

## 2.0 **Groups propose new ‘Backcountry Conservation’ designation**

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By [Kelsey Dayton](#) — October 14, 2014

It wasn't until he left his home in Sweetwater County for other states that Joshua Coursey, president of the Muley Fanatic Foundation of Wyoming, realized how good he'd had it growing up where he could fish and hunt on nearby public lands.

“The amount of access that we have, we tend to take for granted, especially when you have been born and raised here,” said Coursey, who now lives in Green River, Wyo. “We are very blessed, without a doubt, but with that comes responsibility.”

That's why Muley Fanatics joined a coalition of 96 hunting and fishing groups, including Bowhunters of Wyoming and the Travelle Chapter of the Izaak Walton League, in supporting a new land designation called backcountry conservation.

Backcountry conservation designation, like a research natural area or area of environmental concern, would be a federal designation, and come with a specific set of guidelines for using and developing the land for the length of the management plan, usually about 20 years.

The backcountry conservation designation would be another tool the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) could use when creating management plans, said Joel Webster, director of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership's Center for Western Lands.

The backcountry conservation label would preserve undeveloped lands to benefit wildlife populations as well as hunting and fishing. That means existing roads could still be used and ranchers could continue grazing operations and maintaining range improvements, but the area would be protected from new industrial development that could fragment the landscape.

*Mule deer forage in the Wind River mountain range. The BLM is revising its planning process and some groups hope they'll use the time to include a new land designation. Backcountry conservation areas would protect places valued for hunting and fishing and wildlife. (photo by Shelley Gregory — [click to enlarge](#))*

It would not prohibit energy development or leasing, but would require directional drilling with no surface occupancy within the boundaries of the backcountry area, Webster said.

The designation would emphasize fishing, wildlife and outdoor recreation values as the best and most important use of that swath of land, he said.

Webster is already working with local stakeholders in Colorado, Montana, Idaho, Nevada and Oregon on including the designation in land management plans underway. But he wants it to be an option that all local offices know is available. He wants it officially listed in the BLM's handbook.

It is the local BLM offices that create management plans that often dictate recreation opportunities and guide development. The local offices create their plans following steps outlined in a National BLM handbook, which the agency is revising with its new planning process called [Planning2.0](#), expected to be complete in 2016.

The agency wants to create a process that manages for an entire landscape, not just the boundaries of one field office, said Derrick Henry, a spokesperson with the BLM. Sage grouse,

fire and climate change don't pay attention to these boundaries, and decisions made in one planning area can impact species in another. The agency also wants a more collaborative and efficient planning process.

Adding a backcountry conservation designation is possible, if the agency feels it meets the goals of collaboration, efficiency and landscape-wide planning, Henry said. "We're still in the early stages of the process and the BLM is open to any ideas to refine the (planning) process," he said.

This designation is aimed at creating collaborative land planning, not at creating new disputes between user groups, Webster said. To that end it would only be suggested for plans in which the majority of the stakeholders want it. In addition to the 96 groups that support it, more than 200 outdoor-related businesses, including the Irma Hotel, Ovis Consulting, Tim Wade's North Fork Anglers and Sunlight Sports in Cody, as well as Sports Lure in Buffalo, signed a [letter](#) advocating the BLM adopt the designation to use in its planning process.

Jim Magagna, vice president of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, only heard about the designation a few days ago and knew little about it. But the term is something he said he will investigate.

Magagna, who served on a national committee to develop the new Forest Service planning rule, has been following the BLM's Planning 2.0 initiative. It will depend on how the efforts manifest, but he likes the idea of simplifying and shortening the planning process because plans, which can take up to 10 years to complete, are often outdated before they are even implemented. He's also intrigued by the idea of more adaptive management.

"Depending on how that is defined, that could be a good thing," he said.

He's more concerned about the backcountry conservation designation.

Magagna feels that too often special designations, such as wilderness study areas, areas of environmental concern or research natural areas, are well intended, but end up hurting users – often stock growers.

Even if, as Webster said, the designation would allow existing use, Magagna said he's leery.

"I would rather see the focus on not prohibiting development in certain places, but developing criteria for how it takes place," he said. "I believe it can take place in most places if it's done the right way."

If the BLM adopts a backcountry conservation designation, it doesn't mean that every planning area should have one, Webster said.

While there are no proposals for backcountry designation areas in Wyoming at the moment, Coursey said he could see it benefiting the state down the road.

"I think Wyoming would be the perfect poster child for this," he said.

— *"Peaks to Plains" is a blog focusing on Wyoming's outdoors and communities. Kelsey Dayton is a freelancer and the editor of Outdoors Unlimited, the magazine of the Outdoor Writers Association of America. She has worked as a reporter for the Gillette News-Record, Jackson Hole News&Guide and the Casper Star Tribune. Contact Kelsey at [kelsey.dayton@gmail.com](mailto:kelsey.dayton@gmail.com). Follow her on twitter: @Kelsey\_Dayton*

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