

**Wyoming Public Lands Initiative
Gardner Mountain / North Fork
October 27, 2016**

MINUTES

Present: Commissioner Bill Novotny, Commissioner Linda Greenough, Brock Hanson-Rancher; Chris Durham- Assistant Field Manager Resource, Casey Freise-Assistant Field Manager Minerals and Lands, Rob Davidson-Council of Big Horn Range, Carrie Little-Rancher, Nolan Davis-Ranch Manager, Anita Bartlett-Conservation District, Rachel Woita-Outdoor Recreation Planner, Chris Brock-Ranch Manager, Dan Thiel-Wyoming Game and Fish

The meeting was informational to kick off the collaborative so everyone would have adequate information to evaluate the two WSA. The meetings will be held in Kaycee at Harold Jarrard Park or the Red Wall.

BLM

Ms. Woita spoke on the 3 WSA's that falls within the Buffalo Field Office. She showed a map that includes Sheridan County, Campbell County and Johnson County and the 3 wilderness study areas. The laws and regulations are on the Wyoming Public Lands Initiative website. The laws and regulations that guide our management of the WSA's, some of the wilderness characteristics that define wilderness and make the land area qualify as wilderness, the 3 WSA's that within the Buffalo field office and some of the things that guide us and our management decisions and what is going on with the WSA today.

The first law that was past that guides us is the Wilderness Act of 1964 it defines what wilderness is and what characteristics a wilderness area has. Next was the Federal Land Policy Management Act (FLPMA) that created Bureau of Land Management and gives us guidance on land inventory and wilderness study. In 1979 the BLM conducted inventories of different BLM lands to determine if the characteristics were present. Then 1980 proposed 42 different areas in the state of Wyoming. The WSA's were analyzed through environmental impact statements. Buffalo was completed in 1986. And in 1991 the whole state of Wyoming did a report making more recommendations and they recommended that some of those areas be designated as wilderness and some be released from wilderness study.

What qualifies as wilderness?

- It has to be an area of at least 5,000 acres of road less areas.
- An area of outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation.
- Undeveloped federal land that is affected primarily by the forces of nature.
- Protected to preserve the natural conditions with no permanent improvements.

Wilderness is managed under the non-impairment standard. The uses in our facility are temporary and cannot create any surface disturbance. Temporary is defined as a discreet period of time to respond to a temporary need. Surface disturbance is defined as the destruction of rock, soil, vegetation that would necessitate reclamation, rehabilitation or restoration so the site can be put back to the status as it was before the disturbance.

You cannot have motorized uses in the wilderness area, such as chainsaws or vehicles.

All 3 WSA's have those characteristics mentioned, none of them have direct public access and all of them do have some range improvements, such as reservoirs, fencing and routes to get to the reservoirs. All of the improvements are small and blend with the environment.

Gardner Mountain WSA does not have any access but is public via Gardner Mountain trails and then cross country travel. It consist of steep walls, rugged, two principal drainage areas, Bear Trap Creek and the North Fork of the Red Fork of the Powder River, which are important trout waters and fishery of regional importance by the Wyoming Game and Fish, also the Dull Knife Battlefield which is a national historic site.

North Fork WSA is moderately steep, forested terrain, with pine and fir being the principle tree species. Pass Creek and the North Fork of the Powder River are rugged, scenic canyons running through the area. Falcons, hawks and eagles migrate through the area and elk winter in the North Fork Canyon. The entire North Fork WSA provides critical winter range for elk. The Wyoming Game and Fish Dept. have rated the North Fork of the Powder River Class II (fishery of statewide importance) and Pass Creek Class III (fishery of regional importance).

Fortification Creek WSA located partly in Johnson County and Campbell County. There is a 640 acre inholding of state land. This has rugged terrain and the vegetation is slightly different with moderate to heavy strands of juniper, sagebrush and grasses. The area is crucial winter range for elk. And also some auditory and visual intrusions which include railroads, views of high voltage power lines, county roads and adjacent oil development projects. Also 99 percent of the WSA is considered crucial yearlong range for elk as designated by the Wyoming Game and Fish.

BLM is monitoring and documenting the WSA's once a year. They are guided by the decisions of Congress. There are different types of designations. The Area of Critical Environmental concern (ACEC) which is special management attention needed to protect and prevent irreparable damage to important historical, cultural, or scenic values, fish and wildlife resources. Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) is public lands unit identified in land use plans to direct recreation funding. Extensive Recreation Management Area (ERMA) public lands unit identified in land use plans containing all acreage not identified as SRMA.

Discussion ensued on what would happen if a fire broke out in the area and how this would be handled if motorized vehicles were not allowed in the area. Ms. Woita stated that exceptions can be made. There isn't any legislature right now to place these WSA's into wilderness.

Commissioner Novotny stated the purpose of the collaborative is for the Advisory Committee to make a decision on what happens with these areas which will become components of the WY Public Lands Initiative Bill that we will present to the congressional delegation next year. You need to decide if you want full release, change boundaries, or a section to leave as wilderness. The options are limitless. This Advisory Committee is only focused on Gardner Mountain and North Fork. The Commissioners will take your recommendations to the congressional delegation on your behalf.

There is a portal on the Wyoming County Commissioners Association (www.wyo-wcca.org) website designated to WY Public Lands Initiative and you can access what is being done along and have access to the minutes, maps.

Game & Fish

Dan Theil of WY Game & Fish showed the topography of the two WSA's. He stated that they are rugged and remote and they also have undisturbed habitat. Antelope population, part of Antelope Area 20, Hazelton herd area 102 up by Buffalo, managed through landowners and hunters satisfaction. There isn't a significant number of Antelope in the WSA area. Mule Deer which is part of the Upper Powder River herd in areas 30, 32, 33, 163, 169 runs through Big Horn National Forest to Crazy Woman Canyon Road south to 33 Mile Road to Big Horn Divide east to I25. Population of 18,000 mule deer, currently Game and Fish is at 50% objective, North Fork WSA is in area 30, and Gardner Mountain WSA is in area 33. Both have excellent mule deer habitat. There have been some extensive surveys done with landowners and hunters to get an idea of how the herd is doing and what the perceived issues are. Good feedback and some adjustments have been made. Elk population runs both sides of the mountains. The elk habitat is excellent. Survey work done by University of Wyoming in the Gardner Mountain area found good diversity of wildlife species. The fish stream in the North Fork is classified red stream class meaning it has 300-600 pounds of fish per linear miles of stream. The fish species in the North Fork consist of rainbow, brown, and brook trout. Red stream class is considered medium; blue ribbon class is the highest. The primary stream in Gardner Mountain is Bear Trap Creek and North Fork of the Red Fork of the Powder River. North Fork of the Red Fork is a yellow stream class which has 50-300 pounds of fish per linear miles of stream. Bear Trap Creek also is yellow stream class with rainbow and brown trout. The WSA areas are good wildlife habitat areas and the vegetation on the grounds provides that and the open space and the undisturbed areas. These areas draw people, not just to fish, but to explore the areas.

All documentation will be available.

The Advisory Committee decides how the collaborative is set up and how the consensus is reached. As the process moves along a decision can be made if a facilitator needs to be brought in. The County can't hire a facilitator due to declining revenue. The County will try to facilitate the process as much as possible through the Commissioner's office. The County is not going to influence the decisions they are only in a supportive role. The Committee drives the process. The Advisory Committee borrowed a couple of components out of the Roadless

Collaborative of the Big Horns charter and these were passed out. The WPLI Guidelines are available and some base guidelines are available. The first part of the next meeting will be to set up how the Committee wants to run the process. BLM and Game and Fish will be part of the meetings as an advisory role. All of the meetings are open to the public. The Advisory Committee can share what is being discussed and decisions made with their neighbors or others within the area.

The WSA study areas will need to be done by mid-2017.

The next meeting will be Tuesday, November 22, 2016 at 6:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by,

Sheila Newcomb

A recording of the meeting is available.