

January 20, 2012

Ms. Kristen Yannone, Project Manager
Bureau of Land Management, Lander Field Office
1335 Main St.
Lander WY 82520

VIA EMAIL

Dear Ms. Yannone:

On behalf of the Wyoming Chapter of Sierra Club, Sierra Club's Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem Resilient Habitats Campaign, and more than 1.4 million members and supporters of Sierra Club nationwide, we submit the following comments on the 2011 Draft Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement for the Lander Field Office Planning Area (hereafter referred to as the Draft RMP). Since 1892, Sierra Club has worked to help people enjoy, explore and protect the planet. Today, there are 65 Sierra Club Chapters and more than 425 Sierra Club Groups across the country.

Sierra Club believes that climate change is the most pressing issue facing the natural world and our society today, and that by acting now to improve the resilience of habitats and species to climate change, we can help to avert a projected extinction crisis as well as protect our own lives and well-being. We believe that some undeveloped areas of Wyoming provide greater value to current citizens and to future generations when they are protected from development and maintained in a natural condition. Our comments highlight the need to incorporate the potential impacts of climate change on fish and wildlife and their associated habitats into the Draft RMP. We believe that protecting the most valuable undeveloped areas from development will help maintain critical wildlife habitat, protect plant and animal species of special concern, maintain backcountry recreational opportunities, and preserve areas of great scenic beauty and solitude for current and future generations.

LEADING WILDLIFE CONSERVATION CHALLENGE: CLIMATE CHANGE

Secretarial Order 3289, issued by the U.S. Department of the Interior in 2010, directed a Department-wide response to the impacts of climate change on the land, water, ocean, fish and wildlife, and cultural heritage resources that the Department manages. The Order explicitly recognized "the dramatic effects of climate change that are already occurring", and stated that the Department must "Conserve and manage fish and wildlife resources ... and protect and conserve archaeological resources ... that may be affected by climate change." According to Order 3289, "Each bureau and office of the Department must consider and analyze potential climate change impacts when undertaking long-range planning exercises, setting priorities for scientific research and investigations". The order specified that management responses to climate change

impacts must be coordinated on a landscape-level basis, and highlighted protection of wildlife migration corridors, both existing and new.

The Draft RMP describes current understanding of climate change in Sections 3.9 (p. 531-534) and Section 4.9 (p. 1194-1202), and acknowledges that temperatures are expected to increase substantially in the Planning Area in the near future, with increased drought, declining water quality and quantity, increased risk of wildfire, and other impacts leading to shifting vegetation and wildlife ranges throughout the Planning Area as water and food supply and general habitat availability change. The Draft RMP states that “predicted changes in precipitation can affect the distribution of flora and fauna across the landscape”, and that “Sensitive species in the planning area such as the greater sage-grouse, which are already stressed by factors such as declining habitat and increased development, could experience additional pressures as a result of climate change.”

Unfortunately, the Draft RMP appears to conclude that, since our ability to explicitly quantify current and future impacts of climate change in the Planning Area is limited, no further action is warranted beyond this brief acknowledgement of likely impacts of climate change. Research and investigation (as explicitly directed by Secretarial Order 3289) on climate change impacts in the Planning Area is barely mentioned, much less prioritized.

Given that climate change will only exacerbate other human-induced stresses to further increase the vulnerability of ecosystems to loss of native species, we strongly believe that it would be prudent to minimize other human-caused stressors that are well understood to confer heavy impacts to wildlife. This conservative approach is especially important in large areas of intact, relatively undeveloped habitat, which provide the best sanctuary for wildlife, and in critical habitat areas such as breeding grounds, wintering grounds, and migration routes.

The 2010 Wyoming Wildlife Action Plan recognized the necessity of incorporating planning for a changing climate into all wildlife and habitat management activities. That Plan explicitly acknowledged that the effects of a rapidly changing climate will profoundly affect Wyoming’s wildlife and the habitats on which it depends. We strongly urge the BLM to fully incorporate climate change planning into the Final RMP, and to adopt a conservative, precautionary approach to ensure that wildlife has the best chance of surviving in a changing climate.

PRIORITY AREAS FOR MAXIMUM PROTECTIONS

Public lands managed by the BLM Lander Field Office include several high priority areas that should receive the greatest levels of protection from development, including areas within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE). The GYE is one of the last remaining intact temperate ecosystems in the northern hemisphere and one of the few places in the United States where all the top predators roam free. Lands managed by the Lander Field Office provide critical wildlife habitat for GYE species that are listed under the

Endangered Species Act including the gray wolf, grizzly bear, and Canada lynx, as well as the largest wintering elk herd that is not dependent on artificial winter feeding at elk feeding grounds.

In the 1970s, early conservation biology researchers E.O. Wilson and R. H. MacArthur demonstrated that large islands close to the mainland have greater biodiversity than smaller and more isolated islands, and suggested that the same theory applies to terrestrial areas and their degree of connection to similar habitats. Today, it is a widely accepted tenet of conservation biology that the best way to ensure the health and long-term survivability of wildlife is to preserve intact habitat with connection corridors to similar habitats.

The GYE is essentially a large island surrounded by human development, and it is clear that the health and long-term survival of wildlife in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks is quite dependent on lands that fall well outside of the Parks' political boundaries, including public lands managed by the BLM in the Dubois Area and along the foothills of the Wind River Mountains. To protect irreplaceable wildlife resources, we urge the BLM to adopt management actions in the Final RMP that offer the greatest levels of protection from development in the Dubois Area and Wind River foothills, as well as other high priority areas described below that are relatively undeveloped with the highest wildlife, scenic, and recreational values.

In addition to the Dubois Area, other high priority areas include the Lander Front and Beaver Rim Areas, Sweetwater Watershed, and Bridger Mountains. Adequate protection of these areas from additional development is essential to the long-term survival of many species, especially when factoring in unquantifiable but certain climate change impacts. These areas should be made unavailable to energy development and other forms of industrial development. Withdrawing all these areas from energy development would impact only about half of the BLM-managed federal mineral estate in the Lander Field Office, while protecting Fremont County's diverse economy based on tourism, hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation.

The BLM's proposed action to close the Dubois Area to oil and gas leasing (Map 32) is excellent, and we strongly urge the BLM to adopt that provision in the final plan. In addition to the Dubois Area, the other identified priority areas should also be closed to oil and gas leasing, as shown on Map 30. We support the BLM's proposed action to make the Lander Front and the Sweetwater River corridor closed to phosphate leasing (Map 41), but would like to see the Bridger Mountain area, approximately T40N and R89-94W, also closed to phosphate mining, as well as additional acreage along Beaver Rim. We support withdrawing the priority areas from locatable mineral entry as shown on Map 22, but would like to see the Bridger Mountain area, approximately T40N and R89-94W, as well as additional acreage along Beaver Rim, also pursued for withdrawal. We support wind energy exclusion and avoidance areas as shown on Map 100. We support the BLM's proposed Rights-of-Way avoidance and exclusion areas as shown on Map 104, with the addition of the exclusion areas in the Bridger Mountain area as shown on Map 102. We support all of these protective provisions in the priority areas because we

believe they are necessary to protect important resource values, by offering the best defense for wildlife responding to changing habitat conditions resulting from climate change and by maintaining their value as important undeveloped recreational areas.

COMMENTS ON SPECIFIC CHAPTER TWO PROVISIONS

Numbers preceding specific comments correspond to page and record numbers in the Draft RMP.

PHYSICAL RESOURCES (PR) – Water

Map 48 starkly reveals the dire condition of streams and riparian areas in the Sweetwater Watershed, where almost every mapped drainage is classified as non-functioning or functioning-at-risk. We have first-hand, personal experience to substantiate the information shown on Map 48. The BLM should identify the Sweetwater Watershed as its top priority for specific, immediate actions to halt the deterioration and begin to restore these streams and riparian areas before the damage is irreversible. Please see our comments on the Biological Resources – Wetland-Riparian Resources and the Land Resources - Livestock Grazing Management sections of the Draft RMP, for specific recommended actions that will be necessary to address this severe resource degradation.

p. 72 – 1048, 1049 The Little Red Creek Complex should be managed to preserve its wilderness characteristics, and should include Torrey Rim and Glacier Trail (Map 13). The Little Red Creek Complex is immediately adjacent to the Fitzpatrick Wilderness Area, and because larger protected areas provide the greatest conservation value, the entire Little Red Creek Complex should be included and connected with the Fitzpatrick Wilderness Area. The Complex should be closed to motorized and mechanized travel, to be compatible with the adjacent Fitzpatrick Wilderness Area and to protect its wilderness characteristics.

MINERAL RESOURCES (MR) - Locatable Minerals

p. 74 – 2007 The area encompassing the Sweetwater Rocks should be pursued for withdrawal from locatable mineral entry, to protect this area of unique wildlife habitat, unusual landforms, and high scenic value. The rest of the Dubois Area, in addition to the proposed Whiskey Mountain and East Fork withdrawals, should be pursued for withdrawal, to protect wildlife habitat and migration corridors and backcountry recreational values. The Lander Front, Beaver Rim, and Bridger Mountain area, approximately T40N and R89-94W, should be pursued for withdrawal, to protect big game crucial winter ranges, migration routes, sage grouse core habitat, and recreation and scenic values.

MR - Oil and Gas

p. 75 – 2012 As previously stated, we strongly support the proposed action to close the Dubois area to oil and gas leasing. In addition, the following areas should also be closed:

- Beaver Rim area, to protect core sage grouse habitat, other wildlife habitat, open space, and scenic values
- Lander Slope, to protect wildlife, recreation, open space, and scenic values
- Sweetwater Rocks area, to protect unique habitat and landforms, and scenic values
- South Pass area, to protect wildlife, recreation, historic values, and scenic values

In the proposed National Historic Trails Corridor, we recognize that the proposed NSO stipulation is a major step in the right direction, and support that recommendation as the minimum necessary protection, but we would prefer to see the corridor closed to oil and gas leasing.

MR - Phosphate

p. 76 – 2015 We support the BLM’s proposed action in Alternative D, closing about 1.2 million acres to phosphate leasing (Map 41), to protect a multitude of other resource values including wildlife habitat, crucial winter ranges, sage grouse core habitat, wildlife migration corridors, recreational opportunities, and scenic values. In addition to the small areas identified for closure in the Bridger Mountains (Map 41), we recommend that the entire Bridger Mountain area, approximately T40N and R89-94W, be closed to phosphate leasing, or at least all the areas identified as having moderate phosphate potential in the Bridger Mountains (Map 19).

MR - Salable Minerals

p. 77 – 2016 We support the BLM’s proposed action in Alternative D, closing about 1.25 million acres to mineral material disposal (Map 37), to protect wildlife habitat, crucial winter ranges, sage grouse core habitat, recreational opportunities, and scenic values.

MR - Master Leasing Plan - Beaver Rim

p. 78-82 – 2022-2034 We support Alternative B, which would not designate a Master Leasing Plan for Beaver Rim, and would close the entire area to oil and gas leasing to protect sage grouse core, nesting, and brood-rearing habitat, as well as other wildlife values, recreational opportunities, and scenic values. If the proposed actions of Alternative D are adopted, a 1320-foot riparian wetland setback (p. 81 – 2028) should be applied, and surface disturbance should be prohibited in unique plant communities (p. 82 – 2034).

BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES (BR) – Invasive Species

p. 92 – 4028-4029 We support the BLM’s proposed actions under Alternative D to control invasive, non-native species.

BR – Riparian-Wetland Resources

p. 93-94 – 4030-4034 To meet the stated goal and objectives of this section (p. 93 – BR 6, 6.1-6.4), the BLM should explicitly acknowledge that almost every drainage in the Sweetwater Watershed is severely impaired as a result of livestock grazing, as shown by Map 48, where almost every mapped drainage is classified as non-functioning or functioning-at-risk. Substantially reduced livestock grazing is the only management action that would meet the stated goal and objectives for restoration and enhancement of wetland-riparian areas that are non-functional or functioning-at-risk and trending toward non-functional. Complete rest from livestock grazing for several years would greatly assist in moving toward restoration, and is needed to halt the on-going deterioration before the damage is permanent and irreversible.

We have observed that many riparian areas in the Sweetwater Watershed are severely impacted by season-long livestock grazing, as livestock are spending a great deal of time in riparian areas all summer long. The BLM must develop explicit management actions to reduce grazing levels throughout the area, shorten allowed periods (i.e., # of days) of grazing in riparian areas, and provide the most severely damaged drainages with a period of several years of complete rest from livestock grazing, to halt the destruction of riparian areas and begin to restore them to properly functioning condition.

BR – Fish and Wildlife

p. 95 – BR: 8.1 A 10% loss in big game crucial winter range and parturition habitat over the next 20 years (estimated life of this plan) is far too high, especially considering the cumulative amount of habitat that has already been lost on public land in the Planning Area. This objective should be changed to “no net loss”.

p. 96 – 4039 What does “where opportunities exist” mean? Fences that are hazardous to wildlife should be removed or modified, period. Opportunities exist wherever hazardous fences exist.

p. 97 – 4047 We support BLM’s proposed action to prohibit the use of domestic goats and llamas in bighorn sheep core herd areas in the Dubois area.

BR – General Wildlife

p. 99 – 4058 We support Alternative B, and suggest addition of language to specify “no net gain” in fencing.

p. 99 – 4059 We support Alternative B, as we cannot think of a rationale to justify leaving unnecessary and redundant roads open. Clearly, reducing road density and habitat fragmentation supports Goal BR: 7 (p. 95).

p. 100 – 4060 Alternative B is the most appropriate approach to achieve Goals BR: 7, 8, & 9 (p. 95)

BR – Big Game

p. 100 – 4064 New road development should be prohibited in big game crucial winter range and parturition areas as described in Alt. B.

BR – Special Status Species

p. 104 – 4086 & p. 105 - 4090 To meet Goal BR: 11 (p. 102), surveys for sensitive species must be required before any surface-disturbing activities are authorized, as proposed under Alt. B, and with authorization tied to mitigation or elimination of adverse impacts. It would not seem possible to conserve, recover, and maintain sensitive species without knowing where they are.

p. 106 – 4093 Sage grouse core areas should be closed to oil and gas and geothermal leasing.

p. 106 – 4096 Actions proposed under Alt. B would better protect breeding grouse while allowing appropriate inventorying, monitoring, or viewing activities.

p. 107 – 4097 Cumulative surface disturbance should be limited to no more than 2.5% of sagebrush habitat per 640 acres.

p. 108 – 4100 Wind energy development should be prohibited in sage grouse core areas.

p. 108 – 4102 Anti-perching devices should routinely be installed, not on a case-by-case basis.

p. 109 – 4108 Alternative D is good, except that the Dubois area should also be closed to locatable minerals.

LAND RESOURCES (LR) – Renewable Energy

p. 128 – 6015 Generally Alternative D appropriately identifies wind energy avoidance and exclusion areas (Map 100), with the addition of all sage grouse core areas.

LR – Travel Management

p. 133, 136 – 6033, 6041, 6042 The following areas should be closed to motorized and mechanized travel:

- 5,490 acres of Whiskey Mountain area, to protect bighorn sheep
- 5,490 acres of Little Red Creek Complex, including Torrey Rim and Glacier Trail, to maintain wilderness characteristics
- 9,135 acres of Sweetwater Canyon, to preserve outstanding remarkable values of this suitable Wild and Scenic River waterway
- 2,349 acres of Baldwin Creek Canyon, to preserve outstanding remarkable values of this suitable Wild and Scenic River waterway

p. 134, 135 – 6034, 6038 Motorized and mechanized travel should be limited to designated roads and trails in the following areas:

- East Fork (14,802 acres) with seasonal restrictions
- Beaver Rim area (20,254 acres)
- Cedar Ridge (7,039 acres)
- Lands adjacent to Copper Mountain WSA
- Lands adjacent to Sweetwater Rocks area WSAs

While motorized and mechanized travel in the Copper Mountain WSA and Sweetwater Rocks WSAs is currently limited to roads and trails that existed when the areas were designated as WSAs, we recommend that the WSAs be reclassified as closed to all motorized and mechanized travel. We are not aware of any existing roads in these WSAs so this should not be a controversial reclassification, and if there are existing road incursions into any of the WSAs, they should be closed to protect the wilderness characteristics for which these areas were classified as WSAs in the first place.

LR – Livestock Grazing Management

p. 140-143 – 6048-6066 The Draft RMP does not adequately address livestock grazing in the Planning Area. Appropriate analysis and management actions simply aren't included, and this oversight must be corrected in the Final Plan. Additional analysis should include the following at a minimum:

- Areas in the Planning Area that are unsuitable for livestock grazing are identified and withdrawn from grazing, including areas that
 - Are degraded to a non-functioning or functioning-at-risk status
 - Have other, higher values that are significantly compromised by grazing, such as the Sweetwater Canyon where livestock grazing conflicts with wilderness values, recreational values, and fish and wildlife habitat
- Livestock grazing is managed to protect sage grouse habitat and reduce the likelihood that sage grouse will be listed as an endangered species
- Livestock stocking rates and timing of use are reduced in response to reduced forage production that has resulted from degraded riparian and upland range conditions, drought conditions, and predicted or anticipated changes resulting from climate change
- Existing range “improvement” projects are evaluated for modification or removal to benefit wildlife and other public land values
- Motorized vehicle use off of established roads for livestock management is strictly prohibited with no exceptions. Permitting ranchers to use motorized vehicles off-road to manage livestock will cause significant impact to this arid landscape, where a single vehicle passage can leave a visible track down which the next passerby is lured. Furthermore, if ranchers are allowed to drive cross-country, other public land users will argue that they are just as entitled to do the same. Horses provide a reasonable alternative for livestock management on public land.

- All existing allotment management plans are evaluated and revised in response to the above points

LR – Recreation

p. 152 6097 The fenced area of the Sweetwater Canyon SRMA should be closed to livestock grazing to protect recreational and wilderness values.

SPECIAL DESIGNATIONS (SD) – Trails

p. 159-165 – 7003-7008 Generally, we support the proposals of Alternative D related to the National Historic Trails Corridor and Continental Divide National Scenic Trails Corridor, although we would prefer to see the following additional protections in these areas:

- Visible range improvement should not be authorized within 3 miles of the trails
- Oil and gas leasing should be prohibited within 5 miles of the trails
- Corridor should be withdrawn from locatable minerals entry

SD – Wild and Scenic Rivers

p. 171-172 – 7027 We support recommending the Baldwin Creek Unit and Sweetwater River Unit for inclusion in the NWSRS, and suggest also recommending the Little Popo Agie and North Popo Agie segments for inclusion in the NWSRS. We further support interim management of the remaining 5 eligible waterways to protect their outstanding values, including historic, recreational, wildlife, and scenic values.

p. 174 – 7032 The Baldwin Creek Unit and Sweetwater Unit should be closed to motorized and mechanized travel, to protect their outstanding values.

p. 174 – 7034 The Baldwin Creek Unit and Sweetwater Unit should be closed to livestock grazing to protect their recreational, wildlife, scenic, and wilderness values.

SD – Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC)

p. 175-176 – 7040 Generally, we support the proposals of Alternative D, although we would prefer to see the following areas expanded or designated as ACECs, as per Map 131:

- Beaver Rim: retain existing 6,421 acres and add 14,111 additional acres to protect wildlife habitat, scenic values, and recreational values
- Green Mountain: retain existing 14,612 acres and add 10,248 additional acres to riparian, fisheries, and big game habitat
- Sweetwater Rocks: designate 152,347 acres to protect unique wildlife habitats, landforms, and scenic values
- Government Draw/Upper Sweetwater Sage Grouse Area: designate 1,246,791 acres to protect sage rouse habitat

We also support the designation of an entire Sweetwater Watershed ACEC, to protect and restore riparian systems throughout the watershed, wildlife and fisheries habitat, and native plant communities. We request that the BLM develop this proposal for the Final RMP.

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act defines an ACEC as an area that requires special management attention to protect and prevent irreparable damage to important historical, cultural, scenic values, fish and wildlife, and other natural systems or processes; and to protect life and ensure safety from natural hazards. The ACECs recommended for retention and expansion all provide important fisheries and wildlife habitat, scenic values, habitat for special species status, geologic features, and recreational values. Lander Slope and Red Canyon ACECs provide crucial winter range habitat for elk and mule deer including a large percentage of the South Wind River elk herd, which provides hunting opportunities and substantial support for local economies. Dubois Badlands and Whiskey Mountain provide crucial habitat for a world-renowned bighorn sheep herd that has led to BLM land acquisition in the Whiskey Mountain ACEC and a conservation easement by the Nature Conservancy.

The following management actions will ensure protection of the features that qualify these lands as ACECs.

p. 177 – 7044 Lander Slope ACEC should be managed as VRM Class II, and should be closed to oil and gas leasing, phosphate leasing, locatable minerals, and major ROWs. Because the ACEC can be seen from the town of Lander and Sinks Canyon State Park, it is a visually sensitive area. Since VRM Class III allows alterations that only partially retain the existing character of the landscape, it seems likely that potential development under Class III designation will ultimately detract from the scenic values of this ACEC.

p. 185-186 – 7080, 7081 East Fork ACEC provides crucial winter habitat for elk and is managed as part of the Inberg/Roy Wildlife Habitat Management Area (WHMA), which is closed to livestock grazing to maintain forage for big game. The expanded ACEC should all be closed to livestock grazing, and mineral actions should be managed as described in Alt. D.

p. 187-188 – 7088, 7089 Beaver Rim ACEC should be managed as VRM Class II, to protect its scenic values. The escarpment that dominates this ACEC provides numerous perches for raptor species, crucial habitat for sensitive plants species, and a climate within the walls that maintains microclimates similar to those in a moister climate. The “numerous archeological sites, some of which are important to local tribes” should be included in the resources listed for the Beaver Rim ACEC under the historical and culture criteria for an ACEC. The ACEC should be closed to oil and gas leasing, phosphate mining, locatable minerals, and wind energy development, to protect its unique resources and habitats located within the rock walls for plant, mammal, and raptor species.

p. 189 – 7097, 7098 Green Mountain ACEC should be managed as VRM Class II, and that the mineral and realty actions should be managed as proposed in Alt. D, to protect

riparian areas, wildlife habitat, and recreational opportunities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments. We believe that our recommendations, if adopted in the Final Plan, will result in a stronger Lander Area Resource Management Plan that will help protect the health and diversity of Wyoming's wildlife and vegetation, maintain recreational opportunities, and preserve areas of great scenic beauty and solitude for the future, especially in the face of climate change and other threats. Thank you for your consideration of our comments.

Sincerely,

Connie Wilbert, Wyoming Chapter Sierra Club
Bonnie Rice, Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem Resilient Habitats Campaign, Sierra Club

cc: Governor Matt Mead
Don Simpson, BLM Wyoming State Director
Steve Dondero, BLM Wind River District Manager