

RAWLINS FIELD OFFICE

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Bureau of Land Management

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Opinion-editorial

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BLM's Rawlins Field Office concluded its public meetings on the proposed revision of the Rawlins Resource Management Plan (RMP) draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) last week. The meetings were well attended, with 187 citizens attending open houses held in Rock Springs, Baggs, Rawlins and Laramie. In addition, 193 citizens attended the public hearings portion and 79 offered their testimony.

As the field manager of the Rawlins Field Office, I want to offer my thanks to all of these interested citizens. The RMP team appreciates the time you invested to offer your comments. BLM now faces the difficult task of formulating a long-term land use plan that balances the concerns and needs of the American public with the multiple uses of the public lands, as mandated by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976.

Multiple use land management is an extremely challenging proposition. Numerous laws help guide land management but, at the same time, many uses of the public lands are conflicting in nature. It is not possible to do everything, everywhere, for everyone all of the time—thus the challenge of multiple use public land management. Over the next few months you will see a series of articles written by BLM specialists that, I hope, will clarify or expand your understanding of public land management.

A number of comments at each of the public meetings focused on the projected “9,000” (the actual projection in the draft plan is 8,822) wells in the Rawlins Field Office over the next 15 to 20 years. This projection covers the entire Rawlins Field Office area—more than 11 million acres—which include almost 5 million acres of BLM-administered public lands and minerals, and over 5 million acres of private and state lands and minerals.

Of that total projected number of wells, approximately 3,700 will likely be located on public land. Does the BLM have the option to *not authorize* drilling the estimated 3,700 wells to access federal minerals? The answer is simply no—since most of the minerals rights have already been leased for these wells under decisions made in our previous land use plan.

If BLM were to prohibit lease-holders from exercising their rights to drill a well on their lease, this would be a violation of lessee rights. In addition, BLM is charged with protecting public resources. If a well is drilled on private land, and drains the resource from the formation under a

federal lease we--the American public--do not receive any compensation for the use of a public resource.

A lease, however, does not grant unlimited right to explore or develop the oil or gas resources. BLM does have authority to require operators to avoid and minimize potential environmental impacts by placing restrictions on the lease. BLM is authorized to modify facility siting and design, influence the rate of development and timing of activities, and other reasonable mitigations to protect important natural resources.

The Rawlins Resource Management Plan is not the last chance the public has to be involved in what is happening on the public lands in the Rawlins Field Office area. Beyond the broad guidance that this plan lays out, there are additional levels of analysis conducted for each project.

Under the National Environmental Policy Act, BLM is required to assess the impacts of federal actions such as authorizing wells. For example, an oil and gas proposal is assessed based on the Application for Permit to Drill. This assessment is done by writing either an environment assessment or an environmental impact statement that analyzes for local or site-specific effects. The effects are recognized in the document and a decision is made regarding the project. At all phases of the process there is opportunity for public involvement and input to help shape the public land use decisions.

BLM has restrictions to its decision-making latitude, but we seek and use public input in forming these decisions. Written comments on the Rawlins Resource Management Plan will be accepted through March 18, 2005. For more information, log onto www.rawlinsrmp.com

The next article in this series will focus on wildlife habitat and how it is addressed in the Rawlins Resource Management Plan (RMP) draft environmental impact statement.

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