

A call to conserve

Written by CJ Baker

Tuesday, 07 July 2009

Groups call for more protection of Big Horn Basin's federal land

A coalition of conservation groups has offered its take on what should be done with the Big Horn Basin's federal land.

The Bureau of Land Management is putting together a Resource Management Plan that will guide use of the Basin's 3.2 million acres of federally-owned land for the next 15 to 20 years.

The bureau currently is hammering out alternative management options with local governments and agencies. But late last month, a dozen environmental organizations pre-emptively issued a joint "community alternative" that they would like the bureau to consider.

The groups include the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, the Alliance for Historic Wyoming and the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance. Their 128-page alternative suggests measures aimed at conserving the Basin's natural resources.

The proposals include reducing cattle grazing, placing greater restrictions on oil and gas development and withdrawing some lands, which include key wildlife habitat or places of historical significance, from development.

Specific measures include requiring oil and gas developers to use directional drilling and other technologies "in every case where they reduce the environmental impacts," and doubling the amount of wilderness in the Basin to some 287,800 acres.

A state BLM spokesperson said the bureau appreciated the coalition's input.

"We're always accepting comment and information," said spokeswoman Cindy Wertz.

The ideas are contested — in comments to the bureau last year, Marathon Oil Company warned the bureau that the expense of directional drilling can make some wells infeasible.

In their comments, the Basin's four county commissions asked the bureau to eliminate all wilderness areas.

Issues covered in the coalition's proposal "speak to a lot the things we didn't see happening in the (bureau's) alternatives," said Deb Thomas, organizer of the Clark Resource Council.

Thomas said one reason the coalition chose to submit the alternative is because alternatives for the management plan are being developed behind closed doors with cooperating agencies.

"Really, there's no way for the public to really know what's going on," she said.

Wertz said the public is represented in the meetings by local elected officials. The cooperating agencies include county commissioners and conservation districts, as well as state and federal agencies.

Thomas noted that the planning process adds extra work for commissioners and conservation districts.

"I don't think many people voted for them with the understanding that they would be representing them for all the public lands in the region," she said.

Wertz said the Wyoming BLM's interpretation of federal regulations is that members of the public can not be allowed into

the workshops.

"It's set by regulations, so we don't have any leeway on that," she said.

Park County Commissioner Jill Shockley Siggins, who is representing the county at the meetings, said she didn't understand why the public is not allowed to sit in.

Commissioner Dave Burke has participated in the Shoshone Forest's planning process, where the public has been allowed to observe similar workshops. Burke said he didn't think the bureau should be allowed to close their meetings.

The bureau will select a preferred alternative from those that emerge during the workshops, then release a draft plan for public comment in early 2010.

"We still have lots of opportunities to include any additional information," Wertz said.