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LEWIS AND CLARK BICENTENNIAL

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT

The 200th Anniversary of the Lewis and Clark (L&C) Expedition is 2003-2006. Two of the five national signature events planned for our three-state area depend heavily on BLM-administered lands. In June and July 2005, *Explore! The Big Sky* used BLM lands extensively for the opening ceremonies and other key elements of the 34-day event. *Clark on the Yellowstone* will occur July 22-25, 2006, at Pompeys Pillar National Monument. This is the only one of the 15 national signature events to occur entirely on federal lands.

ISSUES

The L&C Bicentennial is a national initiative that spans multiple jurisdictions and involves local communities, tribal governments and private organizations. The bicentennial is drawing enthusiasts from across the country and abroad, placing significant pressure on public lands along the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail (NHT).

The BLM manages about 330 miles of land along the L&C NHT. Of the 330 BLM miles, 310 are in Montana and include the crown jewels of the trail -- Pompeys Pillar and the Upper Missouri River Breaks national monuments.

Because of the significant land base managed by Montana BLM, the Bicentennial is an incredible opportunity for our agency to increase public awareness about BLM, natural resources and stewardship. Visitors to public lands along the L&C NHT will leave with an impression of how public lands are managed. The BLM continues to be a major partner and participant in this commemoration.

The BLM's interactive exhibit has been traveling with the National Park Service Corps of Discovery II exhibit for the last year. Public response to this educational and fun exhibit has been outstanding, with teachers and others calling it the best exhibit on the entire trail.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

With the L&C Bicentennial now being commemorated in our three-state area, we have shifted funding priorities from infrastructure improvements to an operational emphasis. In this final year of the Bicentennial commemoration, national attention will be drawn to the BLM management of Pompeys Pillar National Monument. However, we need adequate resources to ensure safety, security, and protection on-the-ground and are seeking alternative funding opportunities for the entire program through partnerships with other agencies and private organizations.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE

The Corps of Discovery spent more travel time in Montana than in any other state and visitation to FY05 venues indicate that thousands will attend the National Signature Event at Pompeys Pillar and other BLM sites along the trails.

Key partners include Montana L&C Bicentennial Commission; the National L&C Trail Heritage Foundation; and our private sector partners in the national signature events occurring in our three-state area.

Local economies will benefit from increased tourism; however, many challenges are associated with increased visitation to public lands and BLM needs to be prepared. We will continue to work with our partners to address resource needs to provide quality, safe visitor experiences and maintain the integrity of the trail.

CONTACT

Richard Fichtler, Lewis and Clark Project Manager, (406) 329-3884

UNDAUNTED STEWARDSHIP

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Undaunted Stewardship Program Description and Status

ISSUES:

Background: The Undaunted Stewardship concept came from Montana's ranching and agricultural community. It was initiated to recognize the stewardship of private landowners that has resulted in many areas along the Lewis and Clark Trail remaining undeveloped and closely resembling what Lewis and Clark saw during their expedition through the state. Another aspect of Undaunted Stewardship is to develop on-the-ground projects with private landowners that will further enhance the natural resources along the trail. This program, working with private landowners, develops management plans and interpretive kiosks. It has also identified projects to showcase outstanding land stewardship practices on 12 Montana ranches in addition to a certification program which recognizes sound grazing practices. Sixteen other organizations complete the public/private partnership. Congress has been appropriating funding for the Undaunted Stewardship program, through the BLM, since April 2001.

Program Goals:

Goal 1: To demonstrate that agriculture and environmental values can be compatible.

Goal 2: To educate people (e.g., farmers, ranchers, policymakers, and other citizens) about how voluntary, incentive-based approaches can be used to sustain and enhance the environmental, social, historical, and economic values of agricultural landscapes.

Recognition: The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation recognized the Undaunted Stewardship program with the Chairman's Award for Federal Achievement in Historic Preservation. The award, presented in Annapolis, Maryland, on May 18, 2005, cited Undaunted Stewardship as a "wonderful model for similar partnerships across the Nation."

BLM role: As a member of the executive council, BLM has helped develop agreements that:

- Lay out a methodology to prioritize and select projects for funding;
- Create the means to fund projects through Montana State University (MSU) when needed;
- Encourage the use of partnerships with other organizations to leverage available funding.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Although Undaunted Stewardship funding comes to Montana BLM, it is essentially pass-through funding. The intent is not to use this money for projects that would traditionally be funded by regular BLM appropriations. The BLM, MSU, Montana Stockgrowers, and an advisory board jointly select projects that meet the criteria of the Undaunted Stewardship initiative, which is aimed at showcasing stewardship on private lands.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The Montana Stockgrowers Association was instrumental in obtaining the Undaunted Stewardship appropriation and serves on the executive council.

Several conservation groups are involved in the process and will offer advice concerning projects along the Missouri and other rivers and streams along the Lewis and Clark Trail.

Montana State University is providing outreach and research and science assistance for project development and implementation. It is also assisting private landowners in developing management strategies.

CONTACT:

Howard Lemm, Deputy State Director, Division of Resources, (406) 896-5117

**POMPEYS PILLAR NATIONAL MONUMENT
INTERPRETIVE CENTER**

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Construction of a new 5,700-square foot interpretive center and related infrastructure improvements are complete. Two Congressional appropriations totaling \$4.9 million made this project possible.

Additional improvements consisting of a paved ½-mile entrance road and parking lot; entrance station which can either be staffed or collect fees from an automated teller; over ¼ mile of walkways; and an amphitheater will be completed this summer. The additional improvements have been funded by BLM (\$2.6 million) as well as contributions from the Department of Transportation and Yellowstone County (\$400,000 CTEP grant to Pompeys Pillar Historical Association), the National Park Service (\$170,000 grant to Pompeys Pillar Historical Association), and Engineering Inc./Land Design (an in-kind contribution of design work valued at \$50,000 to Pompeys Pillar Historical Association).

ISSUES:

Pompeys Pillar National Monument has been designated by the National Lewis & Clark Bicentennial Council as the site of one of only 15 Lewis & Clark signature events nationwide. The *Clark on the Yellowstone* Signature Event will take place July 22 – 25, 2006.

Pompeys Pillar is a 121-foot sandstone butte 28 miles northeast of Billings, Montana. The only known physical evidence of the Lewis and Clark Expedition still visible along the trail is Captain Clark's signature, which he carved into the Pillar on July 25, 1806. He recorded doing so in his journal.

The BLM purchased Pompeys Pillar November 22, 1991, for its historic significance and its interpretive and recreational potential. In 1992, the BLM constructed limited facilities for the protection of resources and the comfort and safety of visitors. Facilities included a small log contact station and a stairway to Clark's signature and the top of the Pillar. The site's designation as a national monument on January 17, 2001, was widely supported.

The Pompeys Pillar Historical Association has worked closely with BLM in the acquisition, operation and development of this site. It has also agreed to raise \$2 million to match an FY1999 \$2 million Congressional appropriation to go toward the construction of a new interpretive center. In FY2002, Congress appropriated an additional \$2.9 million for construction of the center.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

We need to remain cognizant of our ability to fund annual operation and maintenance costs. We will need to explore all available means to provide funding to keep the center open, especially since the community has expressed a strong desire to have a year-round facility operation.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest is high regarding both the site itself and construction of an interpretive center. Feedback from public meetings, briefings for elected officials, and public comment letters has been generally favorable.

CONTACT:

Dick Kodeski, Pompeys Pillar National Monument Manager, (406) 896-5235

**UPPER MISSOURI RIVER BREAKS NATIONAL MONUMENT
INTERPRETIVE CENTER**

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The community of Fort Benton has proposed a new visitor center to replace the BLM's existing visitor contact station. Congress has appropriated \$2.9 million for construction of a new facility. However, BLM is concerned about long-term funding for operations, maintenance and staffing.

The BLM is planning a 6,000-square foot center located on a 3.64-acre site adjacent to the Missouri River which will be donated by the City of Fort Benton when the building is complete.

ISSUES:

The need for improved visitor facilities surfaced in the late 1980s. Our current 750-square foot visitor contact station is in Fort Benton's downtown area in a small, converted house that is more than 100 years old.

As the head of the 149-mile Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River and the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument, Fort Benton is experiencing increased tourism that is being fed by the approaching Lewis and Clark Bicentennial. Tourism provides an economic boost to the local economy, but there is also recognition of infrastructure needs such as an improved visitor center.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The BLM has prepared an environmental assessment that analyzes development of the visitor center. The EA has been reviewed by the public and after revision, was finalized.

Split Rock Studios has completed the interpretive prospectus. Meetings were held in Lewistown and Fort Benton in late June 2003 concerning interpretive themes. Explus and Mainstreet Design are designing the interpretive displays.

Kadmas, Lee, and Jackson and CTA (A&E firms) have completed the building design. The project was put out for bid in March 2005 and Roundtree Construction from Great Falls, Mont., was the successful bidder for construction of the building.

A groundbreaking ceremony was held June 30, 2005, and clearing of topsoil began July 5. The intention is to have the facility open to the public in mid to late summer 2006, with a grand opening ceremony scheduled for June 25, 2006.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Local public interest is high. The concept of a new visitor center has support from both county and city officials. However, these local partners have questioned the amount of local support, such as in-kind services, that will be needed to augment BLM's limited capabilities to fund operation and maintenance costs.

CONTACT:

Connie Jacobs, Upper Missouri River Breaks Interpretive Center Director, (406) 622-4020

SHEPHERD AH-NEI OFF-HIGHWAY VEHICLE (OHV) TRAVEL MANAGEMENT PLAN

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The BLM initiated travel management planning for the Shepherd Ah-Nei OHV Area during the summer of 2004 with an inventory of all roads and trails. The environmental assessment and decision record for managing off-highway vehicle travel within the OHV area was released May 13, 2005.

ISSUES:

The BLM's Shepherd Ah-Nei Recreation Area near Billings is a very popular destination for a variety of recreationists, including OHV riders. The OHV portion of Shepherd Ah-Nei was closed in April 2004 pending completion of a travel management plan and environmental assessment analyzing the effects of OHV use on the 1,063-acre area.

The Travel Management Plan and decision to reopen was released on May 13, 2005. In June the decision was appealed with a stay. The Interior Board of Land Appeals granted the stay on the decision in July 2005. The stay was lifted in September 2005, allowing the area to reopen. The Interior Board of Land Appeals has yet to rule on the appeal.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The riding area was reopened in mid-October 2005. The Billings Field Office continues to implement the travel management plan that was released in May 2005. The Billings Field Office staff monitors the area weekly, assessing trail conditions, closing unauthorized trails and, when necessary, closing the entire area. Mild, dry winter weather has allowed the area to remain open with most use occurring on weekends.

The field office organized two volunteer projects at the riding area during October and November 2005 and is scheduling other work projects during the spring and summer 2006 with various volunteer groups, Montana Conservation Corps and field office staff.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The BLM will continue to provide safe, motorized recreation opportunities, while protecting natural and cultural resources.

CONTACT:

Lynn Anderson, Outdoor Recreation Planner, (406) 896-5248

BUTTE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN (RMP) REVISION

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Butte Field Office is in the process of revising the Headwaters Resource Management Plan (RMP). Because the new RMP will apply only to the lands in the Butte Field Office area (instead of being split between the Butte and Lewistown field offices as the Headwaters RMP is), the new document will be called the Butte RMP. Land under the jurisdiction of the Lewistown Field Office will continue to be managed under the Headwaters RMP.

ISSUES:

The issues and management concerns are based on the Preparation Plan and public scoping results. Preparation of the RMP affords many opportunities for collaboration with local, state, federal and tribal governments and land management agencies, public interest groups, and public land users. Outreach to the public and other agencies has resulted in some modification of issues and concerns during this process.

Issues identified are: vegetation management; special status and priority species; travel management and access; recreation (including visual resource management, Wild and Scenic Rivers and Wilderness Study Areas); and areas of critical environmental concern. Other management concerns identified for the RMP revision include: air quality; abandoned mine lands; land ownership adjustments; mineral leasing/exploration/development (including oil and gas); soil resources; cultural and paleontological resources; water quality/quantity; and social/economic concerns.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

In December 2002 the Montana State Office approved a Preparation Plan; in August 2003 a contractor (Tetra Tech) was hired to assist in the preparation of the Butte RMP. Initial public scoping began December 19, 2003, with the publication of the Notice of Intent, and ended February 17, 2004. A scoping report has been completed and is available on the Butte FO website: www.mt.blm.gov/bdo/. As a continuation of the scoping process, a Proposed Planning Scenario was developed and mailed out to over 300 parties with a 30-day comment period in June 2005. Alternative development has focused heavily on vegetation management, special area designations, and site-specific travel planning for five sub-areas within the field office (approximately 50 percent of BLM roads in field office).

Five public travel plan scoping meetings were held in November and December 2004. In summer 2005, community-based working groups were developed to assist with developing alternatives for three travel planning areas. The proposed action and alternatives have been developed and a draft environmental impact statement is expected to be released in summer 2006.

The State of Montana, eight counties, and four Native American tribes were invited to be cooperating agencies in this process, but no official agreements were signed. Although agencies and tribes want to stay informed during the RMP process, none wish to be a formal cooperating agency, mostly due to budget and time constraints. The Butte Field Office will work closely with the counties, tribes, public, Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, EPA, and the Western Montana Resource Advisory Council throughout the RMP process. A coordination meeting was held in February 2005, with various federal, tribal, state, and local agencies and to determine any further interest from agencies to be involved with the RMP process. None of the participants in the meeting chose to officially become cooperating agencies.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest is moderate to high because the RMP will set the direction for how the field office will be managed over the next 10-15 years. There is growing concern (based on past and current projects) over the management of roads and trails, wildlife and vegetation, fuels, and special area designations.

CONTACT:

Richard Hotaling, Butte Field Manager, (406) 533-7629

DILLON RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Dillon Field Office began developing a new resource management plan (RMP) in 2001 to replace an aging management framework plan (MFP) approved in 1979. Protests have been resolved and the record of decision was signed February 7, 2006.

ISSUES:

Statutory, regulatory, policy and socioeconomic changes have occurred since the completion of the Dillon MFP in 1979. Issues addressed in the new RMP are related to threatened, endangered and sensitive species; changes in intensity of uses on public lands; vegetation management and fuels reduction; travel management; special management designations; and the general increasing demand for public lands and resources in the planning area.

BLM used comments received from the public on the Draft RMP/EIS, along with internal review, to develop the Proposed RMP/Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Issues receiving the most public attention were travel management and route designations; areas of critical environmental concern (ACECs); sagebrush habitat and greater sage-grouse management; westslope cutthroat trout management; oil and gas leasing and development; and wildlife corridors and grizzly bears.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

After more than three years of intensive effort and collaboration with the public, the proposed RMP and Final EIS were released in April 2005, followed by a 30-day protest period. The Proposed RMP/Final EIS includes adjustments made as a result of public comment and internal review, identifies land use allocations, and provides guidance for about 902,000 surface acres and 1.3 million acres of federal mineral estate. Seven protest letters postmarked by the May 31 closing date were reviewed to determine if clarifications or changes to the Proposed RMP are warranted. The protests addressed a variety of concerns including ACEC designation and management, travel management, wilderness and wilderness study areas, livestock grazing, westslope cutthroat trout, consistency with local plans, monitoring, and Wild and Scenic River evaluations. All protests were resolved in February 2006. The Record of Decision and Approved Dillon Resource Management Plan will be distributed to the public in March 2006 after the document is printed.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Development of the Dillon RMP has been Montana's top planning priority. Funding became available in 2001 to begin the RMP process. The Dillon RMP was developed with unprecedented public involvement measures. Initially, the Montana Consensus Council (MCC) assisted BLM in developing public participation strategies based on suggestions made by the public. Five scoping meetings, three information fairs, nine alternative development workshops, five informational open houses (following release of the draft RMP/EIS), two oral comment meetings, and numerous presentations, discussions, and briefings with public and agency interests have occurred since the planning process began.

The Western Montana RAC has been extensively involved in development and review of the RMP. Three subgroups of the Western Montana RAC provided recommendations on ACEC nominations, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and travel management, and the RAC provided suggestions to BLM during alternative development and review of the draft RMP/EIS. Beaverhead and Madison counties also served as formal cooperating agencies in the planning process, guided by a memorandum of understanding. Both the RAC and the counties involvement have ensured consideration of the diverse constituencies interested in the management of public lands.

Coordination has continued throughout the process with federal and state agencies, including, but not limited to, the Agricultural Research Service, Bureau of Reclamation, Forest Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. Tribal consultation has been ongoing with the Confederated Kootenai and Salish Tribes of the Flathead Reservation and the Shoshone-Bannock at Fort Hall, Idaho.

Other interests include several national and state-level conservation and environmental organizations; state and local officials, especially at the county level; the local ranching and agricultural community; recreationists, especially hunters; wilderness and wildlife advocates; users in the oil and gas, utility, mining and timber industries; and other state and federal management agencies.

CONTACT:

Tim Bozorth, Dillon Field Manager, (406) 683-8023

MALTA RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Malta Field Office is starting work on a resource management plan that will cover the lands managed by the Glasgow and Havre field stations and the Malta Field Office. The RMP will direct the long-term management on about 2,420,000 acres of surface and 3,520,000 acres of subsurface within the three office areas. This plan will replace the West HiLine RMP and the Valley-Phillips portion of the Judith-Valley-Phillips RMP.

ISSUES:

Through internal scoping the following issues were identified: oil and gas leasing; energy development; greater sage-grouse, prairie dog, BLM sensitive species, and migratory bird management; and travel management. We expect to expand these issues during scoping.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The Malta Field Office will work collaboratively with the various HiLine communities, tribes, and state and local governments in determining issues and alternatives to address those issues. Scoping meetings are scheduled to start early in FY 07.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest will be high because of travel management planning, roads opened/closed and game retrieval, and oil and gas leasing in sensitive areas such as in Frenchman Creek and south Blaine, Phillips, and Valley counties where there is extensive sagebrush communities and greater sage-grouse populations.

CONTACT:

Rich Adams, Supervisory Natural Resource Specialist, (406) 654-5131

MILES CITY RMP REVISION

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Miles City Field Office is revising and combining the Big Dry and Powder River resource management plans (RMPs) into one: the Miles City RMP. Prior to 1998, the field office operated under two resource areas -- Big Dry and Powder River -- and the lands in each area are currently managed under their own RMPs.

The Big Dry RMP area consists of about 1.7 million acres of BLM-administered surface acres and 7.6 million acres of BLM-administered mineral resources. It encompasses public lands in 13 counties in eastern Montana: Carter, Custer, Daniels, Dawson, Fallon, Garfield, McCone, Prairie, Richland, Roosevelt, Rosebud, Sheridan and Wibaux. The Powder River RMP area consists of about 1.1 million surface acres of land and 4.1 million acres of subsurface minerals. It includes portions of Custer, Carter, Rosebud and Big Horn counties and all of Powder River and Treasure counties.

ISSUE:

The BLM published a Federal Register notice on February 4, 2005, announcing its intent to plan and conduct public scoping for the RMP. Following issuance of a draft SEIS/Amendment for a 90-day public review and the final SEIS/Amendment for a 30-day protest period, BLM anticipates the Record of Decision to be issued in December 2007.

About 200 people attended nine meetings throughout southeastern Montana. Issues identified include impacts from oil and gas exploration and development; lands and realty management (access); travel management and ownership consolidation; vegetation (noxious weeds); livestock grazing; fire management; off-highway vehicles; socioeconomics; and wildlife management.

One Native American tribe and several local, state and federal agencies are designated cooperating agencies in the preparation of the RMP: Lower Brule Sioux Tribe; Big Horn, Custer, Daniels, Powder River, Richland, Rosebud, Sheridan, and Treasure counties; Carter, Garfield, McCone, Prairie, Richland, and Wibaux county conservation districts; Prairie County Cooperative State Grazing District; Little Beaver Conservation District; Montana Department of Environmental Quality; Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation; Bureau of Indian Affairs; and Environmental Protection Agency.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The changes that have taken place in the past 10 to 20 years have resulted in different users and uses of public lands. Issues have emerged that relate to potential threatened and endangered species, increased demand for oil and gas, and changes in intensity of use of other resources. The public lands and resources need to be managed consistently throughout the Miles City Field Office. The RMP will allow BLM to guide management actions based on current information (changes in policy and guidance), sound criteria and public input and provide a comprehensive framework for managing and allocating use of the public lands and resources in the MCFO.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The overall objective of the Miles City planning effort is to provide a collaborative community-based planning approach to assist the BLM in updating the existing management decisions and resource allocations by addressing new data, changing resource conditions, changes in the use of public land that have occurred since the RMPs were completed, BLM planning instruction memorandums and bulletins. The BLM expects that numerous cooperating agencies and collaborators will continue to become involved in this process and will assist in providing a wide variety of data in support of this effort.

CONTACT:

Mary Bloom, Planning Specialist, (406) 233-2852

Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument Resource Management Plan

Purpose of the Briefing Document

The Lewistown Field Office has released the Draft Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement for Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument and is now soliciting public comments.

Issues:

On January 17, 2001, the President designated the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument with a Presidential proclamation. The proclamation recognizes the spectacular array of biological, geological and historical resources found on the approximately 375,000 acres of public land in this monument. The BLM is preparing a management plan to establish guidance, objectives and management actions for these lands and resources.

After extensive public involvement through scoping and alternative formulation, the Draft RMP/EIS was distributed to the public near the end of October 2005. The deadline for public comment has been extended through April 26, 2006.

To date, the Lewistown Field Office has received slightly over 1,000 comment letters or emails concerning the Draft RMP/EIS. The vast majority of these contacts consist of form letters/emails and most of them address the landing strips that existed before the Monument was designated.

While it is early in the public comment process, some predictable trends are developing. Agriculture groups and individuals along the river or in the uplands fear that monument management will impact their ability to use their private land and/or their BLM grazing permits within the monument; they are also concerned about the federal water reservations in Arrow Creek and the Judith River, and they want to maintain the opportunity to use motorized watercraft on the river. The Montana Pilots Association is lobbying hard in support of the draft preferred alternative. Wilderness advocates prefer fewer roads, no airstrips left open, no development on existing natural gas leases and reduced motorized opportunities on the river. Those favoring motorized recreation are lobbying for extended opportunities for jet skis, seaplanes and other motorized water craft. American Indian tribes are concerned about protecting cultural sites within the monument.

So far, 46 percent of the comments received address the use of landing strips, 13 percent address the use of motorized watercraft (including seaplanes and jet skis), and 11 percent address road density. Wildlife issues, access and oil and gas leasing have each garnered less than 10 percent of the comments offered to date.

Main Decision or Message:

Public participation is a vital element of the BLM's planning process.

Bureau Perspective:

BLM will emphasize public involvement by hosting 12 public meetings throughout central Montana to answer questions about the draft and to solicit public comments. These meetings will begin on February 21 and conclude on March 14.

Information Contact:

Gary E. Slagel, monument manager, 406-538-1950

BADGER-TWO MEDICINE APPLICATIONS FOR PERMIT TO DRILL (APDS)

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The BLM and Forest Service are reviewing a drilling proposal at the former Fina exploratory drilling site in the Lewis & Clark National Forest. Sidney Longwell now holds the lease on which Fina Oil and Chemical Company first proposed an exploratory well in 1983. The proposed well is located at the northern edge of the Lewis & Clark National Forest in the Hall Creek drainage in an area known as the Badger-Two Medicine.

ISSUES:

The BLM decides whether or not to approve applications for permit to drill (APDs) on federal leases. On National Forest land, however, the Forest Service has primary responsibility for surface-related issues while the BLM has primary responsibility for "down hole" issues.

The APD for the well site was approved in 1991 after the Forest Service conducted several environmental analyses; an environmental assessment (EA) was completed in 1985 and a final environmental impact statement (EIS) was completed in 1990. The National Wildlife Federation and six other groups sued the Forest Service. The drilling approval and lawsuit were suspended while the Forest Service gathered information and analyzed the cultural and religious significance of the area to Native American tribes. About 90,000 acres of the Badger-Two Medicine was identified as having traditional cultural importance to the Blackfeet Tribe. In January 2002, the Keeper of the Register of National Historic Places determined this site as eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The drilling proposal is located roughly two miles north of the current district boundary.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The Forest Service is the lead agency for evaluating possible impacts of the proposed drilling on properties that have cultural and religious significance to Native American tribes, as well as ensuring that any other new information since the 1991 decision is considered. The following steps must be taken:

- A review of new information since the decision was made (for example, traditional cultural district, listing of lynx as threatened species);
- A determination as to whether the new information has a bearing on the 1991 decision to approve the drilling; and
- A determination whether the new information requires a revision, correction, or supplement to the previous analysis.

If a review of the new information indicates there is no need to supplement or revise the current decision, approval of the proposal would remain under the terms and conditions established in the 1991 decision. If there is a need to supplement the analysis, a draft supplemental EIS would be developed for public review. The lease suspension will continue until the operator is given approval to commence with the approved APD.

The Forest Service conducted surveys to determine whether newly identified threatened, endangered or sensitive species or their habitat could be impacted by the proposal. A survey of goshawk territories, potential amphibian habitat, and sensitive plants has been completed. Preliminary review of this data indicates no new projected impacts from the drilling proposal.

The Forest Service is also working closely with the Blackfeet Tribe and other consulting parties to identify possible impacts from the proposal to the Traditional Cultural District. An area of potential impacts from the drilling proposal was tentatively identified and the Forest Service requested review and any additional information from consulting parties. The Blackfeet Tribe provided new information with respect to traditional cultural uses in the Hall Creek area, including additional documentary sources and ethnographic information that warrants further research. The Forest Service has contracted for additional ethnographic review, including continued dialogue with Blackfeet elders and tribal government, to identify whether new information indicates a need to reevaluate potential impacts from the drilling proposal and/or the current boundaries of the Traditional Cultural District.

The Devon Operating Company has a pending APD (a lease formerly held by Chevron) nearby in the Goat Mountain Area that will require a similar review.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest is very high. National organizations are involved, and decisions occasionally get statewide attention. Demonstrations of opposition were staged in Great Falls and Missoula, Montana, following the 1993 decision to approve the APD. Senator Baucus introduced Senate bill 1616 on February 5, 1998, and Senate bill 984 on May 1, 2003, to authorize exchange of existing federal oil and gas leases, including those within the Badger-Two Medicine, for federal oil and gas lease sale bidding credits or payments due on existing leases. Neither bill passed.

CONTACT:

Don Judice, Great Falls Field Station Supervisor, (406) 791-7789

COAL BED NATURAL GAS DEVELOPMENT

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Coal bed natural gas (CBNG) is in the early stages of development in the Powder River Basin of southeastern Montana. Production of CBNG began in 1999 from private and state wells and in 2003 from federal wells. Approximately 525 wells are producing CBNG from federal, state and private leases with all production occurring in the CX Field which is operated by Fidelity Exploration & Production Company.

ISSUE:

In order to analyze conventional oil and gas development as well as full field CBNG development, the BLM and the State of Montana (Montana Board of Oil & Gas Conservation and Department of Environmental Quality) prepared a joint environmental impact statement (EIS, 2003) and resource management plan (RMP) amendment. BLM issued its record of decision (ROD) in April 2003. The ROD and supporting EIS are currently under litigation.

The U.S. District Court has directed BLM to prepare a supplemental environmental impact statement (SEIS) to the 2003 EIS that analyzes the phased development of CBNG. The BLM is currently under a court-issued injunction enjoining BLM from approving any CBNG production in the Montana portion of the Powder River Basin.

In order to make the SEIS more comprehensive, air modeling (in addition to the modeling conducted for the 2003 document) will be conducted. Air quality impacts are described qualitatively when air quality is a low priority public issue, when potential impacts are minimal, or when emissions information is insufficient for a modeling analysis. As air quality issues are of great concern to the Northern Cheyenne Tribe and members of the public, and there are potential effects to Class 1 air areas, a quantitative analysis is being conducted.

BLM published a Federal Register notice on August 5, 2005, announcing its intent to plan and conduct public scoping for the SEIS. Following issuance of a draft SEIS/amendment for a 90-day public review and the final SEIS/amendment for a 30-day protest period, BLM anticipates the record of decision to be issued in June 2007.

Several local, state and federal agencies and tribes are designated cooperating agencies in the preparation of the SEIS: Rosebud, Carbon, Golden Valley, Powder River, Yellowstone, Musselshell, Big Horn and Treasure counties; Lower Brule Sioux and Crow tribes; Montana Department of Environmental Quality, and the Board of Oil and Gas Conservation; Bureau of Indian Affairs; Department of Energy; US Army Corps of Engineers; and the Environmental Protection Agency. The BLM and the cooperating agencies and other collaborators met in September 2005 to develop a phased development alternative. BLM then provided the public the phased development alternative for comment. As a result of comments from cooperating agencies, collaborators and the public, an additional phased development alternative was developed.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

BLM Montana continues to process drilling applications as they are received, preparing additional, site-specific environmental documentation as needed. Because of court issued injunctions, Montana BLM cannot approve drilling applications for CBNG production projects until litigation is resolved.

Monitoring and mitigation are vital for ensuring that the decisions made in the EIS/RMP amendment adequately protect the affected environment. Interagency working groups established for water, air, aquatics and wildlife have been in place since 2003 to monitor effects from cbng development. Working group participants include both Montana and Wyoming BLM and Departments of Environmental Quality; the US Geological Survey; Forest Service; National Park Service; the Natural Resources and Conservation Services in Montana, Wyoming and South Dakota; and Native American tribes. Protection measures and best management practices are in place for several resources including air, water and wildlife. Mitigation measures can be modified based upon the results of monitoring and technology.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

There is a high level of regional interest in CBNG production with most concerns focused on water-related impacts, potential impacts to tribal resources, and the SEIS/Amendment.

CONTACT:

David Breisch, Mineral Resource Specialist, (406) 233-3645

**THE COTEAU PROPERTIES COMPANY (COTEAU)
COAL LEASE BY APPLICATION: WEST MINE AREA**

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

In January 2002, The Coteau Properties Company filed an application to lease federal coal deposits beneath private surface within the company's 17,051 acre Freedom Mine-West Mine Area. The application includes about 5,571 acres of federal coal. Coteau estimates the tract contains 88 million tons of recoverable federal coal reserves intermingled with non-federal coal in Mercer County, North Dakota

ISSUES:

The proposed federal coal is considered suitable for mining according to the North Dakota Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (April 1988). The final environmental impact statement (FEIS) for the leasing of federal coal within the West Mine Area (July 2005) defined the loss of American Indian stone features as the dominant issue.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

After receiving comments on the FEIS and continued consultation with tribal representatives, the BLM prepared and released the record of decision (ROD) on December 27, 2005. A notice of availability for the ROD was published in the Federal Register.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Tribal representatives have expressed concerns regarding the disturbance of traditional cultural sites in the area of the proposed mine expansion. Non-tribal public interest, excluding local interest, has been minimal.

CONTACT:

Allen Ollila, Petroleum Engineer, (701) 227-7735; Barry G. Williams, Archeologist, (701) 227-7707.

GOLDEN SUNLIGHT MINE, INC. PARTIAL PIT BACKFILL SUPPLEMENTAL EIS

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Golden Sunlight Mine, Inc. (GSM) mines and processes gold-bearing ore using facilities located on public and private lands near Whitehall, Montana. GSM has conducted mining and mineral processing activities under Operating Permit No. 00065 since 1975.

When the BLM and Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) issued a record of decision in 1998 for expansion of the Golden Sunlight Mine, the EIS analyzed a partial pit backfill alternative but it was dismissed after DEQ concluded, in part, that the alternative was not considered economically feasible. Environmental groups filed suit against DEQ claiming that the partial pit backfill alternative should have been selected as required by the Montana Metal Mine Reclamation Act.

A 2002 Montana State court decision required that GSM submit a partial pit backfill plan. GSM submitted a Partial Pit Backfill Plan to the agencies December 1, 2003. Montana DEQ and BLM have worked with a contractor and GSM to complete a Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) (12/16/2004) to fully evaluate the environmental impacts and mitigation measures associated with partially backfilling the GSM pit.

ISSUES:

The Golden Sunlight Mine is a conventional truck and shovel open-pit mine. Approximately 10 million tons of rocks per year are excavated. Only 2.5 million tons of this total are ore, the remainder being waste rock. Approximately 300 million tons of wastes have been placed in waste rock dumps. The ore is milled using a vat cyanide process. Following processing, the mill stream is piped as slurry to a lined tailings impoundment. An earlier impoundment did experience some leakage in the early 1980s. This was corrected through a series of pumpback wells. This impoundment has been reclaimed.

Because the waste rock at GSM has high potential for "acid rock drainage," effective reclamation of these wastes is crucial. Extensive monitoring of several slopes reclaimed during 1990-1992 has helped the mine and agencies determine what reclamation practices have been most effective. Surface water management is another critical factor in reclamation success and is an important part of the reclamation plan. Long-term water treatment is an integral part of the mine plan. GSM has posted a total bond of over \$50 million to cover reclamation costs.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

BLM and DEQ have prepared a Draft SEIS which fully evaluates the impacts of the proposed Partial Pit Backfill plan. The preferred alternative in the Draft SEIS is the Underground Sump Alternative with Additional Visual Mitigation. Mine impacted waters will be pumped and treated following collection in the underground sump retained from Golden Sunlight's terminated underground operations. Comments on the Draft SEIS resulted in a closer look at backfill alternatives. The original preferred alternative does not require any backfill in the pit and is still felt to be the most protective of groundwater resources. We expect a Final SEIS and decision this spring.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest in the mine is high. Golden Sunlight employs over 150 people and is an important source of revenue for Jefferson County. An SEIS scoping meeting was attended by over 200 people supporting the mine. In 2001 the mine produced 200,000 ounces of gold.

CONTACTS:

David Williams, geologist, BLM Butte Field Office, (406) 533-7655; or Joan Gabelman, geologist, BLM Butte Field Office, (406) 533-7623

MONTANA TUNNELS MINING, INC. PIT EXPANSION EIS

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Montana Tunnels Mining, Inc. (MTMI) proposes to deepen and expand its open pit mine to develop additional ore reserves. This expansion would extend the life-of-mine to 2011.

ISSUES:

MTMI has mined and processed ore from a single open pit mine since the adoption of the draft environmental impact statement (EIS) and approval of the current operating permit in 1986. Montana Tunnels mines a poly-metal bearing ore and produces gold, silver, lead and zinc in the form of metal-sulfide concentrates for sale into commerce. The products are recovered from the ore by conventional milling and flotation processes and gravity concentrating techniques. The mine operates under State Operating Permit No. 00113 and BLM Plan of Operations MTM-82856. It is located on public and private lands near Jefferson City in Jefferson County, Montana.

Development drilling programs at Montana Tunnels have delineated additional ore that extends beneath the existing open pit mine in the pipe of an ancient volcano. The ore body provides a significant resource for mining and milling beyond the current plan of operations. Montana Tunnels proposes to extend its life-of-mine plan to access this resource by open pit mining methods. The added ore resource will lengthen mining and milling operational life by approximately five years. The current mining plan will sustain operations into 2007.

To assure an uninterrupted supply of ore to the mill between the current plan and the mine expansion plan, overburden stripping from the open pit high wall layback must begin in 2006. A major feature of the reclamation at the end of mine life will be the loss of approximately 2,000 feet of Clancy Creek, as a portion of the creek will be encompassed by the pit lake to remain after reclamation.

The consequence of delay likely would mean an interruption in the supply of ore to the mill and possible short term layoffs.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The BLM and Montana DEQ are preparing an EIS to cover the proposed expansion.

In the January 31, 2006, issue of the *Montana Standard*, Montana Tunnels announced that the mine would close in April unless an investor is found to buy or fix the facility after a wall of the open pit mine collapsed in October. The closure would lay off 196 mine workers. The company still holds out hope an investor/money can be found to continue operations at the mine. The principle purpose of the announcement was to comply with federal requirements to notify workers of a potential closure. The agencies will continue to work on the expansion EIS.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest in the mine is moderate. Montana Tunnels has a good history of environmental compliance and has not been a source of controversy. Montana Tunnels employs over 200 people and is an important source of revenue for Jefferson County. More than 100 people, mostly mine supporters, attended an EIS scoping meeting.

CONTACTS:

David Williams, geologist, BLM Butte Field Office, (406) 533-7655; or Joan Gabelman, geologist, BLM Butte Field Office, (406) 533-7623

**OIL AND GAS ISSUES IN AND ADJACENT TO THE
UPPER MISSOURI RIVER BREAKS NATIONAL MONUMENT**

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The BLM has prepared a new analysis of 12 oil and gas leases within the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument that were issued under the 1988 West HiLine Resource Management Plan (RMP).

ISSUES:

In 2000, the Montana Wilderness Association (MWA) filed suit challenging BLM's issuance of three leases under the 1988 West HiLine Resource Management Plan (RMP) and a pipeline right-of-way to Macum Energy. The three leases were issued effective Nov. 1, 1999. MWA alleged that both actions violated the National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act, National Historic Preservation Act, Federal Land Policy and Management Act, and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The leases and pipeline are located inside and outside of the boundary of the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. On March 31, 2004, Judge Molloy of the Montana Federal District Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs. The ruling essentially said that BLM did not sufficiently comply with NEPA. The clear implication in the ruling was that any leases issued under the West HiLine RMP were in jeopardy.

An evidentiary hearing to consider the remedy pending compliance with the March 31, 2004, ruling was held on January 14, 2005. On January 12, 2006, the District Court issued an order. The order shuts in the pipeline and enjoins any activity on the three leases until BLM demonstrates compliance with the directives set forth in the March 31, 2004, order. It also allows the plaintiffs an opportunity to state their position with respect to dissolution of the injunction and BLM's compliance with the March 31, 2004 order. The order also raises Macum's existing \$25,000 bond to \$100,000.

Within the Monument, 350 wells have been drilled since 1950, and 56 have produced at least some gas. With the combination of rough topography, scattered development, 320 and 640-acre spacing, limited roads, and remote location, the area has retained its characteristics of outstanding rugged beauty even with the existing gas production. The natural gas areas of north-central Montana are attracting continued industry interest as a result of rising natural gas prices and improved drilling and completion techniques.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The Monument RMP was delayed to specifically include an analysis of 12 oil and gas leases within the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument that were issued under the 1988 West HiLine RMP. A range of management constraints to protect the Monument is included in the alternatives, including no surface occupancy.

The Draft Monument RMP is currently being reviewed by the public. An environmental assessment for the 1999 pipeline right-of-way has been written and a decision for the pipeline was issued in June 2005. Leases issued under the West HiLine RMP that are outside the monument will be addressed in a new RMP for the Malta Field Office, scheduled to begin in 2006.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

While natural gas production and development are among the historic uses of this area, MWA remains concerned about drilling. Other environmental groups/individuals share MWA's position to some extent. Industry has expressed interest in the energy potential of the West HiLine and Malta RMP areas. Suspension of leasing is of concern to many individuals and local governments, but overall, there is a generally favorable reaction for our rationale to not lease until the RMP is completed.

CONTACT:

Don Judice, Field Station Supervisor, (406) 791-7789

ZORTMAN AND LANDUSKY MINE RECLAMATION

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The bonds posted for reclamation and water treatment at these bankrupt Montana gold mines have not been adequate. The mines are located on about 1,200 acres of intermingled private and public lands near the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Phillips County.

After three years of environmental review, analysis, and consultation with the Fort Belknap Tribes, a record of decision (ROD) was issued in 2002 selecting final mine reclamation plans. The reclamation plans cost was more than the funding available from the reclamation bonds and was supplemented with BLM funding. Reclamation earthwork was completed in May 2005. However, funding is still needed to maintain water treatment. Upon conclusion of the bankruptcy process, BLM invoked its CERCLA authority to maintain the systems used for capture and treatment mine drainage and leaching solutions.

ISSUES:

The mine owner/operator, Pegasus Gold Corporation, declared bankruptcy in 1998 and the bonds collected by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) have been funding reclamation (\$29.6 million for earthwork and a \$13.8 million water treatment trust fund). To date, the BLM has provided more than \$6 million and the DEQ has provided \$1.7 million to assist with reclamation, excess water treatment costs, and preparation of the supplemental EIS.

In 1998, the Interior Board of Land Appeals (IBLA) set aside BLM's reclamation plan decision and required additional consultation with the Fort Belknap government. The BLM, DEQ, EPA, and the Fort Belknap government re-evaluated the reclamation options and collaborated on a supplemental EIS (SEIS). The final SEIS on mine reclamation was released in January 2002, and the ROD was issued May 1, 2002. The preferred reclamation plans in the final SEIS were estimated to cost \$76.9 million for earthwork and water treatment, or approximately \$33.5 million more than was available from the reclamation and water treatment bonds.

The Fort Belknap government was consulted on a draft ROD. Although it agreed in principle with the preferred reclamation plans, the council rejected the ROD because it did not include provisions for Fort Belknap to manage the reclamation, or funds for certain offsite environmental projects that would benefit the Reservation. The Tribes appealed the BLM's ROD to IBLA. The Tribes also have litigation pending in both state and federal court against DEQ and BLM, respectively.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The DEQ and BLM are presently managing the site and have conducted reclamation and water treatment activities since 1999. The reclamation earthwork has been completed.

The ROD selected the preferred reclamation plans from the final SEIS contingent upon funding. Of the \$33.5 million funding shortage identified in the ROD, \$22.5 million was required for earthwork and \$11 million to treat acid rock drainage. Due to efficiencies realized through the competitive bid process, and funding provided by BLM's abandoned mine land program, the shortfall in reclamation earthwork funds has been reduced from \$22.5 million to only \$1.7 million (for work on private lands). Therefore, BLM has been able to complete implementation of the preferred reclamation alternatives on the public lands.

One critical item was to obtain the additional funding for the long-term water treatment trust fund. This fund is supposed to generate enough revenue to fund water treatment indefinitely after year 2017. The Montana legislature approved a bill this spring that would add to the trust fund and appears adequate to pay for water treatment beyond 2017.

Presently, the short-term water treatment bond provides \$731,000 each year (through 2017) to run the seepage capture systems and water treatment plants. Treatment costs have consistently been over this amount since 1999; and BLM has provided money to pay for the excess water treatment costs through 2006. Now that reclamation is complete, the combined site maintenance and water treatment costs will run an estimated \$1.57 million per year through 2017. This means that beginning in 2007, the BLM will need an additional \$840,000 per year to maintain the site and prevent the release of contaminants. This annual treatment shortfall is expected to persist until 2017, when the long-term trust fund for water treatment becomes available.

The federal court in Missoula issued a ruling on June 29, 2004, granting summary judgment in favor of BLM on the trust lawsuit filed by Fort Belknap in 2000 alleging that BLM violated its trust responsibilities. The Tribes appealed this ruling to the Ninth Circuit. In addition, on January 29, 2004, the Tribes filed a citizen suit under the Clean Water Act over mine discharges against BLM, DEQ, and a patented (private) claim owner. In February 2005, the federal district court in Great Falls dismissed the Tribes' case against BLM for lack of jurisdiction, citing BLM's use of its CERCLA

authority as not being subject to its review.

With the closeout of the ZMI bankruptcy proceedings in late 2003, the Zortman and Landusky mines are abandoned. In June 2004, the State Director signed an action memorandum to continue the capture and treatment of mine drainage and heap solutions as time-critical removal actions under BLM's delegated CERCLA authority. The CERCLA removal action is being conducted in close cooperation with the DEQ. The BLM will continue consultation with Fort Belknap on the removal action is presently preparing an Engineering Evaluation/Cost Analysis (EE/CA) on site operations that will be released for public comment in the spring of 2006.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Reclamation at the mines is a contentious issue with the Fort Belknap Tribes and state and national environmental groups. The Mineral Policy Center/Earthworks and Montana environmental organizations often cite the Zortman-Landusky mines during debates on mining regulation. Presently the Fort Belknap Tribes and the Montana Environmental Information Center are using the Zortman-Landusky situation as a basis for requesting that the state prohibit the permitting of any mine that would require more than two years of water treatment after closure.

CONTACT:

Randy Heuscher, Supervisory Mining Engineer, (406) 896-5118; or Scott Haight, Surface Management Program Lead, (406) 538-1930.

BLACKFOOT COMMUNITY PROJECT

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Blackfoot Challenge, in partnership with The Nature Conservancy, is developing the Blackfoot Community Project as a community-based effort to guide the future ownership and management of key lands in the Blackfoot Valley that are currently owned by Plum Creek Timber Company. These lands are being purchased and re-sold by the Conservancy according to this community-driven plan. Some lands will go into public ownership and others to private ownership with safeguards to protect community and conservation values.

Given the strong community interest, The Nature Conservancy and Plum Creek reached an agreement in September 2003 on the sale of up to nearly 89,000 acres in the upper Blackfoot Valley over the next five years. Phase I involves about 41,000 acres for approximately \$30 million. Federal funds will be used for BLM and Forest Service acquisitions and the purchase of conservation easements by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The BLM received \$8 million, the FS \$16 million and USFWS \$2 million in FY 2004, FY 2005 and FY2006 in LWCF funds to help fund Phase I of the project. The BLM and FS have made out-year LWCF requests. The balance will be covered by philanthropic donations and funds generated from sales to private landowners.

ISSUES:

The Blackfoot Challenge, comprised of local landowners, federal and state land managers, local government officials and corporate landowners, has been working in the Blackfoot Valley for 10 years to coordinate conservation efforts in the watershed. The Challenge is developing a disposition and management plan to guide the ownership and management of these lands over the long term, specifically addressing community values for recreational access, grazing, wildlife habitat, forestry, and economic stability.

An important consideration in the Blackfoot's diversity and rural character is that large landholdings in the watershed remain intact. Sixty percent is now in public ownership and the remaining 40 percent is made up of primarily large working ranches or large timberland holdings. Fragmentation of private lands by subdivision and development is a threat to wildlife habitat and the traditional agricultural and rural lifestyle of the watershed. Maintaining the rural lifestyle and protecting the natural resources of the Blackfoot are top priorities for the Blackfoot Challenge.

Community meetings were held in each participating community in the valley. All private landowners adjacent to the project lands were contacted, as some have expressed an interest in acquiring additional acreage. Ranchers with grazing leases on Plum Creek lands were also contacted, and they have indicated a critical need to continue to graze these lands. There was a strongly voiced desire to see these leases remain as grazing areas and to go to public ownership, if necessary, in order to continue traditional grazing usage. The desire to maintain intact working ranches is clear.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

At public meetings, Blackfoot Valley citizens and landowners expressed strong support for substantial public ownership of these lands to maintain historic public access, traditional grazing leases, and high natural resource values. They also encouraged ownership consolidation by adjacent public landowners to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of management activities such as grazing administration, forest management, noxious weed control, and public recreation management.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The BLM is only one public agency expected to acquire some of Plum Creek's acreage. Other agencies include the U.S. Forest Service, the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. All agencies are active partners in the Blackfoot Challenge and are committed to collaboration and community involvement.

Senator Conrad Burns voiced support for the project and applauded the cooperative effort required for a project of this magnitude.

CONTACT:

Nancy Anderson, Missoula Field Manager, (406) 329-3914

BLACK-FOOTED FERRET AND PRAIRIE DOG MANAGEMENT

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

In February 2000, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) determined that the black-tailed prairie dog warranted listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but action was precluded because other species had higher priority. In August 2004, FWS found that proposing a rule to list the black-tailed prairie dog was not warranted and the species was removed from the candidate species list. However, the black-footed ferret remains one of the most endangered mammals in North America. The black-footed ferret was listed as endangered under ESA in 1973, after the last (nearly extinct) wild population of ferrets was discovered in Meeteese, Wyoming. In 1994, an "Experimental Nonessential Population Area" was established in Phillips County, Montana.

Throughout Montana, there is extensive prairie dog habitat on BLM lands. Prairie dog towns in southern Phillips County (Malta Field Office) and in southeastern Montana (Miles City Field Office) are crucial for planned black-footed ferret reintroduction efforts. Since several BLM sensitive species are closely associated with prairie dog habitat, and the recovery of the endangered ferret depends on large, closely spaced complexes of prairie dogs (with few potential release sites in North America), BLM in Montana is without a doubt an essential stakeholder in the conservation of the prairie dog ecosystem.

ISSUES:

Under the Judith-Valley-Phillips Resource Management Plan (RMP), the Malta Field Office has managed prairie dog towns to provide habitat for black-footed ferrets and other associate species, and to provide opportunities for recreational wildlife viewing and prairie dog shooting. In cooperation with other agencies, we maintain the abundance and distribution of prairie dog habitat on BLM land within an area known as the 7-km Complex Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) at the 1988 survey level (26,000 acres of prairie dogs: 12,346 BLM acres, 5,800 FWS acres, 2,012 state acres and 5,821 private acres).

In July 1992, sylvatic plague, an exotic disease transmitted by fleas, began to reduce the prairie dog population; by 1996, about 80 percent of prairie dogs in Phillips County were lost. In 1993, we began to discourage prairie dog shooting on BLM land to allow the prairie dog population to recover. Since then, prairie dogs have nearly recovered on a county-wide basis to 1988 levels. However, in 2004 and 2005, many plague epizootics (prairie dog die-offs) have occurred across the county, bringing the total number of acres to approximately 1,600 acres less than the 1988 level.

In 1998, the Malta Field Office imposed a voluntary shooting closure on 15 prairie dog towns in areas locally known as the 40-Complex and Pea Ridge. In October 1999, The Malta Field Office formally closed 15 of the 228 (now 331) prairie dog towns on BLM lands in south Phillips County to recreational shooting. In 2001, the Montana Legislature passed a law allowing the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) to manage the black-tailed prairie dog as a "species in need of management." Agricultural groups, environmental groups, and members of the Prairie Dog Working Group lobbied in support of this bill. The new FWP regulations for managing prairie dogs on public lands went into effect on March 1, 2002. These two areas are now closed to prairie dog shooting, under FWP regulation.

Establishment of black-footed ferrets on the 40-Complex is limited despite four consecutive fall releases of captive-reared, preconditioned black-footed ferret kits -- a total of 95 ferrets (51 males, 44 females). Five confirmed litters, have been produced on the 40-Complex so far: one litter in 2002 (two kits), one litter in 2003 (four kits), and three litters have been counted so far in 2005 (six kits). The maximum black-footed ferrets counted during fall of 2005 were 12; 6 adults and 6 wild-born kits.

It is unknown, but speculated, that the 2003 litter and three adult ferrets may have been killed by plague on one 40-Complex prairie dog town (B-040). Ferret numbers on B-040 began to drastically decline by December 2003, all of the ferrets were missing in March 2004, and the colony was lost to a plague epizootic in May 2004. In May 2005, another 40-Complex prairie dog town (B-072) was lost to plague. Fleas on both of these towns were confirmed to be plague positive following prairie dog die-offs. We suspect that one adult ferret was affected by the plague epizootic in 2005.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Conservation actions are necessary to prevent the black-prairie dog and other sensitive wildlife species from being federally listed and to assist with black-footed ferret recovery efforts.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The FWS, Predator Conservation Alliance, Defenders of Wildlife, The Nature Conservancy, World Wildlife Fund and the National Wildlife Federation have asked BLM to manage prairie dogs on BLM lands for ferret reintroduction. Other groups such as the Phillips County Commissioners, Malta Chamber of Commerce and local ranchers have asked BLM to

manage prairie dogs based on 1988 survey levels.

The BLM has been an integral partner in the Montana Black-footed Ferret Working Group since 1984, the Montana Prairie Dog Working Group since 1996 and the FWP Region 6 Prairie Dog Advisory Board since 2002. These groups are composed of federal and state agency representatives, conservation groups, permittees, landowners, local merchants and other concerned citizens.

The Malta Field Office is evaluating what the future management direction of the black-footed ferret program should be. This is the last year of the BRD plague study so it is likely we will not continue with the intensive monitoring efforts after this field season.

CONTACT:

For project information or to volunteer to conduct black-footed ferret surveys with the BLM Malta Field Office, contact Fritz Prellwitz, Wildlife Biologist, (406) 654-5118.

GREATER SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION PLANNING STRATEGY

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Growing concern about the status of sagebrush on western rangelands and declines in greater sage-grouse numbers led to petitions to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to protect populations of greater sage-grouse under provisions of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). On January 12, 2005, the FWS published a *Federal Register* notice stating that the listing of greater sage-grouse as threatened or endangered was not warranted at that time.

BLM's sage-grouse conservation strategies in Montana and the Dakotas are guided in part by the BLM's *National Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy* (November 2004). The Strategy outlines BLM's ongoing commitment to support cooperative conservation of sage-grouse and sagebrush habitats on public lands under our administration; guidance for addressing sagebrush habitat conservation in land use plans; and suggested management practices for managing sagebrush plant communities for greater sage-grouse conservation.

BLM has also worked with state wildlife management agencies to prepare state-level management plans/conservation strategies. Montana and North Dakota have completed their plans, and South Dakota is working on a draft. Together with the National Strategy, these plans provide a basis for incorporating sage-grouse conservation into BLM's activities. Field offices (with State Office support) are working to incorporate the Conservation Strategies into the goals, objectives, and desired outcome (management actions and allowable uses) plan decisions.

At the project level, BLM participates in three local Montana work groups (Dillon, Miles City and Glasgow) to identify projects that will fulfill the goals of the conservation strategies, and supports research and habitat improvement projects through the budget planning system.

ISSUES:

BLM continues to honor commitments in the Strategies, including support for local workgroups, data acquisition, habitat evaluations, and incorporation of sage-grouse and sagebrush management objectives into land use planning decisions. As BLM develops local approaches for implementing greater sage-grouse conservation on BLM-managed lands, the Montana state agency-led Plan will provide the basis for identifying appropriate actions to minimize or eliminate threats to greater sage-grouse, while also maintaining and improving existing habitats through projects.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Loss of sagebrush grasslands in some Western states has approached or exceeded 50 percent. Declines in greater sage-grouse populations are a symptom of the declining health of sagebrush communities. Sagebrush habitat loss in Montana may not be as high as in other states, but is significant enough in parts of the state to negatively influence greater sage-grouse numbers and population trends of other sagebrush-associated species. More than half of the remaining sagebrush and greater sage-grouse habitat in Montana is found on public lands, creating a need to understand factors relating to health of sage-brush ecosystems. This understanding will be key to ensuring that currently healthy habitats continue to function and that additional habitat loss is limited. Public interest is high because sagebrush is the dominant habitat type in Montana, and conservation has the potential to influence all programs.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The director recognizes BLM's role in sagebrush habitat management and greater sage-grouse conservation. As a good steward of the land, the agency will continue to focus resources and efforts to implement the Strategy as the framework for delivering sagebrush and greater sage-grouse conservation on BLM-managed lands.

CONTACT:

Katie A. Stevens, Planning and Environmental Coordinator, (406) 896-5246 or Katie_A_Stevens@blm.gov

**GROVE CREEK RANCH -- MEETEETSE SPIRES
LAND EXCHANGE PROPOSAL**

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Billings Field Office (BiFO) has the opportunity to acquire the Meeteetse Spires, a high value subdivided property along the Beartooth Front.

ISSUES:

In early January 2006, Grove Creek Ranch (a.k.a. Larry Semenza) purchased a 560-acre parcel of land commonly called the Meeteetse Spires in Carbon County, Montana, from RLF Bighorn Properties LLC. The parcel has been subdivided into 20-acre lots and borders the Custer National Forest to the west, BLM lands in the Meeteetse Spires Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) to the north and east, and other BLM lands with significant resource values to the south.

Prior to Mr. Semenza's purchase, RLF Bighorn Properties, LLC filed a road right-of-way (ROW) application with BiFO for a ROW across public land to access the subdivided spires parcel (as well as other subdivided parcels). The BiFO manager issued a decision to RLF Bighorn Properties, LLC modifying the original cost recovery category from a Level IV to a Level V, which would require the applicant to complete an environmental impact statement (EIS) for the ROW. The decision was based on the proposal's high level of controversy as well as the potential for significant impacts to public land resources.

Potential impacts related to the road right-of-way application would include: loss or damage to eligible or potentially eligible National Register and Native American cultural sites; impacts to Crow Tribe Traditional Cultural Properties; wildlife displacement during construction activities; habitat destruction; perpetual wildlife disturbance from increased human activities and increased vehicle traffic; interior pasture fence line dissection; conflicts with grizzly bear, wolf, lynx, greater sage-grouse, and crucial big game winter ranges; conflicts with existing block management hunting boundaries; conflicts with existing oil and gas leases (federal and nonfederal surface); and increased fire management complexity.

On January 24, 2006, Mr. Semenza submitted a formal proposal to the BiFO whereby he offers to exchange the spires parcel for 5,900 acres of public land adjacent to his base ranch operation. Mr. Semenza has clearly stated that his goal is to exchange the high value spires lands to the BLM in order to expand private land holdings of Grove Creek Ranch and eliminate public land presence adjacent to his existing private base property. However, he has also insinuated that if the BLM is unwilling or unable to facilitate the exchange, he will sell the parcel, in whole or part, to parties currently interested in developing homes and/or a commercial recreational operation (hunting lodge). If the land was sold, the purchasers would be required to receive a ROW from BLM for access to their lots and for construction activities. Potential impacts from ROW issuance would be the same as those discussed above.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The BiFO desires to acquire the spires parcel to avoid conflicts and impacts associated with ROW issuance and because it contains all the elements for which the Meeteetse Spires ACEC was designated. In addition to a healthy, productive population of the sensitive plant species *Shoshonea pulvinata*, the parcel includes excellent examples of unique vegetative communities and is occupied grizzly bear, gray wolf, lynx and peregrine falcon habitat. The parcel also includes a "hanging" or hidden valley with spectacular limestone palisade cliffs and outcroppings and is considered a place of religious importance to the Crow Tribe and part of a designated Traditional Cultural District eligible for the National Register.

The BiFO has been advised by the Montana BLM Lands and Realty Program Lead that the possibility of a direct purchase of the spires parcel with Land and Water Conservation funds would be unlikely as the proposal does not appear to rank high enough with the specified criteria and when compared to other proposals. Therefore, BiFO is currently conducting a preliminary interdisciplinary analysis of the exchange proposal; however the range of values assigned to the selected public and offered private lands limit the possibilities of a traditional one-on-one land exchange.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The BiFO has received many comments in support of a BLM acquisition of sensitive areas currently threatened by sale and development. Among the interested parties are the Custer National Forest, Northern Plains Resource Council, Montana Wilderness Association, and numerous individuals. In addition, the issues associated with the subdivided property and ROW applications have received attention from local media and generated three congressional inquiries.

The Meeteetse Spires and Grove Creek area present an opportunity and challenge for the BiFO. The situation demands conformance with resource and environmental protection laws, respect of Native American Traditional Cultural Properties, a positive public benefit determination for any land adjustments and respect for private property rights.

CONTACT:

Jim Sparks, Assistant Field Manager 406.896.5241

MONTANA FUEL REDUCTION PROJECTS IN FY06

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Montana BLM plans to complete approximately 14,000 acres of fuels reduction projects in mostly-forested areas in FY06. The goal is to enhance public safety in the wildland-urban interface, and to improve forest health. Our FY06 fuels budget is just over \$5 million.

ISSUES:

The challenge to completing our prescribed fire projects is largely weather-related -- both short-term and long-term drought. We can easily meet our targets if we get enough spring and fall burn windows during which to conduct the treatments. Meeting our mechanical targets will require contracting a number of projects.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Montana BLM is implementing four forestry and fuels stewardship contracts.

The fuels reduction projects are planned on a landscape level, taking into account other resource management objectives and requirements.

The projects will be completed using a combination of contracted and in-house labor and mechanical and prescribed burning methods.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Utilization of the Healthy Forest Initiatives tools such as Streamlined Environmental Analysis and Categorical Exclusions where appropriate will help in expediting critical fuels treatments in the wildland-urban interface.

CONTACT:

Karen Michaud, Fire Management Specialist, (406) 896-2911

HEALTHY FORESTS INITIATIVE

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Healthy Forests Initiative, announced by President Bush in August 2002, arose from the need to make more timely decisions, provide for greater efficiency, and reduce the catastrophic effects of wildland fires on communities and the environment. It is tied very closely to the National Fire Plan and the 10-year Comprehensive Strategy.

ISSUES:

Each summer, thousands of acres are burned by wildland fires in the Northern Rockies. Forest fuels have accumulated so significantly that fires no longer burn at natural temperatures or rates. The fires have a long-term effect and a significant impact on vegetation, soil, water, and wildlife resources. Federal, state, tribal and local governments are making unprecedented efforts to reduce the build-up of fuels and restore forest and rangelands to healthy conditions.

The National Fire Plan, which was adopted in May 2002 by federal agencies and western governors in collaboration with county commissioners, state foresters, and tribal officials, calls for more active forest and rangeland management. It establishes a framework for protecting communities and the environment through local collaboration on thinning, planned burns, and forest restoration projects.

In 2003, Public Law 105-277 was amended in order to provide Stewardship End Result Contracting authority to the BLM. This tool provides the bureau with a mechanism to apply the values of timber and other forest products as an offset against the cost of services received on an approved stewardship project. It also provides an opportunity for multi-party monitoring of the project.

The Healthy Forests Restoration Act was signed into law by the president in December 2003. The purposes of this act are to: reduce the risks of damage to communities, municipal water supplies and federal lands from catastrophic wildfire; authorize grant programs to improve the commercial value of forest biomass; enhance efforts to protect watersheds and address threats to forest and rangeland health; promote systematic information gathering to address the impacts of insect infestation on forest and rangeland health; improve the capacity to detect insect and disease infestations at an early stage; and to benefit threatened and endangered species, improve biological diversity and enhance carbon sequestration.

In FY2006, we are working on awarding four contracts using the new stewardship contracting authority. These are Fish 2 Heart, LBC Hayes, Roosevelt Ranch Phase II, and Englewood 2 North.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Director Kathleen Clarke supports this initiative. She states it will provide for expedited environmental reviews and full public review processes, while ensuring that the projects are carried out efficiently and effectively. She also believes it will preserve the principle of partnerships with local communities and local interests through the use of collaborative processes that include all stakeholders and partners at the local level.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest is high now and we expect it to remain high as the initiative moves forward. There is much support for measures outlined in the initiative, but there is also much opposition to some measures.

CONTACT:

William Hensley, Forester, (406) 896-5042

HORSETHIEF HAZARD FUELS REDUCTION PROJECT

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Billings Field Office and Eastern Montana Fire Zone have begun a hazardous fuels reduction project in a wildland-urban interface area west of Roundup, Montana. The area is overstocked with ponderosa pine and juniper and a fire start there would present a risk to life and property. Between 50 and 100 structures are located near the area selected for treatment. The project area contains about 10,300 BLM acres, of which 3,000 are forested. The forested areas are being treated mechanically and with prescribed fire.

ISSUES:

This project is one of the Departments of Interior and Agriculture's "test drive" projects of new guidance issued December 9, 2002, regarding the preparation of environmental assessments (EA) for forest-health projects. It is also a Healthy Forest Initiative project.

The EA for the project was completed in June 2003 and submitted to the White House Council on Environmental Quality for review. Public comment and review period began July 17 and ended August 20, 2003.

The cooperative project involves area landowners, rural fire departments, county government, industry, and the BLM. The BLM and other agencies have funds available to assist landowners with fuel reduction efforts and to help rural fire departments purchase equipment.

The first phase of the project has been completed on 405 acres using a combination of machine methods and hand crew cutting and piling. Indefinite delivery, indefinite quantity (IDIQ) contracts, which included some local contractors, were used to accomplish the machine work. Fire suppression crews completed the hand cutting and piling. The timber was cut to a specified spacing and the cut materials were placed in decks and sold as saw logs, pulp and firewood. Machine and hand slash piles are curing and will be burned during the winter when snow depths are sufficient. These activities reduced the fire hazard to the surrounding homes and approximately 75 buildings. Timely moisture has allowed the treatment area to establish growth and increase plant vigor.

Phase II of the Horsethief project is well under way on 550 acres in Unit 2, with the completion of severing and decking of larger diameter trees, (DBH) of 6 inches or greater. A proposed stewardship contract that would have involved limbing and piling, and removal of the timber product produced by this contract, did not receive any bids. In response, federal crews were used to remove the limbs and pile slash from the trees on these landings and prepared them for winter burning. Wood suitable for use as fuel wood was left and made available to the public through the permit process. Response to the available fuel wood has been excellent and several hundred cords of wood have been utilized by the public. An IDIQ contract has been let and work is well under way to complete the mechanical work on these acres. Work under this contract includes hand severing and piling of the remaining small diameter ponderosa pine and juniper. Completion of this work is expected by mid April. Federal crews completed treatment, hand severing and piling, on an additional 140 acres in an adjoining part of the project. No additional mechanical treatment is required on these 140 acres. Prescribed fire will be used at a later date, to complete the treatment and restore a more natural fire regime.

Other opportunities are being pursued for use of the wood products including biomass.

In order to maintain the conditions created by the proposed treatment, the area will need to be retreated in 10-20 years.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

In addition to the Horsethief project, Montana BLM will continue to identify projects to implement the Healthy Forest Initiative in collaboration with other federal agencies, state, tribal and local governments, interest groups, local fire organizations, private landowners, and permittees.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Through public comment and community meetings, most residents have indicated support of the project and have expressed an interest in reducing fuels on their adjacent private property.

Some Horsethief area residents are opposed to the project because they don't want the "natural state" of the area disturbed or because they question whether the project will be effective in protecting private property if private landowners don't also implement fuels reduction projects.

CONTACT:

Robert Meidinger, Supervisory Range Technician, (406) 896-5247

EXEMPTION AREA WILDLAND-URBAN INTERFACE PROJECT

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The South Dakota Field Office is addressing hazardous fuels buildup in the wildland-urban interface in the Exemption Area near Lead and Deadwood in southwestern South Dakota.

ISSUES:

The Exemption Area, in the northern Black Hills in South Dakota, consists of 22,530 acres that were exempted from the Black Hills National Forest due to the complex mineral survey and public land configuration. The BLM administers federal lands (5,220 acres) within the Exemption Area. The rest of the area is private land.

Within the Exemption Area of the Black Hills are several “communities at risk” including Lead, Deadwood, Central City, Pluma, and Englewood as well as numerous rural subdivisions. There are 2,675 acres of BLM-administered forested lands within half a mile of these communities.

In 2003, the Wildland-Urban Interface Plan was completed and implementation began by treating the Fire Containment Zones – treatment buffers along existing roads or trails that would provide safe access for fire crews – and decreasing standing dead trees in the Grizzly Gulch fire area within half a mile of Deadwood, South Dakota.

Commercial and non-commercial treatments will continue throughout this area to decrease the fuel loading. An additional issue is increased mountain pine beetle infestations related to the close proximity of the Exemption Area to the Beaver Park area on the Black Hills National Forest.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

In 2005, precommercial and commercial timber removal began around the community of Englewood. This project involves using the stewardship contract to remove the commercial timber and following up with the removal of products other than logs and slash from the area. An adjacent 200 acres will go under stewardship contracts during the summer of 2006. Additional areas near the Deer Mountain ski area and associated residences are being marked and sales of the unit will occur in FY07.

The first round of treatments in each unit of the Exemption Area should be completed by the end of 2010 with follow-up treatments of prescribed fire and other non-commercial means the following years.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

This planning process as well as the implementation is a collaborative effort among the BLM, Forest Service, South Dakota Division of Forestry, South Dakota Division of Wildland Fire Suppression, Lead and Deadwood city fire departments, Lawrence County Fire Board, and private landowners.

CONTACTS:

Marian Atkins, Field Manager, (605) 892-7001; Terry Chaplin, Fire Management Specialist, (605) 720-0745; or go to www.mt.blm.gov/sdfo/pages/eap/index.html.

NOXIOUS WEEDS

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Noxious weeds continue to spread on all lands, reducing natural biodiversity and vegetation production, and leading to soil erosion. BLM noxious weed-infested lands in Montana increased from about 91,000 acres in 1985 to over 500,000 acres in 2005.

In 2005, the BLM treated about 262,000 acres using integrated weed management (IWM) methods in cooperation with other landowners and managers: 16,700 acres - chemical; 69,000 acres - biological weed control agents collected, released or expanded; 316,000 acres - biological weed control agents established; 60,500 acres - sheep or goats; 270 acres - manual or mechanical. In some infested sites more than one treatment method is used on the same acreage (i.e., sheep & biological weed control agents). An additional 378,000 acres were inventoried for weed infestations and 96,000 acres were monitored for the effectiveness of the weed management treatment method or methods.

ISSUES:

The BLM's weed management program involves cooperative efforts with other federal and state agencies, universities, county agencies, high school agriculture science classes and private landowners. There is heavy emphasis on using prevention techniques to protect non-infested lands. These IWM programs average less than \$15 per acre for the BLM. The magnitude of our weed program, particularly our cooperative agreements with counties and private cooperators, exceeded specifically earmarked weed funding that we received in our annual budget. In past years, we had enough discretionary money in other programs that benefited from the weed management program to augment our specifically earmarked weed funding.

Over the past few years, our budget has remained fairly flat while our cost of doing business has increased. This gradual increase in costs has eroded the discretionary funding available from other accounts that previously augmented our weed program

As a result, in FY 2006, we will not have the discretionary funding to maintain our cooperative agreements at previous levels. Our total available funding for weeds in Montana is down again this year, even though our weed funding appears to be flat.

The BLM has cooperated in preventative and educational programs including: noxious weed videos, brochures, posters and other materials; certified weed seed free forage programs; biological weed control demonstration sites; IWM tours; and weed workshops. The Montana/Dakotas BLM staff will continue to provide training and technical assistance to various resource and weed management staffs. We will also support and follow the guidelines set forth in the January 2005 Montana Weed Management Plan in conjunction with other county, state and federal agencies.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

We are committed to doing the best job we can with available funding and will work cooperatively with our partners to set priorities. Montana BLM is also committed to IWM, which includes prevention, education, awareness, biological agents (insects and plant diseases), cultural practices, chemicals, physical, mechanical, re-vegetation and the use of domestic animals. To comply with both federal and state law, the BLM will continue to use an IWM approach and encourage all resource management disciplines to participate in active IWM. It is imperative that the BLM and other cooperators continue their efforts or the "weed battle" will be lost.

Weed management will continue to be a very high priority, but lack of funding will inhibit efforts at all levels. There is no indication that our budget situation will improve in the foreseeable future.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Because BLM's weed program is a cooperative effort involving many counties as well as other state and federal agencies, high schools and universities, and private landowners, the effects of our reduced ability will impact our various partners. There is a universal concern about the spread of noxious weeds and efforts to control them. Weed management cooperative groups and individuals will continue to petition congressional representatives for assistance with this problem.

CONTACT:

John Simons, Vegetation & Restoration Specialist, (406) 896-5043

WILD HORSE AND BURRO PROGRAM

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Wild Horse and Burro Program has two primary goals: managing the wild horse herd in the Pryor Mountains; and the adoption of excess animals from the Pryors and other herd management areas.

ISSUES:

The Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 mandates the BLM to manage self-sustaining herds of wild horses and burros in balance with available resources under a multiple use prescription. It also directs the BLM to remove excess animals and place them with qualified adopters. In addition, the BLM is responsible for compliance inspections and titling.

Montana's only free-roaming wild horses are in the Pryor Mountains, about 60 miles south of Billings. These animals are reputed to be of Spanish ancestry, as evidenced by genetic studies.

The Pryor Mountain Herd Area Management Plan, written in 1984 and revised in 1992, guides management of the Pryor horses. Excess wild horses from the Pryor Range are usually adopted at the Britton Springs Administrative Site at the base of the Pryors. The last adoption took place in 2003 using BLM's internet adoption process. Since 1984, the BLM has placed more than 15,000 horses with qualified adopters in Montana/Dakotas.

A total of 51 Pryor mares have received a primer and at least one booster of PZP (Porcine Zonae Pellucida) vaccine since the fertility control program started in 2001. Fertility control efforts were initiated with yearling and 2-year old mares in order to allow them a chance to fully develop prior to becoming pregnant. The BLM suspended fertility control on younger mares as a result of increased mountain lion impacts on the herd in 2004. Fertility control in older mares (14 years of age and older) began in 2003 and has continued each year. The intent is to allow these older mares a year or more of existence on the range in better physical condition. The long-term goal will be to contracept these mares for the remainder of their lives.

During the winter of 2004, almost 70 percent of the Pryor yearlings were lost and during the summer of 2004 more than 86 percent of the foals were lost. After aggressive hunter activity in the winter of 2004/2005, three adult lions were removed from the area and no foal predation was recorded in the summer of 2005. Use of fertility control on the Pryor range continues after careful consideration of this natural mortality by mountain lion predation. As a result, 20 mares 11 years and older were selected for treatment in 2005 in efforts to partially suppress herd growth rates.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The BLM continues to manage the Pryor herd for optimum benefits to the animals and the fragile ecology of the Pryor Mountains. We are also working on a major revision of the Herd Management Area Plan which involves efforts from all three federal land-ownership agencies. This revision will incorporate the last 14 years of research and studies on herd genetic viability, use of immunocontraceptive (fertility control) techniques for population control, ecosystem modeling, and updates on ecological site inventories, range condition and trend and revised estimates of range carrying capacity. We will also continue with the well-reasoned application of fertility control to the herd, providing humane, genetic and population control benefits.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Wild horse issues attract national and international media attention. Local and national groups often get involved in issues surrounding the Pryor Mountain horses. Some groups are interested in minimizing any human management of the horses, some are concerned primarily with the humane treatment of the horses, and some are concerned about the economics of the horse program. The Pryor Mountain Mustang Association and Pryor Mountain Mustang Center both give strong local support.

Senator Burns' recent legislation regarding wild horse sales should have little or no effect on the Pryor herd. Historically, Pryor mustangs removed from the range have been placed through adoption because of the high interest in the herd. Due to our selective removal policy (primarily removing younger animals) and our use of fertility control to assist with population control, we don't anticipate the need to remove any horses older than ten years of age.

CONTACT:

Linda Coates-Markle, Wild Horse and Burro Specialist, (406) 896-5223

BLM'S DROUGHT POLICY

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Extreme drought conditions over the last several years have impacted most of the West, including Montana and the Dakotas. Current data supports continued concern about the persistent drought caused by low snow pack for the last 5-6 years. The low snow pack, augmented by less than average rainfall, has impacted rivers, streams, reservoirs, springs and wells. This raises concerns for wildlife, recreation and animals grazing on private, state and BLM rangelands.

ISSUES:

Montana BLM developed and issued BLM's first draft drought policy in October 1988. After incorporating comments from the public, academia, Montana Stockgrowers and others, BLM adopted that policy in January 1989. Working with the Montana Drought Advisory committee, the BLM updates it as needed. In 2003, the BLM's Washington Office issued a bureauwide policy to reflect changes in regulations related to drought or grazing.

Field assessments verify and augment data collected from remote automated electronic instruments about rainfall, snowpack, stream flow, reservoir water supplies, and vital soil moisture at frequent intervals. Information from several agencies is summarized and discussed monthly by the Governor's Drought Advisory Committee. Field personnel continue to observe conditions and collect appropriate data. Current data indicates a high concern for most of Montana, especially the southern half of the state.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The Montana BLM's drought policy, supported by the bureauwide drought policy, presents existing laws and regulations used to guide livestock grazing in Montana and the Dakotas during periods of drought. The BLM has provided copies of this policy to grazing lease holders in the three states several times during the last decade. Montana's drought policy may be viewed at <http://www.mt.blm.gov/faq/DroughtPolicy.pdf>.

Under the drought policy, BLM assesses soil moisture levels necessary for plant growth, effective precipitation, environmental demands, plant vigor, and the amount of available water and forage prior to and during the grazing season. Emphasis is placed on allotments having multiple resource values, grazing problems, and a high percentage of federal land. If resource assessments indicate a need to delay livestock turnout, reduce livestock numbers, or close areas to grazing, BLM will work closely with livestock operators to minimize impacts to their operations. Adjustments in fee payments, including any appropriate refunds, will be made on a case-by-case basis. By providing guidance during winter and spring months, the BLM helps land managers and permittees avoid last-minute economic surprises, improve grazing strategies, and reduce land use impacts.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Most livestock operators, Montana Stock Growers' Association, local and state grazing districts, and all resource advisory councils support BLM policy on grazing during periods of drought. Montana BLM is an active participant in the Governor's Drought Advisory Committee as well as local drought advisory committees and groups. When available and applicable, the BLM provides soil moisture and soil temperature conditions from remote automated weather stations (RAWS) located throughout the state. This information, combined with weather and climate data from other agencies and used with GIS soil survey data, assists Montanans in making decisions affecting their farms and ranches.

Montana drought information is available from the state's Natural Resource Information System (NRIS) at <http://nris.mt.gov/drought>. Information on a national scale may be obtained at <http://enso.unl.edu/>

CONTACT:

William Volk, State Soil Scientist/Range Imp & Range Monitoring Program Lead, 406-896-5029

**MONTANA ARMY NATIONAL GUARD (MTARNG) WITHDRAWAL
AT LIMESTONE HILLS TRAINING AREA**

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The MTARNG has received approval from the Department of Defense/Army to file an application (to be submitted by the Corps of Engineers) to withdraw approximately 20,000 acres of BLM-administered land about three miles west of the Missouri River near Townsend in Broadwater County, Montana.

ISSUES:

MTARNG performed training exercises at the Limestone Hills since the 1950s under special land use permits (SLUPs) until 1984 when a 30-year right-of-way (ROW) was issued to authorize the use. Eighty-eight percent of the range is administered by the BLM, with the remainder under state and private ownership. Live fire training at the range has included helicopter, tank, artillery, mortar and Bradley infantry vehicle gunnery. The types of weaponry ranged from small arms to 155 mm artillery, all of which have been fired into the impact area. Military training over the years has resulted in unexploded ordnance (UXO) contamination, particularly within the interior 5,000-acre impact area, though UXO has also been recovered outside that area. In 1993, Army Corps of Engineers (COE) experts determined that the area south of the 2.75-inch rocket safety fan was "widely contaminated" with UXO. Based on BLM policy, the Butte Field Office (BFO) implemented an emergency closure on the impact area. The MTARNG was also advised that its ROW for the range would not be renewed upon expiration in 2014, and the only way to assure its continued use of the area was through a withdrawal.

Continental Lime (now Graymont Western) filed mining claims on lands within the ROW area in the early 1980s when it was authorized by SLUP or the ROW. In 1992 and again in 1995, Graymont filed mining plan amendments resulting in an approved expansion of its operations further into the rocket firing fan area. In an agreement facilitated by the Montana Consensus Council, the MTARNG has agreed to clear UXO from the expansion area so mining can continue under the current safety plan. The BFO recently reviewed a "Safety, Health and Emergency Response Plan" submitted by MTARNG that would allow Graymont to conduct exploratory drilling south of and into the rocket firing fan. The plan has been approved by Department of Defense Explosives Safety Bureau (DDESB). The DDESB must release the area for mining before the BLM can authorize exploration. Graymont is concerned that the current rate of UXO clearance may not meet its exploration needs. Graymont filed 36 additional claims in September 2003.

Site tours were conducted July 2002 and May 2005 with the following entities represented: BFO; BLM Washington Office military liaisons; several members of the MTARNG; the Army COE; the National Guard Bureau; and the plant manager for Graymont Western US Inc. mining company.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The BLM is a cooperating agency for the project legislative environmental impact statement (LEIS), which is contracted by MTARNG to Tetra Tech based in Helena, Montana. Public scoping for the EIS was completed, including a working group process. Currently a draft document is undergoing internal review with a draft document for public review expected later this year.

BFO finalized an interagency agreement with MTARNG which defines roles and responsibilities. The LEIS will result in BLM findings and recommendations to the WO and Secretary of Interior. The action will require an amendment of the Headwaters RMP.

In late June 2004 the MTARNG shared its proposed action with the public at two public meetings and a stakeholder meeting. The proposal is for MTARNG to manage all lands and resources within the training range except minerals. Members of the public who attended the meetings expressed concern with the current proposal. In the fall of 2004, several stakeholder working group meetings were held which have resulted in an alternative to the proposed action that all parties can live with. That alternative will be analyzed in the LEIS.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest is expected to be high. The withdrawal would affect PILT payments, recreationists/hunters, and could impact several grazing allotments, depending on how the resource management plan for the firing range is structured after the EIS is completed. There is also potential for the validity of some of the mining claims to be affected by the withdrawal.

CONTACT:

Steven Hartmann, Supervisory Land Use Specialist, (406) 533-7671