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(Editorial) Conservation groups, drillers can agree

It's always encouraging to see conservation groups, the government, and businesses in the oil and gas industry find things to agree upon.

When they do, the result can be development that also takes steps to protect the environment.

This spring, executives of Bill Barrett Corp. approached the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance and the Wyoming Outdoor Council about development in part of the Thunder Basin National Grasslands. The U.S. Forest Service, which manages the national grassland, had already opened the area to coalbed methane development rather than see that resource drained by nearby drilling operations.

The conservation groups had appealed Barrett's application to drill 200 coalbed methane wells in the area, so Barrett couldn't proceed.

Barrett executives knew the huge coal seam from which the gas was to come likely will be mined eventually, and that they'd have to move quickly.

The conservation groups also recognized that the area someday would be mined, and they saw room for compromise. The groups agreed to drop their objection to the Barrett project, in return for some environmentally friendly concessions from Barrett. The drilling company agreed to limit traffic around sage grouse leks and ferruginous hawk nests; to limit discharge water into Big Porcupine Creek so those flows would match historic stream flows; to reroute roads away from prairie dog colonies; and to suppress dust on the roads.

Barrett also agreed to create a \$50,000 fund for conservation projects that will be used in other areas.

In some respects, the situation was ripe for compromise. Several factors played into making the agreement possible, as far as the groups were concerned. The area was sure to be mined, it wasn't a roadless area, and there was already significant development in the area.

But just because the circumstances were unusual doesn't mean the outcome can't happen again. It should.

When a company is willing to compromise and address concerns about habitat, wildlife, open spaces and so forth, it's not just good for the environment. It shows that the company can be a good neighbor and a good steward of the public land it leases. Likewise, when conservation groups reward such behavior by offering their own cooperation, they send a message to other

producers. And when they're willing to compromise where compromise is reasonable, they can focus their efforts on protection of critically important areas.

State and federal agencies should do all they can to promote similar cooperative efforts, too. Those agencies should offer an expedited permitting process for businesses that agree to use environmentally protective measures.

Certainly, there are places in Wyoming where development is inappropriate. The wildness of such places means more to Wyoming's identity than the dollars that could be extracted from their soil.

But the national demand for natural gas is rapidly outpacing production, and the pressure to tap into Wyoming's gas resources will only grow. Where development is appropriate, it's crucial that developers and conservationists find common ground.