



BILLINGS GAZETTE

Wild prairie inventory: Students document land features north of Winnett



AUGUST 15, 2014 6:15 AM • BY BRETT FRENCH

Sending a dirt bike rider and an Eastern Montana native to inventory lands with possible wilderness characteristics may seem like a bad choice by the Montana Wilderness Association, but Cameron Sapp doesn't see it that way.

"At the base of it, we all love this landscape," said Sapp, the MWA's prairie wildlands outreach coordinator in Billings.

It was his decision to hire Rocky Mountain College student Tyler Kethley and a classmate to chronicle their findings about Bureau of Land Management acreage north of Winnett and in the Judith Mountains near Lewistown. Sapp is a graduate of Rocky's environmental studies program.

Under the BLM's definition, lands suitable for wilderness designation must be at least 5,000 acres and be largely natural while offering opportunities for solitude.

The summer interns were hired to inventory four areas: Dovetail Creek about 18 miles northeast of Winnett; Welter Divide about 11 miles north of Winnett; Cemetery Road about 3 miles north of Winnett; and the Red Mountain Unit in the Judith Mountains, 15 miles northeast of Lewistown.

Their job was to mark any routes or trails, or any other manmade alterations to the landscape, in a computer program that recorded the GPS location of the feature. That data was then compiled in a report that will go to the BLM's Lewistown Field Office and to the MWA.

"One of the things I couldn't stress more is we try to be objective," Kethley said. "We document everything we see so the BLM can decide, even though MWA's primary goal is to protect these areas."

RMP in progress

The Lewistown Field Office has only recently started building a new Resource Management Plan that will govern oversight of its 750,300 surface acres, having just finished holding meetings to outline issues.

The agency is in the process of finishing its own in-house inventory of lands with wilderness characteristics and will next determine which of the lands contain wilderness values, said Dan Brunkhorst, BLM planning and environmental coordinator in Lewistown.

"As with any other inventory effort, we welcome any additional information that helps BLM make more informed decisions," Brunkhorst said in an email. "We'll review any information provided to us and use it, where appropriate, to supplement our existing inventory."

Once the analysis of the scoping issues is completed, probably by this fall, the BLM will begin formulating alternatives for the plan — ranging from a proposal that is more pro-conservation to one that is pro-development with the compromise somewhere in between.

The Resource Management Plans draw a lot of attention from landowners, ag and energy groups as well as conservation and hunting organizations.

Touchy subject

Kethley, who moved to Montana from Arizona and is a devoted dirt biker, had never been to the Winnett or Judith Mountain areas before the inventory.

"You go to Winnett and it's almost a culture shock," said Kethley, a 19-year-old from Surprise, Ariz., who just finished his freshman year studying environmental science and environmental management and policy.

But during the seven days he spent touring the BLM sites, Kethley said the region quickly grew on him as he became impressed by the vast sagebrush and grass landscape that was sometimes dotted with antelope and elk.

"It takes a little time, but that eastern part of the state has beauty, too," he said. "The rolling plains have something to them."

When Sapp first visited the area during the fall archery season he was amazed.

"I was kind of shocked because you think you're going into this remote place in Montana and the roads were lined with hunters," he said. "It's amazing how much value there is for public opportunity out there."

Wild designation

A new wilderness area hasn't been designated in Eastern Montana since 1976 when the 20,800-acre UL Bend and 11,300-acre Medicine Lake wildernesses were set aside. They are the only wilderness areas east of the Rocky Mountains in Montana.

Yet the BLM has 39 wilderness study areas in Montana, six in the Lewistown district which ranges from the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in the east to the Rocky Mountain Front.

"This is a huge area," Sapp said. "Essentially the goal of the inventory is to document what's there right now."

Sapp said he's looked at a lot of reports, and he's amazed at how well the students gather and organize their information.

A similar survey was done last year by Rocky Mountain College students on other stretches of the Montana prairie.

Kethley felt lucky to be able to work on the project at such an early stage in his college career.

His first visit to Montana was during a college recruiting visit. Impressed by the school, he packed up and moved 1,200 miles away from his home and family.

"I'm loving it," he said.