

### **Lewistown Planning Area: What Does it Look Like?**

The Lewistown Field Office (FO) currently manages its federal surface and mineral estates under two RMPs: the 1984 Headwaters and the 1994 Judith-Vally-Philips RMPs. The FO manages about 650,000 surface acres in central Montana, stretching from the Musselshell River to the Rocky Mountain Front, and about 1.2 million acres of mineral estates.

The planning area contains over 200,000 acres of areas identified as lands with wilderness characteristics (LWCs). Most of these LWC units are located along the Musselshell and Missouri rivers in the northeastern part of the planning area. These units are adjacent to important wild landscapes: the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument, the UL Bend Wilderness, and the Charlie M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge. These lands contain a stunning range of sweeping grasslands and deeply rugged river breaks. These BLM units provide critical habitat not just for trophy ungulate species such as mule deer and elk, but also many bird species, including the greater sage grouse. As a whole, this wider landscape represents some of the last intact grasslands in the United States.

There are also eight Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs), designated for the areas' unique recreation, cultural, paleontological, and ecological values. ACECs include: Acid Shale-Pine Forest (2,700 acres), Blind Horse (4,900), Chute Mountain (3,200), Collar Gulch (1,500), Deep Creek/Battle Creek (3,100), Ear Mountain (1,800), Judith Mountains (3,800), and Square Butte (1,900), which overlaps with concurrent management of the Square Butte WSA (slightly smaller than the Square Butte WSA). Collar Gulch ACEC contains the eastern-most population of genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout, the Tate-Poetter Cave, and the popular Collar Peak hiking trail. Square Butte was designated as an ACEC to protect cultural sites, scenic qualities, wildlife and rare geologic features unique to Montana. Acid Shale-Pine Forest is also a Research Natural Area (RNA) because of its unique plant communities on the prairie: rare soils found in this ACEC support unique communities of plants not found elsewhere in Montana and this ACEC/RNA allows for important scientific research and observation of these unique communities. Judith Mountain Scenic ACEC includes Crystal Cave and is a popular recreation area for hiking and mountain biking.

Blind Horse, Chute Mountain, Deep Creek/Battle Creek, and Ear Mountain are also Outstanding Natural Areas (ONAs), located along the Rocky Mountain Front and within the Conservation Management Area established by the Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act. These areas were identified as having wilderness characteristics, and provide critical habitat for bighorn sheep, mule deer, and grizzly bears.

The planning area also contains three Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs). These areas, by federal legislation, must be managed as wilderness areas until Congress acts to designate or release them. It is important that agency land planning documents contain 'back-up' management

schemes for these areas in the event that Congress releases the WSAs during the life of the plan. Square Butte, an iconic butte towering over the surrounding grasslands outside of Great Falls, is a WSA, an ACEC, and also an ONA. Sun River and Beaver Meadows WSAs are located along the Rocky Mountain Front, and provide critical low-land habitat for bighorn sheep and grizzly bears. Neither of these landscapes have any underlying management schemes.

### **The Process: How Did We Get Here?**

This process began back in 2014, when the FO initiated scoping, took public comment and input, and conducted their own inventories of the area's resources.

In 2016, the FO prepared a draft plan and analysis, which was submitted for final secretarial review and approval to the Department of the Interior (DOI). That draft and analysis was not approved in 2016 before the transition from the Obama administration to the Trump administration, which has actively attacked conservation and promoted fossil fuel extraction as the priority use on federal public lands. Throughout 2017, 2018, and 2019, release of a plan for public review and comment was delayed. In late 2018, MWA acquired a copy of the original 2016 DRMP that was submitted for approval through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. That plan contained four alternatives, and the preferred alternative in that plan was the plan that blended the conservation priorities and other uses in a 'middle ground' plan.

In May 2019, the BLM finally released a document for public comment. This 2019 DRMP contains four alternatives. The preferred alternative in this plan emphasizes extraction, including oil and gas leasing, over other resource values across the planning area.

### **Summary of the Alternatives**

Alternative A: This is the 'no action' alternative as required by NEPA. Plan components are the same as the 1984 and the 1997 RMPs. While no lands are administratively managed as LWCs in this alternative (because such specific management was not an option when these plans were developed), this alternative does manage eight ACECs. Likewise, there is an existing protest resolution decision that does not allow oil and gas leasing of nominated parcels that would require a special stipulation (ie, a no surface occupancy - NSO - or controlled surface use - CSU) to protect important wildlife values. Existing fluid mineral leases that expire can be re-nominated for leasing but would be deferred. There are three Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) in the planning area, and motorized and mechanized travel is limited to existing ways when the WSAs were established.

Alternative B: This is the 'conservation emphasis' alternative. This alternative "emphasizes improving, rehabilitation, and restoring resources and sustaining the ecological integrity of habitats... while allowing appropriate development scenarios for allowable uses." This alternative offers the strongest protections for critical landscapes and habitats, including MWA's priority landscapes, and protections for water resources (streams, rivers, and wetlands). This alternative establishes ten ACECs and offers to manage all of the 202,000-plus acres of identified LWC units to "maintain a high degree of naturalness; outstanding opportunities for solitude, and outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation," in a manner that "emphasiz[es] other multiple uses while applying management restrictionsto reduce

effects on wilderness characteristics” and in a manner “similar to WSAs.” Alternative B also designates four Backcountry Management Areas,<sup>1</sup> covering 228,800 surface acres and totaling four units. Under Alternative B, 74% of the mineral estate is open to oil and gas leasing. No oil and gas leasing would be allowed in LWC surface units.

ACECs include: all of the ACECs from Alternative A, with increases to: the Collar Cultch area (1,500 acres to 2,700 acres), the Square Butte area (1,900 acres to 2,700 acres, slightly larger than the WSA), and the Judith Mountains Scenic area (3,800 acres to 4,800 acres); and the additional designation of Blacktail Creek (1,200 acres) and Sun River (4,900 acres).

LWCs managed for their wilderness character include: Armell’s Creek, Big Snowies Tac-ons B1-4, Biggett, Blind Horse Creek, Blood Creek, Carroll Coulee, Carter Coulee, Cemetery Road, Chain Buttes, Chimney Bend, Chute Mountain, Cottonwood, Deep Creek/Battle Creek, Dog Creek South, Dovetail Creek, Drag Creek, Dunn Ridge, Ear Mountain A and B, Fargo Coulee, Fort Musselshell Tac-on A and B, Horse Camp Trail, Little Crooked Creek, Missouri River Island, Spear Coulee, and West Crooked Creek.

Backcountry Management Areas include: Arrow Creek, Crooked Creek, Cemetery Road, and Judith Reservoir complex areas.

WSAs: These areas would be “closed to motorized and mechanized travel except for access to grandfathered uses,” though exactly what “grandfathered uses” would be allowed is not defined.

It should be noted that several priority LWC units are within the Crooked Creek Backcountry Management Area, and it is unclear which management prescriptions take priority in these overlapping areas because the RMP lacks clear standards and direction for BCA management.

Alternative C: This is the ‘extraction and resource-use’ emphasis and the preferred alternative, demonstrating the agency’s preferred course of action. This alternative would “emphasize maximizing resource production in an environmentally responsible manner, while maintaining the basic protection needed to sustain resources.” Appropriate and allowable uses and restrictions would emphasize social and economic outcomes, while mitigating impacts on land health. Under this alternative, there would be no areas managed as LWCs, and none of the existing ACECs would be carried forward. Ninety one percent (91%) of the mineral estate, and therefore 99% of the surface estate, would be available for oil and gas leasing. The only

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<sup>1</sup> We can assume Backcountry Management Areas are similar in spirit to the Backcountry Conservation Areas promoted by other conservation and hunting organizations during the scoping period. However, no actual definition of Backcountry Management Areas is offered in the draft plan. Instead the draft points to Appendix Q. In Appendix Q, the agency addresses “Backcountry Conservation Areas,” not Backcountry Management Areas, defining them generally as “intact landscape” offering “primitive” or “dispersed” “recreational experiences” for hunting, hiking, and angling, with each landscape managed on a case-by-case basis. While this may only be a drafting error, it is an important indicator that the draft was edited and revised, but not carefully, and leaves open the possibility for, at best, unclear public understanding and enforcement, and, at worst, unenforceable management of the entire concept.

'conservation' measure would be the designation of Extensive Recreation Management Areas (EMRA) for Arrow Creek, Cemetery Road, Crook Creek, and Judith reservoir areas.<sup>2</sup> Because no LWC nor ACECs would be managed, these landscapes would not be administratively protected from oil and gas leasing or other potentially destructive development in the future.

Alternative D: This alternative is the 'balance' of Alternatives B and C, and is generally consistent with the preferred alternative in the 2016 RMP draft. Alternative D offers to manage identified LWC units "to maintain the natural quality of the area and to maintain opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation where they occur in these areas," in a manner that "emphasiz[es] other multiple uses while applying management restriction sto reduce effects on wilderness characteristics." Under Alternative D, 90% of the mineral estate is open to oil and gas leasing. The LWC units in this alternative would be available for oil and gas leasing, subject to a no surface occupancy (NSO)<sup>3</sup> stipulation.

LWC units include: Carroll Coulee, Chain Buttes, Dovetail Creek, Drag Creek, Dunn Ridge, Fort Musselshell Tac-on B, Horse Camp Trail, Spear Coulee, and West Crooked Creek.

ACEC units include: Acid Shale-Pine Forest (2,700 acres), Blind Horse (4,900 acres), Chute Mountain (3,200 acres), Collar Gulch (2,700 acres) Deep Creek/Battle Creek (3,100 acres), Ear Mountain (1,800 acres), Square Butte (2,700 acres) and Sun River (4,900 acres).

Notably absent from this RMP analysis is a thoughtful acknowledgment of climate change, and the climate change impacts, exacerbators, or mitigation that could occur under each of the alternatives. The executive summary mentions "climate stressors," and "climate variability" as a concept is briefly addressed in the analysis of each alternative, but a critical understanding of climate change - caused by the emission of greenhouse gases through the burning of fossil fuels, livestock production, and other anthropomorphic causes - that was present in the 2016 RMP analysis is gone from this document.

### **How to Write a Substantive, Personal Comment**

The public, including individual people (like you) and interested organizations (like MWA), have from May 17 through August 15, 2019 at 11:59 pm to provide the BLM with feedback on its alternatives and analysis. It is critical that individual people speak up and write a personal

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<sup>2</sup> EMRAs, like Backcountry Management Areas, are defined on a case-by-case basis, depending on the needs and demands of the area. For example, North Moccasin EMRA, available only under Alternative D (the same area managed as a Special Recreation Management Area under Alternative C), would be managed specifically for ATV, OHV, and snowmobile use, while Judith ERMA (under Alternatives C and D) would be managed "to provide dispersed and unstructured recreation" at the fishing reservoirs. Where ERMA are offered in Alternative C as an alternative management scheme to Backcountry Management/Conservation Areas from other alternatives, the objectives remain the same, but the targeted management and activities differ.

<sup>3</sup> NSO stipulations allow for the mineral estate underground to be developed, but not for any surface-disruption aboveground to occur. That means that surface wellpads, roads, and associated infrastructure would not be allowed, but that a developer could access the oil and gas reserves via horizontal drilling underground from nearby surface developments.

comment to the BLM about this landscape and why it's wildness is important. Please take a few moments to review the tips below for commenting, and submit your comment on MWA's or MWF's action pages online, or by emailing your thoughts directly to the BLM at [blm\\_mt\\_Lewistown\\_rmp@blm.gov](mailto:blm_mt_Lewistown_rmp@blm.gov).

- You don't have to be an expert, write a multi-page essay, or comment on the entirety of issues and landscapes. Write a few thoughtful sentences about the places and issues that are important to you.

- Avoid "copying and pasting" large sections of text from an organization's website or emails. Use our information as a starting point to craft your own sentences. "Copy-and-paste" comments are not particularly helpful to the agency.

- Be as specific as possible about the management you are supporting (e.g. "I support managing the Dovetail area for its wilderness values because...")

- Include things you want to see in the planning area and things you don't (e.g. "I want to see areas open to foot and stock use only because...")

- Mention specific places (e.g. "I particularly care about Square Butte and the Judith Mountains because...")

- Give reasons for your comments (e.g. "I want to see more areas protected in the planning area because wilderness is a valuable resource that protects wildlife and clean water.")

- Include your personal experiences or stories in your reasoning (e.g. "I have hunted in the Chain Buttes area. I got the biggest elk of my life there, and it was such an amazing experience. I can't wait to share that incredible wild place with my kids and teach them the importance of fair chase hunting and respecting the land.")

- Avoid blanket general statements (e.g. "I think everything should be wilderness") and instead, try to give the BLM specific, detailed thoughts, using the guidelines mentioned above.

- Remember that the BLM employees who read these comments are real people too. Be polite and avoid abusive or condescending language.