* The Wilderness Society * Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance *
* Center for Native Ecosystems * Colorado Environmental Coalition *

August 9, 2010

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Dear Sirs and Madam:

Attached please find a recommendation for the Bureau of Land Management Colorado and Utah State Offices and White River, Little Snake, and Vernal Field Offices to prepare a "Master Leasing Plan" for BLM lands managed by the aforementioned field offices. This recommendation is submitted on behalf of The Wilderness Society, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, Center for Native Ecosystems, and Colorado Environmental Coalition. We are aware that under the terms of IM No. 2010-117, each BLM State Office is directed to submit an implementation plan and timeline to the Director for fulfilling the terms of the IM by August 16, 2010.

We have taken the opportunity to prepare the enclosed recommendation to assist you in fulfilling this mandate, and look forward to working with the BLM in the preparation of a "Dinosaur Lowlands Master Leasing Plan." Please contact us if you have any questions or would like additional information or data.

Sincerely,

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Enclosure – MLP Proposal for Dinosaur Lowlands and associated maps
Cc: Assistant Secretary Wilma Lewis
Deputy Assistant Secretary Sylvia Baca
Deputy Assistant Secretary Ned Farquhar
Director Bob Abbey
Deputy Director Mike Pool
Deputy Director Marcilynn Burke

Master Leasing Plan Recommendation:
Dinosaur Lowlands

Prepared by

The Wilderness Society, Colorado Environmental Coalition, Center for Native Ecosystems, and Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance

Summary: The Dinosaur Lowlands area of Northwest Colorado and Northeastern Utah is a diverse region of 999,355 acres. Located on the edge of the Colorado Plateau along the Colorado/Utah border near Vernal, this area contains craggy desert peaks, deep sandstone canyons, and the wide-open sagebrush steppes that harbor important big game and wildlife species. Encompassed by the proposed Dinosaur Lowlands MLP, Snake John Reef is home to the imperiled white-tailed prairie dog, a cornerstone species of the prairie ecosystem that has vanished from 92% of its historic habitat. The Fish and Wildlife Service, which recently released a 12-month finding that the white-tailed prairie dog does not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act, nonetheless found that oil and gas development is the greatest potential threat to the species. The area also contains important winter range for valuable big game species and encompasses Colorado Game Management Unit 10—a trophy elk and mule deer hunting area. The White River Field Office is currently undertaking an oil and gas amendment to its RMP which would allow for a more than tenfold increase in wells. The recently-completed Vernal RMP similarly fails to adequately protect the white-tailed prairie dog and other species and values in the Dinosaur Lowlands. An MLP for Dinosaur Lowlands would allow for this resource-rich area to continue being developed while protecting imperiled species and wilderness-quality lands.

I. **Area Name and Location:** Dinosaur Lowlands, Northwest Colorado/Northeastern Utah

II. **Summary Data:**

- **BLM Field Office and Counties:** White River and Little Snake Field Offices in Colorado (Moffat and Rio Blanco Counties); Vernal Field Office in Utah (Uintah County)
- **Relevant RMP:** White River, Little Snake, Vernal RMPs; White River RMP Amendment (ongoing); Little Snake RMP currently under revision, final due in August 2010.
- **Map:** See Attached
- **Total Acres:** 999,355
- **% Federal Lands:** 77% (774,183)
- **% Federal Minerals:** 63%* (629,655 acres)
- **% Leased:** 48% (480,066 acres)
- **% Leased Acreage in Production:** 25% (114,350 acres)

*Utah BLM was not able to provide any map or data of the federal mineral estate in Utah, so this number refers to the Colorado portions of the MLP proposal.

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III. Indications of Industry Interest

The proposed Dinosaur Lowlands MLP is surrounded by large-scale energy development. To the west, the Uinta Basin of Utah has seen significant oil and gas development—though the public lands adjacent and near to Dinosaur Monument have been largely protected due to successful litigation and appeals in the previous administration, while the Piceance Basin to the south is one of Colorado's most active fields. Most of this area, and the surrounding lands, is leased, and industry continues to nominate parcels. The 2008 Vernal RMP made 90% of the field office available to oil and gas leasing[1], and the 1997 White River RMP made 95% available to leasing[2], including lands with stipulations.

In 2006, BLM began an oil and gas amendment to the White River RMP, which was instigated and paid for by the oil and gas industry. The 1997 RMP estimated a reasonable foreseeable development (RFD) scenario at 1,100 wells, and the RFD for the amendment considers a range of up to 21,200 additional wells. This clearly demonstrates industry interest in leasing and developing this area.

IV. Potential Resource Conflicts

Background on Values for the Proposed Area:

Wilderness-Quality Lands

The proposed Dinosaur Lowlands MLP includes citizen proposed wilderness areas in Colorado and Utah. These include Bull Canyon, Skull Creek, and Pinyon Ridge citizens' wilderness proposals (CWPs) in Colorado, and Bourdette Draw, Moonshine Draw, Beach Draw, Stuntz Draw, Bull Canyon, Vivas Cake Hill, Split Mountain Bench, Split Mountain Bench South, and Stone Bridge Draw in Utah. All of these proposed wilderness areas have been included in Congresswoman DeGette's Colorado Wilderness Act and Congressman Hinchey's Red Rock Wilderness Act. These two pieces of legislation have been introduced in Congress multiple times, and include valuable and high-profile lands for conservation groups and the American public.

Colorado CWPs:

Bull Canyon and Skull Creek CWPs

Bull Canyon and Skull Creek, which are largely protected as WSAs, have the same geologic formations found in Dinosaur National Monument -- green and purple Morrison shales, deep vermilion Triassic shale and sandstone. Above these foundations lie massive pale pink outcrops of Weber Sandstone, the same rock as the Yampa River canyon just a few miles north in the Dinosaur National Monument. There are intricately carved canyons, and mighty palisades tower above the small creeks which drain the southern slopes of Blue Mountain. The richly vegetated riparian habitats of the valleys are interspersed with small stands of Douglas fir in the deep shade of the canyon walls. Expanses of pinyon-juniper woodland range between valleys. Basins covered with sage, saltbush, greasewood, and grass fill the lower elevations. These proposed wilderness areas offer opportunities for scientific study, hiking, and wildlife viewing.

The area offers historical interest as well. A documented campsite of the 1776 expedition of Dominguez and Escalante is located in Bull Canyon. The National Park Service has proposed that the

[1] Vernal ROD, p. 20
[2] White River ROD, p. 2-5

Dominguez/Escalante Trail be designated a National Historic Trail. Bull Canyon provides important habitat for an abundant wildlife population. Nearly all of Bull Canyon is considered critical winter range for mule deer, and the east portion is summer elk range. Nesting golden eagles and great horned owls are residents of the area, and it has been identified as potential peregrine habitat for the falcons of the National Monument. Bull Canyon also is home to ancient pinyon pine forests. The University of Arizona has conducted a study of these relict pinyons and applied the results of tree-ring chronology to studies of climatic variability in North America.

In 1977, the Skull Creek Ecological Study Area (58,626 acres) was the subject of a BLM management plan which noted that "...the entire study area, and Skull Creek Basin in particular, contains such an astonishing array of significant resource values that special management considerations are required." A Skull Creek Natural Environment Area was proposed to be withdrawn from the mining laws and mineral leasing programs; however, BLM never did this.

The proposed wilderness is rich in archaeological resources. The above management plan stated: "...the archaeological resources within the Study Area appear to be more than significant. They appear to be pivotal in understanding the entire prehistory of northwest Colorado." Over 70 prehistoric sites have been recorded on the basis of cursory surveys, including pictographs, a wickiup cluster, and 16 granaries which range in age from 7,000 B.C. to 1850 A.D. Unfortunately, vehicle access to one site has resulted in vandalism by a bulldozer.

Numerous springs that arise from Blue Mountain help to support an abundance and diversity of life. Raptor populations are especially notable, since the cliffs supply many nesting sites. The BLM suggested that peregrine falcons should be introduced into Box Canyon, Red Wash, Willow Creek, and Bull Draw. Eleven golden eagle nests, including at least five active nests, are located within the area. Many other raptors, including red-tailed hawks and northern harriers, frequent the area. Both areas are considered good quality habitat for mule deer and elk. Mountain lion and bear are present as well.

Skull Creek also offers opportunity for scientific study. The pinyon trees in the Skull Creek Basin are the oldest on the North American continent, perhaps dating to the twelfth century. The BLM said, "...their value for scientific research to determine climatological records for the Skull Creek Basin, Northwest Colorado, and the Upper Colorado river drainage is inestimable."

Pinyon Ridge CWP

Pinyon Ridge consists of rolling hills immediately north of the White River. From a sheer and abrupt bluff, the hills overlook a broad basin of high mesas and deep arroyos. There are sweeping scenic vistas of the White River Valley, the Danforth Hills, and the mesas of the Rangely Basin. Pinyon Ridge is one of the very few undeveloped areas of the lower White River drainage.

Pinyon Ridge is an arid area, cut by numerous seasonal streams that create a spiderweb of isolated drainages. Sagebrush, grasses, and cacti cover the lower elevations and pinyon-juniper forest blankets the hills and ridges.

A wide variety of wildlife exists within the area. Eagles and other raptors build nests along ridge outcrops and prey on the extensive prairie dog populations. Larger mammals such as deer, coyotes, and mountain lions inhabit the forested slopes. The western portion of the area is identified as suitable habitat for reintroduction of black-footed ferret.

Hunting is the primary recreational use of Pinyon Ridge. Access to the interior of the area is facilitated by the few overgrown ways that enable visitors to reach vantage points throughout the unit. Pinyon Ridge is also particularly well suited for hiking owing to its outstanding scenic qualities, and the overgrown ways provide excellent foot and horse trails for exploration. Steep canyons and mesas in the western sections of Pinyon Ridge offer challenging hikes and climbs for the more adventurous.
While portions of Pinyon Ridge have been leased, none of those leases are producing and the majority are set to expire within the next five years. The majority of the area remains undeveloped and retains its wilderness character.

Utah CWPs[3]

Bourdette Draw CWP
The Bourdette Draw proposed wilderness unit straddles the state line between Utah and Colorado with a small portion of this roadless area entering the state of Colorado and the majority of the area within Utah. This unit includes the steep, convoluted sandstone face of Cliff Ridge, quite visible north of Highway 40. In addition to Cliff Ridge, this unit features a remarkable Ponderosa pine forest atop along this ridge, nearly encompassing the entire length of this proposed wilderness area. The northern portion of this area is comprised of steep sides rising several thousand feet to the top of Blue Mountain.

This area is covered by thick pinyon-juniper forests and offers impressive views of Split Mountain in Dinosaur National Monument.

The unit has an array of wildlife - antelope, coyote, raptors, hawks, golden eagle, blue jays, canyon wrens, deer, sage grouse, ground squirrel, rabbits and songbirds. The impressive sandstone face of Cliff Ridge is of great geological significance. BLM agrees that the area has several archaeological sites found along the base of Blue Mountain generally consisting of lithic scatters.

In 2007, the Vernal field office determined that 13,335 acres of the Bourdette Draw proposed wilderness unit has wilderness characteristics, noting that "the area contains scenic, archaeological and geologic feature of value."

Bull Canyon CWP
The Bull Canyon proposed wilderness unit straddles the state line between Utah and Colorado and is contiguous with the Bull Canyon wilderness study area. BLM inventoried this unit as part of its 1999 Utah Wilderness Inventory—concluding that it has wilderness characteristics—and described it this way:

> Grassy flats in the south give way to rolling hills and drainages in the central portion of the area and steep, highly dissected, forested mountains in the north. Massive whiterock outcrops and colorful red soils contrast with the juniper woodland. Riparian vegetation in the canyons provides a diverse oasis. . . .
>
> . . .

[3] The overwhelming majority of these proposed wilderness units are not currently leased for oil and gas, though they were subject to significant leasing pressure and related litigation and appeals during the previous administration.

Varied scenery, interesting geology, and wildlife provide a variety of primitive and unconfined recreation opportunities within the Bull Canyon WSA. These opportunities include hunting, hiking, backpacking, photography, wildlife viewing, and sightseeing. These same outstanding opportunities extend into the Bull Canyon inventory units.

The Bull Canyon inventory units have scenic, archaeological, and wildlife values. The white cliffs, red soil, and green juniper woodland in Unit 1 combine to provide a variety of form, line, color, and texture, creating an attractive landscape. Several archaeological surveys have revealed temporary camps and short-term habitation sites, including subsurface stone hearths and millstones, associated possibly with a middle to late archaic period. Antelope and elk are commonly found in the units, as is habitat for Mexican spotted owls, peregrine falcons, spotted and big free-tail bats, and the Utah milk snake, a listed species.[4]

In 2007, the Vernal field office reconfirmed that the Bull Canyon proposed wilderness unit has wilderness characteristics.

Dinosaur National Monument Adjacents (Moonshine Draw, Beach Draw, Stuntz Draw, Vivas Cake Hill, Split Mountain Benches, Stone Bridge Draw)

The following six proposed wilderness units are adjacent to Dinosaur National Monument and are natural extensions of the landscape protected in that National Park Service unit: Moonshine Draw, Beach Draw, Stuntz Draw, Vivas Cake Hill, Split Mountain Benches, Stone Bridge Draw. Each unit is described briefly below.

Moonshine Draw: BLM inventoried this unit as part of its 1999 Utah Wilderness Inventory—concluding that it has wilderness characteristics—and described it this way:

> The western portion of the Moonshine Draw inventory unit (2,700 acres) has wilderness characteristics and is contiguous to a portion of Dinosaur National Monument that has been administratively endorsed for wilderness by the National Park Service (NPS). It is in a natural condition and offers outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation when considered in conjunction with the NPS proposal. . . .
>
> The unit is an extension of the lands proposed for wilderness within Dinosaur National Monument. It contains the portion of Ruple Ridge that drops down into the deeply cut Moonshine Draw, which continues through the NPS lands and empties into the Green River at Moonshine Rapids. Elevations range from about 7,600 feet on the plateau tops to 6,000 feet in the bottom of Moonshine Draw. The open plateaus give way to areas heavily wooded with piñon and juniper. There are also small pockets of ponderosa pine in the south. . . .
>
> . . .
>
> The Moonshine Draw inventory unit is contiguous to and an extension of lands within Dinosaur National Monument. The inventory unit enhances the opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation found on these NPS lands. Hiking, backpacking, hunting, camping, and viewing of expansive scenic vistas are all opportunities provided within the Moonshine Draw inventory unit. . . .

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[4] http://www.access.gpo.gov/blm/utah/pdf/ne135.pdf

The unit contains habitat for the Mexican spotted owl, peregrine falcon, spotted and big free-tail bats, and the Utah milk snake. These are all State and BLM sensitive species.[5]

In 2007, the Vernal field office reconfirmed that the Moonshine Draw proposed wilderness unit has wilderness characteristics.

Vivas Cake Hill
The Vivas Cake Hill proposed wilderness unit is adjacent to Dinosaur National Monument on the north and west and specifically to lands being managed by the Monument for their wilderness values. The area is used for primitive recreation (e.g. camping, exploring), hunting, and antler gathering. Vegetation includes juniper, sage, rabbit-brush, and grasses.

In 2007, the Vernal field office determined that the Vivas Cake Hill proposed wilderness unit has wilderness characteristics.

Stuntz Draw
The Stuntz Draw proposed wilderness unit straddles the Utah and Colorado state line and is adjacent to Dinosaur National Monument. The unit has significant topographic variation and is bisected by several draws, including the deeply entrenched Stuntz Draw.

In 2007, the Vernal field office determined that the Stuntz Draw proposed wilderness unit has wilderness characteristics, noting that "[s]teep canyon walls provide scenic views. Petroglyphs can be found in the unit."

Beach Draw
The Beach Draw proposed wilderness unit is immediately south of Split Mountain and is contiguous to Dinosaur National Monument on several sides. The vast majority of this unit is contiguous to lands being managed by the Monument for their wilderness values.

In 2007, the Vernal field office determined that the Beach Draw proposed wilderness unit has wilderness characteristics, noting that "[s]pectacular rocky and barren outcrops of the southern exposure of Split Mountain and the entrenched Green River provide the area with supplemental values. A variety of raptors and song birds live within the area. Petroglyphs can be found within the unit."

Split Mountain Benches and Split Mountain Benches South
The Split Mountain Benches and Split Mountain Benches South proposed wilderness units are largely adjacent to Dinosaur National Monument on the east. Popular uses include hiking and horseback riding.

Stone Bridge Draw
The Stone Bride Draw proposed wilderness unit is largely adjacent to Dinosaur National Monument on the south. Popular uses include hiking and horseback riding.[6]

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[5] http://www.access.gpo.gov/blm/utah/pdf/ne138.pdf

[6] Portions of the Spilt Mountain Benches, Split Mountain Benches South, and Stone Bridge Draw proposed wilderness units overlap with the nominated Coyote Basin-Shiner area of critical environmental concern. Vernal

Important Species

White-tailed Prairie Dog:
The white-tailed prairie dog is found in the sagebrush landscape of central and western Wyoming, northwestern Colorado, northeastern Utah, and south-central Montana. This beleaguered small mammal is critical to the health of the sagebrush ecosystem. Endangered black-footed ferrets prey almost exclusively on prairie dogs, and use their burrows for shelter. Prairie dogs also provide food for badgers, ferruginous hawks, and golden eagles, and crucial habitat for many other native plants and animals. They play a key role in mixing soil, which results in better forage for grazers like pronghorn, bison, and domestic livestock, and increases soil moisture by allowing precipitation to penetrate deeper into the soil.

The white-tailed prairie dog is suffering severe declines, having vanished from 92% of its historical habitat, and is headed for extinction without assertive and committed conservation action. It is a BLM sensitive species in Colorado and Utah, and is also a Utah Species of Concern and a Colorado Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy Science Forum Species of Most Concern.

The proposed Dinosaur Lowlands MLP includes the following important white-tailed prairie dog complexes: Wolf Creek (CO), Coal Oil Basin (CO), Coyote Wash (UT and CO), Kennedy Wash (UT), and Snake John (UT). The Wolf Creek and Coyote Basin complexes are historically thought to have been among the most robust white-tailed prairie dog colonies in Colorado and Utah.

The Fish and Wildlife Service recently released a 12-month finding that the white-tailed prairie dog does not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act, but acknowledged that the threat of significant pressure from oil and gas development has "the greatest potential to impact the white-tailed prairie dog." This species must be protected from oil and gas development activities before its population in Dinosaur Lowlands collapses entirely, along with the many species that depend on it.

PRMP/FEIS, Appendix G-3 to -4 and Figure 32. BLM described this nominated ACEC—which the agency determined to have relevant and important values—this way:

> **Relevance Criteria:**
>
> This area has relevance due to the existence of an important white-tailed prairie dog complex.
>
> **Importance Criteria:** This area is a critical ecosystem for the white-tailed prairie dog, and is one of 25 white-tailed prairie dog complexes nominated for ACEC status in the Western states. It has substantial significance due to qualities that make it fragile, sensitive, rare, irreplaceable, exemplary, and unique. This species occupies only an estimated eight percent of the area it once occupied, and most of this is on BLM administered lands. The white-tailed prairie dog is particularly vulnerable to adverse change from a variety of current causes. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is currently being petitioned to list this species.

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Black-footed ferret:
The black-footed ferret, a member of the weasel family, is one of the most endangered mammals in North America. Ferrets historically occupied more than 100 million acres of western grasslands, from the Rocky Mountains eastward throughout the Great Plains, but are now reduced to a handful of reintroduction sites in the wild. Healthy ferret populations require very large prairie dog complexes, and dramatic prairie dog declines have taken a brutal toll on the ferret. Prairie dogs make up 90% of the ferret's diet.

Black-footed ferrets were thought to be extinct when a small population was discovered in 1981. A captive breeding program was established, and ferrets have since been reintroduced to less than a dozen sites, including the Wolf Creek complex in northwestern Colorado, in White River, and the Coyote Basin complex in Utah's Vernal Field Office. Since 2001, 237 black-footed ferrets have been released in the Wolf Creek area, and wild-born ferret kits were first found there in 2005. But the ferret's status in Colorado is precarious – only 16 ferrets were confirmed to be present in the reintroduction area at the end of 2007. This year, Wolf Creek was heavily impacted by plague, and ferret numbers may now be even lower than they were in 2006. In Utah, 283 ferrets were released to Coyote Basin between 1999 and 2006. Utah has captured and tagged 27 wild born ferrets. During this time, ferrets were also found in the Snake John complex, likely indicating that ferrets from the Wolf Creek reintroduction successfully colonized the Snake John area. As of 2006, there were a minimum of 25 ferrets present in the Coyote Basin and Snake John complexes.

In addition to being a federally listed endangered species, black-footed ferrets are a Colorado Division of Wildlife Endangered Species and a Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy Science Forum Species of Most Concern.

Reintroduced black-footed ferrets currently occupy the Wolf Creek complex in Colorado, the Coyote Basin complex in Utah and Colorado, and the Snake John complex in Utah. These complexes constitute the most important habitat for white-tailed prairie dogs and black-footed ferrets in Colorado and Utah, and are within the portions of the white-tailed prairie dog's range in Utah and Colorado that are expected to see the most substantial increases in oil and gas development over the next 20 years. In areas where energy development overlaps occupied white-tailed prairie dog habitats, the resulting habitat loss and fragmentation likely has negative effects on individuals and populations, including mortality, noise disturbance, and habitat loss and fragmentation[3], and presumably, there is a threshold level wherein habitat loss and fragmentation may threaten local white-tailed prairie dog populations and reduce prairie dog abundance to a level that is too low to provide an adequate prey base for black-footed ferrets.

The fact that the federally endangered black-footed ferret is dependent on healthy populations of white-tailed prairie dog warrants special management for both of these species to protect them from oil and gas development.

Greater sage-grouse:
Once abundant throughout the west, the greater sage-grouse is threatened by loss of its sagebrush habitat, including loss from oil and gas development, sprawl, human destruction of sagebrush, and invasive weeds like cheat grass. When habitat damage takes place due to one of these activities, sagebrush ecosystems can take 25-100 years to recover. As the sagebrush ecosystem is destroyed, so is the bird's primary source of food and shelter, as well as the setting for its traditional courting ritual.

Studies suggest there has been a decrease of 70-90% in overall abundance of the bird, and they are at even greater risk of reduced genetic variation due to this severe population decline.

In March 2010, the greater sage-grouse was placed on the candidate list for ESA protection. This announcement was issued simultaneously with new guidance from BLM for protecting the species from energy development. IM 2010-071 provided a menu of actions BLM can take in priority habitat when evaluating and approving RMPs and energy projects, including withholding or deferring lease parcels and attaching conditions of approval. The guidance affirmed BLM's commitment to conserving greater sage-grouse, a species which has been greatly impacted by oil and gas development.

Graham's penstemon

The Graham's penstemon is a lovely wildflower that the Colorado Natural Heritage program has ranked as globally critically imperiled. The species has been petitioned for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Oil and gas development is the primary threat to the persistence of this species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service made a determination that the species warranted listing as a threatened species and proposed critical habitat for the species in January of 2006. Then, later that year, they abruptly reversed that decision, and decided not to list Graham's penstemon. This decision is currently being challenged in court. Conservation groups have nominated occupied habitat for Graham's penstemon, including proposed critical habitat in the Little Snake and Vernal Field offices for ACEC designation. There are known occurrences of Graham's penstemon within the nominated Snake John Reef ACEC in areas with high oil and gas development potential. Protecting the small amount of acreage with known occurrences of this species from oil and gas development could potentially help assure the long-term persistence of this species, and eliminate the need for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

Raptors:

The area provides important nesting and hunting habitat for several birds of prey, including bald eagle, golden eagle, ferruginous hawk, and prairie falcon. Several of these species are currently experiencing population declines, and oil and gas development and associated infrastructure and disturbance of nest sites and hunting grounds is suspected to be a contributing factor. Based on ongoing concerns about these impacts to raptors of all kinds, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has recently issued draft guidelines for managing activities such as oil and gas drilling in raptor habitat. These guidelines are being adhered to already by the BLM in other resource management decisions in several field offices in Utah and should be considered in the development of management prescriptions for this Master Leasing Plan area.

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Other important native species in Dinosaur Lowlands include:

- Bald eagle
- Golden eagle
- River otter
- Graham's penstemon
- Ephedra buckwheat
- Rollins' cats-eye
- Utah mountain lilac
- DeBeque milkvetch
- Piceance twinpod
- Narrow-stem gilia
- Duschesne milkvetch
- Ferruginous hawk
- Gibben's beardtongue
- Narrow-leaf evening primrose
- Narrow-stem gilia
- Pygmy sagebrush
- White River penstemon
- Martin's ceanothus
- White River beardtongue
- Many-stem stickleaf
- Piceance bladderpod

Other important values to be considered in the MLP:
Adjacency to Dinosaur National Monument
BLM Designated ACECs
Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP) Potential Conservation Areas
Colorado Natural Areas Program (CNAP) Natural Areas
Colorado State Wildlife Areas
Heart of the West Wildlands Network Design Core

Impacts to Values from Leasing:

The impacts of oil and gas development on the many values in Dinosaur Lowlands are outlined above. Impacts to these resources have been realized from past leasing and development, leading to increased conflict in this area as new leasing continues. The potential impacts to species and wilderness values from leasing decisions made in the 2008 Vernal RMP led to the RMP being litigated by conservation groups.

Additionally, the December 2008 Utah lease sale which was predicated on the recently-completed Utah RMPs led to 77 parcels being protested. Those parcels were invalidated by Judge Urbina based on air quality concerns. The Department of Interior initiated a review of the lease sale, establishing a review team of experienced BLM and National Park Service employees. In October 2009, the team released its final report ("Stiles Report").[7] In addition to specifically recommending certain parcels be deferred due to sage-grouse and wilderness characteristics, the Stiles Report noted the lack of national guidance on managing lands with wilderness characteristics and found that this lack of guidance contributes to uninformed oil and gas leasing decisions, and recommended the guidance be issued soon. The report further recommended that "BLM-Utah review the [recently-completed RMPs] in light of this new guidance and make necessary modifications." (pp. 32-33).

In addition, in May of 2006 BLM offered lands in the black-footed ferret reintroduction area for leasing, these leases were protested by conservation groups. The protest was denied and conservation groups appealed the decision to the Interior Board of Land Appeals. In 2007, the IBLA remanded the decision to BLM, finding that BLM could not rely on existing NEPA documents given the existence of new information on the potential impacts of oil and gas development on reintroduced black-footed ferrets. Recently BLM re-issued these oil and gas leases without preparing the additional NEPA analysis required by the IBLA. Conservation groups again appealed to IBLA. Recently, BLM filed a motion with IBLA, stating that they would like to withdraw the decision. IBLA granted BLM's request, and BLM will now re-issue the decision and conduct a new NEPA process. The controversy over the proposed leasing of black-footed ferret habitat will likely continue.

Leasing in the Dinosaur Lowlands area has already had lasting impacts on important values, and potential impacts from recent leasing decisions have led to many conflicts over the multiple uses of public lands. Leasing in this area must proceed in a well thought out manner, in appropriate areas, to reduce conflict and protect natural resources.

[7] http://www.doi.gov/documents/BLM_Utah77LeaseParcelReport.pdf.

MLP Criteria Attainment:
The Dinosaur Lowlands MLP clearly meets three key criteria set out in IM 2010-117 for when preparation of an MLP is required:

- The oil and gas industry has expressed a specific interest in leasing, and there is a moderate or high potential for oil and gas confirmed by the discovery of oil and gas in the general area.
- Additional analysis or information is needed to address likely resource or cumulative impacts if oil and gas development were to occur where there are:
    - Multiple-use or natural/cultural resource conflicts;
    - Impacts to air quality.
- There is a majority Federal mineral interest.

As discussed previously, there is great demonstrated industry interest and resource potential in Dinosaur Lowlands. However, the area also harbors important habitat for key species and treasured wilderness-quality lands. The White River Field Office is additionally grappling with how to model and manage air quality in light of the increased development scenario.

In summary, the large scale and rapid pace of gas development in Dinosaur Lowlands, along with existing and potential conflicts with wilderness-quality lands and sensitive species habitat, establish that Dinosaur Lowlands meets the criteria for preparing an MLP and make this area an ideal candidate.

V. Potential Master Leasing Plan Decision – Opportunity to Solve or Prevent Conflicts

While the White River RMP Amendment continues to move forward (with a DEIS expected in early 2011) the Vernal RMP is in litigation over failing to protect wilderness characteristics and rare and imperiled species, and Utah has a bottleneck of unresolved lease protests, all of which are stalling oil and gas development on public lands, and there is ongoing controversy over proposed leases at the Wolf Creek black-footed ferret reintroduction site. An MLP for this area could resolve these conflicts and allow for leasing and development to move forward in a timely and responsible manner. To solve current conflicts and prevent future ones, the Dinosaur Lowlands MLP must fully protect citizen proposed wilderness areas and habitat for white-tailed prairie dog, black-footed ferret, sage grouse, and Graham's penstemon. The MLP should prevent renewal of expired leases in these sensitive areas, such as the Pinyon Ridge citizen wilderness proposal, which is leased but not developed, as depicted on the attached map. In both citizen-proposed wilderness and important species habitat, the MLP should also provide that once leases expire, they will not be reoffered and the lands will be closed to leasing. Leasing and development should proceed in other areas with appropriate best management practices and stipulations. In areas with known occurrences for rare plants, leasing should proceed with no surface occupancy/no ground disturbance stipulations within 200 meters of occurrences of rare plants and application of a variety of other best management practices, as outlined in the Colorado Rare Plant Conservation Initiative's recommended best management practices for rare plants. Similarly, leasing should proceed in habitat for raptors with no surface occupancy restrictions within an appropriate buffer around nests, appropriate seasonal limitations on activity within the breeding season, and application of other best management practices, including those outlined in the Fish and Wildlife Service's draft management guidelines for raptors.

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Leasing closures and stipulations for greater sage-grouse should be based on the most recent research from the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) and Doherty. The Stiles Report recommended that lease parcels in all sage-grouse habitat have NSO stipulations year-round. In light of the ESA listing decision and BLM's guidance, the Dinosaur Lowlands MLP should fully protect greater

sage-grouse core areas, as mapped by the Colorado Division of Wildlife in Colorado, and as mapped by Center for Native Ecosystems in Utah.

During the preparation of the MLP, it is vital that no new leases be issued and all applications for permits to drill incorporate new conditions of approval to alert operators to the possibility of new protective stipulations to be incorporated in the ongoing MLP.

VI. Stakeholders

Many conservation and sportsmen groups are working to ensure the breakneck pace of gas development in Dinosaur Lowlands doesn't destroy valuable habitat for native species. While local communities depend on jobs and revenues generated by industry, there is also a viable and potentially growing tourism-based economy due to the area's outstanding recreation opportunities and close proximity to Dinosaur National Monument. Local citizens are actively engaged in ensuring their air and water is not polluted by existing and proposed intense development. Additionally, the Colorado Division of Wildlife is an active participant in the White River RMP Amendment to evaluate species impacts.

VII. Appendix

Maps:

1. Land Ownership
2. Federal Minerals by Surface Ownership*
3. Leases by Years to Expiration
4. Sage Grouse Leks, White-Tailed Prairie Dog Colonies, and Black-Footed Ferret Release Sites

*Utah BLM was not able to provide any map or data of the federal mineral estate in Utah, so this number refers to the Colorado portions of the MLP proposal.