

Sportsmen Seek Protections for BLM Backcountry

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Flat crop country begins to give way to the contours of sharply rising and falling coulees that spread from the Missouri and Musselshell rivers like spider veins.

The working landscape, which includes roads and cattle ranching, is not quite wild enough to be wilderness. But this undeveloped area of remote breaks country is wild enough to be one of the best locations in Montana to shoot trophy elk or mule deer.

This is the renowned Hunting District 410, located north of Lewistown within 185,921 acres managed by the federal Bureau of Land Management.

"It has no other protection, other than being BLM lands now," says Hal Herring, a field representative for the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, while flying over the area one day last week, when the Missouri and Musselshell rivers looked like blue ribbons crossing the green expanse.

The Bureau of Land Management manages land in the Crooked Creek area near the confluence of the Missouri and Musselshell rivers that sportsmen would like to see preserved as a backcountry conservation area.

TRCP and a coalition of sportsmen's groups are proposing a new tool to protect remote blocks of BLM land such as Crooked Creek, and they hope it catches on across the West.

The tool is called "backcountry conservation area."

The goal is to use BCAs to preserve large blocks of multiuse BLM land as they are but also protect them from future threats such as transmission lines. Currently, the lands remain intact, mostly undeveloped and support high-quality wildlife habitat and they're publicly accessible. But they have no special protections.

TRCP is leading the BCA effort, but 95 other sportsmen's groups are supporting the concept including the National Wildlife Federation, Pheasants Forever and Trout Unlimited.

The multiuse land they have in mind is not wilderness quality, Herring says, but its value is no less to the sportsmen who love it.

"It has its own set of challenges for humans," Herring says of Crooked Creek.

Many homesteaders, he points out, couldn't survive there, and the land eventually ended up in the hands of the BLM.

"But it's incredible habitat for wildlife," he adds.

Local BLM offices are revising resource management plans for 123 million acres of the 245 million acres the agency manages in the West, said Joel Webster, another Montana-based TRCP representative.

The plans will dictate how the land is managed for decades to come.

It's through that land-use management process that the sportsmen are proposing BCAs, not through a congressional designation, Webster said. And the land involved is not part of existing wilderness study areas or those with wilderness characteristics, which are separate issues being looked at in the BLM planning process.

The proposed BCA land has multiple uses, and hunting is one of them.

"It's really about keeping it the way it is now," Herring said.

It's been decades since the BLM plans last were changed, and the sportsmen hope to convince local BLM land managers and other users to embrace BCAs.

Through BCAs, current public access would be maintained, according to TRCP. So would traditional uses relied upon by local communities, such as cattle grazing.

But undeveloped backcountry with priority fish and wildlife habitat and dispersed hunting and fishing opportunities would be conserved.

In practical terms, that means if a large road, pipeline or transmission line was proposed, it would be rerouted to avoid the BCA, Herring said.

In BCAs, sportsmen also want to see a bigger commitment from federal land managers to meet wildlife population objectives set by state fish and game managers, protecting animal migration corridors and sustaining public access, Webster said. Management activities that restore habitat and control noxious weeds would be prioritized.

"We don't think everybody's going to hold hands and sing 'Kumbaya' on this," Webster said.

But he adds that he also is hopeful a "sweet spot" can be found in which meaningful conservation can be achieved while maintaining traditional uses, thus avoiding gridlock over management of high-quality backcountry.

"Our real emphasis is trying to move this up from the bottom, because that's how things get done in the West," Webster said.

BCAs also are being proposed on BLM lands in Colorado, Idaho, Nevada and Oregon.

In Montana, sportsmen are focusing efforts on the Lewistown BLM district, which covers a vast swath from the Rocky Mountains to Winnett in eastern Montana, a total of 654,000 surface acres

in Fergus, Petroleum, Chouteau, Judith Basin, Cascade, Teton, Pondera, Meagher and the northern portion of Lewis and Clark counties.

The BLM parcels in the planning area range from 40 acres to large contiguous blocks of 215,575 acres. It's the larger, undeveloped parcels, such as Crooked Creek, that the sportsmen's groups hope to protect.

A formal proposal has not been submitted to the BLM. TRCP say they still are talking with local residents before finalizing the proposal. In Colorado, TRCP sat down with energy interests and ended up dropping places from consideration to eliminate a potential conflict.

"We want local support for a Montana-based solution," Herring said.

Four areas totaling 230,000 acres in the Lewistown BLM are under preliminary discussion as potential BCAs.

TRCP officials are quick to point out they are not seeking a special proclamation or designation for the land. Webster says the BLM has the flexibility, administratively, to implement BCAs under the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act, and through the planning process for the resource management plans.

"It's about land-use plans, not about legislation," said Webster, calling BCAs' a moderate approach to backcountry conservation.

Crooked Creek is part of the Missouri and Musselshell river breaks and 140 miles east of Great Falls.

It includes Hunting District 410.

"It's got a lot of elk, it's got a lot of public access and it has a very high ratio of bull elk as well," said Sonja Smith, a wildlife biologist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks in Lewistown.

In FWP's most recent survey, Smith counted 3,284 elk in the hunting district, which is 53 percent above objective. The numbers included 383 elk with at least six antler points per side, which is generally considered a mature bull elk.

FWP just increased the number of either-sex elk rifle permits for Hunting District 410 from 55 to 100 for the 2104 general rifle season, which begins Oct. 25. Antlerless elk licenses also were increased from 600 to 700. Another 1,900 either-sex archery permits are available in both hunting districts 410 and 417.

Mule deer numbers in the area have dropped in recent years due to difficult winters and dry summers, which has prevented does from building up body reserves prior to winter, Smith said. In the spring deer survey in Sand Creek and Carroll Coulee, a trend area for the broader area, 232 mule deer were counted, which is 50 percent below objective.

But Smith said that mule deer are beginning to rebound due to increased fawn survival. In an informal count of mule deer conducted during the elk survey, Smith spotted 700.

Over the long-term, Hunting District 410 has supported elk and mule deer because of ample security coupled with good forage.

"So there's a lot of places for critters to hide, and there's a lot of good forage," Smith said.

Cemetery Road north of Winnett, which is in core sage grouse habitat, also is being proposed as a BCA. Another possibility is Arrow Creek breaks northwest of Coffee Creek.

A fourth is BLM holdings in the Judith Mountains, which supports the most eastern population of west-slope cutthroat trout.

Dan Brunkhorst, planning and environmental coordinator for the BLM's Central Montana District, and the project lead on the Lewistown resource management plan, said the district is consolidating two resource management plans for the area into one.

The BLM already has taken comments to help figure out what issues are important to public, he said. Now it's developing alternatives that will be included in a draft management plan, which is expected to be released in about a year.

Based on the comments, some of the big-ticket issues that will be addressed are fish and wildlife habitat, recreation and visitor services, travel management, wilderness characteristics and resource uses such as oil and gas development and motorized access.

One of the themes heard during the initial public scoping period, from a variety of user groups, was "keep it the way it is," and now the agency's challenge is to balance those competing values, Brunkhorst said.

"Multiple-use is really hard work," Brunkhorst said.

BLM currently authorizes grazing on 590 grazing allotments in the district.

Besides the 654,000 acres of surface in the district, the BLM also manages 3 million subsurface acres for minerals extraction. Potential for the development of fluid minerals is considered low to moderate. A total of 3,825 wells have been drilled in the area to date.

Changes in values and how people use and recreate on public lands has changed since management of the area was last considered, Brunkhorst said. For example, technology changes in fluid minerals development, such as hydraulic fracturing need to be considered, and there's more demand now for motorized recreation. In addition, updates are needed to recognize the current status of grizzly bear, westslope cutthroat trout and sage grouse populations, he said.

"We are lucky in central Montana that, compared to the rest of the country, we have relatively intact landscapes and health ecosystems," Brunkhorst said. "So our main challenge will be to keep it that way."

The BLM will not designate a new administrative designation such as BCAs in Montana, Brunkhorst said.

But the agency is willing to look at those areas proposed for BCAs to see if they meet the objectives of existing administrative designations, such as areas of critical environmental concern and lands with wilderness characteristics, Brunkhorst said.

"Ultimately, we make a decision to best balance competing values on public lands," he said.

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For more information

For more information on the BLM's resource management plans for the Lewistown planning area go to <http://www.blm.gov/mt/st/en.html> and click "Lewistown" on the map.

Breaks video

To see one of the landscapes sportsmen would like to see protected as a backcountry conservation area go to gftrib.com.

<http://www.greatfallstribune.com/story/news/local/2014/09/14/sportsmen-seek-protections-blm-backcountry/15616633/>