

What is the project and why is the plan being amended?

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is conducting a planning review of the visual resource management (VRM) class decisions applied to public lands in south-central Wyoming administered by the Rawlins Field Office (RFO). A Resource Management Plan (RMP) was recently completed in 2008 for the RFO area. However, a protest of proposed VRM classes presented in the Rawlins Proposed RMP/Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and assertion of lack of compliance with BLM VRM policy in BLM VRM Manual 8400 and 8410 resulted in a remand of the proposed VRM class decisions and required a visual resource inventory (VRI) be completed for the RFO area. The BLM has completed a VRI for the RFO area (Otak, Inc. 2011). The growing interest in wind energy development has increased the urgency to complete the Rawlins VRM planning review in a timely manner. The objective of the planning review is to consider and incorporate new VRI data, changing resource conditions, along with existing and new energy development opportunities within the RFO.

What is the area covered in this planning review?

The planning review will encompass all public land within the RFO administered area in Albany, Carbon, Laramie, and eastern Sweetwater Counties, Wyoming, with the exception of the land within the Chokecherry/Sierra Madre Wind Energy proposed project area where VRM decisions are currently being considered for amendment in a separate effort. The RFO area includes approximately four million acres of BLM-administered public land surface and five million acres of BLM-administered federal mineral estate. Areas administered by other federal agencies within the planning area include the Medicine Bow National Forest, administered by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS); Pathfinder/Seminole Reservoirs, administered by the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR); and two small wildlife refuges, administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

What is an RMP?

An RMP provides management guidance and direction for BLM-administered public land surface and federal mineral estate in accordance with the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA). Land use plan decisions establish goals and objectives for resource management, the measures needed to achieve goals and objectives, and parameters for using BLM lands or resources. BLM land use plan decisions do not apply to 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 BOR. All actions approved or authorized on public lands must conform to the RMP. The BLM may amend the RMP if updated information changes resource management or an action is being considered deviates from the approved RMP.

What is an Environmental Assessment?

An Environmental Assessment (EA) encourages environmental protection and informed decision-making as required by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). The EA establishes the need for agencies to consider alternatives to a proposed action. The EA also serves to provide public disclosure of potential environmental effects and provides opportunity for public review and



comment. The purpose of an EA is to determine if there will be significant environmental effects. If significant environmental effects are not anticipated, then a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is prepared. Otherwise, an EIS is warranted.

What is a VRI?

The VRI provides a snapshot in time of the current scenic values of an area without consideration of jurisdiction, manageability, existing leases, pending or approved projects, or other resource opportunities or constraints (*i.e.*, wildlife habitats, mineral and energy potential, etc.). Scenic quality, sensitivity levels and distance zones are evaluated during the VRI process.

VRI classes are informational in nature and provide the basis for developing alternatives during the RMP process. They do not establish management direction and should not be used as a basis for constraining or limiting surface disturbing activities.

How does the BLM manage scenic values?

The BLM is responsible for ensuring that the scenic values of the public lands it manages are considered before allowing uses that may have negative visual impacts. Scenic quality is one of the resource values specifically addressed and provided for in FLPMA. Consideration of scenic quality is accomplished through the VRM program. The VRM program involves inventory of scenic values, establishment of management objectives for those values and evaluation of proposed activities to determine whether they conform to the management objectives.

What are the VRM Class ratings?

There are four VRM classes (I, II, III, and IV); VRM Class I provides the most protection of scenic values and Class IV provides the least. VRM Class I is assigned to those areas where a management decision has been made previously to maintain a natural landscape (such as requiring VRM Class I in wilderness study areas). VRM Classes II, III, and IV are assigned based on a matrix combination of information from the VRI as well as manageability and resource conflicts.

How are VRM Classes developed?

VRM Classes are established through the RMP Planning process in consideration of: 1) multiple-use objectives; 2) the importance of the visual values; and 3) the impacts projects may have on these values. VRM class designations are based on a VRI and 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 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.

