

September 14th BLM Update from the FLUME

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BLM presents new plan for county land

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The Bureau of Land Management's Royal Gorge Field Office presented the proposed alternative in the South Park Land Tenure Adjustment Plan to Park County's Board of Commissioners on Sept. 5.

Royal Gorge Field Manager Roy Masinton, Wildlife Biologist Erik Brekke and spokesman Ken Smith attended the meeting.

The BLM plans to schedule a meeting in late October or early November to present the plan to the public.

The adjustment plan will amend the 1996 Royal Gorge Resource Management Plan that directs the BLM to dispose or exchange most of the 63,600 acres of BLM-owned land in Park County.

Masinton said that the preferred Alternative A had been revised based on 280 public comments received since Dec. 2006, comments from Park County government and new information regarding conservation easements on private land adjacent to BLM land. The proposed alternative is new and is called Alternative D.

Alternative D increases the amount of land to be retained by the BLM to 40,300 acres, 19,300 acres of land is listed for restricted exchange and land listed for disposal decreased to 4,000 acres.

In the 1996 management plan, only 7,900 acres were listed for retention by the BLM. Since 1996, cultural, historical and natural resources on the lands have been identified that led to the need to amend the plan.

Masinton explained that land listed for disposal mainly consists of small isolated parcels without public access that have no significant resource values. Land listed for restricted exchange will be retained until the BLM finds a partner who would manage the land for its significant resource values in the same way that the land would be managed by the BLM.

Some of the major changes to Alternative A, which was presented at a public meeting in Park County in December 2006, are retaining land around Tarryall Creek, the South Fork of the South Platte River, and north of U.S. 285 between Red Hill Pass and Como. More parcels around Reinecker Ridge are also listed for retention. Those lands had been listed for restricted exchange under Alternative A.

Lands moved from the disposal list in Alternative A to the restricted exchange list include parcels southwest of Antero Reservoir and lands south and southeast of Hartsel.

Resource values used in amending the 1996 management plan included:

- Mountain plover and big game habitat
- Wetlands, fens and riparian areas

- Park County's Strategic Master Plan's designated view corridors
- Adjacent open space, either by conservation easement or other public lands, such as state parks
- Recreation values and road systems allowing access to BLM lands
- Economic cost to ranchers to replace pasture leases
- Cultural and historical significance

Brekke said some changes had also been made in light of the fact that South Park may soon be designated a National Heritage Area.

Park County Tourism and Community Development Director Gary Nichols said he had sent the Alternative D map to the Heritage Program partners and they were about 95 percent in agreement, but a few parcels listed for exchange or disposal were still of concern.

Masinton asked Nichols to forward those comments to the BLM, and he would take a look at specific parcels of concern.

Nichols mentioned one BLM parcel near the Colorado Department of Wildlife's Jim Jones Wildlife Area. An adjacent owner of a large ranch is currently putting a conservation easement on the ranch. Nichols said it was preferred that the BLM retain land in that area and manage it for wildlife habitat and agricultural grazing.

Commissioner Doc McKay said if BLM land is now managed for agriculture, he would prefer it remain managed for agriculture.

Masinton said that most of the BLM land had been listed for disposal or restricted exchange since 1996, yet only a few parcels had been sold or exchanged.

"The BLM will probably have the (restricted) exchange lands for a very long time... for at least 20 years," Masinton said. "Many of the 40-acre parcels listed for disposal will sell when the time is right. Probably within four to five years we will sell about half of them."

A parcel of land just southwest of Fairplay that the commissioners had said the county would be interested in is listed for disposal. Other land the commissioners had identified as good sites for telecommunication towers were changed from exchange to retention.

Masinton said that most telecommunication towers are privately owned and acquired through "right of way" easements, not purchased. Government entities or private companies could negotiate telecommunication site easements on lands retained by the BLM.

Masinton said that anyone who currently has a BLM grazing lease on lands listed for disposal would have the opportunity to buy that parcel. He did anticipate that some disposal lands would be subdivided in the future.

Nichols said he had heard that a developer was negotiating with BLM for a 70-acre parcel near Hartsel. Masinton confirmed that is correct.

Masinton also informed the commissioners that recreational use in the area known as Guffey Gorge had increased and, due to violations of BLM rules, law enforcement has increased. The rules include no fires, no overnight camping and no glass containers. He said the area had become a "hang out" for juveniles. Seventeen citations have been recently given for underage drinking, 15 citations for glass containers and others for overnight camping and campfires. The

Park County Sheriff's Office has also responded to incidents on the BLM property.

Another concern of BLM was the increase in rescue efforts on the parcel due to rock climbing and some jumping off of 65-foot-high cliffs into a small pond on the property. Several significant injuries have occurred, including one death in 2006.

According to Park County Sheriff Fred Wegener, one weekend in August, people recreating at the BLM parcel parked 30 cars along County Road 102. "No parking" signs were erected by the county due to residents' concerns of possible vehicle accidents. Wegener said parked cars on CR 102 have decreased since the signs were erected.

Wegener said because of wetter-than-usual summers the past couple of years, Four-Mile Creek and the BLM pond have more water. That has contributed to increased recreational use. He said in drier years, the area has had less recreational use.

The BLM said it had no plans at this time to close the area to public recreation, but it is trying to manage it by increased enforcement. The BLM will keep Park County informed of the situation.