

Tapping into Thompson — not worth it, says rancher who's been part of preservation effort since the get-go

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Carbondale rancher Bill Fales speaks at a Thompson Divide Coalition/Wilderness Workshop press conference on Wednesday.

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Carbondale rancher Bill Fales remembers those early gatherings going back to the late 2000s when — unlike past environmental debates — agriculture, recreation, conservation, and even different political sides found common ground.

The issue: how to convince the federal government to cancel roughly two dozen undeveloped natural-gas leases in the rugged terrain west of Carbondale where advocates had coined a new geographical designation, the Thompson Divide — named for the headwaters of Thompson and Divide creeks.

The concern was the potential impact development of those leases — and the infrastructure that would be needed to actually produce natural gas in the region — would have on ranching interests, recreation, road systems, water resources, and the bluebird sky that's so revered in the Colorado high country.

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Those early meetings — first at The Orchard church and, eventually, in local government halls including the Carbondale Trustees, Glenwood Springs City Council, and Garfield County Commissioner chambers — drew as many cowboy hats and boots as fancy outdoor wear, tie-dye shirts, and sandals.

“Unified for the Thompson Divide” became the rallying cry for the broad base of advocates who fought to have those years-old leases eventually canceled a number of years later. The battle then turned to convincing the federal government to provide permanent protection from future oil and gas leasing in the roughly 225,000 acres of land held by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

Today, that prospect seems as close as it ever has to becoming a reality — yet, ever so far away as politics and bureaucratic hurdles still stand in the way.

Fales spoke at a Wednesday press conference organized by the Carbondale-based nonprofit Wilderness Workshop, also a strong supporter of Thompson Divide protections, and the TDC.

“Like every other rancher in this valley, we absolutely depend on these Forest Service grazing permits for our operation,” he said. “It’s bigger than just our individual ranches, though. It’s what the ranchers provide to the community in terms of open space, clean air, wildlife habitat, everything ...

“It’s also about how important agriculture is to the community, and how important this community is to agriculture,” he said, citing an economic impact report that shows recreation to be far and away the biggest economic engine on the White River National Forest, and livestock grazing holding its own.

Fales noted that agricultural activities on the forest generate about 300 jobs and \$13.5 million of gross domestic product, compared to 10 jobs and just under \$2 million for oil and gas.

The press conference came as the BLM and USFS held an [informational meeting](#) about a formal proposal to withdraw the Thompson Divide, which spans multiple counties and national forest and BLM jurisdictions, and the timeline to actually accomplish the withdrawal.

On Oct. 17, the Department of Interior published a notice in the Federal Register of a proposed mineral withdrawal in the Thompson Divide, prompting a 90-day public comment period and a two-year segregation period in which new mineral leases cannot be issued in the designated area while formal comments and data are collected, and a more formal environmental analysis is conducted.

Should the Department of Interior approve the withdrawal, new mineral leases would not be allowed in the area for 20 years. Valid existing rights would not be affected.

Meanwhile, U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet (D-Colo.) is still working hard to get the provisions in his Colorado Outdoor Recreation & Economy (CORE) Act passed in Congress, which addresses permanent protections for the Thompson Divide. Thus far, it has stalled in the Senate and continues to be bogged down by politics.



Carbondale rancher Bill Fales poses a question during the U.S. Forest Service/BLM information meeting on the proposed Thompson Divide mineral withdrawal on Wednesday at the Carbondale Fire Department.

John Stroud/Post Independent

Fales operates Cold Mountain Ranch just south of Carbondale with his wife and daughter and relies on grazing allotments in the high country west of the ranch, within the Thompson Divide.

On the local level, the Thompson Divide issue has garnered the support of three successive Carbondale mayors and Board of Trustees members, various makeups of the Glenwood Springs City Council, and county commissioners from Garfield, Pitkin, and Gunnison counties.

“Little did we know that we’d be meeting with officials in the White House and actually discussing with the President of the United States about this,” Fales said after the press conference, referring to President Biden’s direction to the Secretary of the Interior to formally study mineral withdrawal for the Thompson Divide.

“It’s been heartwarming to see the incredible, unanimous support for protecting this area,” he said. “It’s just such rugged terrain, and any amount of infrastructure development — with the roads and pipelines that they would need to develop the marginal amount of gas that may or may not be there — is just not worth it.

“What’s on top is so much more valuable to this community than what possibly could be under the surface of the ground.

“And, this effort, going back more than a decade, should serve as an example for every other issue that this country is facing? We can all get up there and scream and yell at each other and just move backwards, but, when we can we all work together to a common goal, we can actually advance civilization instead of trashing it.”

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