

Dirt Rich

In western Wyoming, the pressure is on.

By Suzanne Kate Finney

Just before sunup in early July, Victor Mack Jr. pushes cattle to the top of Monument Ridge in the Wyoming range. His lean, compact body is strong from a lifetime of riding and haying; his eyes are a crystalline blue. He takes a deep breath of sagebrush and looks out across the sunflowers that turned their heads east overnight, across the sparkling Hoback Basin and toward the Gros Ventres. His gaze lingers on the blanket of yellow mule's ears covering the mountainsides, sprinkled with scarlet gilia, blue penstemon, and delicate white sego lilies. He can tell you everything there is to know about these blooms—the birds and the bugs, too.

He rides to the edge, where a two-and-a-half-mile string of cattle zigzags to the bot-

tom and beyond. It's a lot of cattle in steep country, but eight Hoback Stock Association riders keep them moving in the right direction. He glances at his daughter Megan, starting down to sort pairs at the bottom. Before he joins her, he takes a long, hard look at Tosi Peak. He recalls seeing that peak more than 50 years ago, when he was a young boy. Vic Junior stood on the seat of the 1948 International stock truck next to his dad, hauling cows from their ranch in Riverton to summer range in the Hoback. He stared through the windshield, jumping up and down with excitement. His delight has not diminished.

Today, Vic and the other Hoback Stock Association members face a barrel of battles. "In 1976 we got a dollar a pound for calves.

Last year we got a dollar a pound for calves." In a state known for vicious winters, temperatures in the Hoback can plummet to minus-40 degrees. Wolves and grizzlies remain listed as endangered and now range far from Yellowstone, which means ranchers risk serving a buffet to these alpha predators. In the winter of 1902, Vic's grandparents owned 175 mares and lost every foal to wolves, and that was in the days when they could fight back. Vic and his family have always met these challenges, but now there's a threat that could permanently change their way of life: gas drilling.

Thirty-five miles southeast of Monument Ridge, 30,000 acres of sagebrush flats clank and sputter with the sounds of extraction.



This is a private ranch bordered by public ground and meadows that were purchased by an energy company. Both are being drilled. The rigs are about one mile from the New Fork River.

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