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Montana Wildlife Federation Annual Meeting

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Statement of Senator Baucus

Before the Montana Wildlife Federation Annual Meeting

Saturday April 21, 2007

That great conservationist, Teddy Roosevelt, said “Optimism is a good characteristic, but if carried to an excess, it becomes foolishness. We are prone to speak of the resources of this country as inexhaustible; this is not so.” One hundred years later as Montana experiences an energy boom, his words continue to ring true.

I want to thank all of you for inviting me here to speak on the energy development and wildlife. I would especially like to thank Craig Sharpe and the board of the Montana Wildlife Federation for honoring me with this opportunity.

As Montanans we are all too familiar with the boom and bust cycles of a natural resource based economy. The economic history of Montana can be read in abandoned mine shafts, shuttered timber mills, and rusted oil derricks. The jobs left, but we didn't.

Why did we choose to weather the tough economic times? Any one who has ever cast a fly on the Bighorn or hunted elk along in the Madison Valley know the answer. Montana is a sportsman's paradise. Hunting and fishing are part of our outdoor heritage. They are a part of who we are as Montanans.

There is cause for hope in the latest energy boom. The market fundamentals have changed. Gas is at nearly \$3 per gallon. No one expects oil to drop below \$50 dollars per barrel. The market for clean and green energy continues to grow as we move toward addressing climate change and energy independence.

We are on the cusp of an enduring energy industry in the State of Montana. And therefore, it is critical that we take the time to get the development of that industry right.

Energy development and wildlife protection are compatible. To get it right I propose three principles. Keep it public, keep some areas off limits, and get it right the first time.

First, we need to keep public lands in public hands. Energy development will occur on private lands. Montana farmers and ranchers have the right to develop the nature resources on their lands, and many will supplement their income and the local tax base by doing so. This will make adjacent public lands even more important in terms of game habitat and hunting access.

I strongly oppose efforts to sell off our public lands for short term operating expenses. That's why I've worked hard the last two years to kill the Administration's misguided efforts to sell off thousands of acres of public land to fund the Secure Rural Schools program.

Instead of selling off public lands I inserted a provision in the emergency supplemental appropriations bill currently moving through Congress that will fully fund the Secure Rural Schools program for five years without selling one acre of public land.

Second, some areas should be kept off limit to development. Oil wells dry up and mines get depleted, but a landscape like the Rocky Mountain Front keeps giving. And my legislation that banned new oil and gas leases on public land in the Rocky Mountain Front ensures that Montanans will be hunting and fishing there for years to come.

I'm also fighting hard to stop the Cline mine from going forward in British Columbia. The impacts on the North Fork of the Flathead River, Flathead Lake, and the countless miles of great fishing therein would be devastating.

Canadian Ambassador Wilson has told me that the Canadian Federal Government will be conducting an environmental review, and just yesterday I wrote him a letter urging him to have the review conducted with the broadest possible scope under the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act. This Federal review must take into account the devastating affects this mine would have on Montana's fisheries and wildlife.

Finally, the Federal government should get it right the first time. This means that in areas where energy development is appropriate, adequate environmental reviews must be completed to make sure the interests of sportsmen are taken into account.

Hunting and fishing bring in over \$1 billion dollars every year to the State's economy, and we should not jeopardize this important industry or our outdoor heritage.

Montana is an outdoors State. We hunt. We fish. We take our kids hiking and camping. It's part of who we are as Montanans. In our efforts to make Montana a better place to work, we must not forget who we are and what makes our Montana the Last Best Place.