



In Reply To:

United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Butte Field Office
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9200 (070)

January 4, 2013

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Butte Field Office is in the initial stages of developing proposed project work in the Jefferson County SE Planning Area near Whitehall, Montana, and is requesting scoping comments. The planning area consists of approximately 24,490 acres of public land as shown on the enclosed map.

The legal description of the planning area includes public lands in: T1N, R1W, Sections 1-24, 26-35; T1N, R2W, Sections 1-18, 20-26, 36; T1N, R3W, Sections 1-13; T1N, R4W, Sections 1-4, 11-12; T2N, R1W; T2N, R2W; T2N, R3W; T2N, R4W, Sections 1-4, 9-16, 21-28, 33-36; T3N, R1W; T3N, R2W; T3N, R3W; T3N, R4W, Sections 13-16, 21-28, 33-36; T4N, R2W, Sections 7, 17-36; T4N, R3W, Sections 1-5, 8-17, 19-36; T4N, R4W, Sections 13-16, 36.

BLM intends to complete an Environmental Assessment (EA) on the Jefferson County SE Planning Area by the spring of 2013. The EA will evaluate a variety of resource issues and develop a range of management actions to address those issues. To date, the issues that have been identified include:

- Access and travel planning.
- Increased recreation opportunities, including a non-motorized, multiple use trail system proposal.
- Grazing permit renewals for nineteen (19) different grazing allotments.
- Vegetation treatments to restore uplands to more historic conditions.
- Riparian treatments to restore more healthy and historic conditions to streams and wetlands.
- Treatment of nonnative and noxious plant infestations.
- Abandoned Mine Land (AML) sites in the "West District" located west of the Golden Sunlight Mine at the south end of the Bull Mountains

Travel Planning and Recreation. A travel management plan for the Jefferson County SE Planning Area is needed to fulfill directives established by BLM policy using the criteria identified at 43 CFR 8340-8342 and the Butte Resource Management Plan (RMP).

Trail System. A proposal for increased recreational opportunities in the form of a non-motorized trail system in the Doherty Mountain area will be considered. Members of a mountain bike club in Bozeman have prepared a conceptual trail proposal for BLM's consideration.

Livestock Grazing. Grazing permit renewals are needed for the following nineteen (19) allotments: Lower Butte, Bull Mountain, South Doherty, North Doherty, McKenna, County Line, Boulder River, Cottonwood, Huller Springs, Sappington, Dry Hollow, Cottonwood Springs, Shoddy Springs, Willow Spring Road, Black Sage, Fitz Creek, Three East Pastures, Wickham Field, and T4N, R2W, Sec 21. Some adjustments to grazing regimes in these allotments and range improvement projects, such as water developments and fencing may be considered to improve resource health.

Vegetation Restoration Treatments. Overall, vegetation communities in the project area have been altered from historic (pre-settlement) conditions by a combination of management activities, including

long-term fire suppression, mining activities, and livestock grazing. The Butte RMP provides direction in several places to restore current altered vegetative conditions to more historic types. Grassland and shrubland habitats in the project area have undergone colonization or encroachment by conifers due to the interruption of the natural disturbance regime by long-term fire suppression. Many acres of grasslands and shrublands within the Jefferson County SE Planning Area have been converted to woodlands as a result of successful colonization by juniper and Douglas fir. As a result, these acres are outside the expected historic range of natural variability associated with the pre-settlement mid-severity fire regime. In their current condition, they are less stable and more susceptible to damage from disturbance events like severe or uncharacteristically large-scale wildland fire, insect infestations, and weed species establishment. Treatments to restore a more historic condition to the planning area could include prescribed burning, hand cutting, mastication, and timber sales.

Riparian Treatments. Riparian vegetation communities have also been affected by historic land use and long-term fire suppression. Some portions of the planning area have mixed stands of conifers and aspen or cottonwood in riparian areas. Understory conifer colonization in close proximity to localized hardwood patches are preventing the establishment of aspen and cottonwood regeneration that would likely occur under a more natural disturbance regime. Treatments could include hand cutting, piling and burning, planting desired species, and exclosure fencing.

Treatment of Noxious and Invasive Species. Noxious and invasive species such as spotted knapweed, Dalmation toadflax, yellow toadflax, Common mullein, Canada thistle, whitetop, houndstongue, leafy spurge, black henbane, and cheatgrass are common in some parts of the planning area, affecting native vegetation communities. Most infestations are found along roadways, corridors, and in disturbed sites in the planning area. Actions to reduce weed infestations and use preventive measures are a main focus in the planning area.

West District AML Sites. The West District AML sites have been inventoried through the BLM's AML program and work continues in coordination with Golden Sunlight Mine to resolve potential environmental and safety issues.

Commenting

At this time, we would like to hear your comments on any additional issues, concerns, or alternatives that should be evaluated by the BLM during this process. We will use your comments to prepare an EA which we plan to make available for public review in mid-March, 2013.

If you care to comment, please make your comments as specific as possible, including suggestions regarding resource issues, data sources, or alternatives to be considered in the environmental analysis.

Please provide your comments to the Butte Field Office at 106 N. Parkmont, Butte, MT 59701 or by e-mail to Michael O'Brien at mrobrien@blm.gov. Although comments will be accepted at any time throughout the process, comments submitted by **February 15, 2013** would be the most helpful in development of the proposed action and EA. To be considered, all comments must contain the name and address of the submitter. Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment -- including your personal identifying information -- may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

If you have questions regarding this project or if you would like to have your name removed from the mailing list, please contact the Project Lead, Michael O'Brien at the Butte Field Office at 406-533-7643 or e-mail at mrobrien@blm.gov.

Sincerely,

Signed by: Scott Haight, Butte Field Manager
Jan. 7, 2013