

CONTINUATION OF EXISTING MANAGEMENT ALTERNATIVE

This alternative would maintain present management direction to resolve issues, while responding to the requirements of new regulations and changing policies. This is to be considered a no action alternative. Resource development and other activities would remain static.

Grazing Management

Resource Objectives and Recommendations

The resource condition objectives of this alternative are: (1) to the extent possible with grazing management systems alone, improve poor condition ranges in the "I" allotments to fair condition and fair condition range to good condition in 25 years; (2) to maintain the current satisfactory conditions on the "M" (Maintain) category allotments; and (3) to manage the "C" (Custodial) allotments custodially.

The livestock production objective is to maintain the current proper use AUM allocations in the short term, while increasing available forage in the long term by improving range conditions through grazing management. Where current allocations exceed proper use, the objective is to determine the proper use level, through monitoring, and allocate livestock forage accordingly.

Table 2.1 shows management objectives for each "I" allotment.

Two constraints limit achievement of these objectives: (1) no vegetative manipulation practices would be done, as has been current practice; and (2) leafy spurge control would continue to be done on only one allotment.

Proposed Allocation

In this alternative, 62,437 AUM authorizations to 333 operators would continue in the short term. Intensive monitoring of actual livestock use and forage utilization would be conducted on the Dryhead and Upper Sage Creek allotments to determine proper stocking levels. Less intensive monitoring of stocking levels would be done on the remaining "I" and the "M" and "C" allotments. Any reductions in livestock use would be phased in over a 5 year period according to BLM grazing regulations. In the long term, it's assumed that increased forage, available under proper use, would be allocated to livestock. This increase is estimated to be 3,120 AUMs.

Grazing Treatments and Systems

Sixteen new AMPs would be developed on "I" category allotments and six existing AMPs in the "I" category would be revised. Allotment-specific objectives would be developed to resolve resource conflicts and improve resource conditions on these "I" allotments to the extent possible, with grazing systems alone. Grazing systems incorporating rest and deferment treatments would be designed to achieve these objectives. A total of 87,679 acres, of which 43,114 are in fair and poor

range condition, would have improved grazing systems. The current grazing systems in 16 "M" and 2 "C" category existing AMPs would be continued.

Proposed Range Improvements

In order to develop grazing systems on the "I" category allotments, 4 reservoirs, 8 wells, 21 miles of stock-water pipelines, 19 water catchments and 13 miles of fence would be proposed. The total cost of these improvements is estimated at \$306,000.

No vegetative manipulation is proposed, except for the continuation of leafy spurge control on 45 acres with Tordon (picloram) herbicides in the Paradise (#4111) allotment. The cost of this weed control program is \$3,000 per year. The total cost of weed control during the 8 year implementation period is estimated at \$15,000 based on a gradual decreases in the amount of spraying needed. Labor and equipment costs are not included since summer fire crews would be used.

The total cost of improvements in this alternative is \$321,000. Part of these costs would be borne by the livestock operators. Current range improvement funds available through grazing fee receipts returned to the Billings Resource Area total \$60,000 annually. These improvements would be accomplished in 8 years assuming a continuation of current range improvement funding levels and rancher cooperation. See Appendix 2.1 for average costs of the various improvements.

Monitoring

Monitoring would vary with management category as shown on Table 2.2. Permanent trend studies are located in 67 allotments. These sites should continue to be monitored, with the 22 "I" allotments receiving the greatest emphasis. Actual livestock use and utilization data would be collected on "I" allotments where there is a need to closely monitor the level of livestock use.

Wild Horse Management

The current carrying capacity of the PMWHR is approximately 121 wild horses yearlong (see Appendix 2.9). This is the total number of horses of all ages, including current year's foals, on the range at the beginning of the winter grazing period. Approximately 80% of this total would be horses 2 years old or older. A population at this level, which is nine (9) horses below the present number on the range (130), would maintain the habitat and allow for improvement over the long term.

Resource Objectives and Recommendations

The resource objectives in this alternative are: (1) to maintain areas that currently have satisfactory range condition; (2) to prevent further deterioration of range sites in less than satisfactory condition; and (3) to strive for an upward trend in condition on those range sites in less than satisfactory condition.

The recommendation for achieving these objectives is to maintain the population of 121 wild horses in the short term. This would require an initial stocking level of 46 on the Tillett Ridge, 44 on the Sykes Ridge and 31 on the Dryhead herd areas. These numbers depend on the continuation of current agreements allowing wild horses to graze areas outside the designated wild horse range boundary. The population of a herd area shall not exceed the current grazing capacity by more than 10% until range, watershed and wildlife habitat conditions are rated good and have stabilized. Should monitoring studies indicate a downward trend in a herd area due to the wild horses, the wild horse population would be reduced below current grazing capacity. During the short term (8 years), the number of wild horses would be maintained at approximately 121 head. Ultimately, the PMWHR has the potential to support approximately 179 wild horses yearlong, assuming all areas now grazed by the wild horses would continue to be available to the horses (see Appendix 2.10). However, the projected long-term (25 years) population increase in this alternative is considerably less than the potential level of 179 head since no rotational grazing systems would be in effect.

The maintenance of a healthy, viable breeding population of wild horses would be achieved through the retention of animals of the required sex and age class and the annual selective removal of excess animals. Maintenance of this number of wild horses would keep a balance with available forage and allow range condition and wildlife habitat to improve to a good condition. Excess wild horses would be made available for private maintenance and care through the Adopt-A-Horse Program.

The current sex ratio, age class structure, color and other genetic traits would be maintained at this level of management.

Proposed Range Improvement

This alternative requires minimal additional man-made improvements or facilities. Five water catchments would be required to improve wild horse grazing distribution. About 2 miles of fence would be needed for improving the efficiency of capturing the horses and 5 miles to complete fencing the southern boundary. The total estimated cost of these improvements is \$56,500. This figure does not include an annual excess and removal cost of approximately \$21,000 required to gather and excess an average of 30 horses per year in the short term. See Appendix 2.1 for a summary of estimated costs for range improvements.

Monitoring

Monitoring the wild horse herd would involve studies on the herd population, distribution by herd area and population characteristics such as sex ratio, age structure, social structure and animal condition.

Habitat studies would focus on utilization, condition and trend, and vegetation cover. These studies would be conducted on key range sites in each herd area and would be the basis for adjusting population levels in each herd area.

Wildlife Management

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 chartered BLM with the responsibility of maintaining or enhancing fish and wildlife habitats that occur on the public lands.

Resource Objectives and Recommendations

The Billings Resource Area operates under a number of general wildlife habitat management objectives which are utilized Bureau-wide. Each objective is mandated and/or supported by specific Federal regulation or legislation. These wildlife program objectives are common to each alternative level discussed in this RMP/EIS. The BLM wildlife habitat management program places special emphasis on, but is not limited to the protection, maintenance and enhancement of:

- Crucial habitats for big game, upland game birds and waterfowl.
- Crucial habitats for nongame species of special interest and concern to state or other Federal agencies.
- Wetland and riparian habitats.
- Existing or potential fisheries habitat.
- Habitat for state or Federally listed threatened and/or endangered species.

These commitments to the wildlife resources vary by alternative only in the level of effort devoted to each element within the program. The level of effort undertaken annually is dependent upon national priorities, Washington Office direction and the availability of funding and manpower to effectively complete the workload.

The level and intensity of wildlife habitat management activities presented in this alternative have been selected based on feasibility, opportunity, need and associated impacts to other resource programs.

Wildlife Improvements

In the short term, 12 upland game bird watering devices would be installed, 20 waterfowl nesting islands would be constructed, 7 reservoirs would be fenced for waterfowl production, 2 riparian zones would be fenced and reservoirs would be stocked with fish if they are determined suitable.

The maintenance of existing facilities would receive priority over construction of any proposed additional facilities.

Monitoring

To achieve this annual objective, the program would focus on completing 50,000 acres of terrestrial habitat monitoring, surveying 7 waterfowl concentration areas, monitoring 300 acres of known prairie dog colonies for the presence of black-footed ferrets and surveying approximately 5 miles of streams with active fisheries and 2 reservoirs with fisheries potential.

Coordination

All major wildlife habitat enhancement projects would be coordinated with regional personnel of the MDFWP. As mandated in a joint memorandum of understanding with the MDFWP, all projects involving vegetative manipulation would be presented to the regional personnel for comments and recommendations in advance of project initiation.

Informal and formal consultation with USFWS would be initiated on all proposed actions in which BLM determines a may affect situation exists for any Federally listed threatened or endangered species. Consultation would be done in accordance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, as amended.

An interagency team of wildlife biologists has been established to review and make final recommendations on the application of the Federal coal program wildlife unsuitability criteria for the Bull Mountain area. This effort would be accomplished in consultation with USFWS and the MDFWP.

Implementation Costs

It's estimated that the total cost of improvements to implement this alternative is \$42,100 (see Appendix 2.2).

Timber Management

The resource area has conducted small timber sales in the past, primarily along the Beartooth Front (south-east of Big Timber). Two other sales have taken place in the Bull Mountains. Productive forest lands in the Billings Resource Area total 14,225 acres. Outside the "protected areas", productive forest lands total 9,013 acres. There are 14,457 acres managed as protection areas in the Twin Coulee (Snowy Mountain area) and PMWHR of which 5,210 acres are productive forest lands.

Resource Objectives and Recommendations

To meet local demand and salvage fire damaged or bug-killed trees, small timber sales would continue. The yearly cut should average 45 MBF, over about 20 acres, which is the approximate average cut in the resource area in recent years. The 14,457 acres described above would continue to be managed in the protection category. In these areas, timber may only be harvested for the benefit of some other resource value or concern such as safety, watershed or wildlife.

Coal

There are several coal fields in Stillwater, Carbon and Musselshell Counties. The only coal mined in the resource area is from the Bull Mountain Field where two surface mines are currently operating. The coal is used mainly for domestic purposes and light industry.

One mine produces about 10,000 tons per year of privately-owned coal. The second mine is operating under a Federal lease, producing about 10,000 tons per year which disturbs about 1½ acres annually. Both mines serve a large part of southern Montana.

Industry has a history of interest in Federal coal from the Bull Mountain and Joliet/Fromberg fields for potential underground and surface mining.

Resource Objectives and Recommendations

Since the lessee (Divide Coal Company) is about to exhaust its coal reserves, new leases or additional acreage to the existing Federal lease would be required. Over the long term, this could affect 37½ acres. To satisfy the current demand, the present production level would be maintained by issuing emergency leases.

Oil and Gas Leasing

Most of the Federally managed oil and gas estate is already under lease. The largest block of unleased acreage is in the Pryor Mountain Area, where until recently, industry interest has been low. One 360 acre lease has been issued in the Wyoming portion of the PMWHR. Current management (the Big Horn Planning Unit Management Framework Plan) allows for leasing with no surface occupancy. Lease applications have been received for an additional 1,800 acres in this portion of the range, as well as for the entire Twin Coulee WSA. On the average, the Billings Resource Area receives 10 applications for permit to drill (APDs) annually. Each site location disturbs approximately 2 acres. This level of development is anticipated for all alternatives.

Resource Objectives and Recommendations

The BLM would continue to recommend leasing of Federal minerals within the resource area with the appropriate stipulations to protect other resource values. Lease parcels covering sensitive areas would be routed to the resource area for attachment of special stipulations. Nonsensitive lands would be leased directly from the Montana State Office with only standard stipulations attached.

Land Tenure Adjustment

A scattered land pattern exists within the Billings Resource Area with the exception of the Pryor Mountain area and the Bridger, Warren, Belfry Triangle Area (see Map 1—Map Pocket). In the past, the resource area has not pursued consolidation or disposition of scattered isolated tracts. Within the last 10 years there has been one sale (40 acres) and two exchanges (1,388 acres) in the resource area.

Resource Objectives and Recommendations

The resource objective is to continue to adjust the land pattern at the current level. If this trend were to continue the resource area anticipates one sale (40 acres) and two exchanges in the short term and two to three sales (100 acres) and four to five exchanges (3,470 acres) in the long term.

Lands to be considered for disposal are those identified for disposal in the Land Tenure Adjustment Area. Land disposal proposals for any other lands within the resource area must meet the disposal criteria defined in the State Director Guidance Land Pattern Review Criteria (see Appendix 1.6). These criteria would be applied on a case-by-case basis to any proposed lands or minerals disposal actions that develop during implementation of this resource management plan.

Classifications

Under the Classification and Multiple Use Act of 1964 (see Glossary), three areas were classified for retention (see Figure 1.2). They were also segregated from appropriation under the agricultural land laws, from sales under Section 2455 of the Revised Statutes, and from the operation of the mining laws, but not from mineral leasing laws.

Resource Objectives and Recommendations

Under this alternative, these classifications would be reviewed, by the end of fiscal year 1983, to determine if they are still serving their original purpose. These classifications would be reviewed in accordance with Organic Act Directive No. 81-11 (see Appendix 1.7). Reviewing these classifications could result in lifting the segregative effect on approximately 28,586 acres.

Recreation Access

Most large tracts of public land within the resource area have legal access provided by either a county, state or a BLM-administered road. Those public lands near Billings with access are heavily used.

Resource Objectives and Recommendations

Recreational demand on public land would be satisfied through existing, legally accessible roads and trails. No effort would be made to acquire additional access for recreation purposes.

Off-Road Vehicle Use

There is presently a demand for ORV use on public lands in the resource area. Much of this activity is concentrated near Billings.

Resource Objectives and Recommendations

The BLM would resolve the conflict between ORV users and adjacent landowners by permanently closing a 70 acre tract in the South Hills (see Figure 2.4). Approximately 1,200 acres in the South Hills would remain open to ORV use. To protect the fragile soil and vegetation in the Pryor Mountain area, 52,000 acres would be closed except for designated open roads and authorized use (see Figure 2.5). The 3,800 acres in the Acton area would be protected by limiting ORV use to existing roads/trails and authorized use (see Map 1—Map Pocket). The remainder of the public lands in the resource area would remain open to unrestricted use by ORVs.

Environmental Education

Since 1974, BLM has provided 77 acres of public lands north of Shepherd to the Billings city and rural schools for environmental education. This led to the development of trails, interpretive signs and parking areas.

There is also another area located approximately 13 miles northwest of Billings near the community of Acton which is available for environmental education purposes if the Shepherd site is overused. A good quality BLM road accesses the area. However, there are no developments for environmental education in the area.

Resource Objectives and Recommendations

The Shepherd Ah-Nei area would be maintained as an environmental education site for use by local school districts as long as there is a need for it. Other activities, such as hunting, would be discouraged during periods of peak use.

Wild Horse Interpretation

The general public has shown interest in the PMWHR and management of the wild horses. Five signs (three on BLM-administered lands and two on the Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area) indicate the boundary of the horse range. A film shown by Park Service personnel at the NPS Visitor Center in Lovell, Wyoming is the only interpretation of wild horses and the PMWHR available for use by the general public.

Resource Objectives and Recommendations

The BLM would continue to inform the public about the boundaries of the PMWHR by maintaining the five road signs described above. The BLM would also encourage and assist the NPS in providing general information about the Pryor Mountain wild horses.

Wilderness

There are no designated wilderness areas in the Billings Resource Area. Four areas containing 32,302 acres have been identified as having wilderness values (see Alternative Figures 2.6, 2.7, 2.8 and 2.9). They are: the Twin Coulee WSA—MT-067-212, containing 6,870 acres; the Pryor Mountain WSA—MT-067-206, containing 16,927 acres; the Burnt Timber Canyon WSU—MT-067-205, containing 3,955 acres, and the Big Horn Tack-On WSU—MT-067-207, containing 4,550 acres.

Resource Objectives and Recommendations

Under this alternative, none of the areas would be recommended for wilderness designation. The objective of this alternative for wilderness would be the continuation of present management in the four study areas and units while continuing present resource use and management direction. This alternative proposes the continuation of present levels of resource use and manage-

ment and represents the most likely condition to exist in the future if current uses, without regard to the Interim Management Policy for lands under wilderness review, were to continue.

The Twin Coulee WSA is presently managed primarily to retain its natural character. The majority of the area is not suitable for livestock grazing and presently has no mineral development or timber harvesting, although the area does have potential for these two activities.

The Pryor Mountain WSA and the Burnt Timber Canyon and Big Horn Tack-On WSUs are within the PMWHR. The area presently has restrictions on mineral leasing, with no surface occupancy allowed. The area is closed to domestic livestock grazing. There are several mining claims for uranium, but there is presently no mining occurring. Further mineral entry is precluded in this area because of the C&MU Act classifications. These areas contain some commercial timber that is not being harvested.

