

Bill aims at range impacts

By TOM MAST Casper Star-Tribune | Posted: Sunday, February 7, 2010 11:30 pm |

CASPER — A bill that would allow the state to compile information on Wyoming rangelands could help county commissioners evaluate the economic consequences of resource management decisions, according to a state senate committee chairman.

“We’re trying to fix it so local counties and cities have the right information so when some organizations says, ‘We’re going to stop drilling, we’re going to stop grazing,’ they’ll know what the impact will be to the local communities if you shut those things down,” said Gerald Geis, chairman of the Senate Agriculture, State and Public Lands and Water Resources Committee. The bill will be considered during the legislative budget session that begins this week.

Evaluating consequences

Geis said that if lawsuits or appeals threaten to disrupt economic activity on rangelands, local governments should have a means for evaluating the consequences. Senate file 7 would allow the state to compile data on a variety of activities.

If passed, Geis said the measure would provide the state and local governments with some leverage “so they can speak up and don’t have to take somebody else’s facts and figures. It’s right there for them.”

A second bill, Senate File 13, would empower the state Division of Economic Analysis to maintain data related to Wyoming counties and to prepare an annual catalog of statistical information available from the state and other sources.

Richard Garrett, legislative advocate for the Wyoming Outdoor Council, said if the objective is to acquire quality information that advances good decision-making, “then we’re all in favor of that.

“We have no objection against acquiring data. We think there’s just not enough of it out there.”

Generally, Garrett said there is a desire for more socioeconomic information, which is a good thing when such data are properly acquired and the results peer reviewed.

The bill would create a “federal natural resource policy account.” Money in the account could be spent by the governor on behalf of the state and local governments in response to federal resource policies that might affect the state’s tax base or other interests. Money also could be spent “for preparing and participating in environmental impact statements and environmental assessments, including analysis of economic or social and natural or physical effects on the human environment.”

Conducting assessments

On federal lands, assessments could be conducted only with agreement and participation of the managing agency.

The rangeland health assessment program would be developed by the state Department of Agriculture, with a budget of \$420,000.

The department would receive \$20,000 to develop the program, \$200,000 to participate in and to contract for assessments, and another \$200,000 to contract for participation by the University of Wyoming.

Assessments could look at impacts on state, federal, local or private property, “but shall be done only with the voluntary cooperation and participation of all participants.”

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