

Executive Summary

This executive summary is intended to provide a brief overview of the Proposed Visual Resource Management (VRM) Plan Amendment, alternatives considered, and conclusions from the impact analyses in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (Final EIS). For the supporting documentation and detailed analyses, see the full VRM Plan Amendment EIS contained in Volume I. The project-specific EIS for the Chokeycherry and Sierra Madre (CCSM) Wind Energy Project is included in Volume II.

Plan Amendment Overview

The *Rawlins Field Office (RFO) Resource Management Plan (RMP) Record of Decision (ROD) (2008b)* included a remand of the VRM class designation and decision portions of the Approved RMP. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) continues to use the VRM class designations as established and analyzed in the No Action Alternative (Alternative 1 in the 2008 Proposed Rawlins RMP/Final EIS; 2008a) until updated and/or changed by a VRM-targeted Plan Amendment. In response to a protest, the BLM remanded the VRM decisions to allow a current inventory of visual quality to be completed (BLM Handbook H-1601-1 *Land Use Planning*). The BLM has completed a visual resource inventory (VRI) for the RFO (Otak, Inc. 2011). Since an area-wide Plan Amendment for VRM decisions in the RFO has been initiated but is not completed, a VRM-targeted Plan Amendment is being conducted concurrently with the development of the CCSM Wind Energy Project EIS (detailed in Volume II).

A majority of the CCSM Wind Site Testing and Monitoring Application Area (Application Area) is designated as VRM Class III, but a portion of the Sierra Madre site is identified as VRM Class II. Wind energy development typically is not considered to be compatible with VRM Class I; VRM Class II within the Foreground/Middleground and Background Distance Zones; and VRM Class III within the Foreground/Middleground Zone. Therefore, the proposed CCSM project is not in conformance with the VRM direction provided in the 2008 Rawlins RMP. In this situation, the BLM can either require modifications to the proposed CCSM project to be in compliance, consider an amendment to the 2008 Rawlins RMP of the VRM decisions in the 2008 Rawlins RMP, or deny the right-of-way (ROW) application. Through Volume I of this EIS, the BLM is considering options for amending the VRM decisions in the CCSM project Decision Area. As part of the ROD, the BLM will decide whether to amend the VRM decisions in the CCSM project Decision Area as a prerequisite to approval of the CCSM project.

The BLM developed a range of alternatives for VRM classes within the VRM Plan Amendment Planning Area (Planning Area). The RMP Amendment Planning Area addresses a nominally 30-mile buffer from the CCSM Wind Energy Project (discussed in Chapter 1.0, Section 1.4) and the alternatives address VRM management within a smaller Decision Area (discussed in Chapter 1.0, Section 1.5 and shown in **Figure 1-1**). With the multitude of additional influences on visual resources in the Planning Area (including overhead utility corridors, areas visible from the CCSM project, and jurisdictional considerations), the BLM determined that the Decision Area for this analysis should focus on those areas that were most likely to be influenced by the CCSM Wind Energy Project proposal. The Decision Area boundary was developed by reducing the nominally 30-mile distance zone that delineates the Planning Area by using following features: the State Highway (SH) 789 designated overhead utility corridor as the western boundary, the Interstate 80 (I-80) designated overhead utility and major transportation corridor as the northern boundary, the Scenic Quality Rating Unit (SQRU) encompassing Elk Mountain as the northeastern boundary, and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) boundaries and Wyoming state line to the east and south. There are a total of 3,664,795 acres of public, state, and private lands in the Planning Area, of which there are 1,428,294 acres of public land and 1,634,599 acres of federal mineral estate. There are 742,612 acres of public lands and 919,296 acres of federal mineral estate in the Decision Area. The remaining area outside the Decision Area boundary (but

within the Planning Area boundary) will be addressed in the upcoming VRM Plan Amendment for the RFO area.

Purpose and Need

The purpose for this Plan Amendment is to establish new VRM class designations based on the 2011 VRI (Otak, Inc. 2011) as well as consideration of: 1) managing the public lands and their various resources so that they are used in the combination that will best meet the present and future needs of the American people in accordance with the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) 103(c); 2) managing public lands in a manner that will protect the quality of scenic values in accordance with FLPMA 102(b); 3) the impacts resource uses may have on scenic values; and 4) the impacts VRM class designations may have on other resources and uses.

The need for this Plan Amendment is to address the remand of the VRM class designation and decision portions of the Approved RMP (2008b) and the lack of conformance of the proposed CCSM Wind Energy Project with the existing VRM class designations in the 2008 Rawlins RMP. Since an area-wide Plan Amendment for VRM decisions in the RFO has not occurred, the BLM is using the opportunity to update the VRM classes based on the recently completed VRI (Otak, Inc. 2011) concurrently with the development of the CCSM Wind Energy Project EIS (detailed in Volume II).

Decisions to be Made

This VRM-targeted Plan Amendment will determine the appropriate management actions for visual resources on public lands in the Decision Area (defined in Chapter 1.0, Section 1.5) and amend the associated decisions in the 2008 Rawlins RMP. The public land in the Decision Area is the subject of this Plan Amendment and the associated EIS analysis. Lands or minerals that are privately owned or state-owned or that are administered by federal agencies other than the BLM, such as the USFS and the Bureau of Reclamation, are not affected by BLM management. Other BLM management actions beyond the scope and geographic extent of this VRM-targeted Plan Amendment will not be affected.

Planning Issues and Criteria

The process for developing, amending, or revising an RMP begins with identifying the issues (43 Code of Federal Regulations 1610.4-1) based on the input of BLM personnel, the public, and interagency consultation. Some of the issues addressed in the EIS for the 2008 Rawlins RMP were reviewed and found to be applicable to this Plan Amendment. The following issue topics (slightly modified to be consistent with a VRM-targeted Plan Amendment) have been determined adequate for this Plan Amendment.

1. Development of Energy Resources and Minerals-related Issues
2. Special Designations/Management Areas
3. Resource Accessibility
4. Fire Management Wildland Urban Interface Areas
5. Special Status Species Management
6. Water Quality
7. Vegetation Management
8. Recreation, Cultural Resources (including National Historic Trails), and Paleontological Resource Management

General planning criteria developed for the 2008 Rawlins RMP were used for this VRM-targeted Plan Amendment, where appropriate. Planning criteria help focus the preparation of planning and management alternatives and the analysis of impacts and to guide selection of the Proposed Plan.

Proposed Action and Alternatives

Four VRM Plan Amendment alternatives were developed for managing visual resources within the Decision Area. Alternative formulation took into consideration existing decisions in the 2008 Rawlins RMP as well as issues and concerns developed internally and solicited from the public during CCSM project scoping as documented in Volume II. The results of the VRI (Otak, Inc. 2011) served as a baseline to develop a reasonable range of VRM class alternatives and analysis of impacts associated with the various alternatives in this project-specific Plan Amendment. A summary table of proposed VRM classes by alternative is provided in **Table ES-1**.

Table ES-1 Acreage of Proposed VRM Classes on Public Lands in the Decision Area by Alternative

VRM Class	Alternative 1: No Action	Alternative 2: Development	Alternative 3: Protection	Alternative 4: Preferred
I	5,613	5,613	5,613	5,613
II	124,207	1,445	318,792	83,067
III	573,612	160,395	340,589	233,498
IV	39,180	575,159	77,618	420,434

Management Actions Common to All Alternatives

The VRM actions common to all alternatives from the 2008 Rawlins RMP were determined to still be valid. In addition, there are some existing visual resource designations and decisions within the Decision Area that will not be revisited as part of the VRM Plan Amendment and will apply to all alternatives considered:

- Existing VRM Class I areas within Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) and along the Encampment River segment suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers system.
- Existing VRM Class II within the Sand Hills/JO Ranch Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC).
- Management of surface disturbing activities within the North Platte River special recreation management area (SRMA), setting of historic trails, and cultural properties.

Changes in VRM classes will affect the acreages covered by management actions for lands and realty and minerals; however, these management actions in the 2008 Rawlins RMP will remain unchanged.

Alternative 1 (No Action – Continuation of Existing Management Direction)

VRM classes would remain as designated in the 2008 Rawlins RMP. The BLM would continue to use the VRM class designations as established and analyzed in the No Action Alternative (Alternative 1 in the 2008 Proposed Rawlins RMP/Final EIS; 2008a) until updated and/or changed by a VRM-targeted Plan Amendment.

Alternative 2 (Emphasis on the Development of Resources)

Alternative 2 allows for management activities to dominate the view and remain the major focus of viewer attention. Under Alternative 2, landownership patterns and areas of high potential for energy and mineral development formed the basis of this alternative.

Alternative 3 (Emphasis on Protection of Resources)

Alternative 3 emphasizes protection of the existing character of the landscape. Relative to all alternatives, Alternative 3 allows management activities to be seen, but not attract the attention of the casual observer or dominate the landscape. Under Alternative 3, the VRI classes formed the major baseline for this alternative with minor modifications.

Alternative 4 (Proposed Plan)

Alternative 4 strives for a balance of opportunities to allow some modification while partially retaining the existing character of the landscape. Under Alternative 4, the VRI classes in concert with landownership patterns and areas of high potential for energy and mineral development formed the baseline for this alternative. As a result of public comments on the DEIS, the Proposed Plan has been modified to include more protective VRM classifications surrounding Elk Mountain and less protective VRM classifications along the North Platte River that coincides with the ROW corridors along Interstate 80 (I-80) where major utilities are planned.

Affected Environment

Information applicable to the Planning Area has been summarized in Chapter 3.0 and additional data or updates have been added as needed, with particular emphasis on those resources that have the highest potential to be affected. Additional information for all resources in the Planning Area can be found in Chapter 3.0 of the 2008 Rawlins RMP Final EIS (BLM 2008a).

The most prominent land use feature in the Planning Area is a large swath of land that is divided into a checkerboard pattern of ownership. In this area, ownership is divided among private land, state land, and public land along 20 miles perpendicular to both sides of the Union Pacific Railroad line. Visual resources within the Planning Area are influenced by a wide variety of topographic, geologic, hydrological, vegetative, and other characteristics of the region. The excellent air quality in the area allows for mostly unobstructed views. The Planning Area topography ranges from relatively flat land and low rolling or flat-topped hills to high elevations containing mountain shrub vegetation. The type of vegetation varies and is dependent on the amount of precipitation received in any given area. Vegetation communities within the Planning Area exist almost entirely within the Intermountain Semi-Desert Province (sagebrush steppe) and the Southern Rocky Mountain Steppe-Open Woodland-Coniferous Forest Province (transition from grass and shrub dominated areas to shrub and tree dominated areas). The largest water bodies in the Planning Area are the North Platte and Medicine Bow rivers. Both of these rivers are in the Platte River watershed and drain north into Seminole Reservoir.

The Planning Area also includes a diverse landscape that supports a variety of multiple uses such as wind development, other lands and realty developments, mineral development, livestock grazing, and some commercial timber harvest. The Planning Area contains 1,183,528 acres with high wind potential, 565,390 acres of areas with high and moderate potential for oil and gas, and the 5,670-acre area Elk Mountain Forest. Recreation and off-highway vehicle use in the Planning Area also are prevalent. The Planning Area contains six developed recreation sites, three undeveloped recreation sites, one National Scenic Trail, and two SRMAs. The Planning Area contains no wilderness areas, two WSAs, one ACEC, no National Natural Landmarks, no designated Wild and Scenic Rivers, four historic trails, and other management areas.

Environmental Consequences

A comparative summary of the impacts of the VRM Plan Amendment alternatives is provided in Chapter 2.0, **Table 2-6**. The environmental consequences of the management actions proposed under each alternative are analyzed in Chapter 4.0. While the RMP Amendment Planning Area addresses a nominally 30-mile buffer from the CCSM project (discussed in Chapter 1.0, Section 1.4), the alternatives address VRM management within the smaller Decision Area (discussed in Chapter 1.0, Section 1.5).

Impacts under Alternative 1: Continuation of Existing Management

VRM classifications restrict landscape altering activities (VRM Class I in WSAs) or influence the size, design, or location of landscape altering activities (VRM Class II and III elsewhere) that affect the visual setting in the Decision Area. Only minimal areas along the I-80 and State Highway 789 corridors would allow opportunities for landscape altering activities that require major modifications of the existing character of the landscape and visual intrusions. Areas of VRM Class II and III areas over the larger Decision Area would likely limit opportunities for landscape altering activities that require major modifications and visual intrusions unless mitigation measures could minimize the visual contrast to conform with the VRM class objectives for the area. Limiting opportunities for landscape modification in Class II and III areas would retain or improve the quality of visual resources in these areas. The majority of areas with high and moderate oil and gas potential are within VRM Class III and IV areas, which would produce few if any conflicts between mineral extraction activities and VRM objectives. Opportunities for wind energy development would potentially be limited on nearly 100 percent of areas classified as having high wind potential within the Decision Area if adequate mitigation measures could not be employed to ensure that developments conformed to VRM class objectives.

Alternative 1 provides protection of visual settings in areas determined to contain Class A scenery as depicted in the VRI (Chapter 3.0, **Figure 3-4**) with VRM Class II designations and Class B scenery with VRM Class II and III designations. Although this alternative provides more protective VRM management in the northern portion of the Decision Area, the visual setting in the checkerboard ownership areas and other fractured landownership patterns is influenced by uses on private and state lands beyond BLM's jurisdiction.

Impacts Under Alternative 2: Emphasis on Development of Resources

Under Alternative 2, an increase in VRM Class III and IV areas and a decrease in Class II areas from Alternative 1 would allow for more opportunities for landscape altering activities that require major modifications of the existing character of the landscape and visual intrusions. This alternative would provide the highest level of change to the natural elements of form, line, color and texture, resulting in the greatest alteration to the natural setting, potentially resulting in an industrial setting. The majority of areas with high and moderate oil and gas potential are within VRM Class III and IV areas, which would produce few if any conflicts between mineral extraction activities and VRM objectives. Opportunities for wind energy development would be limited on only 2 percent of areas with high wind potential if adequate mitigation measures could not be employed to ensure that developments conformed to VRM class objectives.

Alternative 2 provides the greatest potential for alteration of visual settings in areas determined to contain Class A and B scenery as depicted in the VRI (Chapter 3.0, **Figure 3-4**) with VRM Class III and IV designations. Although this alternative allows for a higher degree of alteration of visual settings in the northern portion of the Decision Area, the visual setting in the checkerboard ownership areas and other fractured landownership patterns is influenced by uses on private and state lands beyond BLM's jurisdiction.

Impacts Under Alternative 3: Emphasis on Protection of Resources

Alternative 3 considers the most VRM Class II areas in the Decision Area, which would limit opportunities for landscape altering activities that require major modifications and visual intrusions unless mitigation measures could minimize the visual contrast to conform to the VRM class objectives for the area. Limiting opportunities for landscape modification in Class II and III areas would retain or improve the quality of visual resources in these areas. Approximately 39 percent of areas with high and moderate oil and gas potential would occur in VRM Class III and none would occur in VRM Class IV areas. Opportunities for wind energy development would be limited on approximately 77 percent of areas with high wind potential if adequate mitigation measures could not be employed to ensure that developments conformed to VRM class objectives.

Alternative 3 provides protection of visual settings in areas determined to contain Class A scenery as depicted in the VRI (Chapter 3.0, **Figure 3-4**) with VRM Class II and III designations and provides varying levels of protection and alteration of Class B scenery with VRM Class II, III, and IV designations. Although this alternative allows for a moderate to high degree of alteration of visual settings in the northern portion of the Decision Area, the visual setting in the checkerboard ownership areas and other fractured landownership patterns is influenced by uses on private and state lands beyond BLM's jurisdiction.

Impacts Under Alternative 4: Proposed Plan

Alternative 4 would allow for more opportunities for landscape altering activities that require major modifications of the existing character of the landscape and visual intrusions than Alternatives 1 and 3, but less than Alternative 2. Limiting opportunities for landscape modification along the forest fringe, North Platte River, and contiguous federal ownership outside of areas with moderate to high wind and mineral development potential would retain or improve the quality of visual resources in these areas. Approximately 98 percent of areas with high and moderate oil and gas potential would occur in VRM Class III and IV areas. Opportunities for wind energy development would be limited on approximately 40 percent of areas with high wind potential if adequate mitigation measures could not be employed to ensure that developments conformed to VRM class objectives.

Alternative 4 provides protection of visual settings in areas determined to contain Class A scenery as depicted in the VRI (Chapter 3.0, **Figure 3-4**) with VRM Class II designations, including the Elk Mountain area with VRM Class II and III designations. This alternative provides varying levels of protection and alteration of Class B scenery with VRM Class II, III, and IV designations. Although this alternative allows for a higher degree of alteration of visual settings in the northern portion of the Decision Area, the visual setting in the checkerboard ownership areas and other fractured landownership patterns is influenced by uses on private and state lands beyond BLM's jurisdiction.