

*Over The River*TM – The road to developing an Environmental Impact Statement

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In March 2009, the Bureau of Land Management began the process, through a third-party contractor, to develop an environmental impact statement in response to an application submitted by Christo and Jeanne-Claude for a temporary work of art along a 42-mile stretch of the Arkansas River corridor between the towns of Cañon City and Salida, Colo. The need for an EIS surfaced as the BLM conducted an environmental assessment to determine the significance of impacts of the applicant's proposed action and it became apparent it would not be possible to sign a Finding of No Significant Impact.

Throughout the EIS process, there has been strong support and opposition for the proposed project. This is a unique proposal and involves a large number of other state and local government agencies. However, for the BLM the project is also not unlike other land-use proposals. The BLM is often faced with conflicts in the decision-making process related to the use of the public's lands and resources. Our multiple-use mission mandates that we manage public lands for long-term productivity and sustainability. When evaluating this proposal, we must consider impacts to natural resources in the area, such as wildlife habitat and viewsheds, as well as the potential impacts and benefits to the public. Finally, we must develop mitigation measures to address impacts identified in the analysis for each alternative.

The public is an integral part in the development of the *Over The River*TM EIS. The BLM uses a public process under the National Environmental Policy Act to ensure that these decisions are guided by input from the public and that we make the best possible decision. Three public meetings were held during the initial scoping process in 2006, which generated over 1,100 comments. Four public meetings were held shortly after the release of the Draft EIS in July 2010. The BLM received more than 4,500 comments during the 45-day Draft EIS public comment period. Comments received during the comment period were distributed to resource experts who considered the issues and concerns and prepared responses. These responses will be included in the Final EIS.

The BLM is the lead agency responsible for preparing the EIS. In addition, a number of federal, state and local government agencies have jurisdictional responsibilities within the project area, some with their own permit requirements. The agencies include the Colorado Department of Natural Resources (includes the Division of Wildlife, State Parks and State Land Board), Colorado Department of Transportation, Colorado State Patrol, and Chaffee and Fremont Counties. These agencies are an integral part of the EIS process, and we are excited to have them contribute as cooperating agencies. They have been great partners and their input has been vital throughout the EIS process.

The BLM is committed to completing the EIS in a timely manner. However, the process is not a simple one, nor should it be. It's not a matter of deciding to let it happen or not because that is the desire of the majority of commenters or the interested public. The decision will be based on a complex analysis, which will assist the BLM to determine whether, where and under what conditions the BLM would issue a land use permit.



We are hard at work, crafting measures to mitigate impacts identified in the alternatives impact analysis, the last step to complete the Final EIS. The Final EIS will be available to the public for a 30-day period this spring. Although it will identify a preferred alternative it is by no means a final decision. The final decision will follow this summer with a Record of Decision.

Greg Shoop is the District Manager for the BLM Colorado Front Range District. The Front Range District manages 1.3 million surface acres and 9.5 million acres of subsurface minerals east of the Continental Divide. The district is comprised of the Royal Gorge Field Office based in Cañon City, Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area (co-managed with the Colorado State Parks) in Salida, and the San Luis Valley Public Lands Center in Monte Vista that includes the La Jara, Del Norte, and Saguache Field Offices.