
Fortification Creek RMPA/EA

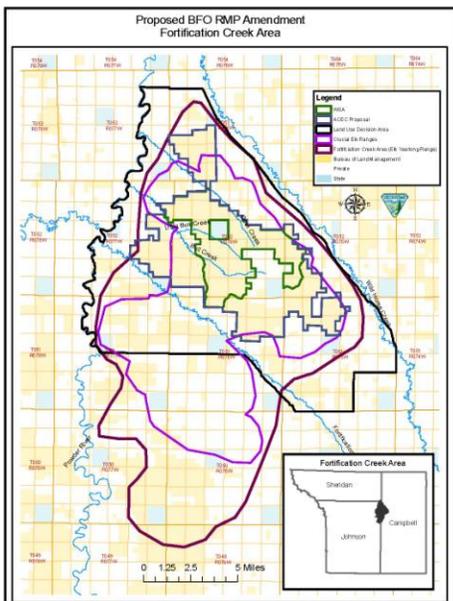
Available for Public Comment

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Buffalo Field Office's (BFO) Draft Resource Management Plan Amendment/Environmental Assessment (Draft RMPA/EA) for the Fortification Creek Planning Area (FCPA) was released for public review and comment on July 25, 2008. The purpose of the RMPA/EA is to consider changes in management of coal bed natural gas (CBNG) development within the FCPA. While virtually all of the Federal CBNG reserves have been leased, new information regarding wildlife, notably elk, has led the BLM to consider modifying certain operational standards for CBNG development.

The Fortification Creek Planning Area

The FCPA is generally bounded on the northeast by Wild Horse Creek, on the west by the Powder River, and on the south by Fortification and Montgomery Roads. It includes a diverse landscape that is home to an isolated elk herd as well as a variety of other wildlife.

Fortification Creek Planning History



In 1975, BLM prepared a Management Framework Plan (MFP) for the area. In the MFP BLM decided that development would not destroy critical watershed, wildlife, and natural values in the area. In 1982, the Fortification Creek Oil and Gas Surface Protection Plan was completed which outlined management stipulations for the area including: forbidding overhead power lines across public lands, restricting production facilities, and establishing the area Visual Resources Management (VRM) Class III. The 1985 BFO RMP designated a portion of the Basin as a Wilderness Study Area (WSA), but was not recommended as wilderness area by the field office because of the area's high oil and gas potential. Congress has yet to act on BLM's recommendation and it continues to be managed under the BLM's interim wilderness guidelines until Congress makes a final decision whether to designate the area as wilderness.

During the scoping for the Powder River Basin Oil and Gas RMPA/EIS in 2003, an environmental group proposed an area with the FCPA, including and surrounding the WSA, as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). BLM deferred consideration until a plan amendment could be prepared. Because of increasing concern for the Fortification Creek elk herd, BLM also deferred CBNG APD processing while conducting additional elk studies in 2006. During this time, the BLM received a right-of-way request to access State-owned land within the WSA for CBNG development. Based on continued concern for the elk herd and increasing CBNG development, the BLM decided to reevaluate its management controls to minimize additional impacts to the elk and to other resources.

The RMPA/EA

The RMPA/EA was developed with the cooperation and input of many State agencies, the three affected counties, and other interested parties. BLM also consulted with other Federal agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Three primary issues were initially considered in the RMPA/EA:

- Whether to continue current management objectives and actions for steep slopes and erosive soil, elk habitat, and visual resources;
- Consider the citizen proposed ACEC; and
- Consider a land exchange with the State of Wyoming.

Because the development lease for the State of Wyoming land has almost expired, and the State indicated that they would not renew the lease, this decision was eliminated from evaluation in the RMPA/EA.

The RMPA/EA proposes three alternatives that contain a range of management options. Existing conditions in the FCPA are described in Chapter 3 – Affected Environment.

The potential consequences of implementing the three alternatives are discussed in Chapter 4 – Environmental Consequences.



The Alternatives

The three alternatives described and analyzed in the Draft RMPA/EIS represent a reasonable range of potential management actions for Fortification Creek. The three alternatives are:

- Alternative I, the No Action Alternative: continue current management. Development on the CBNG leases could proceed without any new management direction.
- Alternative II: CBNG development would be managed through a phased approach. Continued development would be performance-based in that monitoring of reclamation with



two-year grazing rest and resources would help determine whether additional development could occur. There would be Timing Limitations (TLs) for the elk crucial winter range, for surface-disturbing activities. Overhead power lines would be allowed on BLM surface land within road corridors. There would be no net loss of elk security habitat by allowing no net increase in road density. Development would not be allowed on highly erosive soil or slopes greater than 25 percent. Along with the CBNG and elk management actions, an ACEC would be established along elk crucial ranges, and ACEC management prescriptions would be

identified.

- Alternative III, calls for performance-based, phased CBNG development, as described in Alternative II, along with one year of livestock rest after interim reclamation before additional development. Overhead power lines would be allowed on BLM surface land within road corridors. Security habitat loss would be kept below 20 percent by limiting new roads. Surface-disturbing activities on slopes greater than 25 percent and erosive soils would not be allowed, but there could be exceptions. Exceptions would be granted if the operator proposed adequate site mitigation to meet the BLM-Wyoming policy.

Important Dates and Estimated Timeline

Public Participation is an important component of the NEPA and RMPA processes. The following table lists past and future public participation opportunities and key dates for the completion of the RMPA/EA.

EVENT	DATE
<i>Federal Register</i> Notice of Intent	August 2007
Public Scoping Period	August 2007 to October 2007
Prepare DRMP/ DEA	Winter 2007 – Spring 2008
Draft RMPA/EA Available 60-Day Public Comment Period Begins	Notice Of Availability published in Federal Register – July/August 2008
Public Meetings	August/September 2008
Proposed RMPA/EA Complete	Winter 2008
Finding of No Significant Impact	January 2009

How to Access the Draft RMPA/EA

The Draft RMPA/EA will be posted on the Fortification Creek website at: http://www.blm.gov/wy/st/en/info/NEPA/bfodocs/fortification_creek.html. CD copies will be made available to the public for personal use. In order to conserve natural resources, paper copies of the document are not being printed in bulk. Paper copies will be available for viewing during regular business hours at the following locations:

BLM Buffalo Field Office
1425 Fort Street
Buffalo, WY 82834

Campbell County Library
2101 South 4-J Road
Gillette, WY 82718

Johnson County Library
171 North Adams Street
Buffalo, WY 82834

Sheridan County Fulmer Public Library
335 West Alger
Sheridan, WY 82801

How to Comment on the Draft RMPA/EA

Public comments are an essential component of a successful planning process and useful RMPA. Written comments on the Draft RMPA/EA will be accepted for 60

days after the Notice of Availability is published in the Federal Register. Comments received during this time will be fully evaluated and considered in the development of the Final RMPA/EA. In addition to public meetings, comments may be submitted via the following methods:

E-mail : Fort_Crk_WYMail@blm.gov

Fax: 307-684-1122

Mail: Bureau of Land Management, Mr. Thomas Bills, Project Manager
1425 Fort Street, Buffalo, Wyoming 82834.

The public comment process is most useful to the development of the Proposed RMPA/EA when comments specifically address aspects of the range of alternatives and/or the impact analysis.

Such comments allow the BLM to integrate important information and viewpoints to strengthen all aspects of the Proposed RMPA/EA. Substantive comments often address one or more of the following:

- New scientific information or data that would have a bearing on the analysis;
- Errors in the analysis;
- Misinformation that could affect the outcome of the analysis;
- Requests for clarification; or
- A substantive new alternative with a mix of allocations that differs from those under any of the proposed alternatives.

Comments must include complete names and addresses to allow the BLM to request clarification of messages that are not legible or to ask follow-up questions. Incomplete comments or those from unidentified sources cannot be considered or included as part of the official comment record. All

submissions from organizations and businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, will be available for public inspection in their entirety.



Bureau of Land Management
1425 Fort Street
Buffalo, Wyoming 82834.

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