

SUMMARY

The Powder River Resource Management Plan (RMP) addresses future management for approximately 1,080,675 surface acres and 4,103,700 acres of federal mineral estate administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) through its Powder River Resource Area office in Miles City, Montana. The Powder River Resource Area encompasses Powder River and Treasure Counties and portions of Rosebud, Carter, Big Horn, and Custer Counties in southeastern Montana.

The Powder River RMP provides a framework for managing and allocating public land and resources in the Resource Area during the next ten to 15 years. The RMP primarily focuses on resolving four key resource management issues. These issues are coal development; vegetation utilization among livestock, wildlife, and watershed; land pattern adjustment; and wilderness suitability of two wilderness study areas.

Five RMP alternatives are considered in detail. One represents no action, which means a continuation of present management direction. The other four provide a range of themes from favoring resource protection to favoring resource production. The preferred alternative, which is the proposed resource management plan, incorporates portions of the other four alternatives.

PROPOSED PLAN (Preferred Alternative)

Future coal development would come from current leases covering 39,391 acres, 91,700 acres of unleased federal coal found acceptable for further consideration during past planning, and **869,600** acres found acceptable for further consideration in this RMP for a total of **1,000,691** acres. A total of 1.26 million acres were considered. Emergency leases to enable existing mines to maintain production or avoid a bypass situation would be issued on a case-by-case basis. **Coal exchanges in cleared areas would be considered for existing leases, by direction of legislation, or for leases located in alluvial valley floors.** A wide selection of potential sites for coal leasing consideration is provided while areas with substantial multiple use conflicts are removed and protected. The approach allows future flexibility in meeting longterm energy needs. The lands selected for further consideration for leasing meet or exceed federal coal program requirements. Mining these lands would create environmental, economic and social impacts. Federal and state requirements for mitigation measures would have to be met to offset many impacts from mining and all mined lands would have to be reclaimed.

Vegetation utilization would allow for 233,387 animal unit months (AUMs) for livestock grazing and provide 700,161 AUMs for wildlife and watershed following the upgrading of 160,024 acres of public land in less than good condition and monitoring. Available vegetation

for all uses would be up 12 percent over current levels with the increased vegetation on the 160,024 acres selected for improvement. The percentage of the Resource Area in good or better condition would increase from 70 percent to 85 percent. Improvements would be made through range developments, grazing management practices and some mechanical treatment of lands. The estimated cost of improvements is \$6,465,960 over a 15-year period. About 5,000 acres of riparian vegetation would receive special management as wildlife habitat and a number of wildlife facilities would be constructed throughout the area. All range improvements would consider wildlife requirements and mitigation measures would minimize environmental impacts. Management would result in an overall long term improvement in ecological range condition, while providing for a balanced improvement of vegetation, wildlife habitat, and watershed. Individual grazing allotments are categorized for improvements, maintenance, or custodial care. Ranch operations would not be adversely affected because no grazing reductions are proposed.

A total of 165,054 acres of public land would be categorized with potential for disposal, with 75 percent targeted for exchange. Lands so categorized are primarily small, isolated tracts with no public access or significant resource values. Most lands would be considered for exchange to consolidate larger tracts, gain public access to other tracts and acquire lands with greater public resource value such as lands along major river drainages and reservoirs. Sales would be used to a lesser extent to reduce administrative costs and improve the land ownership pattern. Cumulatively, exchanges would result in beneficial impacts while sales at a low level would result in a small reduction of the public land resource. Transactions would only be made after preparing a land report which considers the environment and all resource values on each tract as it is proposed for disposal.

Zook Creek and Buffalo Creek wilderness study areas (WSAs) would be recommended as not suitable for wilderness designation. Future management would consider other resources and the WSAs would be managed the same as the rest of the Resource Area under this overall alternative. Current wilderness characteristics would be expected to decline slightly with continued multiple use. After fully studying and assessing the WSAs, neither Zook Creek nor Buffalo Creek were considered outstanding proposals for wilderness designation. Zook Creek possesses low wilderness values and Buffalo Creek possesses minimum wilderness values compared with other wilderness study areas **within the District and general area.** Wilderness manageability problems could arise from existing oil and gas leases at Zook Creek and at both areas from indirect conflicts with local coal development.

ALTERNATIVE A (No Action)

This alternative emphasizes a continuation of present management direction and would continue the present levels or systems of resource use and respond to the requirements of new regulations and policies.

Future coal development would come from current leases covering 39,391 acres and those unleased areas determined acceptable for further consideration in past planning covering 91,700 acres for a total of 131,091 acres. Emergency leases to enable existing mines to maintain production or to avoid a bypass situation would be issued on a case-by-case basis. **Coal exchanges in cleared areas would be considered for existing leases, by direction of legislation, or for leases located in alluvial valley floors.** No new areas would be made available for further lease consideration. Mining would create environmental, economic and social impacts. Federal and state requirements for mitigation measures would have to be met to offset many impacts from mining and all mined lands would have to be reclaimed.

Vegetation utilization would continue with the existing 208,083 AUMs for livestock and 624,249 AUMs for wildlife and watershed. The current condition of the public land would be maintained with 70 percent remaining in good or better condition. Normal range developments would continue to be made throughout the Resource Area, with no attempt to upgrade range conditions. Current grazing management practices and mechanical treatments would continue. The estimated cost of maintenance or replacement improvements is \$4,018,500 over a 15-year period. About 5,000 acres of riparian vegetation would receive special management as wildlife habitat and a number of wildlife facilities would be constructed throughout the area. All range developments would consider wildlife requirements and mitigation measures would minimize environmental impacts. Management would result in a static ecological range condition, providing existing vegetation for livestock, wildlife and watershed.

Adjustments to the land ownership would be made on a case-by-case basis. Based on a ten-year average, some 640 acres would be expected to be sold and 3,840 acres exchanged. There would be no special emphasis on land pattern adjustment and no categorization of lands for disposal. Any land transactions would involve criteria which consider the environment and all resource values on each tract as it is proposed for disposal. The small amount of lands involved would create minimal impacts, either adverse or beneficial. The large majority of resource area lands would remain in public ownership with minimal changes in pattern.

No suitability recommendation would be made for Zook Creek or Buffalo Creek WSAs. Present management for livestock grazing and wildlife would continue. Current wilderness characteristics would not be expected to change unless oil and gas leases result in development.

ALTERNATIVE B (Multiple Use)

This alternative emphasizes the management and production of resources with full consideration for multiple use values. Multiple use management would be directed toward providing a flow of renewable and non-renewable resources from the public lands considering conflict with and mitigation measures for other resources.

Both the coal and vegetation utilization issues are the same as described in the preferred alternative.

A total of 165,054 acres of public land would be categorized with potential for disposal, with even consideration for sale or exchange. Lands so categorized are primarily small, isolated tracts with no public access or significant resource values. About half of the lands would be considered for exchange to consolidate larger tracts, gain public access to other tracts and acquire lands with greater public resource value such as lands along major river drainages and reservoirs. The other half of the disposable lands would be considered for sale to reduce administrative costs and improve the land ownership pattern. Exchanges at this level would result in beneficial impacts while sale at the same level would result in a sizeable reduction of the public land resource. Transactions would only be made after applying criteria which consider the environment and all resource values on each tract as it is proposed for disposal.

Zook Creek WSA would be recommended as suitable for wilderness and Buffalo Creek WSA would be recommended as not suitable for wilderness. Zook Creek would be managed as wilderness but some current commitments would have to be honored, including oil and gas leases. Future management of Buffalo Creek would consider other resources and would be managed the same as the rest of the Resource Area under this overall alternative. Current wilderness characteristics at Zook Creek would be preserved and those at Buffalo Creek would be expected to decline slightly with multiple use. Zook Creek, following a study and assessment of both areas, would be considered the better proposal for wilderness designation, with some wilderness provided in a multiple use alternative. However, wilderness manageability problems could result from indirect conflicts with local coal development.

ALTERNATIVE C (Resource Production)

This alternative emphasizes a dominant singular resource use instead of the full spectrum of multiple uses. Management would be directed towards providing a significant increase in the use of a few resources with a corresponding reduction in the multiple use balance.

Future coal development would come from current

leases covering 39,391 acres, 91,700 acres of unleased federal coal found acceptable for further consideration during past planning and 963,900 acres found acceptable for further consideration in this RMP for a total of 1,094,991 acres. Emergency leases to enable existing mines to maintain production or avoid a bypass situation would be issued on a case-by-case basis. **Coal exchanges in cleared areas would be considered for existing leases, by direction of legislation, or for leases located in alluvial valley floors.** This approach is designed to offer the widest selection of coal for future development that regulations and policy will allow. Using this approach only legally protected lands are removed from further consideration and the value of other multiple uses is considered offset by the value of the coal resource. The lands selected for further consideration for leasing meet the basic federal coal program requirements. Mining more of them would create greater environmental, economic and social impacts. Federal and state requirements for mitigation measures would have to be met to offset many impacts from mining and all mined lands would have to be reclaimed.

Vegetation utilization would allow for 319,269 AUMs for livestock grazing and provide 957,798 AUMs for wildlife and watershed following monitoring and the upgrading of 876,614 acres of public land to excellent condition and monitoring. Allocations for all uses would be up approximately 53 percent over current levels with the increased vegetation on the 876,614 acres selected for improvement. The percentage of the Resource Area in good or better condition would increase from 70 percent to 95 percent in excellent condition. Improvements would be made through range developments, grazing management practices and mechanical treatment of lands. The estimated cost of improvements is \$18,043,680 over a 15-year period. About 5,000 acres of riparian vegetation would receive special management as wildlife habitat and a number of wildlife facilities would be constructed throughout the area. All range developments would consider wildlife requirements and mitigation measures would be used to minimize environmental impacts. Management would result in an overall long-term increase in vegetation production, providing for increased livestock grazing at the expense of some wildlife habitat. Individual allotments are categorized for improvement, maintenance, or custodial care, but allotments in both the improvement and maintenance category would be improved. Ranch operations would be provided the opportunity to expand.

A total of 165,054 acres of public land would be categorized with potential for disposal with 75 percent targeted for sale. Lands so categorized are primarily small, isolated tracts with no public access or significant resource values. Most lands would be considered for sale to reduce administrative costs and improve the land management pattern. Land sales at this level could

result in federal revenues of about \$12,000,000. Exchanges would be used to a small extent to consolidate larger tracts, gain public access to other tracts and acquire lands with greater resource value such as lands along major river drainages and reservoirs. Cumulatively, sales would result in a significant reduction of the public land resources. Exchanges at a low level would result in a minor opportunity to consolidate larger tracts, gain public access to other tracts and acquire lands with greater public resource value.

Wilderness proposals are the same as described in the preferred alternative.

ALTERNATIVE D (Resource Protection)

This alternative emphasizes a reduction in the use of resources and stresses the protection and enhancement of the natural environment.

Future coal development would be restricted to current leases covering 39,391 acres. Unleased federal coal found acceptable for further consideration during past planning would be dropped. No other lands would be recommended for further consideration, except emergency leases to enable existing mines to maintain production or avoid a bypass situation. These would be issued on a case-by-case basis. **Coal exchanges in cleared areas would be considered for existing leases, by direction of legislation, or for leases located in alluvial valley floors.** Any new mines would be confined to state and private coal, those resulting from legislated exchanges, and to current leases.

Mining lands already leased would create environmental, economic and social impacts. Federal and state requirements for mitigation measures would have to be met to offset many impacts from mining and all mined lands would have to be reclaimed.

Vegetation utilization would consist of a targeted cut in livestock AUMs to 177,491 allocating 654,841 AUMs for wildlife and watershed. This cut would be based on monitoring. There would be 314,469 acres of rangeland upgraded to good condition from these livestock reductions coupled with range improvements, grazing management practices and some mechanical treatment of land. The estimated cost of improvements would be \$6,465,960 over a 15-year period. These actions would result in a long-term availability of 232,608 AUMs available for livestock and 701,727 AUMs provided for wildlife and watershed. Livestock use AUMs would be adjusted as necessary after monitoring. Vegetation available for all uses would be approximately 11 percent over current levels, with the increased vegetation on the 314,469 acres. The percentage of the Resource Area in good or better condition would increase from 70 percent to 98 percent.

About 5,000 acres of riparian vegetation would receive special management as wildlife habitat and a number of wildlife facilities would be constructed throughout the area. All livestock related range developments would be secondary to wildlife and watershed requirements. Mitigation measures would minimize environmental impacts. Management would result in an overall long-term improvement in ecological range condition, while also providing for enhanced wildlife habitat and watershed. Individual grazing allotments would be categorized for improvement, maintenance or custodial care; grazing reductions would involve all categories. Ranch operations would be adversely affected by proposed grazing reductions.

The lands issue is the same as described in the preferred alternative.

Zook Creek and Buffalo Creek WSAs would be recommended as suitable for wilderness designation. Both areas would be managed as wilderness but some current commitments would have to be honored, including oil and gas leases at Zook Creek. Current wilderness characteristics at both areas would be preserved. Both WSAs, following this study and assessment would be recommended as suitable for wilderness designation to protect the existing wilderness resource. Other resources, such as coal development, would not conflict with wilderness manageability under this alternative.