



October 31, 2008

BLM management plans for 9 million acres of public land set for approval

By *MIKE STARK*
Associated Press Writer

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — The Bush administration on Friday is expected to approve five sweeping plans meant to govern nearly 9 million acres of public land in Utah.

Years in the making and often controversial, the Bureau of Land Management plans will serve as a management blueprint for 8.7 million acres managed by the agency's offices in Price, Vernal, Richfield, Moab and Kanab.

Much of the focus was on off-road vehicle use and future plans for oil and gas development.

"What we've tried to do is accommodate that use, provide for that use when possible, while balancing that with necessary resource protections," Don Ogaard, lead planner for BLM's Utah office, said Thursday.

Instead of allowing cross-country travel for off-road vehicles, the new plans allow travel on 7.6 million acres of identified roads, according to the BLM.

Oil and gas development will continue on BLM lands, but the agency says more than half of the acres open for oil and gas leasing will be under stricter environmental rules.

Environmental groups, though, have criticized the plans for not doing enough to protect the environment and human health. They say the five resource management plans (RMPs) have been rushed through as a last-minute bonus for oil and gas companies in the waning days of the Bush administration.

Final versions of the BLM's plans were released this summer with little time for citizens to analyze thousands of pages of complex management proposals, said Steve Bloch, attorney for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.

"I think it's a deplorable and unmistakable effort by the Bush administration to cement its legacy in Utah of opening up enormous swaths of the state for irresponsible development," Bloch said.

He said BLM has moved so fast it couldn't have time to consider input from one fellow federal agency.

The Environmental Protection Agency recently wrote to the BLM with concerns about the plans, including that there hadn't been enough analysis on potential air quality impacts from oil and gas development.

"We received it and are considering what response would be appropriate," Ogaard said.

Although the plans are expected to be finalized by the Interior Department on Friday, Ogaard said it's possible the BLM could amend them later.

Lee Peacock, president of the Utah Petroleum Association, said he's glad to finally see plans being finalized.

Many of them started years ago and replace some in place for 15 to 25 years. The new ones provide a road map for “wise development” of BLM land.

The process has been contentious and drawn out, he said, and no one walked away with everything they wanted. Still, he’s satisfied with the results.

“Obviously we’re concerned with any areas being taken off the table but, that being said, there are clearly areas where development shouldn’t take place,” he said.

Oil and gas companies are eager to see the plans implemented and to have leasing opportunities move ahead. It’s good for business and good for local communities, he said.

The industry, he said, has played “a significant role in helping rural Utah withstand some of these tough economic times,” Peacock said.

The BLM plans to announce Tuesday parcels it expects to lease to oil and gas companies in December.

Many of the areas are “pristine” spots in Desolation Canyon, land near Nine Mile Canyon and outside of Dinosaur National Monument, according to a SUWA analysis of parcels on a preliminary list.

Terry Catlin, energy team leader for the Utah BLM office, said the agency has not finalized a list for the sale and said she hasn’t seen a preliminary list.

The sale in December will likely be larger than several of those in the past. That’s partly because of the five plans being approved and another environmental analysis that’s being finished.

Still, she’s not expecting a mega-sale.

“We’re not in a position to be looking at all five RMPs and deciding anything that quickly,” she said.

“We’re not going to have everything up for grabs suddenly.”
