

Chapter 4: Countywide Policies by Area of Concern

Sustainable Growth

General:

Hot Springs County generally does not enjoy a well diversified economy with agriculture, tourism, health care and mining/oil/gas extraction being the major industries in the County. Manufacturing and hi-tech industries in particular have poor representation in the County. Due to the wonderful scenery and hot springs, tourism is a major industry although quite seasonal in nature. Since almost 70% of the County's surface ownership is public lands, the agriculture and mining/oil/gas extraction industries are especially sensitive to policy changes and management decisions on the public lands within the County and to commodity prices in general.

Background:

Jobs in agriculture have dwindled over the last half century. The Hot Springs County agricultural industry is heavily dependent upon the availability of grazing leases on both State of Wyoming and Federal land within the County in order to sustain a viable industry. A recent study by the University of Wyoming Department of Agriculture, which assesses the effect of reduction of AUMs on federal lands in adjacent Fremont County, showed a significant negative effect on the County's jobs and net cash flow when AUMs were reduced (see Appendix "C"). Without the State and Federal leases, many of this County's agricultural operations would undoubtedly become unviable leading to shrinkage of the industry even more; and eventually, subdividing of the smaller tracts of private land for residential purposes.

For those portions of Hot Springs County falling within the Shoshone National Forest; that is, in the extreme western part of the County, the Multiple Use and Sustained Yield Act of 1960 directs the Secretary of Agriculture to manage the grazing, timber production, tourism and mineral resources to produce a sustainable yield of products and services, and for other purposes. It is one of the most important laws governing the management of the national forests.

Historically, the oil industry has been a leading employer in the County but has suffered as commodity prices fluctuate. At the time of this writing, the oil and natural gas prices are quite high thus leading to increased activity, increased assessed evaluations and a large budget surplus for the State of Wyoming. The natural gas industry has seen almost all of the increase in the recent drilling recovery, with oil well drilling lagging natural gas well drilling, due to uncertainties in the price of oil and lack of a national energy policy. The possibility exists that

some methane development may spread from the Powder River Basin to the Big Horn Basin in the near future which would help replace the dwindling oil production. The oil and gas industries in the County are almost totally dependent upon the availability of State and Federal leases in order to sustain production or replace reserves. Retraction of State or Federal lands in Hot Springs County from mineral leasing would have a devastating long-term effect on the economy and upon the assessed evaluation which the County depends upon in order to provide services.

The tourism industry in Hot Springs County is well established, focusing on the Wind River Canyon and mineral hot springs. In addition, the County has benefited from the establishment of the Wyoming Dinosaur Center in East Thermopolis which has provided a boost to the tourism industry in general. Further growth in the tourism industry could possibly be gained through improved infrastructure such as an updated airport. The scenic nature of public land in the County is certainly a tourism attraction along with the hunting and fishing opportunities afforded by the public lands, all of which require access.

One of the strongest industries in the County is the health care industry which is well represented by the Hot Springs County Memorial Hospital, Gottsche Rehabilitation Center, assisted living, nursing homes, mental wellness, and Big Horn enterprises which cares for the disabled. These are supplemented by many service organizations, businesses and volunteers. Since Hot Springs County has a rapidly aging population (defined as the oldest median age), which is the largest in the State on a percentage basis, it is again extremely important to have the facilities in place and well financed to serve the older and disabled population. Doing so requires an adequately funded County government, supported by tax revenue largely generated by the public lands in the County. In brief, multi-use of the public lands in a productive manner contributes greatly to the support of the health care industry and other vital aspects of the economy such as the school system.

Areas which are lacking in the economy are manufacturing, importing/exporting, logging, mining of rock products and minerals, and value added industries. An industrial park and airport relocation are needed in order to properly address these weaknesses.

Sustainable Growth Thresholds:

Webster's Dictionary defines *threshold* as " a level, point or value above which something is true or will take place and below which it is not or will not". In order to perpetuate the sustained growth of the County, the following thresholds are herein established:

GRAZING

For purposes of the BLM Grass Creek Resource Management Plan revision, table 5-4 the preferred alternative of the Final Grass Creek EIS, established a threshold for 2005 of 135,241 estimated long-term AUMs available for livestock use by the end of calendar 2005 on the public lands. This figure was for the entire four county resource area not Hot Springs County alone.

Therefore, the County recommends a threshold level for oil production in the Grass Creek planning area of 4,200, 000 barrels per year which requires the recovery of recently lost production during the course of the next RMP period, approximately 2006-2020. That is, an increase in production is required in order to re-establish the socio-economic base of the County. Again, the 4,200,000 barrel threshold level is combined figures for all counties in the planning area.

For the BLM administered Washakie Resource area precise production records were not readily available in the plan. However, the Final RMP provided good information on Minerals Management such as:

Approximately 117,800 acres (7 percent of the federal mineral estate) would be leased with a "no surface occupancy" restriction to protect important wildlife habitat, and cultural and recreation sites.

Approximately 953,500 acres (60% of the federal mineral estate) would be leased with seasonal restrictions to protect important wildlife habitat.

Approximately 520,500 acres (33 percent of the federal mineral estate) would be leased with other standard surface protection restrictions applied.

Since the County has been experiencing steadily declining oil/gas production, population loss, aging in place and is a distressed community, the threshold which the County establishes for the Washakie Resource area and the potentially combined Washakie/ Grass Creek RMP, is to reduce the total lease restrictions and land withdrawals as a mechanism of sustaining and/or reestablishing the all important mineral base of the County's economy. Therefore, the following threshold is proposed by Hot Springs County:

For purposes of the Washakie/Grass Creek Resource Management Plan revision(s), a net reduction of 20% in lease restrictions and land withdrawals is deemed essential by the County in order to sustain the custom, culture, general welfare, and socio-economic structure of Hot Springs County.

NATURAL GAS PRODUCTION

Hot Springs County is not a large producer of natural gas and has lost production in the period 1999-2004. Limited production, lack of deep plays, lack of transmission lines, and commodity prices have all influenced declining production. Until such time as the major gas/oil companies invest in exploratory deep drilling, the County will have insignificant production plagued by various problems. A natural gas threshold is difficult to establish and would best be related to number of exploratory wells drilled in the County.

The Grass Creek RMP/EIS of June 1996 projected a +5.87% increase in gas production across a 4 county management area; however, Hot Springs County's production is not

SW Bighorn mule deer	(9 hunt areas)	23,000 to 25,000
Basin mule deer herd unit	(hunt area 125,127)	2,900 to 3,300 minimum
Owl Creek/Meeteetse	(hunt area 116-120)	4,700 to 5,300 minimum

ELK: The County recognizes elk hunting and viewing as a major socio-economic factor in the County well established in the resident's and non-resident's custom and culture. Therefore, the County's management goal is to sustain elk populations at or near historically high numbers. As with the other ungulates, the County recognizes predator control as a valid method of increasing and/or sustaining elk herd populations.

So. Bighorn Elk herd	(6 hunt areas)	6,400 to 7,000 minimum
Gooseberry Elk herd	(hunt areas 62-64)	3,900 to 4,100 minimum

ANTELOPE: Historically, the County has supported antelope herd populations which are at or near historically high levels in order to sustain the hunting, viewing/eco-tourism industry. As with other ungulates, the County supports hunting licenses in order to control herd sizes on the high end and predator control in order to increase the beneficial take of antelope.

Copper Mtn. Pronghorn herd	(areas 76,114,115)	5,900 to 6,300 minimum
15 Mile Pronghorn herd	(areas 83,77,110)	3,900 to 4,200 minimum

GRIZZLY BEARS: The County recognizes that the grizzly bear constitutes a socially unacceptable species in the BLM administered Grass Creek Resource Management Area. The County asserts that the Grass Creek plan did not allow for grizzly occupancy and desires to maintain this provision in upcoming BLM RMP revisions. It is the County's belief that the presence of grizzly bears on the BLM lands within the County represents a threat to the health, safety and general welfare of the County's residents. Therefore, the County desires to establish the following threshold levels for grizzly bears in Hot Springs County:

BLM administered lands	0 grizzly bears
Shoshone National Forest	0 grizzly bears on grazing allotments
Washakie Wilderness Area (in Hot Springs Co.)	5-20 grizzly bears in the Washakie

BIG HORN SHEEP: The County recognizes the reintroduction efforts to establish healthy herd populations, supports the effort and recommends management techniques which benefit the herds by preventing substantial losses due to predators and disease. The County's goal is to encourage herd populations which benefit eco-tourism and limited hunter harvest. A recommended threshold herd size for the Game and Fish management area which includes the County is;

Incremental Bureaucratic Regulations:

Hot Springs County is concerned about the steadily increasing number of restrictions, mitigating measures and stipulations which State and Federal resource managers have put on grazing leases, mining operations, oil and gas production, timber harvesting, recreation and multiple use in general. The accumulative effect of the restrictions, mitigating measures and stipulations has reached the point in Hot Springs County where some components of the economy, particularly agriculture and the oil/gas/minerals industries, are threatened. In most cases, the accumulative regulations have been implemented without an economic analysis of the effect upon the County's economy and social structure including schools, hospitals, government and emergency services. Admitably, this is a very difficult problem to address. Hot Spring's County asserts that the most reasonable method of addressing the issue is through economic analysis of the impacts of the various regulations on the County's economy whether the action is State or Federal in nature. Therefore, the County shall advocate the following remedial actions in order to protect the economy:

1. Establishment of a working group consisting of County, State and Federal representatives to seek solutions to the incremental regulations problem,
2. As required by Federal statute, Hot Springs County shall require that both State and Federal agencies assess the effect of their actions on the economy, custom and culture of Hot Springs County by utilization of economic studies such as cost/benefit analysis, economic impact analysis, lowest cost alternatives, most economic benefit analysis and analysis of the economy of the County in order to protect its general economic health. Hot Springs County at its discretion, may be involved in this process.
3. Hot Springs County shall generally require that the economic alternative which does the least damage to the economy or benefits the economy the most be implemented,
4. As required by the Administrative Procedures Act, Hot Springs County shall require the various agencies to document that their decisions adequately took into account the health, safety, custom, culture, and general welfare (including the economic impact) of their actions on the County,
5. Hot Springs County asserts that the County, at its discretion, has the right to be involved in all decision making and regulatory functions which have an effect on the County's economic stability, custom, culture and the well being of its citizens,
6. At its discretion, Hot Springs County asserts its right to be a "cooperating agency" in order to have direct input into the decision making process and be included in various working groups that determine matter of policy which affect the County,

- The County recognizes the need to participate in State and Federal land use planning processes in order to protect the health, safety and economy of the County and specifically to make sure the County's needs are communicated.
- The County recognizes that over-regulation has a negative effect on the economy and sets a goal of negotiating with State and Federal resource managers reasonable restrictions, mitigating measures, and stipulations on the various industries in the County.
- The County establishes a goal of implementing and periodically updating a Land Use Plan for State and Federal Lands in Hot Springs County and communicating the existence and provisions in the plan to State and Federal resource managers.
- The County establishes a goal of requiring the usage of cost/benefit, socio-economic and other economic studies when the County deems it necessary in order to determine whether or not a particular action is beneficial or detrimental to the economy of the County.

Public Policy:

1. As required by Federal law, public lands in Hot Springs County must be managed by multiple use principles in a manner which sustains and/or increases the productivity of the public lands. (see the Multiple Use and Sustained Yield Act of 1960)
2. Hot Springs County is opposed to public land withdrawals and land restrictions such as additional wilderness areas, wilderness study areas, primitive areas, restrictions on vehicular travel such as roadless areas, unreasonable seasonal restrictions on various industries and other designations which have the effect of withdrawing land from production and thereby impacting the economy.
3. The County will support diversification of the economy and efforts to recruit new businesses and industries to the area that do not hamper or hinder the custom, culture and general welfare of the County.
4. The County will actively work to improve infrastructure needs such as the airport and improve other infra-structure needs such as roads, water distribution and storage systems, emergency services, law enforcement and other vital services.
5. The County will encourage new infra-structure construction in semi-desert locations in order to protect the limited prime, irrigated bottom lands along the Big Horn River and the other major drainages in the County. Future dam site selections, the airport location, roads, powerlines, etc. will be closely reviewed.
6. Hot Springs County may seek cooperating agency status and participate in planning and scoping of management plans affecting the County.