



## Lands with wilderness qualities now focus of BLM plan

By MARTIN KIDSTON Gazette Wyoming Bureau | Posted: Thursday, January 19, 2012 12:00 am

WORLAND, Wyo. — The Bureau of Land Management led Bighorn Basin commissioners and their cooperating partners through the nuances of federal land planning Wednesday, detailing the methods used by the agency to identify wilderness-quality lands.

In its latest inventory, the BLM identified around 500,000 acres of public land across the Bighorn Basin that still contain wilderness qualities.

The agency defines lands with wilderness qualities, or an LWC, as a place larger than 5,000 acres that remains in a somewhat natural state and that offers opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation.

"There's a lot of subjectivity to the LWC inventory and there's a lot of emotion around it across the basin," said Fred McDonald, assistant field manager for the BLM's Cody office. "Looking at all these values isn't any easy process, but I think it's a good opportunity to keep the discussion going."

The eight-hour session, held at the Worland Community Center, covered the legal requirements applied by the BLM when defining a landscape as an LWC in its public lands inventory.

Officials spent the day defining the differences between inventory and management, and roads versus ways. They reviewed the federal definition of naturalness and discussed the meaning of outstanding when applied to the federal planning process.

While some cooperators argued points not relevant to the discussion or got stuck on semantics, most walked away with a greater understanding of the BLM's work and how to approach the next step in the agency's planning process, which is now in the 11th hour.

"At least we're speaking the same language now," said Big Horn County Commissioner Jerold Ewen. "We still need to debate the accuracy of the data that's out there. In some areas, I expect we'll find that we agree and in others, we may not."

The prospect of not finding agreement on some area's identified as an LWC played as a possibility as the session wore into the afternoon. Cooperators asked what recourse of action they had to resolve any disagreements, or how they could dispute areas identified by the BLM as having wilderness qualities.

Paul Rau, an outdoor recreation planner with the Worland Field Office, said that if the agency overlooked something that could disqualify a place from meeting the definition of an LWC, then cooperators should bring it to the BLM's attention.

Yet Rau also said that the agency's on-the-ground surveys, conducted last year, were both in-depth and thorough. Disagreements may simply be a matter of perspective, he said, and may come down to one's appreciation for the landscape before them.

"We had boots on the ground, with key observation points and route analysis and everything else, and we kind of know what we're talking about," Rau said. "We've driven these areas, hiked them, mountain-biked them and even cross-country skied them, whatever it took. Hopefully, today, we were able to dispel some of the myths that are out there."

The on-the-ground review, prompted by pressure from the basin's counties and their hired consultant, Ecosystems Research Group, has already prompted a drastic reduction in landscapes across the basin inventoried as an LWC.

The Worland Field Office had initially identified 42 areas as a possible LWC, but after further review and analysis, it reduced that number to just 30, or around 249,000 acres. The Cody Field Office also started with 36 LWCs. It too reduced its inventory to just 13, or around 240,000 acres.

The reduction in number and acreage marks a victory for conservative-leaning counties and their cooperating partners. Still, many at Wednesday's session remained skeptical about the remaining LWCs and believe that additional work must be done to pair them down even further.

"We still have a disagreement of sorts on what they view as an LWC and what we see as an LWC," said Washakie County Commissioner Terry Wolf. "If we can come up with something that works for all the entities here, I think it's good for everyone in the end."

Bighorn Basin counties have received their share of criticism for the amount of money they've taken from the state's Federal Natural Resource Policy Account to pay ERG, their consultant, to look for flaws in the BLM's plan.

But Washakie County Commissioner Aaron Anderson said the money has been well spent. He said it has forced the BLM to go back and review its data and make corrections to its inventory of LWCs.

"This isn't about destroying what's out there," Anderson said. "Sometimes it comes off that our only concern is for more and more development. It's about maintaining our standards and our lifestyles, and this inventory plays into that."

Monica Deromedi, executive director of the Natural Resources Growth Coalition in Thermopolis, said she wants to take what she sees as the subjectivity out of the LWC review process.

"Hopefully we can take the subjectivity out of this and drive it back to the facts," she said. "Were not against LWCs, we just want them to be accurate and based on science and actual fact. Everyone is going to have a differing option."

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