

## INTRODUCTION

The Sand Hills Management Area (MA) is located northeast of Casper, Wyoming encompassing approximately 17,633 acres of BLM-administered lands (map 1). The area is comprised of large stabilized sand dunes and the associated vegetation communities. The ecosystem is easily impacted by ground-disturbing activities. Comprehensive travel management plans have been completed for areas like the Sand Hills, because they require more intensive management practices to preserve natural resources and ecosystems.

Comprehensive travel and transportation management plans (CTTMP) strive to balance transportation and access needs with resource concerns. An interdisciplinary approach ensures that differing and potentially conflicting uses are represented during the planning process. CTTMP include management prescriptions for motorized and non-motorized travel, designate transportation routes, set maintenance levels, and include any seasonal closures that may be necessary. Baseline data collection, implementation strategies, and monitoring protocols are also included in this effort. An analysis area extending approximately ½ mile beyond the boundary of the MA was created to provide an assessment of the alternatives and to better understand the cumulative impacts. The total analysis area is 24,836 acres including 4,772 acres of State lands.

In order to complete the Sand Hills CTTMP, the established transportation network was evaluated for suitability and active off-highway vehicle (OHV) management. All existing roads and trails including any new routes must meet resource needs and the management objectives outlined in the Casper Field Office's resource management plan (RMP; BLM 2007) in order to be considered for inclusion. This process takes into account the following factors:

- Access needs for all BLM-administered programs and resource activities, including but not limited to access associated with mineral and energy development, rights-of-way and utility corridors, grazing management, wildlife, vegetation management, fire, lands, and recreation.
- Mitigation measures including seasonal restrictions to avoid on-site and off-site impacts to important natural resources from current and future land uses. Examples of resource concerns include, among other issues, erodible soils, listed and sensitive species habitats, historic and archeological sites, and habitat fragmentation.
- Consistency with resource program goals and objectives.
- Trail suitability for different categories of OHVs including but not limited to dirt bikes, ATVs, dune buggies, 4-wheel drive vehicles, and over snow vehicles as well as opportunities for joint trail use.
- Opportunities to enhance non-motorized trail and off-trail recreational use.

## **PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION**

The purpose of the Sand Hills CTTMP is to establish a transportation plan for a designated network of roads and trails for public access, recreation use and resource management of sensitive soils and unique vegetative communities while maintaining valid and existing rights and other obligations already established within the Sand Hills Management Area. In addition, to implement Decision 6075 from the Casper Resource Management Plan (RMP), December 2007, to complete a transportation plan within 5 years of completing the RMP for the Sand Hills Management Area.

The Sand Hills MA has no legal motorized public access, limiting public recreation and motorized travel in the area. User groups include land owners whose properties border the planning area, developers, and professional hunting guides who have obtained land access agreements. This restricted access has limited the potential for negative environmental impacts resulting from uncontrolled off-route and cross-country vehicle travel. Recently private ownership patterns have changed. The historic BB Brooks Ranch, one of the larger ranches near the Sand Hills MA has been subdivided. As more people move into the area it is reasonable to assume that motorized travel on public lands would increase, escalating the importance of active travel and transportation management. Public interest in obtaining access and increased recreation use threaten sensitive soils and a unique vegetative community within the Sand Hills Management Area.

**Decision to be made:** The BLM will decide whether or not to establish a Comprehensive Travel and Transportation Management Plan for the Sand Hills Management Area and whether or not to expand the existing transportation boundary of the Sand Hills Management Area through a Resource Management Plan amendment.

The objectives of this plan are to manage travel in such a manner as to protect the natural characteristic and important resource values set forth in the revised Casper RMP (appendix R: Travel and Transportation Planning). These objectives have been listed below.

- Protect resources;
- Designate a transportation network;
- Define the maintenance standards for all designated travel routes;
- Promote the safety of public land users;
- Minimize conflicts among the various users of public lands;
- Minimize resources damage from both motorized and non-motorized travel; and,
- Provide for appropriate recreational opportunities and other uses.

## **CONFORMANCE WITH LAND USE PLANS**

The completion of the CTTMP complies with decision 6075 in the current RMP (BLM 2007) which states that motorized travel within the Sand Hills Management Area (17,633 acres of public surface) would be limited to “a designated network of roads and trails.” Decision 6078 designates all historic trails to be “closed” to motorized and non-motorized modes of travel. This decision will be applicable if the any remnants of the Bozeman Trail which is located within the MA are found to be historically significant. The Sand Hills MA was established in order to maintain the integrity of vegetation and to protect highly erosive soils and watershed values. The completion of this plan

complies with the Casper RMP and must be completed within five years of the signing of the record of decision. RMP decisions specific to the Sand Hills MA are listed below.

- 7046 The Sand Hills MA is established on 17,633 acres, all of which are BLM-administered public surface.
- 7047 The area is administratively unavailable for oil and gas leasing and geophysical exploration.
- 7048 The area is withdrawn. The withdrawal segregates from operation of the public land laws, including the mining laws.
- 7049 The area is closed to disposal of mineral materials.
- 7050 Time would be allowed for land-tenure adjustments (consistent with management objectives).
- 7051 No new corridors are established in the Sand Hills MA; rights-of-way (ROWs) will be allowed when management objectives for the area can still be achieved.
- 7052 BLM would pursue acquisition of lands in the Sand Hills area.
- 7053 A watershed plan would be developed for the area in coordination with wildlife and range resources. The plan would clarify any special mitigation required to reduce impacts associated with surfacing disturbing activities.
- 7054 Pursue obtaining legal public access and limit use to non-motorized.

The preferred alternative (B) and alternative C described in this environmental assessment (EA) include the proposed boundary change of the Sand Hills MA. The expanded boundary described in these two alternatives would include additional public lands to the west and to the southwest of the existing Sand Hills MA increasing the public surface by 2,460 acres for a total of 20,090 acres of BLM-administered land. The total analysis area is 24,836 acres including 4,772 acres of State lands.

The proposed boundary change would require an amendment to the Casper RMP, and improve the likelihood of management success. In addition, the proposed boundary change addresses comments received during the public scoping process. The RMP decisions for the Sand Hills MA would not be carried over into the proposed expanded transportation boundary. The RMP amendment described under the preferred alternative (B) and alternative C would apply only to transportation and OHV use within the Sand Hills MA as described in the proposed Sand Hills CTTMP. Appendix A lists the RMP decisions that apply to public lands inside the existing Sand Hills MA.

## **STATUTES, REGULATIONS, AUTHORITY, AND OTHER GUIDANCE**

- *Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA)*, 43 U.S.C 1701. Land use plans and revisions should be based on principles of multiple use and sustained yield.
- *National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)*, 42 U.S.C. 4321.
- *Archeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA)*, 1979, as amended.
- *National Historic Preservation Act*, as amended, 1966.
- *National Trails System Act*, 16 U.S.C. 1241.
- *Taylor Grazing Act*, 43 U.S.C. 315a.
- *Endangered Species Act*, 16 U.S.C. 1531. Federal agencies shall give consideration to ensure agency actions do not jeopardize the continued existence of any endangered species.
- *Land and Water Conservation Fund Act*, 16 U.S.C. 460 1-6a.
- OHV. National Management Strategy for Motorized Off-Highway Vehicle Use on Public Lands, USDI, BLM, January 2001.
- Executive Order No. 11644, Feb 8, 1972. This order established criteria by which federal agencies were to develop regulations for the management of (off-road vehicle) ORVs on lands under their management. Agencies are to monitor the effects of ORV use on their public lands and on the basis of the information gathered; they shall from time to time amend or rescind designation of areas for ORV use as necessary to further its policy.
- Executive Order 11644 (as amended by Executive Order 11989) and regulation 43 CFR 4340 states that all RMPs would designate public lands as open, closed or limited to OHV use.
- Executive Order No. 12898, 1994. Indicates that federal planning efforts should give consideration to how plans would affect local economies.
- Washington Office Instruction Memorandum No. 2007-030, Clarification of Cultural Resource Considerations for Off-Highway (OHV) Route Designation and Travel Management.
- Washington Office Instruction Memorandum No. 2004-005, Clarification of OHV Designations and Travel Management in the BLM Land Use Planning Process.
- BLM Land Use Planning Handbook H-1601-1. Outlines exceptions by which the BLM can complete land use planning without including all designations.
- Washington Office Instruction Memorandum No. IM 2006-173, Implementation of Roads and Trails Terminology Report.

- Washington Office Instruction Memorandum No. 2008-104, Guidance and Integration of Comprehensive Travel and Transportation Management (CTTM) Planning into Land Use Planning.
- BLM NEPA Handbook H-1730-1. Discusses the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) guidance for the No Action alternative with respect to environmental assessments (EA).