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Badger-Two Medicine land declared eligible for historic designation

By CAROL BRADLEY, Tribune Staff Writer

Roughly two-thirds of the breathtaking Badger-Two Medicine area along the Rocky Mountain Front has been declared eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, a move that could hamper developers' efforts to explore for oil and gas.



"The remote wilderness area is associated with the significant oral traditions and cultural practices of the Blackfoot people, who have used the lands for traditional purposes for generations and continue to value the area as important to maintaining their community's continuing cultural identity," the keeper of the National Register wrote.

The decision, announced Monday by Lewis and Clark National Forest officials, caps eight years of research, fieldwork and documentation and could alter the fate of the Badger-Two Med.

The area in question is a part of the Lewis and Clark forest, sandwiched between Glacier National Park to the north, the Blackfeet Indian reservation to the northeast and the Bob Marshall Wilderness to the southwest.

Developers are anxious to explore for oil and gas in the 133,000-acre Badger-Two Med. A historic designation wouldn't necessarily block exploration, but it would give the federal government pause about opening the door to oil and gas rigs.

It also would add to the emotional arguments that have been used successfully to keep oil and gas exploration at bay.

At the same time, the Bush administration has expressed a desire to tap oil and gas reserves at home in an effort to lessen dependence on foreign oil.

The Badger-Two Medicine already is considered a traditional use site under the National Historic Preservation Act.

Although oil and gas development is permitted in national forests, the federal government has for years blocked exploration in Badger-Two Med.

Despite the delays, and despite Forest Service estimates that less than one half of 1 percent of natural gas lies beneath the Badger-Two Med, a Houston-based the oil and gas company, Ocean Energy, acquired Chevron's leases in the area and has been eyeing the site.

A spokesman for Ocean Energy wasn't immediately available for comment.

At one point 10 companies held leases to 114,000 acres, almost all of the Badger-Two Med.

Archived information doesn't clearly define what role the Badger-Two Medicine played in the lives of the Blackfeet. Researchers found evidence, though, that at least one band of Blackfeet ancestors, the Piegans, lived exclusively in the eastern Rockies foothills during the early 1800s.

Traditional Blackfeet also are believed to have used the mountains and forests area to hunt elk and other game, gather plants, collect lodgepoles and searched for supernatural power.

The Badger-Two Medicine is the last such area where the Blackfeet are allowed to hunt, fish and log timber. In a sale whose terms remain in dispute, the Blackfeet sold the federal government in 1895 a "ceded strip" running north of Badger Creek to the Canadian border.

Some Blackfeet contend their ancestors never sold the Badger-Two Medicine but instead leased it for 50 years.

The tribe was supposed to retain the rights to cut wood, hunt and fish on the land, but the creation of Glacier National Park in 1910 blocked off a major portion of the strip.

In addition to the National Historic Preservation Act, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act directs federal agencies to evaluate the effects of their policies and procedures on Native American religions.

That law also says it's the policy of the United States "to protect and preserve for American Indians their inherent right for freedom to believe, express and exercise traditional religions ... including but not limited to access to sites, use and possession of sacred objects and the freedom to worship through ceremonies and traditional rites."

Staff of the Forest Service will be consulting with affected tribes regarding this determination.

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