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Governor raps Great Divide plan

By **JEFF GEARINO**
Southwest Wyoming bureau
with wire reports Thursday, March 17, 2005

What the governor said

Here are some other comments made by Gov. Dave Freudenthal regarding the Bureau of Land Management's draft environmental impact statement on the Great Divide/Rawlins resource area:

* Adobe Town

The area has been identified by conservationists as a site deserving protection from mineral development, and Freudenthal generally supported that approach.

"I recognize that there are existing leases in (the Adobe Town) area that must be honored or bought out. The political will of the BLM to buy out these leases is slight, so I ask that the existing leases be managed to protect the wilderness qualities as much as possible and that no additional leases be let in this area in the immediate future. Presently, the impacts to developing the Adobe Town fringe are such that I cannot advocate additional leasing."

* Wind energy

"The Rawlins Field Office has excellent wind energy potential, yet the BLM eliminated significant areas from consideration for wind energy development. I ask that you reconsider your decision and maximize wind energy development potential to help diversify our energy reserves."

* Wild horses and grazing

The governor said the BLM plan doesn't comply with a consent decree between the state and the agency. He said the proposal essentially justifies the elimination of 30,000 animal unit months of livestock grazing because of increased wild horse numbers. "Clearly, the state cannot abide by any such reduction," he said.

How you can have a say

Friday is the final day for written comments to be submitted to the BLM on the draft EIS. Comments can be submitted by mail to John Spehar, BLM Project Manager, BLM Rawlins Field Office, P.O. Box 2407, Rawlins, 82301. Comments can also be e-mailed to commentsrawlinsrmp.com.

GREEN RIVER -- The Bureau of Land Management's plan for mineral development in the Great Divide area doesn't give a clear enough idea of what's going to happen on the ground, Gov. Dave Freudenthal says.

Without a more detailed plan, he predicted, the agency faces "protracted litigation" that could delay development and tie up interested parties in court for years.

In comments submitted to the BLM's Rawlins Field Office, Freudenthal also chided the agency for not taking a closer look at a proposed "Western Heritage" alternative plan drafted by the Laramie-based Biodiversity Conservation Alliance.



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Freudenthal -- who has a lengthy background as an attorney and was U.S. attorney for Wyoming during the 1990s -- said the draft environmental impact statement on the Great Divide resource management plan doesn't provide assurances that mineral development will proceed without irreversible harm to the environment.

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"This plan does little to meet a level of predictability and certainty that such a long tenured document should clearly offer," Freudenthal said in the letter released Wednesday. "We must provide the developer, conservationist and average citizen a clear, defined and mutually understood picture of what they can expect to happen on the ground.

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"If you as the decision maker and we as cooperators fall short in this effort, the situation will unravel and will no doubt result in protracted litigation," he said.

Wild Things

BLM Rawlins Field Office Manager Mark Storzer could not be reached for comment late Wednesday.

**Inside and
Out**

The draft plan analyzes about 4.5 million acres of federally owned mineral estate in Sweetwater, Carbon, Albany and Laramie counties. The draft examines four alternatives, including the agency's preferred alternative which calls for up to 8,822 new oil and gas wells over the next 20 years in the Great Divide area. BLM officials said about 3,700 of those wells will be located on public lands and the rest on private or state lands.

Freudenthal said he is committed to responsible development, but "we must be deliberate in how we proceed."

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"We continue to move forward with a quickening pace of development, without considering the breadth of impacts that attend to that development," he said. "Such a lack of precision is dangerous when there are no 'do-overs' to full-field development."

The governor said that during the 15 to 20 years the plan will guide development in the area, it's likely that the lion's share of known energy reserves will be leased and developed. And because the Great Divide plan is the first in a series of similar documents being prepared for BLM across the state, "it is essential to set a high bar for expected future achievement."

'Western Heritage' plan

The governor told BLM officials he was disappointed that they did not consider the conservationists' "Western Heritage" alternative in the draft document. The proposal offers more rigid cultural and environmental protections than the BLM's preferred alternative, calling for a total of 8 percent of the resource area to be designated as wilderness study areas; for directional drilling and no surface occupancy in big game wintering areas and sage grouse strutting grounds; and for minimizing the number of roads and well pads.

Freudenthal said the alternative was an example of a grassroots effort to participate in the planning process.

"The BLM might not have liked the proposed direction (of the alternative) -- I have my own concerns about it and do not advocate for it to be the preferred alternative -- but the National Environmental Policy Act is not about what we do or do not like," the governor wrote. "Rather it is about displaying a true range of alternatives to address the issues raised during the planning process."

The alternative "should be included in the final analysis to broaden the alternatives," he said.

Biodiversity wildlife biologist Erik Molvar said Wednesday he welcomed the governor's comments.

"I think the governor's letter is part of a broad and bipartisan recognition throughout the state that oil and gas development is out of control and that the BLM's plan that is moving forward is not adequate to protect the wildlife and sensitive lands that we all love in this state," Molvar said.

In his letter, Freudenthal also highlighted the need for more active management in the "checkerboard" areas along the state's southern Union Pacific corridor, especially in those areas of potential conflict among development, wildlife, recreation and other resource uses.

He asked the BLM to create a special management area for some checkerboard areas and give special management considerations within the checkerboard for grazing, access, oil and gas development, private property rights and cultural resources protection.

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