

Jack Morrow Hills Coordinated Activity Plan

Annual Report

December 2011

BLM

High Desert District Rock Springs Field Office



Background

The Jack Morrow Hills Coordinated Activity Plan (JMH CAP) encompasses approximately 622,000 total acres, of which the BLM administers approximately 574,800 acres through the Rock Springs Field Office (RSFO) in Rock Springs, Wyoming. The JMH CAP area encompasses the Steamboat Mountain, Greater Sand Dunes, White Mountain Petroglyphs, and Oregon Buttes Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC); a portion of the South Pass Historic Landscape ACEC; the Oregon Buttes, Honeycomb Buttes, Greater Sand Dunes, Buffalo Hump, Whitehorse Creek, South Pinnacles, and Alkali Draw Wilderness Study Areas (WSA); and three special recreation management areas (SRMA) – Greater Sand Dunes, Continental Peak Side Trail; and the Oregon, Mormon Pioneer, Pony Express, and California National Historic Trails.

The RSFO has been in the process of implementing management decisions and actions from the JMH CAP since the Record of Decision (ROD) was signed in 2006, as an amendment to the Green River Resource Management Plan (RMP). Many of the management decisions were immediately implemented at the time the ROD was signed, including identification of lands available for oil and gas leasing, and are administratively final.

Most activities identified as implementation decisions in the JMH CAP will require the preparation of additional National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis, which considers project and site-specific conditions and identifies mitigation to reduce impacts before approval/initiation. Examples include future oil and gas lease sales, grazing permit renewals or future land exchanges. Public involvement opportunities, including further protest or appeal opportunities, are provided at that time.

JMH CAP Interagency Work Group

The JMH CAP Interagency Work Group was established by the ROD. The Work Group is a forum for government agencies to aid the BLM in management of the Jack Morrow Hills area. The Work Group considers numerous topics affecting the planning area, including mutual goals, policy coordination, resource conditions, pending actions or decisions, and opportunities for further cooperation. Through this cooperative management effort each agency will gain a better understanding of the issues and concerns surrounding resource management within the JMH CAP area.

Typically, meetings have been held on a quarterly basis or as needed. However, in May of 2011, the Work Group decided to suspend quarterly meetings due to the ongoing revision of the Green River RMP. The RMP revision efforts will include planning and analysis for management within the JMH CAP area. Although implementation actions for the JMH CAP will continue, the Work Group will focus on the RMP revision planning efforts in lieu of separate JMH CAP quarterly meetings.

Green River RMP Revision (Rock Springs RMP)

The RSFO is in the process of revising the existing Green River RMP, which has been in effect since the ROD in August 1997. The RMP revision will be incorporating all amendment decisions, including the currently ongoing sage-grouse amendment (see below) and the JMH CAP of 2006.

Currently the revision of the Green River RMP (which is being renamed the Rock Springs RMP) is in the alternatives development phase with a series of meetings being held with Cooperating Agencies. The first meeting was held Sept. 14-16, 2011. The first meeting focused on the review of the Analysis of Management Situation and established Goals and Objectives for each resource or resource use in the Rock Springs Planning Area. The second alternative development meeting was held Nov. 2-4, 2011 and the next meeting is scheduled for the week of January 6, 2012. Additional meetings will be scheduled as needed. The preferred alternative meetings will be held after the development and analysis of the alternatives have been completed.

The current schedule for release of the revised RMP/Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is October 2012 followed by a 90-day public comment period. Open house meetings will also be held requesting public comments. The projected completion date for the approved RMP is September 2014.

Sage-grouse Amendment to the Green River RMP

The Green River RMP (August 1997) is one of six RMPs in Wyoming being amended to incorporate the management strategy of the BLM Instruction Memorandum WY-2010-012 "Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat Management Policy on Wyoming Bureau of Land Management Administered Public Lands including the Federal Mineral Estate." An EIS is being prepared to determine impacts within all six field offices for the implementation of this new sage-grouse management strategy.

Currently, the sage-grouse RMP amendment interdisciplinary (ID) team is conducting the impact analysis for the identified alternatives and evaluating which alternative will be the preferred sage-grouse management. The BLM preferred alternative workshop was held on September 27 and 28, 2011. The next steps will be the public comment on the Draft RMP Amendment scheduled for release to the public January 2012; and then development of the Proposed RMP Amendment/Final EIS; followed by the development of the Record of Decision/Approved RMP Amendment, tentatively scheduled for December 2012. However, this schedule does not take into consideration any changes that may be necessary due to the forthcoming BLM National Greater Sage-grouse Interim Management Policy, which may alter the preferred alternative selection and/or the impact analysis for the EIS.

Resource Updates

This section provides updates for a variety of implementation activities provided for in the JMH CAP.

- **Minerals Leasing**

Within the 574,800 federal acres of the JMH CAP area, less than half (42% or 242,667 acres) is available for leasing. Currently 26,000 acres are held by production (HBP) with an additional 52,910 acres leased. Since the signing of the ROD in 2006, there has been a 66% decline in the number of producing wells. Currently, there are 30 active oil & gas wells in the JMH CAP area, of which 15 are federal wells.

Attachment 1, Map for Minerals Leasing, shows the location of the 30 active wells and leases that are HBP. The plugged wells have not been shown on the map. Leases that will or have expired in the JMH CAP designated 'Area 3' will not be offered for new leasing. Remaining leases are depicted by year of expiration (note: some of the leases that expired in 2010/11 are not yet officially closed and still appear on the map).

Also depicted on the map are 26 parcels recently nominated for the May 2012 Lease Sale. Some parcels were nominated within 'Area 3', which is closed to leasing, making them unavailable for sale. The remaining parcels were deferred for completion of the Greater Sage-grouse RMP Amendment. Therefore, all parcels nominated within the JMH CAP area will not be offered for lease.

- **Range**

The Range Program has continued to complete monitoring of grazing allotments within the JMH CAP area. In 2011, the Bar X and Continental Peak allotments were monitored for upland trend. Utilization monitoring was conducted in the Bar X and Pacific Creek allotments. All grazing allotments within the JMH CAP area were monitored for compliance. Grazing allotments will continue to be monitored for compliance, utilization, trend, and riparian health. Re-evaluation of the Wyoming Standards for Healthy Rangelands for each of the allotments will be scheduled in upcoming years, but no specified dates are available at this time.

The Range Program has continued to issue and process livestock grazing applications, grazing bills, and grazing permits for the livestock permittees within the JMH CAP area. Upcoming projects and permit renewals planned for the allotments within the JMH CAP include the Continental Peak Allotment. The BLM is currently reviewing and preparing to conduct an analysis of a livestock conversion, fencing projects, water developments, grazing management plan, and a permit renewal within the Continental Peak Allotment.

- **Wildlife**

- **Jack Morrow Hills Mule Deer GPS Project**

The purpose of this 3-year project is to identify the habitat selection and distribution patterns of mule deer in the Steamboat Herd Unit, with an emphasis on crucial winter ranges extending from the JMH CAP area to I-80, near Superior. Information gained will improve mule deer management with detailed migration data which can ensure migratory routes be accurately depicted and prioritized across the landscape and help assess potential impacts of future renewable and non-renewable energy developments. The contractor captured and collared 40 mule deer across crucial winter habitat near Superior, Wyoming in January 2011.

Several fixed-wing flights were also flown this year to monitor general animal movement and locate mortality signals. Of the 40 deer captured, only 1 stayed within the JMH CAP area. All others moved north of the area, with some moving ~140 miles north into the Hoback Basin. This preliminary information has shown that these collared mule deer are dependent on many variables outside of the area. Future information should determine primary migration routes and important use areas which will help afford better protection and area land-use management decisions.

- **Big Game Surveys - 2010 Seasonal Activities Report**

Funding provided by the RSFO was used to conduct both big game classification surveys and population trend counts during the 2010 biological year winter by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD). Mule deer helicopter classification flights were conducted during late December 2010 and elk classification flights were conducted in early March 2011. In addition to helicopter classification flights, fixed-wing trend counts were conducted to count elk during January 2011. A total of 2,376 elk and 1,988 mule deer were classified during the helicopter flights along with 1,858 elk counted during the fixed-wing trend counts. The observed cow:calf and bull:cow ratios from the classification flights were 29 calves per 100 cows and 56 bulls per 100 cows for the Steamboat elk herd; and 42 calves per 100 cows and 50 bulls per 100 cows observed in the South Rock Springs elk herd. The ratios that were observed during the mule deer classification flights were 51 fawns per 100 does and 21 bucks per 100 does for the Steamboat mule deer herd; 45 fawns and 23 bucks per 100 does in the South Rock Springs mule deer herd.

- **JMH Elk GPS Distribution Project 2009**

This multi-year project includes the use of GPS collars and associated equipment to track elk distribution and monitor habitat in the JMH CAP area. Information will be used to determine potential impacts from activities such as minerals and wind development. In December 2009, 17 collars were placed on female elk within the White Mountain area west of Highway 191. Monitoring flights have been completed to gather distribution data. Four collars were replaced on female elk in January 2011. A final report is planned for 2013 to include description, analysis, and maps of elk habitat selection patterns.

- **Sage-Grouse Lek Monitoring**

In spring 2011, the RSFO staff continued to assist the WGFD with individual sage-grouse lek monitoring. Approximately 20 leks within the field office boundary, several of which are located within or in proximity to the JMH CAP area, were monitored.

- **Cultural**

- **National Historic Trails (NHT) Inventory**

In 2011, an inventory of the NHT across Wyoming and other states was conducted by a national team of archaeologists. This ongoing inventory project was funded by the America Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 in an effort to guide the location of future renewable energy projects. The project was designed to assess the physical condition as well as the setting of the NHT. The

team also searched for sites associated with trail use such as graves, campsites, and historic rock inscriptions. Most of the NHTs in the RSFO received inventory this year, including much of the trail routes in the JMH CAP area. The project team was also provided all of the JMH CAP area existing inventory data, including the 2006 inventory of the South Pass Historic Landscape. An inventory report for both the physical aspects and the integrity of setting for the trails is being prepared.

- **South Pass Area Test Excavations**

During 2011, a field school from Central Wyoming Community College conducted test excavations at Pacific Springs, within the South Pass Historic Landscape area. A report on this project is currently being prepared and should be available in 2012.

- **Wild Horses**

The RSFO manages the Great Divide Basin Herd Management Area (HMA), which is located 40 miles east of Rock Springs to the Rawlins/Rock Springs field office boundary, west to the Continental Divide, and north of I-80 to just south of South Pass City. The HMA encompasses 778,915 acres, of which 562,702 acres are BLM-administered public lands, a portion of which are located within the JMH CAP area. The Appropriate Management Level (AML) for the Great Divide Basin HMA was confirmed in the 1997 Green River RMP and remained unchanged in the 2006 JMH CAP ROD. The AML has an identified management range of between 415-600 wild horses.

Census flights in April 2010 estimated the population within the HMA to be 1,640 wild horses, greater than twice the AML. An Environmental Assessment (WY-040-EA11-154) was completed in 2011 to conduct a wild horse gather and implement a fertility control program within the HMA. The Decision Record and Finding of No Significant Impact were issued on August 17, 2011.

Gather operations began in the Great Divide Basin HMA in October 2011 and were completed in November. A total of 1,132 wild horses were gathered, with 139 wild horses returned to the HMA, some with fertility control treatment applied.

Attachment 1: Map for Minerals Leasing
'Fall 2011 JMH Update'