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BILLINGS – The Bureau of Land Management in Montana has issued a Record of Decision for the Montana Statewide Final Oil and Gas Environmental Impact Statement and Amendment of the Powder River and Billings Resource Management Plans.

The Powder River Basin straddles the Wyoming-Montana border and is one of the country's most mineral-rich regions, supplying approximately one-third of the nation's coal and significant quantities of natural gas and oil. The significant energy resources of the region are described in a January 2003 report released by the Departments of Interior and Energy in accordance with the Energy Policy and Conservation Act of 2000.

The decision is the culmination of more than two years of comprehensive environmental analysis that included substantial public input. The EIS addresses potential coal bed natural gas development as well as traditional natural gas and oil activities, and was a joint effort by the BLM, the Montana Board of Oil and Gas Conservation and the Montana Department of Environmental Quality. The BLM also worked closely with the Environmental Protection Agency, Tribes and other cooperating agencies in developing the final EIS.

Today's BLM decision covers the natural gas and oil resources administered by the Montana BLM within the Powder River and Billings Resource Management Plan areas, in southeast and south-central Montana, and amends those two land-use plans. The Montana Board of Oil and Gas Conservation previously issued a separate decision document related to its portion of the EIS, and the Montana DEQ is expected to release its decision document in the near future. Concurrently, the BLM in Wyoming has issued a decision implementing a companion EIS covering the Wyoming portion of the Powder River Basin.

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“This EIS is our framework for orderly, environmentally responsible development of coal bed natural gas,” said Marty Ott, BLM’s Montana State Director. “And our Record of Decision gives us the flexibility to make any needed course corrections in the future. This has been an exhaustive analysis, and we appreciate all the input we received from our state agency partners, other federal and state agencies, tribes, citizen groups and individuals.”

With the EIS completed, the BLM will be able to consider drilling or development proposals in the geographic area studied; however, before any proposals are approved, the BLM will conduct an additional round of environmental review to identify site-specific environmental impacts and appropriate mitigation measures.

A key element of the ROD is the establishment of a working group, consisting of Tribes and state and federal agencies, including representatives from the EPA, National Park Service and the Forest Service. The working group will assist the BLM and the Montana DEQ in addressing natural gas and oil development issues in the basin and ensuring coordination with Wyoming BLM and the State of Wyoming on natural gas and oil development issues common to both states.

The State DEQs and EPA fully support this collaborative approach to allowing oil and gas development while addressing environmental concerns. The use of a working group stems from the partnership approach used by BLM, EPA and the state DEQ's to address EPA's concerns with the Draft EISs. According to Robbie Roberts, EPA's Regional Administrator (Region 8), "The BLM, EPA and Montana and Wyoming worked well together. It was tough, work on hard and important issues. The end result represents a model of cooperation amongst federal agencies and the states."

Copies of the Record of Decision are available on BLM’s Miles City Field Office website at: www.mt.blm.gov/mcfo/ or from BLM offices in Miles City and Billings. Related documents can be reached through <http://www.blm.gov>.