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## BLM Struggles to Find Balance on Green Mountain Allotment

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 LANDER -- The Green Mountain Common Allotment is one of the largest unfenced ranges in the nation, and the Bureau of Land Management has been struggling for more than a decade to come up with a plan to manage the half-million-acre spread.

The most recent plan, completed in 1999, almost immediately proved to be ineffective -- once the drought began in 2000 and never let up, according to Bruce Collins, regional spokesman for the BLM.

In 2002, the agency conducted an assessment of the health of the rangeland on the allotment and found that several federal standards were not being met, particularly requirements for riparian areas -- the lush, green ribbons of vegetation that run alongside streams and waterways.

Many of these riparian areas are ailing, and have been for years, BLM officials say. In an attempt to rejuvenate them, the agency is proposing to divide the allotment up into six smaller ones, and install nearly 100 miles, and about \$1 million worth, of barbed-wire and electrical fences.

A 400-plus page draft of the proposed action and its alternatives was published last month by the BLM's Lander office, and the public has until June 27 to comment on it.

Robert Ross, field manager for the BLM's Lander office, said although the agency has chosen one plan as its "proposed action," at this point all of the alternatives, in his mind -- including the "conservation alternative," which could reduce permitted livestock grazing by up to 75 percent -- are equally valid. The final plan will most likely cherry-pick from all four of the alternatives.

Will new analysis suffice?

In 2005, the BLM renewed two grazing permits, even though the health of the rangeland was failing.

A coalition of four conservation groups -- the Western Watersheds Project, the Wyoming Wildlife Federation, the National Wildlife Federation and the Wyoming Outdoor Council -- sued the agency. They argued that because the land was not meeting federal standards for health, the BLM couldn't renew permits without first completing a federally required environmental study.

As part of a settlement, the BLM agreed to complete a new environmental analysis by the end of

2007, and issue a wholly new management plan by 2008, in order to ensure the land would meet rangeland health standards in the future.

The agency was a few months late on its deadline for this current draft, but is now on pace to make a new decision for the allotment in the coming months.

While officials with the BLM believe the new plan will help rehabilitate the damaged areas, conservationists want to see the agency do a more in-depth environmental analysis this time around, before drawing up another plan that fails to adequately protect wildlife and riparian zones.

### Controlling cattle

Along with its value for ranchers, the Green Mountain Common Allotment is a recreation area that is home to historic, unspoiled sections of the Oregon Trail, and is a place where hikers, hunters and backcountry horse riders explore some of the largest portions of open wilderness left in the American West.

The allotment -- 86 percent federal lands, with some state and private parcels -- also provides critical habitat for great herds of antelope, mule deer and elk, and is home to three iconic herds of wild horses, some of which are descended from Spanish mustangs, Ross said.

"One of the benefits of having very little fencing out there is that it allows horses in the three main groups to interbreed and maintain genetic diversity," he said.

The proposed fencing would probably keep the three groups separate from one another, and do away with future genetic interchange, Ross said. It also would limit the horses' movement between summer and winter forage.

"Any time you talk about putting up fences, it's going to be a cause of concern for the horses," said Rubel Vigil, BLM assistant field manager at the Lander office.

The primary benefit of the new fencing, said John Likins, a rangeland management specialist with the BLM, is that it would allow for better and easier control of cattle on the range, which is essential, because uncontrolled cattle have done serious damage to riparian areas on the allotment over the past century.

"Controlling the cattle has been an issue over the years," Likins said.

Fencing would allow cattle grazers to reduce costs, and allow the BLM to meet its management goals, he said.

Of the available forage in the allotment, 81 percent is permitted for livestock, 13 percent for big game species and 6 percent for wild horses.

Bad for grouse?

The BLM's proposed action also calls for the installation of water pipelines and the development of several wells throughout the rangeland. A total of \$527,000 already has been spent on range improvement projects including construction of wells, water pipelines, storage tanks and cattle guards.

"The water development allows you to redistribute the grazing, attract the animals to different places and change the grazing patterns," Likins said.

While changing grazing patterns could help the riparian areas and help some fields to regrow, a down side is that it could also lead to conflicts with sage grouse habitat, Ross said.

The allotment is home to numerous sage grouse leks, the bird's breeding grounds, which could be disturbed by new grazing patterns.

"Everything you do out there has trade-offs," Likins said.

Ross said the public feedback helps the agency determine which actions to take and which to abandon.

"The public comment period is very important to us to make those kinds of assessments," he said.

Highest value?

Jon Marvel, with the Western Watersheds Project, said the current environmental assessment is inadequate when one considers the scope of the action, and the complexity of this half-million-acre piece of historic range.

Marvel said the appropriate thing for the BLM to do would be to up the ante, in terms of its level of analysis.

"First, the BLM really needs to do an environmental impact statement because of the scope of the area, because it's so many hundreds of thousands of acres," he said. "If it did, it would have to do a more thorough economic analysis, which they've given only cursory attention to in this assessment. Some of these alternatives require massive miles of fencing, plus pipelines and stock tanks, all for the sole benefit of ranchers."

One of the ongoing failures of the BLM throughout the West, Marvel argues, is its continuing lack of accountability for the cost of its projects.

"The (environmental assessment) doesn't even address what has been spent to date on that giant area in order to pretend that keeping ranching out there is economically feasible -- which, of course, it is not," Marvel said. "It's a super-dry landscape, and it has much higher value as wildlife habitat, especially for sage grouse."

As one of the biggest unfenced ranges left, it also represents a historical asset, he said.

"To just turn it into another series of pastures for cattle and sheep is to undermine the heritage of all Americans," Marvel argued. "This is a legacy landscape, and it's in the public interest not to do anything out there until it's fully examined, and the cost is made apparent so that everybody can understand why the BLM is choosing to throw money down essentially a black hole."

Restrictive for ranchers?

Fremont County Commissioner Doug Thompson said he doesn't think the proposed action is all that rancher-friendly.

And it at least has the potential to be too restrictive for stockgrowers, he said, depending on how the management plan is ultimately written and implemented.

"The one thing I've noticed is they're only allowing the permittees to utilize, at times, something like 40 percent of their permits, and there are a lot of terms and conditions coming in that are fairly restrictive," Thompson said. "It doesn't seem to reflect a good scenario for grazing, or for our county's economy."

His biggest concern, Thompson said, is that the plan will be inflexible and favor some uses over others.

A positive component of the proposed plan is the water development, he said, although it should have been done five or six years ago.

As for the proposed fencing, Thompson said it would probably be an improved way to manage cattle in the allotment.

"You break that up into six pieces, and those six pieces are still going to be huge areas," he said. "It would help manage the cattle better, and you can put in wildlife-friendly fences that don't harm anything. If you develop good water and put in some well-planned fencing out there that is wildlife-friendly, I think it'll look a lot better."

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