



The formations of Adobe Town southwest of Rawlins caught late-morning light on Tuesday. Conservation groups want the Bureau of Land Management to create wilderness at Adobe Town through its long-term land use planning process. Comments on the draft environmental impact statement for the Rawlins Resource Management Plan are due March 18.

Daily Times / Kathy Johnson

# BLM has the space to meet many needs

The Bureau of Land Management has an easy task.

Within the Rawlins Resource Area, all it has to do is manage sometimes-competing interests, allow for maximum gas drilling and development, protect scenic, wild and historic places, preserve livestock grazing, take care of wildlife, and in particular the sage grouse, make sure recreationists find their places to play and deal with wild horses. Among a whole lot of other stuff.

Looks easy, right?

People who've been watching the planning process say they'd hate to be in BLM shoes. The interest groups are too entrenched, the issues too sensitive to arrive at conclusions that please ... anyone.

That's not the truth, though. This is big country, with room for every interest.

"There's a lot of land in play," says Erik Molvar of Biodiversity Associates. In fact, it's 4.67 million acres of federally managed land, within an 11.2-million acre mix of private and public ground that stretches from Nebraska to the middle of the Red Desert.

BLM is accepting comments on its draft environmental impact statement for the Rawlins Resource Management Plan through March 18. It appears from this distant seat that win-win possibilities exist, if people are willing to communicate and compromise with one another.

On this plan, Molvar says, the conservation interests have "never gotten credit for being moderate." In contrast to the Jack Morrow Hills, where the conservationists want no development, they are "coming to the middle" on the Rawlins plan.

"We're not looking to say 'hands off'" the Red Desert, Molvar said. Within the Rawlins Resource Area, "7 percent really needs to be protected. The rest needs to be drilled responsibly. We are asking BLM to take every pain they possibly can to do the job right."

Some in the environmental community

use an absolute number on the Red Desert. They say 8,820 wells will be drilled, as if they'd all happen at once. Of those, though, 3,700 would be on public land. And they'd be developed over a 20-year time line. The estimated short-term disturbance to the surface from gas and oil drilling amounts to 1.2 percent of the planning area; the long-term impact, .3 of 1 percent.

"To me, 99.7 percent isn't going to be bothered," an industry official said. "That number never comes out."

Much of that impact, of course, would occur to the west, southwest and northwest of Rawlins. And there are things that can be done to minimize the impacts of gas development.

Molvar talks often about the "smaller footprint" the BLM could require of the gas industry. He specifically mentions directional drilling.

The concept, where multiple gas wells are drilled directionally from one or several drilling "pads," is "huge." It would "not make much difference in oil and gas produced, or jobs, but a big difference in what the land would look like. Let's use this as a tool" to minimize surface disturbance and to protect wildlife.

The industry counters that directional drilling is viable on deep, conventional natural gas, less so on shallower coal bed methane. And it costs more, up to 25 percent in some instances. Still, some companies — among them BP America, which does much of its work on private land near Wamsutter — are studying and deploying the strategy.

"Where you can, you should look at it," said one industry representative. "Technologically, it's got to be possible, and economically, it's got to be viable."

BLM could properly ask that directional drilling be used to the greatest extent feasible within the Rawlins Resource Area.

In the Western Heritage Alternative, the conservation groups lobby for wilderness. They suggest Wilderness Study

Areas at Wild Cow Creek southwest of Rawlins and Kinney Rim, and wilderness study additions to Adobe Town, the Pedros and the Ferris Mountains.

It's about time to get off the Wilderness Study Area knot, one way or another. What's it been -- 20 years?

Places are either suitable for wilderness, or they are not.

Decisions should be made.

Adobe Town, southwest of

Rawlins, is the highest priority of the conservation community. It is "a world-class wilderness," Molvar said, "the best one in the state on BLM land, and one of the best ones in the West."

Why not set aside Adobe Town, and make it wilderness? Why not take a part of this huge land, and make it off-limits to mechanized industry and motorized traffic? There would remain plenty of room to drill, and to play, in the resource area.

A game bird scurries about all of this planning discussion. It is the sage grouse, nearly listed as "endangered" by the Feds a few months back.

Every interest group in Wyoming should realize the state must protect the sage grouse. If it does not, and grouse are listed, *everything* changes.

Molvar acknowledges Wyoming gets elevated attention because its sagebrush steppes are "in the best shape in the West." The Rawlins Resource Area contains a quarter of all Wyoming's sage grouse leks. So the debate is engaged — how much of a buffer zone should be provided grouse leks? The answer, subject to interpretation, is simple: as much as can be reasonably afforded to protect the birds and to allow other, nearby uses.

There are 109,000 pronghorn antelope in the western two-thirds of the plan area, and many areas of crucial winter range for wildlife. Wildlife proponents will tell you distance and seasonal protections are not enough; industry will tell

you seasonal stipulations and protections — in some instances, 90-day operating windows each year — are much too restrictive.

There's room to move, in both directions. No one wants to lose wildlife habitat. Still, operating windows have to be wide enough that people can make a living without moving from one town to the next. The human condition needs to be considered in all this. Ranchers need assurance their grazing rights are protected. Families need assurance they can stay in one community for a while.

Industry would like to see this settled. The resource management plan is an umbrella document under which sit environmental impact statements on gas drilling and development proposals. Industry craves certainty. The BLM should give it to them.

Rawlins, Baggs, Wamsutter and Carbon County prosper when minerals are strong. Look at our rising tax bases, providing the funds for jails and library hours and hospital improvements and good roads. Our federal government has a responsibility, as the largest local landowner, to make sure revenue is generated on those lands that can benefit local communities.

At the same time, the Feds have a responsibility to protect precious wildlife and recreational resources. Those are important values to everyone.

It's not an easy job. But, if BLM goes about this the right way, it can create a plan that protects all those interests on the great expanse of the resource area.

If you feel strongly about the future of federal lands management in south-central Wyoming, submit your comment by March 18. The mailing address is Rawlins RMP, John Spehar, Box 2407, Rawlins, 82301-2407.

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