

Outdoors businesses rally behind BLM lands

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GREAT FALLS – More than 200 outdoors-dependent businesses in a dozen states have asked the Bureau of Land Management to protect wild country.

On Wednesday, First Lite marketing manager Ryan Callaghan announced that a letter, signed by 212 U.S. sporting businesses, had been sent to the U.S. Department of the Interior and the BLM, asking the BLM to preserve backcountry areas.

First Lite makes outdoors clothing in Ketchum, Idaho.

The letter was sent in advance of the BLM's reworking of its planning documents, including an overarching planning handbook that will guide BLM managers in rewriting separate resource management plans for 98 BLM districts.

Many sportsmen depend on larger chunks of backcountry to hunt big game and fish but don't realize that land agencies might not always protect such land.

While the BLM establishes areas for energy development and general recreation, it does not yet consider untouched backcountry as a quality to preserve.

So, as the BLM is getting ready to write new management plans that will be used for the next 20 years, 96 sportsmen's groups are trying to encourage the BLM to protect intact backcountry areas in their plans.

In a show of support, the outdoors businesses, including around 20 Montana businesses, are asking for the same.

Public lands help support America's \$821 billion per year outdoor recreation-based economy and Montana can claim a big portion of that.

Economic studies show that the rate of job growth in the 11 western states that contain most of the nation's public land is twice that in the rest of the nation, according to a Headwaters Economics survey.

While there isn't much BLM land around Bozeman, it is abundant in eastern Montana and includes such prime hunting areas as the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. Bozeman-based businesses Yellow Dog Flyfishing Adventures, the Bozeman Angler and Seacat Creative pledged their support, as did the more national companies Sitka Gear and Simms Fishing Products.

Mark Seacat employs 13 people to provide advertising and promotional products for the outdoors recreational industry. Both his customers and his employees work and play on public land, so he didn't hesitate to pledge his support.

"My personal standpoint is the more access, the better. If we can protect these areas that all Montanans can use, I think we ought to protect it," Seacat said.

This isn't the first time that Montana businesses have spoken up in support of maintaining public land.

Two years ago, more than 60 Montana outdoors-related businesses formed Business for Montana's Outdoors to add their voices in support of public policy that benefits outdoor recreation.

BFMO polled 200 businesses in Montana, and 70 percent of owners said public lands were a reason they were based in Montana.

So BFMO members have lobbied the Montana legislative delegation and Interior Secretary Sally Jewell to protect public land and support legislation such as the Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act and the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which provides oil and gas money for parks and recreation projects on public lands.

BFMO spokeswoman Marne Hayes said she hadn't been contacted about adding the BFMO's support.

"I would love to hear more about it. It sounds like something like a lot of the things we do but we'd need to learn more," Hayes said.

Mystery Ranch Backpacks spokeswoman Catie Webster attended Wednesday's announcement but said Mystery Ranch, a BFMO member, hadn't been contacted to weigh in.

"We're looking into it. The products we make depend on there being wilderness available, so preservation of those areas is important to us at Mystery Ranch," Webster said.

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