

BLM to Look at Land Issues; New Analysis Plan Coming

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The Bureau of Land Management announced Friday that it has launched a major effort to write a new management plan for more than 600,000 acres of federal public lands in nine central Montana counties, from the Rocky Mountain Front to the Musselshell River.

Public meetings to identify issues and concerns are scheduled in White Sulphur Springs, Winifred, Winnett, Great Falls, Lewistown and Choteau in March and April, the BLM said.

“This is just our first step to have the public kind of tell us what’s important to them, so we can include that in our analysis,” said Dan Brunkhorst, planning and environmental coordinator for the BLM in Lewistown.

Typically, about 17 major issues are addressed in a resource management plan, he said.

Some of the bigger issues that will be addressed in the new plan are oil and gas leasing, the status of threatened, endangered and sensitive species such as sage grouse and the inventorying of lands with wilderness characteristics, Brunkhorst said.

Other issues that will be addressed include livestock grazing, noxious weeds, fire management, commercial recreation permits and travel management and access.

The planning area includes 654,025 of federally managed surface acres, and 1.4 million acres of federal mineral estate in Fergus, Petroleum, Judith Basin, Chouteau, Meagher, Cascade, Teton, Pondera and northern Lewis and Clark counties.

When the plan is completed, it will replace the Headwaters and Judith resource management plans, which were developed in 1984 and 1994, the BLM said.

The Montana Wilderness Association noted that the 654,025 surface acres, while scattered around central Montana, is the equivalent to three-quarters of Glacier National Park, and that the plan will determine how the lands are managed for the next 20 years.

“Although the BLM lands have a lower profile than our national forest and parks, these lands are important for all Montanans and all Americans,” said Mark Good, a MWA spokesman in Great Falls.

Among the reasons the new plan is needed: Adjustments for field office boundaries, consolidating management plans, changes in the status of threatened, endangered and candidate species and land ownership and new technologies in minerals and energy development, Brunkhorst said.

Written comments should be sent to: Lewistown RMP, BLM Lewistown Field Office, 920 N.E. Main, Lewistown, MT 59457 or faxed to: 406-538-1904. Comments may also be submitted via email to: blm_mt_Lewistown_RMP@blm.gov. Further information is available at the following website: <http://blm.gov/ngld>.

The formal information gathering period ends April 11.