

**WTE column of November 12, 2015. Editor's headline: "Giving public land away"
CST of November 15: "Feds condemn wild places to industrialization"**

Here's how the federal government treats Wyoming's wild places: For the per-acre price of a packet of gum, it condemns them to industrialization. Yet public lands are supposed to be managed for the public good—not just for people here and now, but for the good of future generations.

Thus on November 3, 2015, a group of determined activists rallied on behalf of the environment and climate change. From San Francisco arrived Ruth Breech of Rain Forest Action Network, who brought stickers and a huge banner, "Keep it in the Ground." From Laramie came Erik Molvar of WildEarthGuardians with supporters, some from Sierra Club, some from the Social Action Committee of Universalist Unitarian Church in Laramie. The Cheyenne community was represented by yours truly and friends.

The occasion was the Bureau of Land Management's sale of oil and gas leases at Holiday Inn in Cheyenne. Our peaceful if rigorous protest was based on the premise that it is wrong for our government to exploit publicly-owned land for corporate profit. Our banners and signs declared the message—which got the finger from some bidders as they drove in. Many passers-by, however, waved and honked or shouted encouragement.

"We came to express our opposition to the whole system of leasing out land at pennies on the dollar," said Ralph Garrett of the Laramie contingent, who identifies himself as "public-land owner." He added that he objects to Wyoming's public places being "degraded and destroyed for corporate profits."

"The sale was an outrage," said RAN's Ruth Breech, who went inside to observe. "Nine of the forty parcels went for \$2 an acre."

Two dollars an acre! That's the federal minimum for bids. What can you buy for \$2? An acre of land near Kemmerer in Wyoming's Red Desert.

Within an hour, 60,000 acres of prime sage-grouse habitat was bought and sold. This, notwithstanding the May 28, 2015, speeches of U.S. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewel who, along with Governor Mead, pledged protection of Wyoming's sage grouse "in collaboration with industry." It seems, all the talk that day amounted to nothing more than PR hype: The governor, the secretary, and BLM attendants went back to business as usual.

What was auctioned off: taxpayers' rights; the inherent value of wild spaces; the need for carbon sinks.

The true costs of all that additional industrial development are increases in climate-change emissions. The costs of droughts and floods. The negative impacts on plant and animal agriculture. The costs of care for public health.

Two hundred years ago we thought industrialization was the cure-all for poverty and hunger. Today we know better. Regrettably, bargain-basement prices are the norm rather than the exception in these federal lease sales, which happen quarterly.

“Historically, industry and wealthy individuals have made vast fortunes from grazing, timber, mining, and oil and gas extraction on public lands leased,” Mr. Garrett reminded us. He noted with some astonishment that the BLM people he spoke with “actually said they appreciated our being there.”

“This sale is just the latest episode in a vicious cycle of destruction and debt,” Ms. Breech commented. “Someone is going to have to bear the real cost. I guarantee that Texan oil companies like Anadarko and Exxon aren’t going to volunteer any clean-up. It’s going to be the state of Wyoming’s out-of-pocket expense.”

A recent Wyoming National Public Radio segment reported we have so many orphaned wells, it could cost Wyoming “up to \$30 million over the next decade to clean them up.”

Congress, too, is waking up to the government’s mismanagement of public lands. A “Keep it in the Ground” bill just launched in Washington, D.C.

Introduced in the U.S. Congress by Sens. Jeff Merkley and Bernie Sanders along with five of their colleagues, the “Keep it in the Ground” bill aims to cut off all sales of coal, oil, and gas from publicly-owned lands. It’s a message to President Obama: If, as you state, climate change is a threat to human survival, then the government must turn serious about keeping fossil fuels in the ground.

Essentially, the bill says it is wrong to wreck the planet and its climate, and it’s wrong for our government to be digging up coal, oil, and gas from publicly-owned land. Hence our sidewalk protest focused on one clear message: leasing public lands to fossil-fuel companies must end.

“We are organizing a climate march for the first of December,” the Laramie protesters said as they packed up. Communities across the U.S., indeed, across the globe, are mobilizing in similar marches, all with an eye to the climate talks in Paris.

Individually, protests like the November 3 event may not count for much, but successes like the “No KXL” movement could extend, and compel future high-level action on climate and on protecting the land.