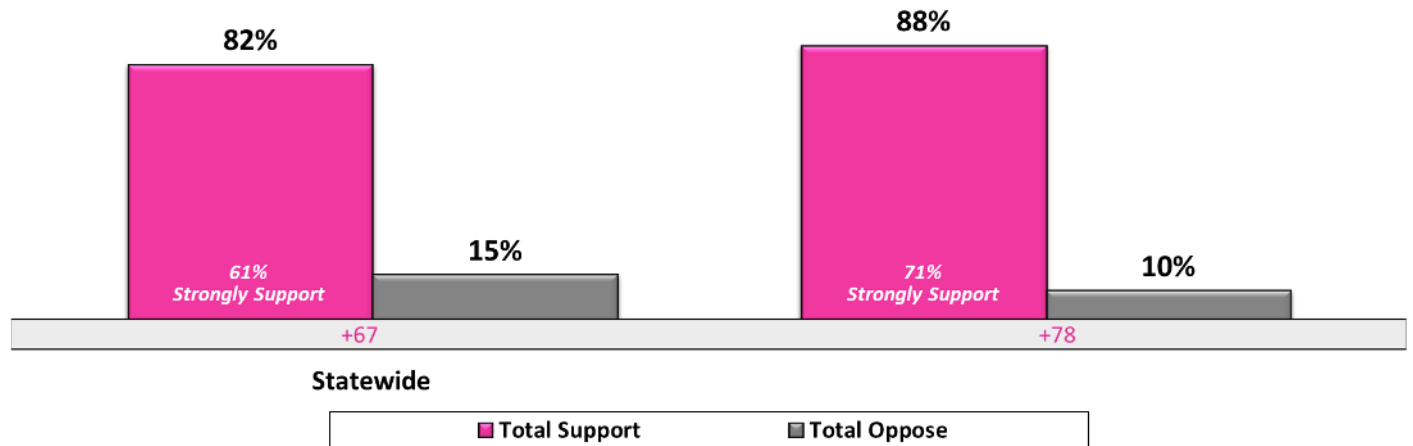
Support for BLM choosing a strong option that would include limiting new energy development on these public lands in Southwestern Montana, extends across party lines in that region of the state as well as statewide. In Southwestern Montana, 81 percent of Republicans, 88 percent of independents and nearly all (97 percent) Democrats offer support for this stronger option to manage

---

<sup>1</sup> New Bridge Strategy conducted a survey among N=500 voters throughout Montana and a total of 300 voters in Southwest Montana (defined as Beaverhead, Gallatin, Madison and Silver Bow counties) 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 each sample is  $\pm 4.38\%$  for the statewide sample and  $\pm 5.66\%$  for the Southwestern region. Margin of error will vary for sub-groups based on the number of interviews conducted.

sagebrush habitat. In this region of the state, support stands at 80 percent or higher across all demographic sub-groups, in all types of communities including rural areas (83 percent) and with sportsmen (85 percent).

### Support for Strong BLM Plan for Sagebrush Habitat on Public Lands



- In fact, voters say that BLM should continue to prevent new oil and gas leasing on national public lands in Southwestern Montana’s Beaverhead County and along the Big Hole and Beaverhead Rivers, an action taken under the Trump Administration. Fully 83 percent in Southwest Montana and 77 percent statewide say they would continue that action to restrict leasing in this area.** The desire to continue the current restriction on leasing is evident across party lines both statewide and in Southwestern Montana where 77 percent of Republicans, 85 percent of Independents, and 86 percent of Democrats say to continue the previous administration’s action to restrict leasing in Beaverhead County and along the Big Hole and Beaverhead rivers.
- When asked to explain their views in supporting a stronger plan that includes limiting new energy development on those public lands in Southwestern Montana, voters emphasize that they want priority given to protecting wildlife and their habitat, their recreation opportunities on public lands, and the natural beauty of these areas. They also express concerns about how well oil and gas development aligns with their priorities for public lands.** We provided respondents with the opportunity to explain their views on this policy – either in support of or in opposition to it. Voters across the political spectrum indicated concerns about ensuring that public lands are available to average Montanans for recreation, hunting, and fishing, and they also emphasize a need to ensure water and nature are conserved. A few examples of what Montanans say:

*“I believe in protecting land for recreational and hunting use and maintaining it for wildlife. Raw land is becoming more and more scarce. It needs to be preserved.”* Republican woman in Gallatin County

*“I desire to live and recreate, hunt, fish, camp, float, hike, backpack, and horseback ride in a clean, healthy environment with intact ecosystems and robust game populations, for both myself and future generations.”* Independent man in Lewis and Clark County

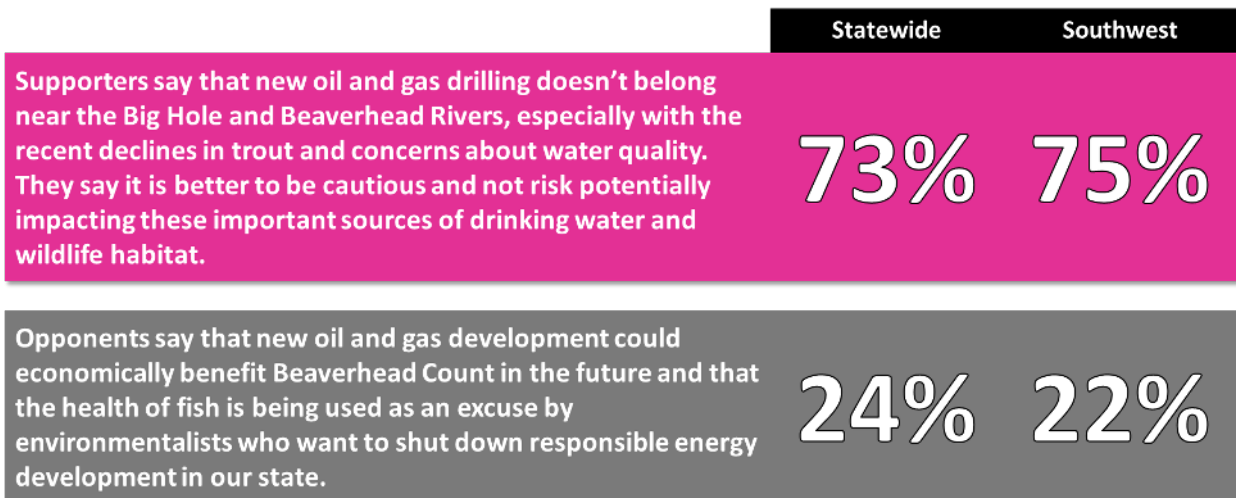
*“Allowing drilling in areas with little chance of production value would only encourage multiple drilling sites, and more damage, as the company keeps searching for the reward, hole after hole. Bad policy.”* Republican man in Silver Bow County

*“As a 5th generation Montanan, I recognize that our access to public lands in Montana is not only an immense privilege but an integral part of being a Montanan...it is vital that we as Montanans make every effort possible to protect our environment. I also recognize the importance of energy development and creating jobs in this day and age and feel very strongly that we exercise as much responsibility and consideration for our public lands throughout that process as possible.” Democrat woman in Lewis and Clark County*

*“We all deserve to use the land but if there is little chance of producing oil why bother the wildlife when they don't have much wilderness left as it is.” Republican woman in Beaverhead County*

On the flip side, concerns are primarily focused on concerns about overregulation, a desire to be more energy independent and a distrust of the government.

- **Support for the limit on new energy development is fairly resistant to erosion even after an engaged debate on this issue.** In the survey, we simulated both a pro- and a con- statement and asked respondents to indicate which one comes closer to their own view. As the following graph illustrates, three-quarters of Southwest Montana voters and 73 percent statewide side with those who support not allowing new leases for energy development in Southwestern Montana:



The response does differ in this region of the state by party, with Republicans leaning toward the supporters' statement (48 percent to 44 percent for the opponents' statement), while independents (80 percent to 19 percent and Democrats (97 percent to 2 percent) overwhelmingly side with supporters.

- **Nearly four-in-five Montanans say the health of rivers and fish should be one of the few most important things for BLM to consider in their plans for these lands in Southwestern Montana.** The graph below details how nearly four-in-five Montana and Southwest region voters say that rivers and fish should be at the forefront of considerations. They were told that “one of the reasons why some people support a stronger BLM plan to protect wildlife habitat in Southwestern Montana is due to big declines in the number of trout in the rivers that flow through this area, such as the Big Hole and Beaverhead Rivers.” They were then asked how important rivers and fish should be in considering management of these lands:

Statewide	SW	
40%	41%	A top priority
38%	43%	One of the top two or three most important to consider
17%	14%	Somewhat important to consider
4%	1%	Not that important to consider
1%	0%	Not at all important to consider

**In Summary:** Montana voters and particularly those in Southwestern Montana, support strong actions by BLM to manage sagebrush habitat, including preventing new oil and gas development in Southwestern Montana on those public lands. More than three-quarters statewide and in Southwestern Montana want to continue to prevent new leasing on public lands in this area of the state given that rivers and fish populations are already struggling. They prioritize the health of those waters first. Even when presented with different viewpoints, they continue to side with those who would prevent new leasing.