

West HiLine

Resource Management Plan
Environmental Impact Statement

Record of Decision

September 1988

United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Lewistown District, Montana



BLM-MT-ES-88-009-4410

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

RECORD OF DECISION
and
RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN SUMMARY

for the
approval of portions of the
WEST HILINE
Resource Management Plan and
Environmental Impact Statement

United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Marvin LeNoue

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Montana State Director
September 1988

RECORD OF DECISION
and
RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN SUMMARY
for
THE WEST HILINE
RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN AND FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL
IMPACT STATEMENT

The West HiLine Resource Management Plan (RMP) addressed the Bureau of Land Management administered lands in the Havre, Great Falls, Judith and Phillips Resources Areas, in the Lewistown District.

This Record of Decision (ROD) pertains to all these lands with the exception of the Sweet Grass Hills in the Great Falls Resource Area, and the Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River in the Judith and Phillips Resource Areas. Protests have been received on these two portions of the RMP. The Bureau will begin implementing those portions of the RMP/EIS not under protest. A separate ROD will be published following the resolution of these two issues.

This document records the decisions reached by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for managing 529,993 surface acres of BLM-administered land and 1,242,321 sub-surface acres in parts of the Havre and Great Falls Resource Areas, Lewistown District, Montana.

The West HiLine RMP was prepared under the regulations for implementing the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976 (43 CFR 1600). An Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was prepared for this RMP in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969.

DECISION

My decision is to approve the proposed Resource Management Plan, as described in the final West HiLine RMP/EIS final, for the Havre and Great Falls Resource Areas (exclusive of the Sweet Grass Hills and the Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River portions of this RMP).

The Preferred Alternative (D), as modified by public comments on the Draft RMP/EIS, has been selected as the RMP.

PLANNING ISSUES

Land tenure adjustment, off-road vehicle management, right-of-way location, and emphasis areas designations were issues identified through public comment, resource monitoring and policy mandates during the scoping process. These issues reflect resource concerns or conflicts which could be partially or totally resolved through this RMP.

ALTERNATIVES

The formulation and analysis of alternatives is required by the council on Environmental Quality, which oversees the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA 40 CFR 1500.2(e)); and by the BLM to implement its RMP regulations (43 CFR 1610.4-5).

Alternatives Eliminated From Detailed Study

Several alternatives were considered during the formulation process, but were deleted from detailed study because they were unreasonable or did not resolve the planning issues.

Alternatives proposing maximum resource production or protection of one resource at the expense of other resources were not considered because this would violate the Bureau of Land Management's legal mandate to manage BLM-administered land on a multiple-use, sustained yield basis, unless otherwise specified by law.

Alternatives Developed in the RMP

Four alternatives to resolve the issues were developed and analyzed in detail. The major management actions and environmental impacts of the four alternatives are discussed below. More information on the alternatives is located in Chapter 2, of the final RMP/EIS.

Current management of non-issue resources and programs would have continued under each alternative and is described in the Management Common to All Alternatives portion of Chapter 2. Each alternative, in conjunction with the Management Common to All Alternatives guidance, presented a complete and reasonable guide to future management of BLM-administered lands and resources.

The Preferred Alternative (D)

This alternative, as modified by public comments on the draft RMP/EIS, has been selected as the final Resource Management Plan. The following digests summarize the principle issues of this RMP.

LAND TENURE ADJUSTMENT

The BLM manages a variety of public land in the West HiLine area, including Land Utilization (LU) project lands (private land acquired by the federal government under the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of July 22, 1934), public domain lands and mineral estate subsurface lands. Many of these lands are widely scattered and often pose multiple resource management problems. This RMP identifies BLM-administered lands which should be retained; lands which may leave federal ownership; and areas where BLM would like to acquire lands.

BLM would consolidate land holdings in areas of high resource values. A total of 15,689 acres of BLM-administered land would be identified for disposal including sale, with an emphasis on exchange. An additional 34,428 acres of land would be identified for disposal primarily through exchange. However, if it is in the public interest and a parcel meets the specific criteria listed in Appendix 1.1 of the final RMP/EIS, the parcel(s) may be disposed of through sale. The total identified for disposal through various means is 50,117 acres.

Retention and acquisition efforts would be concentrated in the Marias River area, the Cow Creek and Kevin Rim Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs); and important wildlife habitat.

Impacts to vegetation would be moderate if a considerable amount of the native prairie disposal tracts are plowed. Land disposal could critically impact 9,885 acres of crucial wildlife habitat if land uses change after disposal. The loss of this habitat could be mitigated by acquiring private areas of comparable crucial wildlife habitat. Public lands consolidation through exchange could enhance livestock management; however, these options would decrease if disposal was by sale. Recreation opportunities could significantly improve due to increased access and protection of recreational values resulting from land consolidation through exchanges.

OFF-ROAD VEHICLE MANAGEMENT

The BLM would provide for public off-road vehicle (ORV) use while protecting resource values and providing for public safety. The BLM would limit ORV use to designated roads and trails in the Cow Creek and Kevin Rim ACECs and in riparian areas. Travel in WSAs would be limited to existing roads and vehicular ways.

ORV use is increasing throughout the RMP area and unauthorized roads and trails are extending into previously unroaded areas. Executive Order (EO) 11644, as amended by EO 11989, directs that all public lands be designated as open, limited, or closed to ORV use. This RMP identifies areas of resource conflicts, resource degradation or public safety concerns associated with ORV use and amends previous designations, where necessary.

ORV implementation plans will be developed and may include type of vehicle and seasonal restrictions, as well as road closures. A total of 130,070 acres will be designated "year-long limited;" 298,039 acres will be designated "seasonally restricted;" and 197,984 acres will remain "open" to ORV use in the RMP.

Positive benefits to soil and water resources may occur from restricting ORVs to roads and trails in areas of sedimentary Breaks-type soils (226,071 acres). Moderate positive impacts would be expected from the seasonal protection of essential wildlife habitat.

RIGHT-OF-WAY LOCATION

This RMP deals with rights-of-way (ROW) planning by identifying avoidance areas, exclusion areas and acceptable locations "windows" for lineal rights-of-way. It does not identify corridors because of the fragmented public land ownership pattern, the existing facilities and the small amount of BLM-administered land included in and along existing ROWs.

This RMP also identifies areas which are not suitable for communication site locations.

BLM will permit lineal rights-of-way, provided impacts can be mitigated in the majority of the planning area. Avoidance areas for lineal rights-of-way total 106,004 acres and include the Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs), the Kevin Rim and Cow Creek ACECs, riparian areas, and areas containing sedimentary Breaks soils.

The BLM will determine where transmission and distribution ROW facilities could be located off the east side of Kevin Rim following a raptor inventory and development of an activity plan. An Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) activity plan will determine if, how many, and where any "windows" should be designated. Windows will not necessarily be established along existing facilities.

A locally moderate negative impact to the mineral and utilities industries would result from the increased costs of routing ROWs around avoidance and exclusion areas.

EMPHASIS AREAS

The proposed RMP designates the Kevin Rim and Cow Creek areas as ACECs.

The Kevin Rim (Great Falls Resource Area) is valuable raptor habitat, is a potential peregrine falcon reintroduction area, and has significant cultural resources.

The Cow Creek area (Havre Resource Area) contains a segment of the Nez Perce National Historic Trail, the Cow Island Trail, and the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. It also includes portions of the Cow Creek WSA.

Activity plans will be developed for all areas to detail specific actions needed to implement the RMP guidance.

Management direction for Kevin Rim will apply the *Rocky Mountain Front Raptor Guidelines* (see Appendix 2.2 in the final RMP) to new federal mineral leases within the valuable raptor habitat. BLM will not authorize new developments within 1/4-mile of the base of the Kevin Rim escarpment, unless impacts to cultural resources can be mitigated; the BLM will determine where ROW facilities off the Kevin Rim escarpment (east side) can be located after completing a raptor inventory and an activity plan.

Management direction for the Cow Creek area will include: preserving the scenic, interpretive, recreation and paleontological values; reevaluating the visual resource management ratings; and emphasizing riparian management.

ACEC designation and management of the Kevin Rim may significantly increase oil and gas development costs due to raptor and cultural resource stipulations. The mineral and utility industries could be moderately impacted by the need to restrict ROWs on the east side of Kevin Rim. Management emphasis on raptor and cultural resources will produce a significant positive impact for the raptor habitat and a moderately beneficial impact to cultural resources.

Management of the Cow Creek ACEC will create a significant improvement in riparian vegetation, soils, streambank stability and water quality. Vegetation condition improvement will be a significant positive impact to wildlife habitat. Application of more stringent restrictions to surface development will enhance the preservation of the Nez Perce National Historic Trail, a significant benefit. The emphasis on visual and natural resource qualities of the area will be a moderately positive benefit.

No Action Alternative (A)

This alternative represented continuation of present management direction. It would have continued to implement policies, regulations, and decisions from five management framework plans, several grazing environmental impact statements, a wilderness EIS, various programmatic environmental activity plans, and the BLM State Director's "Guidance for Land Pattern Review and Land Adjustment (1984)." This alternative served as the baseline for the comparison of other alternatives. This alternative plus the guidance given in the Management Common To All Alternatives section would have formed the RMP.

Consumptive Use Emphasis Alternative (B)

This alternative emphasized the availability of public land for consumptive uses with minimum restrictions. The non-consumptive resources (cultural, soil, water, air, threatened-endangered species, vegetation, etc.) would have been provided the minimum protection required by law. The alternative would have generally provided the opportunity for the maximum allowable levels for resource use, exploration, development and production. This alternative plus the guidance given in the Management Common To All Alternatives section would have formed the RMP.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative (C, Protection Emphasis)

The management guidance in this alternative emphasized the protection of natural and cultural resources. Other BLM-administered lands uses would have been constrained by stipulations and/or mitigation developed to provide protection and enhancement of non-consumptive resources (recreation, soil, water and air), the natural resources (wildlife, vegetation, etc.), and cultural resources. This alternative plus the Management Common To All Alternatives section would have formed the RMP.

Alternative C presented the lowest level of surface disturbance, impact on regionally or nationally significant resources, and disruption of regional economic and social conditions. However, this alternative was not the BLM's preferred plan because of the alternative's failure to achieve balanced resources multiple-use and incomplete resolution of the planning issues.

SELECTION OF PROPOSED ALTERNATIVE

In selecting the proposed management plan each alternative was reviewed for: effectiveness in resolving planning issues; conformance with the guidance established by the planning criteria; avoidance of unnecessary impacts to the human environment, and responsiveness to public opinion.

MITIGATION

The RMP has been designed to avoid or minimize environmental harm where possible. Specific mitigation measures are described in Chapter 2 of the RMP and in Appendices 2.2, 2.6, and 2.7 of the draft RMP/EIS.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

A monitoring program has been developed for the RMP which includes monitoring and evaluation standards for implementing the RMP and determining whether mitigation measures are satisfactory.

The impacts of implementation, as evaluated through resource monitoring, will be evaluated on a periodic basis over the life of the RMP. The general purposes of this resource monitoring and plan evaluation will be:

1. to determine if an action is fulfilling the purpose and need for which it was designed, or if there is a need for modification or termination of an action;
2. to discover unanticipated and/or unpredictable effects;
3. to determine if mitigative measures are effective as prescribed;
4. to ensure that decisions are being implemented as scheduled;
5. to provide continuing evaluation of consistency with state and local plans and programs; and
6. to provide for continuing comparison of plan benefits versus costs including social, economic, and environmental conditions.

A specific monitoring plan was prepared (1984) for the wildlife, watershed and grazing management programs in each of the four resource areas included in the RMP. These monitoring plans will be used to monitor the implementation of specific management guidance and actions which impact wildlife, watershed and grazing management.

Wildlife Resources

Monitoring is directed at the biotic resource components, using both temporary and permanent studies. The results of these studies can be used to determine responses in habitat condition and trend; food availability, composition, and vigor; changes in cover and habitat effectiveness; and habitat management objectives.

Some of the available methods include: canopy cover transects; browse transects, riparian survey and photo plots; habitat condition ratings; color-infrared aerial photography; wildlife species composition and population and dynamics inventories; raptor use and mortality from powerlines; ungulate pellet group transects; and selected threatened and endangered species inventories.

Watershed Resources

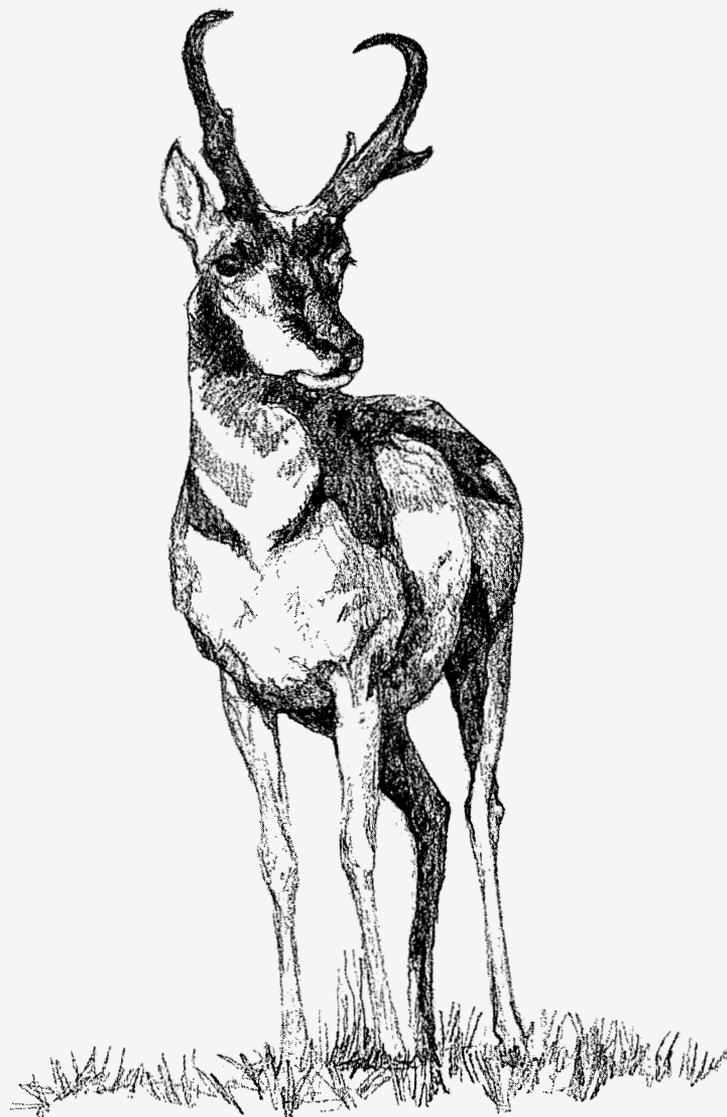
Monitoring the impacts of management activities on watershed condition is done in the following ways: measuring ground cover to assess erosion and sedimentation potential; measuring runoff, sediment production, water quality and water quantity at stream gauging stations, studying runoff plots; monitoring streambank stability and riparian communities at selected sites; establishing demonstration units to exhibit the affects of management on riparian communities; and monitoring observation wells for groundwater level and quality. Climatic data (precipitation, air temperature, soil moisture and soil temperature) will be collected and used in evaluation with other monitoring data.

The type of monitoring is dependent on the type and location of the activity. Monitoring parameters, levels and frequency will be determined at the activity plan stage.

Grazing Management

The grazing allotment management plans (AMP) will provide the specific objectives to collect information needed to implement and monitor specific management decisions which impact watershed, wildlife and grazing management. Monitoring efforts will focus on vegetative trend, forage use, actual use (livestock numbers and periods of grazing) and climate in the Improve category allotments. The data collected from these studies will be used to evaluate current livestock stocking rates, to schedule livestock moves within pastures, to determine levels of forage competition, and to detect changes in plant communities and to identify patterns of vegetation use. Some of the methods to be used include the Daubenmire canopy transects, photo plots, key vegetation use transects, aerial and ground surveys of livestock numbers and grazing patterns, actual use questionnaires and low altitude aerial photography transects.

Priorities for monitoring grazing allotments are documented in the resource area monitoring plan. The methodology and intensity of study chosen for an AMP will be determined by the nature and severity of the resource conflicts present in that AMP.



PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public participation has been sought throughout the planning process and is summarized in Chapter 5 of the RMP.

Page 46, Table 5.1 in the final EIS chronologically presents the public involvement for preparing and reviewing this RMP.

A partial list of persons, agencies, and groups involved in the public participation process is given on page 47 of the final EIS.

CONSISTENCY

This plan is consistent with the plans, programs, and policies of other federal agencies, and state and local governments.

PUBLIC AVAILABILITY OF THIS DOCUMENT

Additional copies of the final West HiLine Resource Management Plan are available on request from: the Great Falls Resource Area, 812 14th Street North, P.O. Drawer 2865, Great Falls, Montana, 59403, telephone (406) 727-0503; and the Havre Resource Area, West 2nd Street, Drawer 911, Havre, Montana 59501, telephone (406) 265-5891. Copies may also be obtained from the Lewistown District Office, Airport Road, Lewistown, Montana, 59457, telephone (406) 538-7461; and the BLM Montana State Office, 222 No. 32nd St., P.O. Box 36800, Billings, Montana, 59107, telephone (406) 657-6561. In addition copies are available at selected local libraries.

The complete approved RMP will be published as a "desk document" after protest resolution.