



Local News - Gillette, Wyoming

Sunday, October 07, 2007

Forum on sensitive landscape scheduled

By The News-Record staff

A public forum to discuss the future land use of an environmentally sensitive landscape that supports a rare herd of 230 prairie elk will be hosted later this month.

The Bureau of Land Management is seeking input on a proposed amendment to the Fortification Creek resource management plan — the results of which could affect both the range and the animals inhabiting the 123,000-acre area straddling the Campbell, Johnson and Sheridan county lines.

A few issues the amendment may include:

n Whether to manage a proposed Area of Critical Environmental Concern surrounding the 12,832-acre wilderness study area, which consists of the elk's most crucial habitat.

The critical concern designation highlights an area like Fortification Creek with scenic values, wildlife resources or archaeological significance. It differs from a wilderness study area in that development is not automatically restricted. Rules for development can be tailored.

n Whether overhead power lines should be allowed on federally owned surface where it is now restricted.

— Whether to continue resource management plan objectives for any or all of the resource values identified in the area, such as its steep slopes, erosive soils, elk habitat, archeological and paleontological resources and visual resources. BLM officials will also look at the geographic extent of these resource values.

— Whether to identify tracts for a land exchange for the patch of state-owned surface and minerals at the center of the wilderness study area. Yates Petroleum Corp., who has leased the patch, would need a right-of-way across the most crucial elk range to get to that area.

The development of the Fortification Creek area has met opposition from the beginning. Conservation groups like the Wyoming Wildlife Federation and the

Powder River Basin Resource Council have protested the leasing of the area and have filed appeals to the Interior Board of Land Appeal, contesting the BLM's decision to approve nearly 100 new wells and more than 20 coal-bed methane water reservoirs.

A BLM in-house study predicts that the elk habitat will be reduced by 75 percent if industry goes ahead with full development at 80-acre well spacing. It also identified 16 free-flowing wells that may be lost due to drawdown of water in the coal seams as producers pump them to relieve the hydrostatic pressure trapping the gas.

The scoping meeting will begin at 7 p.m. at the Campbell County Extension Office on Oct. 30.

Comments will be accepted through Nov. 10 and can be submitted by mail to BLM Buffalo Field Office, Attention Tom Bills, Project Manager, 1425 Fort Street, Buffalo, WY 82834 or by fax to Tom Bills at (307)684-1122 or by e-mail to fort_crk_WYMail@blm.gov