

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Vernal Field Office (VFO) of the Utah Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is revising and integrating the Book Cliffs and Diamond Mountain Resource Management Plans (RMPs) into a single new RMP. The revised RMP will be called the Vernal Field Office RMP and will provide planning guidance for public land and federal mineral estate managed by the VFO in Daggett, Duchesne, and Uintah Counties in northeastern Utah, as well as a small portion of Grand County. The consolidated Diamond Mountain and Book Cliffs areas will be referred to as the Vernal Planning Area (VPA).

The VPA includes the south slope of the Uinta Mountains, the Uinta Basin, and the Book Cliffs region (see Figure 1). The BLM manages approximately 30% of the land within this planning area. Most of the land that BLM manages is in the eastern and southern portions of the planning area and is generally characterized by habitats associated with the Uinta Basin and Colorado Plateau. Other agencies that manage land in the vicinity of the VPA include the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the National Park Service (NPS), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR), and the Utah Division of Lands and Forestry. Additional lands are held in private ownership or in trust by the United States for the Ute Tribe or individual tribal members. Much of the planning area is within the boundaries of the Uinta and Ouray Indian Reservation, with Reservation Trust lands managed by the BIA.

The Diamond Mountain portion of the planning area includes BLM-administered lands and minerals in Daggett and Duchesne Counties and a portion of Uintah County northwest of the Green River. The plan is responsible for the administration of public land in Browns Park and the Diamond Mountain Plateau for the Little Snake Field Office of Colorado. For ease of management, the VFO also manages certain resources south of the Duchesne-Carbon County line in the Nine-Mile and Argyle Canyon areas of the Price Field Office. Similarly, the Little Snake Field Office administers public land in Browns Park and the Price Field Office administers certain resources in the Nine-Mile Canyon area. Administration of these agreed-upon resources is in accordance with the parent Field Office's management plan. There are also fire suppression agreements between the VFO and these other BLM field offices.

The Book Cliffs portion of the planning area is located in northeastern Utah. It is bounded by the Utah-Colorado state line on the east, the Book Cliff Mountains to the south, the Green River to the west, and Blue Mountain to the north (see Figure 1). The Book Cliffs area includes public land and minerals in Uintah and Grand Counties. The VFO boundary officially ends at the Uintah County line; however, a small portion of public land in Grand County of the Moab Field Office is administered by the VFO under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Additionally the VFO manages livestock grazing for some allotments in Colorado along the Utah-Colorado border for the White River Field Office. Similarly, the White River Field Office administers livestock grazing for certain allotments in Utah. The agreement with the Moab Field Office includes the administration of all resources and programs including land use planning, while the agreement with the White River Field Office includes only grazing administration. Thus, this planning effort will not consider alternatives for grazing in Colorado.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

Purpose: The Proposed Action for this project is to revise and integrate the Book Cliffs and Diamond Mountain RMPs into a single new RMP that will guide management of public lands in the VPA. The revised RMP will coordinate the management of the VPA with other land management agencies including: the State of Utah; the Ute Indian Tribe; NPS; USFS; BIA; Daggett, Duchesne, and Uintah Counties; municipalities; and private entities. The revised RMP will also coordinate the management of federal subsurface mineral estates with private landowners, the Ute Tribe, or other nonfederal surface owners. The VFO will coordinate plan implementation with adjoining BLM Offices in Wyoming and Colorado as well as with the Price and Moab Field Offices.

Need: This RMP revision process is necessary because of the dated nature of the Book Cliffs RMP, completed in 1985, and the incompatibility of the Book Cliffs and Diamond Mountain RMPs. Major changes within the VPA have occurred since the completion of the Diamond Mountain and Book Cliff RMPs. Population growth and the increased need for resource development have occurred, while concern for the environment has also increased. In addition to traditional consumptive uses (e.g., mining and livestock grazing), there is now a heightened interest in uses that emphasize aesthetic values such as open space and recreational opportunities. These often-conflicting uses need to be addressed in terms of how they affect local communities, regional and state interests, and ecosystem health. Additionally, several changes regarding land management direction have occurred since the Book Cliffs RMP was written. These changes need to be addressed as part of this RMP revision and integration process.

PLANNING ISSUES

Special Management Designations

Some areas within the VPA have unique resource values that warrant special management and may be suitable for designation as Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), Wild and Scenic Rivers, or Special Recreation Management Areas (SRMAs).

Resource Accessibility and Use

The VPA has oil, gas, and mineral resources that benefit the local communities, the state, and the country. The exploration and development of oil, gas, and minerals need to be managed with consideration of recreational uses, such as off-highway vehicle (OHV) use, in order to protect the long-term productivity of the VPA's natural and cultural resources.

ALTERNATIVES

This RMP presents four alternative proposals for managing public lands in the VPA. The alternatives were developed in response to the issues identified in the public scoping process and the planning criteria. The BLM recognizes that social, economic, and environmental issues cross land ownership lines and that extensive cooperation is needed to actively address issues of mutual concern. To the extent possible, these alternatives were crafted utilizing input from public scoping comments: Duchesne, Daggett, and Uintah County representatives and other cooperating agencies.

Key management decisions for this RMP include the amount of land open for oil and gas leasing, the designation of ACECs and other special management designations, and management of OHV

use. A comparison of the alternatives regarding these key management decisions is given in Tables S.1 through S.4 below.

Alternative A

This alternative provides generally broad management direction to accommodate a wide variety of values and uses. The planning area would be managed to provide development opportunities while protecting sensitive resources. This alternative employs timing and sequencing of events through adaptive management based on sensitive resource indicators. It designates ten ACECs and recommends sections of two rivers for Wild and Scenic River designation (Tables S.2 and S.3). It has more area available for oil and gas leasing than Alternative D (No Action) (Table S.1). Note: The increase of 188,500 acres in Alternatives A, B, and C can be attributed to the proposed leasing of split estate lands in the Hill Creek Extension.

Alternative B

This alternative focuses on providing development and use opportunities, while addressing required natural resource protection through focused and prudent mitigation measures. It designates seven ACECs and recommends sections of one river for Wild and Scenic River designation (Tables S.2 and S.3). This alternative has the largest area open to oil and gas leasing (Table S.1).

Alternative C

This alternative focuses on protection of natural and cultural resources, while providing for compatible development and use. It designates fourteen ACECs, and recommends sections of six rivers and creeks for Wild and Scenic River designation (Tables S.2 and S.3). It has the least amount of area open to oil and gas leasing (Table S.1).

Alternative D – No Action

This alternative would maintain present uses by continuing present management direction as stipulated in the Diamond Mountain and Book Cliffs RMPs. This alternative would also comply with all new mandates, Executive Orders, and directives that have been implemented since these previous RMPs were completed. This alternative has the greatest amount of unregulated open area for OHV use and no designated OHV routes (Table S.4). It designates seven ACECs, and recommends sections of one river for Wild and Scenic River designation (Tables S.2 and S.3).

TABLE S.1. ALTERNATIVES COMPARISON: OIL AND GAS AND COAL-BED METHANE LEASING (ACRES)				
Leasing Category	Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C	Alternative D (No Action)
Open	982,904	1,113,116	858,619	918,315
Administratively Open with Controlled Surface Use	793,878	706,281	768,466	617,715
Administratively Open with No Surface Occupancy	66,483	42,053	58,670	136,930
Closed	70,734	52,550	228,246	52,540

TABLE S.2. ALTERNATIVES COMPARISON: ACECs (ACRES)				
ACECs	Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C	Alternative D (No Action)
Bitter Creek	68,834	0	68,834	0
Bitter Creek-P.R. Spring	0	0	78,591	0
Coyote Basin	87,743	47,659	124,161	0
Four Mile Wash	0	0	50,280	0
Middle Green River	0	0	6,768	0
Lower Green River	10,170	0	10,170	8,470
White River	17,810	0	47,130	0
Browns Park	52,721	18,475	52,721	52,721
Red Mountain-Dry Fork	24,285	24,285	24,285	24,285
Nine-Mile Canyon	48,000	44,181	81,168	44,181
Main Canyon	0	0	100,915	0
Lears Canyon	1,375	1,375	1,375	1,375
Pariette	10,437	10,437	10,437	10,437
Red Creek	24,475	24,475	24,475	24,475
Total Acres	345,850	170,887	681,310	165,944

TABLE S.3. ALTERNATIVES COMPARISON: WILD AND SCENIC RIVER DESIGNATIONS (LINEAR MILES)				
Wild and Scenic River Designations	Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C	Alternative D (No Action)
White River	20	0	44	0
Nine Mile Creek between Green River and Duchesne county line	0	0	13	0
Nine Mine Creek between Carbon county line and confluence with Gate Canyon	0	0	6	0
Middle Green River	0	0	36	0
Evacuation Creek	0	0	21	0
Bitter Creek	0	0	22	0
Argyle Creek	0	0	22	0
Upper Green River	22	22	22	22
Lower Green River	30	30	30	30
Total Linear Miles	72	52	216	52

Categories of OHV Use	Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C	Alternative D (No Action)
Open to OHV (acres)	6,202	5,434	5,434	787,859
Limited to OHV (acres)	1,643,475	1,659,901	1,353,529	887,275
Closed to OHV (acres)	75,845	60,187	366,559	50,388
Designated OHV Routes (miles)	4,860	4,861	4,707	0

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

Resources within the VPA include mineral resources, wildlife, fisheries, botanical (including listed and non-listed sensitive species), rangeland, wild horses, wilderness, cultural resources, water resources, wetlands and riparian resources, visual resources, and recreational resources. Land use and economic resources include oil and gas, phosphate, tar sands, Gilsonite, livestock grazing, woodland products, building stone, and rights-of-way. Opportunities for hunting, sightseeing, hiking, viewing historic sites, camping, fishing, and OHV use provide public enjoyment, as well as additional revenues to businesses in and adjacent to the VPA. Unique features within the planning area include the White and Green River; Browns Park, which provides crucial deer winter range and a high density of cultural and historical sites; the Pariette Wetlands, which provide habitat for over 100 species of wildlife; Red Mountain, with its high mountain vistas and plentiful recreational opportunities; Nine-Mile Canyon, with its Fremont rock art; and the Book Cliffs, an area rich in resources with abundant management opportunities.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

The environmental impacts of the project alternatives are summarized in Table 2.5 of Chapter 2 of this EIS.

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