

BLM Public Meetings Underway On New Resource Management Plan

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Despite being the smallest county, in population, a sizeable number of Petroleum County residents attended last week's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Open House to hear about the planned Resource Management Plan (RMP) update.

About twenty people came to the meeting held in the county courthouse in Winnett.

According to Dan Brunkhorst, RMP Project Manager with the BLM, the Lewistown RMP planning area is currently operating under two different management plans. The Headwaters Resource Management Plan has been in force for thirty years and controls the western portion of the Lewistown district. The twenty year old Judith Basin RMP covers the eastern portion.

According to Brunkhorst, one of the reasons for updating the RMP is to put the entire district under a single RMP. Another reason, "A lot of things have changed. A 'protest resolution' that affects fluid minerals (oil and gas) needs to be resolved." Other considerations are mineral withdrawals along the Rocky Mountain Front and the expectation that new rules governing hydraulic fracturing may be in the works.

The Project Manager, in a lengthy description of the RMP process and what the BLM does in that process, said the agency, when it comes to "visual resources" considered in the drafting of the new RMP "manages the scenery," and when it comes to lands with wilderness characteristics, considers "apparent naturalness" and "opportunities for solitude."

Brunkhorst said that there were three Wilderness Study Areas that were administratively designated that will be re-considered. "No new WSAs can be created," he said. The Wilderness Study areas are Square Butte, North Fork of the Sun River and Beaver Meadows.

Asked about the protest resolution, Brunkhorst said it arose from a lawsuit filed in 1988. The case was given as the reason for drilling suspensions.

The Lewistown BLM office manages 654,025 acres of public land surface and 1,399,880 acres of subsurface minerals. Some of the minerals are "severed estates," where the minerals are managed by the BLM while the surface is under different ownership. As is the case with the Solonex lease in Glacier County, the BLM minerals are under U.S. Forest Service surface.

Most of the questions from the crowd centered on the affects of severed estates and state leases. Brunkhorst said those should not be effected.

In the meeting a former military bombing range that is located north of Winnett was mentioned by Brunkhorst, who said, "there will never be a drilling pad there."

No BLM staff from the fluid minerals division came to the meeting, held in a county where oil wells outnumber residents. The county is home to one of the oldest oil fields in Montana, the Cat Creek Field. Other fields in Petroleum County are Brush Creek, Cat Creek West Dome, Cat Creek Mosby Dome, Kootenai, McDonald Creek, Oiltana and Rattlesnake Butte. Only Cat Creek, McDonald Creek and Rattlesnake Butte are listed as currently producing fields by the Montana Board of Oil and Gas Conservation.

Meetings were held in White Sulphur Springs on March 4 and Winifred on March 6. The next meeting is set for March 18 at the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center in Great Falls; April 1 at the Yogo Inn in Lewistown, and at the Public Library in Choteau on April 3. All meetings open at 5:00 pm and run until 7 pm.