



Montana Wildlife Federation

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Critical Time In Missouri Breaks Monument Planning Process

by Larry Copenhaver

As our readers learned in the Dec/Jan issue of Montana Wildlife, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has released its Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument Draft Resource Management Plan (RMP) for public comment. The scheduled December open houses were postponed primarily due to inclement weather causing the RMP public comment process to be extended from January 26, 2006 to April 26, 2006. The public open houses are rescheduled to begin February 21 in Lewistown and finish March 14 in Helena (see schedule below).

The future integrity of the Monument is a major concern to the MWF Board and our membership. Public comments gathered by the BLM on the RMP will guide the formulation of a final management plan. Hunters, anglers and outdoor recreationists, MWF constituents, are major stakeholders in the resulting management plan. MWF continues to urge the BLM to adopt policies that are visionary in scope protecting the historic, cultural and wildlife values while ensuring balanced and diverse public recreation opportunities including hunting and fishing.

In general, MWF supports the principle of "managed area restrictions" to ensure wildlife habitat, habitat health, and security, quality outdoor recreational experiences, diverse fish and wildlife populations, and ethical, fair-chase hunting/fishing for this and future generations. MWF has not only previously submitted comments to the BLM but also encouraged the Central Montana Resource Advisory Council (RAC) to forward recommendations to the agency that reflect these principles.

One recent proposal MWF submitted to the RAC is for an Interagency Wildlife Management Steering Committee composed of BLM, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation regional staff. MWF believes that an adaptive management policy will require coordinate activities between the agencies to ensure the Monument's diverse wildlife.

MWF is troubled by several management proposals in the Monument RMP, Preferred Alternative F, that we believe *must* be changed. For instance, large blocks of land within the Monument are basically landlocked by private land. Many of these private lands have informal roads that extend into the public land National Monument. MWF believes that if these roads are allowed to remain open or designated open only, or exclusively to the landowner or as publicly permissive roads regulated by the landowner it risks the creation of unlimited wildlife privatization and commercialization schemes while creating elite access opportunities. Imagine hunting outfitter operations where only paying clients are allowed to use the roads as private hunting grounds accessible to thousands of acres and public wildlife while the public has no access.

The preferred alternative also allows for outfitter Resource (operation) Permits where the public doesn't enjoy any or equitable access thereby creating private hunting preserves within a National (public) Monument.

Another issue for MWF is the lack of parameters that must guide BLM decisions in years to come governing use or allocations. As public use increases on the river and within the uplands it may require, as it states in the RMP, the creation of a rationing or user allocation system to prevent overuse. However, there are no benchmarks, or proposed baselines that protect or prioritize public use over commercial use. MWF believes that any permit system must protect public opportunity and if a permit system is created that the allocation should go directly to the user, never to a commercial service provider. No "set-asides" for commercial users should be created that would eliminate public opportunity. MWF has asked BLM to develop the lacking criteria complete with threshold figures which will determine when these allocations might become implemented.

Other MWF concerns include the approval of unauthorized airstrips near important wildlife areas, the lack of a prohibition on landing crafts and motorized watercraft competition, and the designation of some roads in wildlife and landscape sensitive areas.

MWF continues to press for management plans that prioritize the conservation of the natural values and balanced public recreation opportunities that inspired the Proclamation. We can't stress enough; your input is an essential factor in attaining an RMP that reflects the essence of the Proclamation. The RMP deadline has been extended until April 26, 2006; please submit your comments in support of a Management Plan that has integrity.

Send written comments to: Monument RMP Team, BLM Lewistown Field Office, 920 NE Main St., Lewistown, MT 59457.

