

Process delayed as feds include detailed input from county cooperators

## Locals heavily involved in BLM plan

By RUFFIN PREVOST - The Billings Gazette | Posted: Friday, October 30, 2009 1:00 am |

CODY -- Heavy involvement from county elected officials has meant that it will take a little longer to revise a federal plan that will define how more than half of all land in the Big Horn Basin will be managed for the next two decades.

"But I think that's a good thing," said Mike Stewart, Cody field manager for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which has been consulting with commissioners from Park, Big Horn, Hot Springs and Washakie counties.

The BLM is revising its Resource Management Plan, a process that will take several years. Last changed in 1990, the plan guides decisions on a host of issues, including energy development, recreation and wildlife habitat management.

"The more involvement that we have and the more information we have as we get to the end of the process, the better we're able to understand what the issues are, and it will probably make it a better plan," Stewart said of input from county elected officials.

"We had so much interest in this plan that the state director went back to Washington to request an extension," said Chris Carlton, a BLM state office liaison for local field offices.

The agency held an open house on Wednesday night in Cody, mainly as a reminder to community members that the process was ongoing, and public participation continued to be an important part of the plan revision, said Sarah Beckwith, a BLM spokeswoman.

The new plan combines areas around Cody, Worland and Grass Creek that have previously been managed separately. It covers 3.2 million acres of BLM land, or 57 percent of all public and private lands within the agency's planning area.

According to public comments released previously by the BLM, among the major issues identified in the scoping process, those who commented most often cited oil and gas development, off-road-vehicle use, wild horses, wildlife and habitat management.

One issue that has become increasingly important since the plan revision began is the growing interest in renewable energy, said Park County Commissioner Jill Shockley Siggins.

Siggins said that rising demand for energy by West Coast states was a major topic at the Western States Energy Symposium held earlier this month in Jackson.

States like California, Oregon and Washington will be looking to energy-rich Wyoming and other states for more power produced by fossil fuels, but also from wind, solar and other renewable sources, she said.

"People in Wyoming need to think about the possibility of transmission lines going across the Big Horn Basin," Siggins said, adding that large wind turbine installations could change scenic vistas across the Rocky Mountain region.

"They can be a visual obtrusion, but when you're looking at the cost versus benefit, there's no question" that wind turbines have a place on public lands, said John Osgood, a retired park ranger and renewable energy advocate.

Beckwith said the Big Horn Basin, while sometimes quite windy in some places, lacks the steady, large-scale wind resources of other parts of Wyoming, and has fewer major power transmission lines, making it less attractive as a renewable energy hotspot.

"But those (renewable) options will be represented in the range of alternatives as we continue working with cooperators," she said.

A draft Resource Management Plan is expected to be released in early 2011. The BLM will solicit additional public comment on the alternatives outlined in that plan, with a final version implemented in 2012.