



Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument

Update – September 2004

Many of you have been following the planning process for this monument and may be wondering when the draft resource management plan (RMP) will be available.

Originally, we planned to have the draft completed this summer. However, the RMP will now include an analysis of 12 existing natural gas leases within the monument, which means we're still at least 9 months away from having a draft available for distribution, public meetings and public comment.

Our decision to examine these leases is the result of a recent Montana Federal District Court ruling in favor of a suit alleging the BLM did not fully comply with the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered Species Act when we awarded three of these leases in 1999.

The decision to award these three leases was based on analysis in the West HiLine RMP (1988). However, in light of the court's ruling we now feel all 12 of the leases (the three mentioned in the suit plus nine others) within the monument and based on the West HiLine should be analyzed in the RMP.

With respect to the three natural gas leases, the court's March ruling ordered the BLM to:

- Prepare an EIS for the oil and gas leasing program that covers the three leases.
- Prepare a valid biological assessment of the oil and gas leasing program in conjunction with the EIS.
- Consult with all required entities.

We want to address the court's concerns as quickly, completely and efficiently as possible. Our first step in this revision process will be to host public meetings to involve you in this process. We'll examine the areas covered by these 12 natural gas leases to create a range of alternatives for determining the resource stipulations necessary to protect the values for which this monument was designated. We'll be hosting these meetings in Lewistown, Winifred, Chinook, Great Falls, Fort Belknap and Billings.

I'll contact you again as quickly as we have the dates, locations and times worked out.

In the interim, we're continuing our work on the other portions of the monument RMP and I'll keep you posted of our progress.

Sincerely,

Gary Slagel
Monument Manager