

# HiLine Highlights

A BLM newsletter for the HiLine Resource Management Plan

Volume 4, Issue 1

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The HiLine Draft Resource Management Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DRMP/DEIS) will provide direction for managing 2.4 million acres of public land and 3.5 million acres of federal minerals in northcentral Montana. These lands and minerals are managed by three BLM Field Offices in Havre, Malta and Glasgow, along with the Great Falls Oil and Gas Field Office. The DRMP/DEIS addresses eleven planning issues, many of which have been discussed in previous newsletters that are available on our website. This update will focus on two—inventorying public lands for wilderness characteristics and conservation of Greater Sage-Grouse habitat.

A lot has happened since our last newsletter. Our timeline has slipped as we have addressed important issues concerning the BLM's management of natural and cultural resources. Developing uniform oil and gas lease stipulations to enhance consistency, updating guidance for conducting wilderness characteristic inventories, and addressing how we strengthen the conservation of Greater Sage-Grouse habitat are the major items we have addressed.

Ensuring that the HiLine DRMP/DEIS is consistent with national BLM policies has kept the BLM interdisciplinary team busy. Implementing the updated guidance and policies discussed below has delayed the release of the draft plan, but we are confident that the additional time spent will result in a better, more comprehensive final document.

## Inventorying Public Lands

Managing the wilderness resource is part of the BLM's multiple use mission. Section 201 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act requires the BLM to maintain on a continuing basis an inventory of all public lands and their resources and other values, which includes wilderness characteristics. Regardless of past inventory, the BLM must maintain, and update as necessary, its inventory of wilderness resources on public lands. Beginning a land use planning process is an appropriate time to update a wilderness characteristics inventory.

In the process of updating the wilderness characteristics inventory in the HiLine District, BLM resource specialists revisited existing information (maps, photos, records related to range projects, monitoring data). This information was field checked as deemed necessary during the summer of 2011. Not surprisingly, some areas that had wilderness characteristics during the original inventory completed in the early 1980s still possess those characteristics today. In some cases conditions relating to wilderness characteristics have changed over time, and areas that were once determined to lack wilderness characteristics now possess them.

So what are wilderness characteristics? In order for an area to qualify as lands with wilderness characteristics, it must possess sufficient size, naturalness, and

outstanding opportunities for either solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation. In addition, it may possess supplemental values. Generally an area must meet the following criteria:

**Size** - It must be a roadless area with over 5,000 acres of contiguous BLM-managed lands or of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition. State or private lands are not included in making this acreage determination.

**Naturalness** - The area must appear to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable. Examples of human-made features that may be considered substantially unnoticeable in certain cases are: trails, trail signs, bridges, fire breaks, pit toilets, fisheries enhancement facilities, fire rings, historic properties, archaeological resources, hitching posts, snow gauges, water quantity and quality measuring devices, research monitoring markers and devices, minor radio repeater sites, air quality monitoring devices, fencing, spring developments, barely visible linear disturbances, and stock ponds.

**Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude or a Primitive and Unconfined Type of Recreation** – Outstanding opportunities for solitude are provided by allowing a visitor the opportunity to avoid the sights, sounds, and evidence of other people in the area. Some examples of primitive and unconfined

*more...*

*Photos on this page by Craig Miller, wildlife biologist for the BLM Havre Field Office*



types of recreation include hiking; backpacking; fishing; hunting; horseback riding; climbing; cross-country skiing; snowshoeing; dog sledding; photography; bird watching; and sightseeing for botanical, zoological, or geological features. Present visitor use of an area is not necessary in determining whether an outstanding opportunity is present.

Supplemental Values – The area may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value. Supplemental values are not required to be present in order for an area to be identified as lands with wilderness characteristics, but their presence and location should be documented.

The updated wilderness characteristics inventory in the HiLine District determined that 26 areas encompassing 386,000 acres of BLM-managed lands have wilderness characteristics. A map displaying the general location of these areas is presented below. The HiLine DRMP will present and analyze four different alternatives for managing these areas with wilderness characteristics.

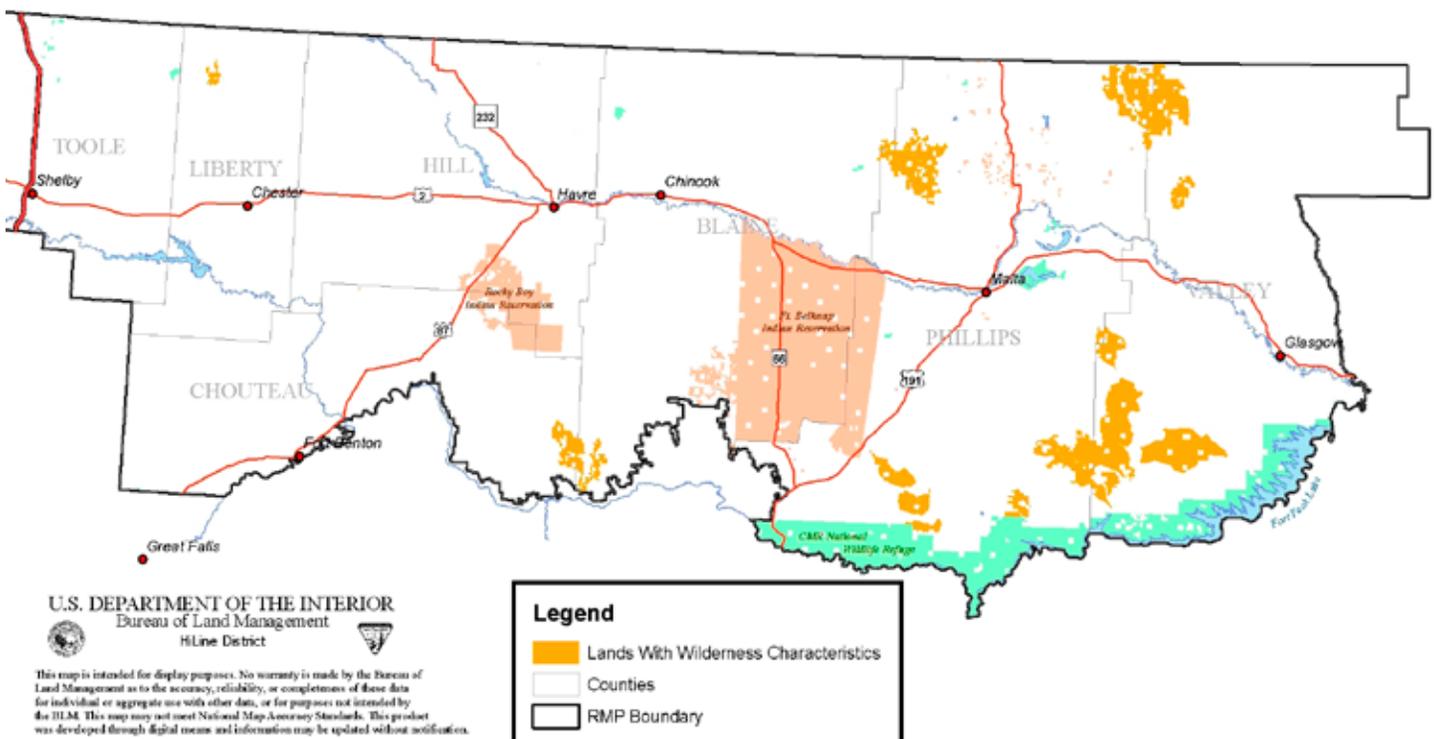


*While perhaps not providing a stereotypical representation of Wilderness, Area 91B in northwest Valley County met all the criteria to qualify as lands with wilderness characteristics. Photo by Brian Hockett*



*Area 4 in southwest Blaine County has wilderness characteristics. Photo by Brian Hockett*

## HiLine District - Lands with Wilderness Characteristics



# Greater Sage-Grouse



*Two Greater Sage-Grouse cocks face off on a lek in the HiLine District. Photo by Craig Miller*

In March 2010, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) published its petition decision for the Greater Sage-Grouse as “Warranted but Precluded” for listing as a threatened or endangered species.

The FWS determined that “the present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of habitat or range” of the Greater Sage-Grouse, and the “inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms” posed “a significant

threat to the species, now and in the foreseeable future.” The FWS identified the principal regulatory mechanisms for the BLM as conservation measures in land use plans.

Maintaining and restoring sagebrush landscapes on public lands is the BLM’s primary means of conserving sage-grouse populations and one of its most important current programs. Because the BLM administers a large portion of Greater Sage-Grouse habitat (52% range-

wide), changes in BLM management of Greater Sage-Grouse habitats and proactive steps to rehabilitate sagebrush habitat are anticipated to have a considerable beneficial impact on present and future Greater Sage-Grouse populations and could reduce the need to list the species as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

As part of the BLM’s National Sage-Grouse Planning Strategy and in response to the Sage-Grouse National Technical Team’s recommendations, the HiLine District DRMP will propose specific mitigation measures and conservation actions for Greater Sage-Grouse across nearly 1.6 million acres of BLM-administered habitat.

Priority habitat areas were identified in consultation with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and reviewed by the FWS. These priority areas contain substantial, high quality sage-grouse habitat that supports sustainable sage-grouse populations. Priority areas would be managed most intensively to conserve sage-grouse. The HiLine DRMP will present and analyze three different alternatives for managing priority sage-grouse habitat as well as propose various management prescriptions for sage-grouse habitat outside priority areas (general habitat).



Implementing management strategies to conserve Greater Sage-Grouse habitat will also benefit a whole host of grassland birds including our other native prairie grouse, the Sharp-tailed Grouse. *Photo by Craig Miller*

# Stay Informed and Involved!

To help keep folks informed, HiLine District staff and the BLM Montana State Office have been conducting briefings on the proposed management of wilderness characteristics and sage-grouse habitat for our cooperating agencies, the Central Montana Resource Advisory Council, the Montana Governor's office, congressional staffers, and non-governmental organizations. Briefings regarding the HiLine DRMP/DEIS planning process can be requested at any time, and BLM staff members are available to speak to organizations about the HiLine RMP.

The HiLine DRMP/DEIS is currently undergoing internal review in the BLM's Washington Office. Our goal is to have the draft available for a 90-day public comment period by

early January 2013. If you choose to remain on our mailing list, we'll be contacting you shortly after the New Year with information about open houses scheduled across the HiLine that will provide you with an opportunity to visit with resource specialists and give us feedback on the draft plan.

In the meantime, if you have any questions regarding the HiLine DRMP/DEIS or would like to schedule a presentation, please contact:

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You may also visit our website at <http://blm.gov/8qkd> for more information.



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We appreciate your help in this planning effort and look forward to your continued interest and participation.

*Photo by Craig Miller*

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