1

Purpose and Need

CHAPTER 1

PURPOSE AND NEED

INTRODUCTION

The Medicine Lodge Resource Management Plan (RMP) is being prepared to provide the Bureau of Land Management, Idaho Falls District Office, with a comprehensive framework for managing 648,700 acres of BLM-administered public land over the next 10 years. With increasing demands for various resources, prudent stewardship of the public lands can no longer be accomplished without comprehensive land use planning. This section of the document is a draft environmental impact statement (EIS) which addresses a BLM-preferred RMP and four other altenative RMPs. Each of the RMP alternatives reflect key public land issues identified through public participation. The preferred RMP alternative reflects BLM's effort to resolve resource conflicts and assure that the public lands are managed in accordance with the principles of multiple use and sustained yield.

The Medicine Lodge RMP is being prepared under the authority of and in accordance with Sections 201 and 202 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (Public Law 94-579, FLPMA). Further, pursuant to Section 603 of FLPMA, this document analyzes preliminary wilderness suitability recommendations for two wilderness study areas (WSAs) located within the planning area boundary. For these WSAs, this document will make only preliminary recommendations as to their suitability or nonsuitability for inclusion into the National Wilderness Preservation System. These recommendations will be reported through the Director of the BLM, the Secretary of the Interior, and the President to Congress. The final decision on suitability or nonsuitability of the WSAs will be made by Congress.

This document also serves as the instrument to satisfy the intent of the 1975 U.S. District Court approved agreement (Case 1983-73) between BLM and the Natural Resources Defense Council, et. al, in which BLM agreed to consider the impacts of various intensities of livestock grazing in its decision making process. Livestock grazing was identified as one of the planning issues. This issue was addressed in the land use plan and considered in this EIS.

The draft EIS is designed and intended to aid Bureau officials in the final selection of a resource management plan. The EIS further satisfies the intent of the Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), 40 CFR Part 1500. The intent of the CEQ regulations is to "ensure environmental information is available to public officials and citizens before decisions are made and before actions are taken." When finalized, the EIS will provide an environmental analysis of the approved RMP which may be referenced for future activity planning and project implementation associated with the RMP.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLANNING AREA

The Medicine Lodge Resource Area contains about 648,700 acres of public land in eastern Idaho. It includes all or part of Bingham, Bonneville, Clark, Fremont, Jefferson, Madison, and Teton counties in Idaho and part of Teton county, Wyoming. An additional 140,400 acres lie within the boundary of the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory. The planning area lies north and east of Idaho Falls and is bordered on the east by Wyoming and the north by Montana. The area is part of the Snake River plain. Two major river drainages, the Henry's Fork and the South Fork of the Snake River, traverse the area. These rivers provide excellent habitat for fisheries, waterfowl, raptors and big game, as well as excellent boating, fishing and camping for recreationists.

Area land forms vary from exposed lava flows in the south to prominent sand dunes in the central portion. Foothills, bisected by alluvial fans, lie at the mouths of canyons that extend into the mountains to the north and east. Elevation varies from 4,700 feet near Idaho Falls to 10,100 feet near the Montana line. Upland climate ranges from semi-arid to sub-humid. Precipitation averages 8 to 20 inches a year, falling mostly during the winter and spring.

Most public lands in the area are dry grazing intermingled with and adjacent to irrigated farm lands. Most grazing land is marginal for agricultural development and is left over from Homestead Act and Desert Land Act settlement. Livestock use the public land during all seasons of the year.

The total population in the area is about 120,000 people. The area's largest communities are Idaho Falls, Rexburg, St. Anthony, Ashton, Rigby, Dubois, Terreton, and Driggs.

Agriculture and agricultural related industries provide the base for the local economy. Also contributing significantly to the economy are recreational activities, such as hunting, fishing, camping, and off-road-vehicle use. The major transportation routes from the west to Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks cross through this area, increasing the recreational use and adding to the general economy.

SCOPING AND ISSUES IDENTIFICATION

Issue identification began in the spring of 1981 by conducting several meetings and sending out 450 issue response forms. Fifty people responded to our request for comments, with 32 of those replies addressing management concerns in the area. Meetings were held with other land managing agencies, county governments, Fort Hall Indian Tribal Council, and with concerned individuals. A total of 55 persons attended those meetings. All comments received and a record of those submitting comments are on file in the Medicine Lodge Resource Area, Idaho Falls District Office.

The issues presented here are those that received major emphasis in the public responses and ones that need a land use decision in the resource management plan.

Issue 1: Public Land Transfer

The Medicine Lodge Resource Area has a scattered land pattern and some parcels are isolated. Individuals having isolated public land parcels within private land holdings want to see them sold. Other comments were to exchange public land where possible to improve manageability. Comments received on Omitted Lands recommended retention of all Omitted Lands in public ownership. Several comments, letters and public statements were received, both supporting and opposing land transfer. Comments were received from both private citizens and from other federal and state agencies.

Questions to be Answered:

1. What public lands should be transferred out of public ownership or consolidated with other public lands?

2. Which public lands have agricultural potential?

3. What should be done with isolated tracts and omitted lands?

Issue 2: Mineral and Energy Exploration and Development.

The Medicine Lodge Resource Area lies within the overthrust belt and interest has been shown for oil and gas leasing and exploration. There is also interest in geothermal leasing. Oil and energy related companies have urged BLM to leave public lands open to exploration until energy and minerals potentials are known. Wildlife and other interests are concerned about protection of habitat and environmentally sensitive areas such as the Henry's Fork and South Fork of the Snake River. Comments were received both supporting and not supporting development of energy and minerals. This was not an intense concern as long as precautions are taken to minimize impacts to wildlife habitat.

Questions to be answered:

1. Should some public lands be closed to mineral leasing?

2. Should any areas be withdrawn from mineral entry?

3. What special conditions should be placed on mineral exploration and development?

Issue 3: Timber Resource Utilization

Timber sales have taken place in the resource area in the past. The demand for firewood has increased over the last few years and is expected to remain high. Comments received expressed the desire to continue timber resource utilization and coordinating the firewood program between the USFS and the BLM. Concern was also expressed over elk use in Douglas-fir areas. Public comment was generally in favor of promoting timber resource utilization with concern for elk use in Douglas-fir areas. Overall concern is low because BLM's volume is low compared to USFS.

Questions to be answered:

1. Should any areas be closed to timber harvesting?

2. Should restrictions be placed on timber harvesting?

Issue 4: Livestock Use

The Medicine Lodge Resource Area is important for livestock use, both sheep and cattle, but also includes critical deer and elk winter range. Portions of the resource area are spring and fall staging areas for deer and elk. It is important that both livestock and wildlife use be maintained or improved. Comments were received on all sides of the livestock use issue. Two comments wanted livestock use maximized, some wanted livestock use maintained at the existing level, four comments wanted livestock use reduced, but the majority wanted both livestock and wildlife use maintained or improved. Interest was also shown in the development of additional range improvements as long as wildlife needs and concerns are taken into account. Because of the importance of livestock use to the local economy and the importance of the deer and elk habitat to the local economy, this issue is one of the most sensitive in the RMP.

Questions to be answered:

1. How should the range resource be managed to meet existing and future livestock demand?

2. How much forage should be designated for livestock use?

3. What special conditions should be placed on livestock grazing?

Issue 5: Wildlife Use

The Medicine Lodge Resource Area supports four major big game species (elk, deer, moose, and antelope) and a large array of small game and non-game species. About 2,000 elk and 800-1400 deer winter on the Sands Habitat Management Area north and west of St. Anthony. Approximately 1,400-1800 elk and 1,600-2200 deer winter on the Tex Creek management area southwest of Idaho Falls. Active bald eagle nests and numerous osprey nests exist on public lands along the South Fork, Henry's Fork and main Snake River. Comments emphasized maintaining and improving elk and deer winter ranges (Tex Creek, Sand Creek, Medicine Lodge Canyon). No comments were received calling for a reduction in wildlife. Concern was expressed in preserving migration routes for elk, deer and antelope. Another area of major concern was protection of the South Fork ecosystem, riparian areas and birds of prey. Comments on installing and modifying range projects for wildlife purposes were received. It was expressed that elk herd expansion at the expense of livestock was not wanted unless State Endowment Lands are compensated. Concern was expressed for the preservation of sage grouse habitat and the purchasing of private lands that are critical to maintaining optimum big game herds. There is a Ferrugenous hawk nesting concentration in the vicinity of Hamer and a Swainson's Hawk nesting concentration around Crystal Butte.

Questions to be answered:

1. How should the range resource be managed to meet existing and future wildlife demands?

2. How much forage should be designated for wildlife use?

Issue 6: Recreation and ORV Use

There is good potential for recreation use and development within the Medicine Lodge Resource Area. Areas of recreation concentration are in the South Fork of the Snake River and the Sand Dunes area north of St. Anthony. Most other recreation in the area is of the dispersed nature. Comments were received on both sides of the ORV issue. Some wanted the Sand Dunes kept open to ORVs and others wanted ORVs kept off areas such as Big Sandy. There were also views on developed recreation sites. Several comments advocated creating more environmental education and interpretive programs such as on the Cress Creek Trail.

Questions to be answered:

1. What areas should be designated as open, closed or limited to motorized vehicles?

2. What areas should be developed as recreation sites?

3. Should the South Fork of the Snake River receive special designation as a scenic or recreational river?

Issue 7: Wilderness Designation

There are two areas in the Medicine Lodge Resource Area which have been determined to be wilderness study areas. Considerable controversy and a lot of public participation efforts have gone into the wilderness program. Comments were received recommending BLM consider South Fork islands for wilderness designation. Comments received on the Sand Dunes consisted of keeping them open to ORVs, keeping Big Sandy free from ORV use,maintaining dunes for multiple use, making part of the dunes into Research Natural Area, no wilderness, and not recommending areas with mineral or energy potential for wilderness designation.

Questions to be answered:

1. Which areas should be recommended for addition to the National Wilderness Preservation System?

2. If not recommended and designated as wilderness, how will the Wilderness Study Areas be managed?

Issue 8: Water and Water Quality

This issue is one developed within BLM. Part of the concern deals with the protection of water quality and riparian areas that occur on public lands in the area. Public ownership of water sources and of riparian areas is small and must be protected. The second part of the issue deals with the Soil Conservation Service's (SCS) Willow Creek 208 Watershed Project. This is an authorized project that deals with control of erosion in this area. There are public lands within the area and management needs to be consistent with the objectives of that project.

Questions to be answered:

1. Which riparian areas need to be improved in the area and which maintained?

2. How should the public lands be managed to compliment the SCS Willow Creek 208 Project?

Issue 9: Fire Management

This issue is one developed within BLM. The use of fire as a vegetation management tool is a management concern within Idaho. Appropriate constraints on the fire program are needed to protect or enhance sensitive and significant resource values. This concern is recognized within BLM and one which needs to be addressed within resource management plans.

Questions to be answered:

1. What areas should be designated for full suppression, limited suppression, suppression with restrictions, and prescribed burns?

2. What restrictions are needed in fire suppression to protect sensitive resource values?

2

Alternatives

Chapter 2

ALTERNATIVES

Both the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations and the BLM resource management planning regulations require the formulation of alternatives. Each alternative represents a complete and reasonable plan to guide future management of public land and resources. One alternative must represent no action. This means a continuation of present level or systems of resource use. The other alternatives are to provide a range of choices from those favoring resource production to those favoring resource protection.

The planning issues that were determined in the planning process dictatated the way in which alternatives were formulated. Land, resources and programs administered by the BLM are proposed for changes in management based on the preferred means of resolving all issues. Those lands, resources and programs not affected by the resolution of any issue will be managed in the future essentially as they are at present. Future changes will be permitted based on case-by-case analyses and in accordance with applicable laws, regulations and policy.

ALTERNATIVES ELIMINATED FROM CONSIDERATION

Two additional alternatives were considered but not developed for analysis in the RMP/EIS. These alternatives do not meet the standards in Section Two VI. C. 4 of the Idaho RMP Guidebook:

-Consistent with existing law and regulations;
-Reflect probable future funding levels, technology or other constraining factors;
-Manageable.

Maximum Grazing Alternative

The objectives of this alternative would be to improve the range, establish grazing systems, adjust season of use and produce the maximum amount of livestock forage possible without depleting the basic production capability of the soil. This alternative was eliminated from consideration because (1) future funding will not likely allow the amount of range improvement associated with this program, (2) the impacts created on other programs would not be acceptable or allowable.

No Grazing Alternative

The objective of this alternative would be to remove all livestock use from the public land. This alternative was not developed because (1) Livestock use on public land provides approximately $1.4 million to permittee livestock income and this would be lost, (2) Resource conditions do not warrant prohibition of livestock grazing resource area-wide, (3) This would not be consistent with existing laws and regulations for multiple use, (4) The cost of removal of range improvement projects not benefiting other programs would be prohibitive, (5) The enforcement of no grazing on the highly fragmented pattern of public lands in the resource area would be unmanageable and cost prohibitive.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

Items Included in the Alternative Descriptions

The description of alternative plans presented later in this chapter each include a discussion of alternative goals, multiple use and transfer areas, other resource uses and a summary of activity plans. These components are described immediately below. In addition, there are elements of the alternatives that are the same for all the alternatives. To avoid unnecessary repetition these elements have been presented in the draft plan (Part I) only. They include multiple use and transfer class, purposes and policies, standard operating procedures, support requirements, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation guidelines.

Goals

Goals are general states or conditions that resource management is designed to achieve. They are generally not quantifiable. Goals are the basis for developing objectives.

Multiple Use and Transfer Areas

Multiple use and transfer areas were delineated to describe land use allocations for the Medicine Lodge RMP Alternatives. The multiple use and transfer designations will change from one alternative to the next as a change in resource use emphasis is expressed. The acreage in each multiple use and transfer area is shown by alternative in Table 2-1, page 2-23. These multiple use and transfer categories are significant in that once a plan has been selected and approved, the categories cannot be changed without a plan amendment. General provisions for multiple use and transfer areas were presented in Part I.

In addition to multiple use and transfer areas, each alternative plan includes a discussion of other resource uses. These are resource uses that occur in more than one multiple use area and are not addressed in each multiple use area discussion.

Objectives are stated in each discussion of multiple use and transfer areas or other resource uses. Objectives are resource specific conditions to be achieved. They are well defined to guide future management and preparation of activity plans. Where possible, they are quantified.

Required actions to accomplish the objectives are discussed for the multiple use and transfer areas or other resource uses. Examples of required actions are range improvements, ORV restrictions and development of more detailed management plans and activity plans.

Summary of Activity Plans

Each alternative plan description ends with a summary of activity plans required for implementation of the plan. Activity plans are site specific, detailed plans developed after approval of the RMP. The RMP identifies where activity plans are needed to implement the general mangement decisions of the RMP.

Activity plans are generally resource specific covering major program areas. Examples of activity plans are habitat mangement plans (HMPs) for a wildlife management area, allotment management plans (AMPs) for specific grazing allotments and a fire management plan for the Medicine Lodge Resource Area.

Description of Alternatives

Five alternative plans were developed for consideration in the selection of a preferred plan for the Medicine Lodge Resource Area. Each alternative addresses the planning issues in a different way. The alternatives were developed to cover a range of possible resource uses. Thus, the environmental consequences of various management options were available for consideration in selection of a preferred alternative.

Alternative A

Goals: The "No Action" alternative would continue present management and will serve as the baseline for analyzing all other alternatives. Resource use levels for Alternative A were established by examining current use levels. The present level of management on the public lands would continue while measures would be taken to prevent or correct deteriorating conditions. Any changes in management would be brought about through monitoring and the environmental analysis process. All actions would be handled on a case by case basis.

Management actions required to implement an existing activity plan could be accomplished. New uses, such as communication sites, rights-of-way and landfills could occur subject to environmental review. The resource management guidelines discussed at the beginning of this chapter would apply. Land transfer actions would apply only to those lands where no conflicts occur and where transfer would be of benefit to the federal government and in the best public interest.

No wilderness study areas would be recommended for wilderness designation. Those areas not recommended for wilderness designation would be managed for their multiple use values.

As defined by BLM policy, Alternative A is the proposed action for livestock grazing.

Multiple Use and Transfer Areas in Alternative A

Map 3 shows the location of the multiple use and transfer areas for Alternative A.

M 1 - Moderate Use, 607,944 acres. No special limitations or restrictions on the type or intensity of resource use would be applied. Valid uses would be allowed subject to environmental review and stipulations or special conditions to protect resources. This area would be open to ORV use.

L 1 - Idaho National Engineering Laboratory, 140,415 acres. This area is a withdrawal by the Department of Energy. All of the area is currently withdrawn from leasable and locatable mineral exploration or development, 45% is withdrawn from disposal of salable minerals. There is grazing on about

119,500 acres of the withdrawal with the rest being closed. Other uses are prohibited or restricted.

L 2 - Game Creek, 1380 acres. This area is a municipal watershed and is closed to livestock grazing. It is also open to leasing under the "No Surface Occupancy" restriction, but beyond the reach of directional drilling.

L 3 - Menan Butte, 1120 acres. This area has been designated a National Natural Landmark and contains fragile soils and is of unique geologic interest. Menan Butte is closed to off-road-vehicle use (ORV) and no grazing is allowed. It is also closed to sales of mineral materials. There are 300 acres open to fluid mineral leasing but beyond the reach of directional drilling.

L 4 - Sand Mountain Wilderness Study Area, 21,100 acres. In order to protect the wilderness characteristics of the Sand Mountain WSA, it is assumed that development of fluid mineral resources within the WSA would require directional drilling from outside the WSA. Most of the area is beyond the reach of directional drilling.

L 5 - South Fork of the Snake River, 4500 acres. Approximately 400 acres of public land are leased under the "No Surface Occupancy" restriction and are beyond the reach of directional drilling. About 4300 acres are included in the Bureau of Reclamation withdrawal and are closed to locatable mineral entry.

T 1 - Transfer, 2015 acres. These areas would be available for transfer from federal ownership. Transfer could be by sale, exchange, agricultural entry, or other means as determined appropriate. Detailed examination would be conducted for these tracts prior to the final decision about transfer of type of transfer. Examinations would consider threatened and endangered species, cultural resources and other resource values.

These transfer acres are composed of 540 acres which would be transferred from public ownership by sale or exchange. An additional 1475 acres of public land have Desert Land Entry Applications filed on them which need to be examined and processed.

Other Resource Uses in Alternative A

Energy and Minerals: A total of 408,100 acres would be open to fluid mineral leasing with standard stipulations, 320,920 acres with seasonal occupancy restrictions and 65,630 acres under no surface occupancy restrictions. There would be 135,380 acres closed to solid and fluid mineral leasing.

A total of 793,110 acres would be open to locatable mineral entry and 136,920 acres closed to protect other resource values.

A total of 797,540 acres would be open to mineral material sales and 132,490 acres closed.

Forest Management: Approximately 14,410 acres of public land would be open to commercial harvest under existing regulations, restrictions and stipulations.

Under this alternative 12,773 acres of woodland would be available for selective management.

Livestock Forage: Provide 88,302 AUMs of livestock forage. Approximately 621,019 acres of public land and 125,026 acres within the INEL boundary would be included in grazing allotments. Average stocking rate would be 8.4 acres per AUM (See Table 2-1.).

The objective for Alternative A would be to maintain existing livestock use. No range improvements are proposed for this alternative.

The proposed livestock stocking level of 88,302 AUMs is the five year average actual use less any AUMs associated with the transfer category. For some allotments, less than five years of actual use was used because wildfires closed a portion or all of the allotments to grazing.

A stocking level of 88,302 AUMs is being proposed for Alternative A even though the present active preference is 103,281 AUMs. The five year average actual use level is a better indication of the existing ecological condition and trend and present management than the active preference, which includes 14.5 percent nonuse.

Wildlife Management: The Sands Habitat Management Plan includes 208,532 acres of public lands and would continue to be implemented and the objectives stated in the plan would be followed. In addition, the guidelines established by the Memorandum of Understanding for the South Fork of the Snake River and the Tex Creek Cooperative Agreement with the Idaho Fish and Game would be followed.

Approximately 11,500 total acres are scheduled for prescribed burn in the Edie Creek Bench area and an additional 4,260 total acres under the Sands HMP (see Table 2-1).

There are 35,865 AUMs of wildlife forage being proposed under this alternative to satisfy existing demands.

Water/Water Quality: Approximately 53 miles of stream would be managed to maintain existing fisheries, water quality and riparian habitat in current satisfactory conditon.

Public land within the SCS Willow Creek 208 project would be managed in accordance with that watershed protection plan.

Recreation:

ORV Designations: Under this alternative, 1,120 acres would be closed to ORV use in the Menan Butte area and 21,580 acres in the Sand Mountain and Stinking Springs area would have seasonal closures to protect big game wintering areas.

Special Designations: Under this alternative the National Natural Landmark designation would remain on the 1,120 acres of Menan Butte.

Wilderness: The wilderness recommendation is nonsuitable under this alternative for both WSAs. The areas would be managed under the Interim Management Policy until Congress acts. If the 2 WSAs were not designated as wilderness by Congress, they would be managed for other multiple uses as outlined in this alternative.

Fire Management: All areas would be considered as full suppression. Prescribed burning would occur on approximately 15,760 acres of which 50% would be burned.

Summary of Activity Plans Required for Implementation of Alternative A

Habitat Management Plan for Edie Creek Bench.
Extensive Recreation Management Plan

Alternative B

Goals: This alternative would favor production and use of commodity resources and commercial use authorizations. Management direction would favor higher livestock stocking levels, more range improvements, land disposal for agricultural development, and transfer of isolated or difficult to manage parcels out of federal ownership. Restrictions on mining, mineral leasing, mineral material removal, and off-road-vehicle use would be minimized.

Multiple Use and Transfer Areas in Alternative B

Map 4 shows multiple use and transfer areas for Alternative B.

M 1 - Moderate Use, 604,723 acres. No special limitations or restrictions on the type or intensity of resource use would be applied in this area. Valid uses would be allowed subject to environmental review and stipulations or special conditions to protect resources. This area would be open to ORV use.

L 1 - Idaho National Engineering Laboratory, 140,415 acres. This area is a withdrawal by the Department of Energy. Under BLM's recent proposal for withdrawal modification, 15 percent of the area would be withdrawn from mineral leasing and all of the area would remain closed to locatable mineral entry. There is grazing on about 119,500 acres of the withdrawal with the rest being closed.

L 2 - Game Creek, 1,380 acres. This area is a municipal watershed and is closed to livestock grazing. It is also open to leasing under the "No Surface Occupancy" restriction but beyond the reach of directional drilling.

L 3 - Menan Butte, 1,120 acres. This area has been designated a National Natural Landmark and contains fragile soils and is of unique geologic interest. Menan Butte is closed to off-road-vehicle use (ORV) and no grazing is allowed. It is also closed to sales of mineral materials. There are 300 acres open to fluid mineral leasing but beyond the reach of directional drilling.

L 5 - South Fork of the Snake River, 4,300 acres. Approximately 400 acres of public land are leased under the "No Surface Occupancy" restriction and are beyond the reach of such an operation. About 4,300 acres are included in the Bureau of Reclamation withdrawal and are closed to locatable mineral entry.

L 9 - Timber Withdrawal, 570 acres. This acreage would be withdrawn from timber harvest to protect Threatened and Endangered Species habitat and critical wildlife habitat. Because of small acre size these tracts were not shown on map 4a.

T 1 - Transfer, 25,466 acres. These areas would be available for transfer from federal ownership. Transfer could be by sale, exchange, agricultural entry, or other means as determined appropriate. Detailed examination would be conducted for these tracts prior to the final decision about transfer or type of transfer. Examinations would consider threatened and endangered species, cultural resources and other resource values.

T 2 - This area has a mixed land ownership and transfer action would be aimed at transfer of public lands within the area. Priority for transfer actions would be (1) State exchange, either within the area or for public land acquisition in other areas (2) private exchange, and (3) sale.

T 3 - This area lies within the Sands Habitat Management Area and has a very mixed land ownership. Transfer actions in this area will be aimed at acquisition of nonpublic lands and consolidation of existing public lands to enhance wildlife management. The use of state exchange would be given priority under this Alternative to consolidate ownership patterns.

Other Resource Uses in Alternative B

Energy and Minerals: A total of 566,440 acres would be open to fluid mineral leasing with standard stipulations, 308,520 acres with seasonal occupancy restrictions, and 27,170 acres under no surface occupancy restrictions. Only 27,900 acres would be closed to mineral leasing. This alternative would include opening about 106,840 acres of the INEL to mineral leasing.

Areas open to locatable mineral entry total 794,090 acres. Areas closed total 135,940 acres.

A total of 915,510 acres would be open to sales of mineral materials and only 14,520 acres closed to protect other resource values.

Forest Management: Approximately 13,841 acres of public land would be open to commercial harvest under existing regulations, restrictions and stipulations under this alternative. Another 569 acres would be lost through transfer actions.

Under this alternative, 12,638 acres of woodland would be available for selective management. One hundred thirty five acres of woodlands would be withdrawn from harvest around existing bald eagle nesting sites.

Livestock Management: Provide 108,835 AUMs of livestock forage. Approximately 621,019 acres of public land and 125,026 acres within the INEL boundary would be included in grazing allotments. Average stocking rate would be 6.9 acres per AUM (See Table 2-1).

The objective of Alternative B would be to maintain or improve existing perennial forage plants, maintain soil stability, stabilize areas currently in downward trend, and increase availability of perennial forage plants.

Range improvements would be accomplished in support of achieving the objectives stated above. See Table 2-1.

Total cost of the improvements would be $2,772,740.

Increases could be up to full preference or beyond depending on trend, actual use and feasibility of range improvements. Range improvements, in some allotments, and existing forage production and facilities would allow for the proposed increases. Grazing preference was not considered on lands in a transfer category.

The grazing preference level proposed for Alternative B assumes an optimistic future funding level for implementation of range improvements. Burning is the preferred method of brush control and would be used where ground cover is adequate to carry fire and species composition would allow recovery of desirable vegetation.

The initial stocking level of 108,835 AUMs is 23% higher than the current five year average actual use and slightly higher than the current active preference. There are several reasons for this stocking level.

-Alternative B goals favor higher stocking levels.

-Although the current rate of 14.5% nonuse may continue into the future, the exact rate of nonuse is unpredictable. Actual use is tied to market conditions and other factors such as weather and fire. Thus, if Alternative B were implemented, the initial stocking level of 108,835 AUMs may or may not be fully utilized. The initial stocking level of 108,835 AUMs is used for analysis of the environmental effects in the event it were fully utilized.

-The initial stocking level of 108,835 AUMs for Alternative B may not be supported in a drought year when forage production is low. This would be handled by temporary suspension.

The initial stocking rate of 108,835 AUMs would occur based on monitoring data as discussed under Implementation in Part I, page 47. Increases that are dependent on range improvements would occur only if funding for the necessary improvements is available and the projects are completed. Feasibility for project implementation would be handled on a case-by-case basis as the activity plans are developed. Decreases resulting from land transfers would occur only as the identified tracts are transferred from federal ownership.

Changes in season of use would occur in some allotments where there is a conflict with other resource needs. Altered turnout dates and/or season of use may be used to improve range condition, improve vigor of perennial vegetation and implement reductions needed to achieve management goals.

Wildlife Habitat: The Sands Habitat Mangement Plan would continue to be used and updated. A total of 24,601 AUMs of wildlife forage would be allowed under this alternative.

Range improvements would take wildlife needs into consideration where possible.

An HMP would be developed for the Edie Creek Bench area covering 11,500 acres. Objectives for this HMP would be to improve deer, antelope, sagegrouse, and moose habitat in the area. This would be accomplished through controlled burning and livestock use adjustments.

The Tex Creek Cooperative Agreement and the South Fork MOU would continue to be followed.