

Bureau of Land Management
Northeast California Resource Advisory Council

Field Tour and Business Meeting
Wednesday and Thursday, Aug. 24-25, 2011
Susanville, California

Summary Minutes

Wednesday, Aug. 24

Members of the RAC participated in a field tour to the Dry Valley Off Highway Vehicle Area, where BLM staff members Stan Bales and Marisa Williams provided updates on recent improvements. The tour continued to the Smoke Creek Road, where RAC members saw remnants of the Noble's Emigrant Trail and learned about BLM work to preserve the trail vestiges and interpret them for the public.

Thursday, Aug. 25

Chairman Nancy Huffman convened the meeting at 8 a.m. in the Conference Room of the Eagle Lake Field Office.

Members attending:

Category One: Ken McGarva, John Erquiaga, Jack Razzeto, Skip Willmore, Todd Swickard.

Category Two: Frank Bayham, Martin Balding, Rosalee Bradley, Gale Dupree. Absent: Alan Cain.

Category Three: Nancy Huffman, Sean Curtis, Jim Chapman, Norvie Enns. Absent: Brad Hanson (attended tour).

There is a quorum

BLM Staff: Erin Curtis, acting deputy state director for external affairs; Nancy Haug, northern California district manager; Tim Burke, Alturas field office manager; Ken Collum, Eagle Lake field office manager, Allen Bollschweiler, Surprise Field Office manager; Jeff Fontana, Northern California District public affairs officer; Jennifer Mata, Eagle Lake Field Office supervisory natural resources specialist; Marisa Williams, Eagle Lake Field Office outdoor recreation planner; Stan Bales, Eagle Lake Field Office outdoor recreation planner; Wade Salverson, Eagle Lake Field Office forester.

The meeting agenda and minutes from the last meeting were approved without changes.

State Director's Report

Erin Curtis from the California State Office external affairs staff presented a report on behalf of Associate State Director Jim Abbott.

- Wild Horse & Burro – We are winding up our adoption season, with a number of adoption events concluded and two more to go – Sept. 10 in Redlands and Sept. 16-18 in Napa. Our biggest priority for the state is the High Rock Complex round up, scheduled to begin October 15 in the Surprise Field Office. A Decision Record for the environmental assessment of the round up was signed August 15. The goal of the round up is to return the population to the appropriate management level. Additionally, nearly 400 wild horses are roaming on public and private land outside of designated herd management areas and will be removed.

There was continuing discussion about horse management and the mechanics of gather operations.

- Legislation – As you well know, the primary focus of this Congress so far has been on budget and economic issues. There are about a half dozen legislative proposals that we are tracking. A few that might be of interest to the RAC include:

- H.R. 1581 (Rep. McCarthy) – releases BLM wilderness study areas that are not suitable for wilderness designation and release U.S. Forest Service-inventoried roadless areas. BLM Director testified in strong opposition to the bill on behalf of the Department on July 26.
- S. 138 (Sens. Boxer and Feinstein) – establishes the Sacramento River National Recreational Area (Tehama & Shasta counties) to be managed as part of the NLCS.
- OH.R. 1237 (Rep. Herger) – Involves a land exchange between the BLM, Forest Service and Trinity Public Utilities District. BLM would acquire 47 acres known as the Sky Ranch parcel.
- Wilderness – As part of Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar's push to build a bipartisan wilderness agenda that can be enacted in the 112th Congress, BLM state offices solicited suggestions and recommendations from state and local elected officials, Tribes, and other federal land managers on areas that deserve wilderness protection and that have broad support for congressional designation. The focus of this effort is to identify lands that have strong backing for protection as wilderness and that might be appropriate for congressional action. The best ideas for conservation come from the ground up, and we hope this effort will help lay a foundation for a bipartisan wilderness agenda in this Congress. We've heard from the public and many people have expressed how much they value wilderness areas. This effort is

an extension of Secretary Salazar's June 10, 2011, letter to Members of Congress requesting their ideas on "crown jewel" areas of public lands that have strong local support for permanent protection as Wilderness under the Wilderness Act. This fall, the Department of the Interior will submit to Congress a list of "crown jewels" that it believes are ready for Wilderness designation by Congress based on the combined input from Congressional, state, local and tribal partners. BLM-CA is reviewing the 10 responses sent in by county supervisors, tribal leaders and a state park. We will provide our recommendations to the national office for further review and consideration and they will forward to the Secretary for his report to Congress by mid-October.

- BLM Priorities – Our priorities continue to be renewable energy and America's Great Outdoors, including the National Landscape Conservation System, youth initiatives and recreation.

District Manager's Report

Nancy Haug reported:

- Intensive planning is underway in the western states to improve conservation strategies for sage grouse. The effort is designed to have significant conservation measures in place. The Fish and Wildlife Service is considering petitions to list the species under the federal Endangered Species Act. Northeast California and Nevada field offices will be coordinating on a single environmental impact statement for this undertaking. There are other sub-regional teams working across the western states. BLM has created a detailed management structure to deal with the effort which is important to conserve habitat and avoid the need for a listing. Discussion continued.

Nancy Huffman said the BLM needs to provide ample opportunity for public comment. Haug said the process will follow the public involvement process used in all BLM planning efforts, and local stakeholders will be involved.

BLM Natural Resource Specialist Jennifer Mata explained that a process called Rapid Ecoregional Assessment will be used to examine landscape-level indicators of habitat health. This will focus on indicator species as a gauge of habitat health. Wildfire, invasive species, large-scale development will be evaluated. Grazing might be included. The effort crosses all boundaries. Locally developed data, such as that developed by the local Buffalo-Skedaddle Working Group, will be included.

Skip Willmore wanted to know what the FWS did not like about current conservation work. Haug responded that the FWS wants to see regulatory mechanisms to conserve sage grouse habitat included in BLM land use plans.

Jim Chapman noted there have been significant local conservation efforts, specifically the sage steppe conservation project. He said a regional “one size fits all” approach will not work for habitat concerns that are localized.

Nancy noted that various issues including increased energy development and widely varied currency of land use plans, in BLM are driving the issue.

The FWS is seeking a regional planning approach that takes into consideration the fact that sage grouse migrate among various BLM jurisdictions.

Frank Bayham observed that the effort is almost paradoxical because hunting seasons continue for sage grouse. There is a perception issue. He suggested that the BLM “push back” on the FWS, particularly because of that public perception.

Jennifer noted the most recent FWS decision on listing (warranted but precluded) shows that habitat loss due to sage brush stand conversion to cheat grass is a major risk factor.

Skip said it is important for BLM to recognize that local residents don’t have confidence in the public input process. His constituents ask him to deliver their concerns to BLM via the RAC. These constituents will be concerned that this current effort is just more government control, and they will be resistant. He expressed disappointment that the FWS has not been more specific in its concerns.

- Nancy also noted that Interior agencies and Fish and Game will be releasing an EIS on impacts of removing four dams on the Klamath River. A public comment period will be announced.

Field Trip Review

There were opportunities for members to comment on the field trip to Dry Valley and Smoke Creek.

Martin Balding commended the BLM for addressing the needs for OHV recreation in a managed way that protects other areas from road proliferation.

Frank Bayham commended the effort to document the historic Noble’s Trail.

Alternative Energy

Medicine Lake Geothermal: Alturas Field Manager Tim Burke summarized various court actions that have been underway regarding proposed geothermal power plant developments at Telephone Flat and Fourmile Hill near Medicine Lake. Litigation is complex. After resolution of the litigation, Calpine, the proponent company, may propose developing a 480-megawatt power plant. Any new proposal would be analyzed in an environmental impact statement.

Wind Energy: Eagle Lake Field Office Realty Specialist Charlie Wright updated the RAC on wind power proposals in northeast California:

- Intel Wind is proposing installation of new data collection towers in the Cold Springs area near Dodge Reservoir.
- Horizon is studying wind energy potential in the Beckworth Pass area near Highway 70 and could submit a plan of development there. The company might propose up to 40 turbines including some on private land. Horizon also has applications for rights of way and is collecting wind data on Antelope Mountain and Snowstorm Mountain. Lack of transmission lines continues to be an issue for those proposals.
- BP and the Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD) are collecting data in the Shinn Mountain and Ravendale areas respectively. Lack of transmission is an issue there as well.
- Invenergy has submitted a plan of development for the Horse Lake Wind proposal east of Eagle Lake on Fredonyer Mountain. The environmental review process has not yet started. The company has presented three alternatives for wind turbine placement.

Responding to a question from Martin Balding, Charlie said the BLM can ask companies to divulge wind energy data. Martin said that information would be useful for the BLM's determination about project viability. He also expressed concern with possible Eagle mortality if a project is developed.

Eagle Lake Field Manager Ken Collum noted that impacts on sage grouse habitat could also factor in to the development proposal.

Charlie said the BLM has received copies of recently completed avian studies. Estimates range from one to four bird losses per turbine, per year, at the proposed project site.

There was discussion about other details of wind projects, including whether energy sale contracts must in place before BLM approves projects, and the amount of money the BLM receives from wind energy production on public lands.

For the Alturas Field Office, Burke reported:

- Enel Wind is focusing on the Arrowhead project. A right of way for wind testing covers about 65,000 acres near Knox Mountain.

In the Surprise Field Office, BP is proposing wind testing towers in the northern part of the Surprise Valley. There has been some testing for geothermal resources as well, but no test wells have shown a geothermal resource that could produce power.

Sean Curtis noted that development of a transmission line would open the door to more projects. There needs to be a way to study the cumulative development impacts of constructing new transmission lines.

Wild Horse and Burro Update

Surprise Field Manager Allen Bollschweiler updated the RAC on the proposal to gather excess wild horses from the High Rock Complex on northwest Nevada lands administered by Surprise. The plan is to begin on Oct. 15 and continue through November. The roundup is designed to bring the wild horse population to an appropriate management level of 258-451 wild horses in the Biter, Wall Canyon, High Rock, Nut Mountain and Fox Hog herd management areas that make up the complex

Mares returned to the range will be treated with a fertility control drug, PZP, in an attempt to slow the population growth rate on the range.

Horses removed from the range will be offered for public adoption. Unadoptable horses will be shipped to BLM long-term holding pastures. They can be made available for direct sale, or will be placed in BLM's long term pastures where they retain federal protection under the Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act.

Tim Burke reported that the Modoc National Forest has opened a scoping period on a proposed management plan for the Devil's Garden Wild Horse Territory near Alturas. The proposal is to gather about 600 horses. The BLM wild horse and burro program completes the on the ground work for the forest. On BLM land next to the territory, rangeland health impacts are nearly exclusively from wild horses.

Sage Grouse Conservation

Jennifer Mata provided detailed information on the sage grouse conservation topic discussed earlier in the meeting. In a PowerPoint presentation, she noted the conservation objectives are to put new regulatory mechanisms in place, restore habitat across the range of greater sage grouse and ensure that conservation measures are carried forward in BLM land use planning.

RAC comments:

- Martin said the effort appears to contain little on the ground work and encouraged the BLM to focus as much work as possible "on the ground."
- Skip suggested that the Alturas Field Office expansion of juniper wood cutting areas benefits sage grouse habitat. It should be promoted more widely.
- Skip suggested that the BLM recommend to the FWS the importance of predator control.

- Sean noted that BLM success will be measured in terms of numbers of birds, not habitat health. It is difficult for the BLM because the agency has no authority to control actions such as hunting and predators which can impact sage grouse population numbers. He suggested that local government access to the process needs to be discussed soon.
- Martin suggested an agenda item for the next meeting focusing on a recommendation addressing predation on sage grouse
- Todd Swickard said this conservation effort is similar to the process undertaken for the northern spotted owl. He suggested it is an effort by opponents of public land grazing to end that practice. He said sage grouse populations were highest when grazing intensity was highest. He said there are only so many activities that the BLM can control. He questioned how many of those actions will actually benefit sage grouse.
- Jim Chapman said the RAC's diversity of opinion is valuable in this discussion. He said BLM needs to present to the FWS the concerns expressed in today's meeting, including the concerns about predation.
- Nancy Huffman asked that this be the main topic on the next meeting agenda. She asked the RAC to consider establishing a subcommittee to focus on sage grouse.

PGE Lands

Tim updated the board on the status of lands proposed for transfer from Pacific Gas and Electric to the Alturas Field Office. There have been no decisions made yet. Discussions continue on a number of issues related to power production, conservation easements and other topics.

Ruby Pipeline

Allen noted the 42-inch pipeline that crosses part of his field office jurisdiction is charged, but not yet delivering natural gas. Crews are repairing construction impacts to the Barrel Springs/Surprise Valley Back Country Byway. Reseeding work on the pipeline work will get underway soon and continue for the next three years.

Wilderness

Eagle Lake Field Office Outdoor Recreation Planner Marisa Williams led a discussion about BLM's current wilderness inventory process. She illustrated the discussion with a PowerPoint presentation.

Eagle Lake Field Office Outdoor Recreation Planner Stan Bales explained that the current policy brings the BLM is back to the direction from the Federal Land Policy and Management Act to inventory lands for wilderness characteristics. The most recent direction from the secretary of the interior reaffirmed that that BLM must maintain wilderness inventories. He said the policy enables interest groups to request that BLM reevaluate the existing wilderness inventories through an established process that Marisa outlined.

After continuing discussion, the RAC adopted the following recommendation:

Action: The RAC recommends to the Secretary that when he proposes new wilderness areas to Congress, the recommendation should include a request that Congress release the non suitable areas from interim wilderness management and back to full multiple use management or other appropriate transitional management.

The recommendation will be forwarded to the California State Director.

Public Comments

Judy St. John discussed the situation involving horses at the Whispering Pines Stables near Susanville. The animals are being neglected. There are dead and dying horses. She adopted four or five mustangs that were brought to the stables. She has not been allowed to remove the horses. She feels they are BLM horses and BLM needs to be responsible for them.

Ken Collum provided an update on BLM involvement including checking for BLM ownership and assisting with moving the horses into good care either at the Grace Foundation or at the BLM corrals.

Louise Jensen, Lassen Land and Trails Trust, updated the RAC on the public comment period now open for the Modoc Line. The 85-mile former rail line from Wendel to the Likely area has been purchased by the Trust and a management plan is being developed. The line crosses about 50 miles of BLM-managed public lands. Louise provided copies of the draft management plan and a comment form.

Linda Hansen, Sierra Nevada Conservancy, presented information on the development of a National Geographic geotourism map guide and explained the nomination process that is open to the public. She explained the geotourism concept and provided information on the website and web-based nomination process.

Linda also noted that the SNC has \$10 million in grant funds remaining to distribute and will work in two focus areas: forestry, fuels and watershed restoration, and working landscapes. The public comment period closed. The SNC board will launch the FY 11-12 grant round soon.

Stan Bales, BLM, updated the RAC on construction of new trails on BLM-managed lands in the Susanville Ranch Park. The new Coyote Bluff trails are receiving more public use and enthusiastic reviews.

Stewardship Contracting

Eagle Lake Field Office Forester Wade Salverson described the stewardship contracting management tool. The process allows the agency to merge traditional timber sale and service contracts into single contracts.

Field Managers' Reports

Alturas: Tim Burke presented a written report. Highlights:

- The drought policy has been a great success. It might be time for some refining, possibly dropping the Termo and Canby reporting stations.
- Monitoring of juniper response on the South Fork Allotment shows that resource conditions appear to be improving.

Eagle Lake: Ken Collum presented a written report. Highlights:

- Concerns over the Bly Tunnel are being discussed in public forums.

Surprise: Allen Bollschweiler presented a report.

Sage Grouse Subcommittee

The RAC established a sage grouse subcommittee to include Sean Curtis, Gale Dupree, Todd Swickard and Nancy Huffman. The BLM will convene the committee if needed prior to the next meeting.

Closing business

Next meeting dates: Primary dates: Feb 8, 9, 10; Backup dates: Feb 1, 2, 3.

Location: Redding. This will include a joint meeting with the Northwest California RAC.

Northeast RAC topics: Sage grouse, wild horses and burros, status of the High Rock Complex, cheat grass/invasive weeds and impact on grouse habitat and status of wind energy project.

The meeting was adjourned.