CHAPTER 6

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SHORT-TERM USES AND LONG-TERM PRODUCTIVITY OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Approval of the Buckskin mining and reclamation plan would allow mining of 80 million tons of coal over a 20-year period to meet national energy demands. Although Buckskin would be a new mine, coal mining is not new to Campbell and Converse counties. There are already fifteen coal mines in the region either operating or pending final approval, and the Buckskin site is only 2 or 3 miles from the currently operating Rawhide Mine. The proposed Buckskin Mine site is presently used for livestock grazing, and it could be returned to that use after reclamation.

The coal removed from the Buckskin Mine by 1990 would amount to 42 million tons (2% of all coal mined in the region by 1990); it would be consumed in the production of electricity outside the region. About 2.6 million tons of coal would be lost at the Buckskin Mine by the end of mine life, because current mining technology does not permit its economic separation from overburden and partings.

The 1978 population of Campbell and Converse counties is estimated at 37,780. By 1990, population increases in these counties due to the Buckskin project would amount to 815, or 3.8% of total increases expected in these counties by 1990.

In the short term, the Buckskin Mine would contribute to increased local income and stimulate retail and wholesale trade. The loss of buying power of people on fixed income would be a long-term effect.

Permanent employment at the Buckskin Mine would reach 133 by 1990; this project alone probably would not create a labor shortage in other sectors of the economy, although it would contribute (3.4% by 1990) to the effect of total regional mine employment. In the long term, the regional labor force would grow to meet the demands of all employers, and increased employment would tend to hold the unemployment rate at its current low level. At the end of the Buckskin Mine life, it is expected that the employees could find work at other mines in the region.

In the short term, the population increase attributable to the Buckskin Mine would contribute to community problems; in Gillette, the Buckskin-related population increase by 1990 would amount to 6% of total community growth expected. Rising housing prices and crowded conditions, crowding of classrooms, increased pressures on health care and transportation facilities, and overtaxing of local services would occur. However, in the long term, housing stock would increase to meet demand; new facilities would be built and personnel to man them would be hired; the tax base would increase to pay for these needs.

Since the Buckskin Mine site could be reclaimed, mining would represent a short-term commitment of land use. Following reclamation, construction of buildings on the site might be restricted due to decreased ground stability. Land occupied by expanded urban areas (45 acres to serve Buckskin-related population increases) would be permanently committed.

Short-term disturbance of the soil resource would disrupt the productivity levels, destroy existing soil profiles, and increase soil erosion losses on 1,071 acres by the end of mine life. Soil productivity levels could be restored in the long term to an estimated 94% of premining levels.

Development of the Buckskin Mine would result in short-term losses of vegetation on 1,071 acres by the end of mine life. Reestablished vegetation could support livestock grazing within 10 years after reclamation begins, and in the long term, productivity would probably stabilize at 94% of premining levels.

The use of 45 acres for housing and support services for the Buckskin-related population increase would be a long-term commitment of the land. Productivity in relation to soils, vegetation, livestock grazing, and wildlife habitat would be lost, but productivity as measured in benefits to people would be enhanced.

A total of 1,071 acres of wildlife habitat would be lost for the short term at the mine site. Habitat diversity would be reduced, because areas formerly dominated by big sagebrush and silver sagebrush would be reclaimed to grassland. The riparian habitat along Rawhide Creek and Spring Draw would be lost and replaced by grassland with a few shrub species. The edge between major habitat types would be reduced by 61% after reclamation compared to the premining habitat. Existing wildlife populations on the site would be lost as their habitat is destroyed. Repopulation of reclaimed areas by small nongame mammals, birds, and reptiles should occur. The rate of repopulation and postmining densities are currently unpredictable.

The loss of 256 animal unit months (AUMs) of grazing annually would be a short-term loss.

Salvage of the two cultural resource sites within the area to be mined would be a long-term commitment.