

Coalition urges BLM to protect land

Wyoming groups concerned about development effects

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CODY - As the U.S. Bureau of Land Management revises its plan for managing federal lands in the Bighorn Basin, a coalition of environmental and other interest groups is calling for greater protections against energy development and grazing, especially in sensitive areas.

Members of at least 10 groups, including many Wyoming organizations, say they want to see public lands better protected for wildlife and recreational use.

Dick Kroger, a retired BLM biologist in Worland, said he favors "an approach that puts wildlife and restoration of the health of the land on an equal footing with the oil and gas industry's profits and livestock grazing."

Last changed in 1990, the plan guides federal land management decisions. The agency's new Bighorn Basin planning area covers 3.2 million surface acres, plus an additional 1 million acres of federal mineral rights lying under private lands.

Among the local groups calling for greater protections are the Clark Resource Council, the Friends of a Legacy wild horse advocates, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition and the Northern Arapaho Preservation Society.

A BLM fisheries biologist in Worland for 10 years, Kroger said that the agency has had a "built-in bias that's come down through the history of the organization" favoring grazing and energy interests over wildlife and habitat issues.

"We would like equal footing in the Bighorn Basin with oil and gas and grazing from the wildlife, ecology, environmental and watershed standpoint, and it should be done in a manner that maintains the health of public lands," Kroger said.

The 171-page alternative plan put forward by local groups calls for more protections in sage grouse habitats and big-game winter ranges as well as requiring more directional drilling and "no surface occupancy" mineral leases.

It also stresses phased mineral development and greater cooperation between the BLM and surface landowners in split-estate situations.

Kroger said that all the groups endorsing the alternative plan recognize grazing as a legitimate use of public lands, but he added that the agency should do more to minimize conflicts between livestock and threatened and endangered species.

"And while oil and gas are much more regulated than they were 20 years ago, there are opportunities to reduce impacts to sage grouse" and other animals, he said.

New technologies and practices have allowed the industry to pursue reserves that were

not practical just a few years ago, said Kathleen Sgamma, director of government affairs for the Denver-based Independent Petroleum Association of Mountain States.

"Because of these unconventional plays across the Rockies, our technology enables us to have as small and temporary an impact on the land as possible," Sgamma said, adding that more than a quarter of the nation's natural gas comes from the Rocky Mountain states.

Any plan calling for wide areas to be put off limits or to be developed under no surface occupancy would restrict access to badly needed energy supplies, Sgamma said, adding that directional drilling is not always practical in some areas.

Sarah Beckwith, a BLM spokeswoman in Worland, said that the agency had not yet had a chance to fully review the alternative plan.

"We are going to ensure that all of the points that they make are addressed in our range of alternatives, which is what we're working on right now," Beckwith said.

Planners from the BLM are working in closed-door meetings with cooperating agencies to develop a draft resource management plan, expected to be released in spring 2010.

The BLM will solicit additional public comment on the alternatives outlined in that plan, with a final version to be released in early 2011.

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