

# Wyo BLM: No public access to meetings

By MEAD GRUVER - Associated Press writer | Posted: Wednesday, February 3, 2010 12:00 am |

CHEYENNE -- The U.S. Bureau of Land Management said it doesn't intend to open meetings to the public that are intended to lay the groundwork for managing a significant amount of land in Wyoming.

The move came despite insistence from environmentalists and others that the meetings be open.

The meetings are part of processes that can take years, meaning people who sit in on just one or two meetings can walk away with an incomplete and inaccurate sense of what's going on, said Mary Wilson, a BLM spokeswoman in Cheyenne.

"That could be folks in the community going out and saying, 'uh oh, look at this,'" Wilson said. "'They're going to make a car with only one wheel.' No, that was part of the brainstorming process."

The director of a government watchdog group said debating public issues behind closed doors isn't a good way to do business.

"Even the BLM probably has to feel a little squeamish about shutting the door and saying trust us, there's nothing in here you need to know," said Dan Neal of the Equality State Policy Center.

About 30 percent of Wyoming is BLM land. Documents known as resource management plans guide the management of that land in ways such as prioritizing activities including recreation, mining, drilling and grazing.

The BLM develops the plans out of its local field offices in consultation with local, state, tribal and other government officials.

Environmentalists including the Sheridan-based Powder River Basin Resource Council said the BLM is leaving people in the dark by not allowing the public to attend meetings.

"Those are the kinds of discussions we're interested in hearing. What are they seriously looking at as alternatives? What's on the table and how do they decide which ones are in and which ones are out?" said Jill Morrison, an organizer with the council.

Wilson said that even with closed meetings, the public gets plenty of opportunities to comment on alternatives for resource management plans.

Environmentalists point out that the U.S. Forest Service in Wyoming and BLM in Montana open up their land use meetings.

"I'm not sure that we have that many members of the public actually show up, or want to," said Mary Apple, acting chief of external affairs for the BLM in Montana.

The office of Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal also has been in contact with the BLM about opening up its meetings. Freudenthal is an advocate of government transparency but agrees with BLM that the public should have a sophisticated understanding of the process, said Ryan Lance, a deputy chief of staff to the governor.

That includes not mischaracterizing the views of cooperating officials, Lance said.

"So long as there is some productive end to be achieved and not a 'gotcha' moment, I think that's great," he said.