

VERNAL MANAGEMENT PLAN FAVORS OIL AND GAS DEVELOPMENT AND ORVs, DISCOUNTS WILDERNESS

The Bush Administration continues its program to ramrod an anti-wilderness, pro-development agenda on our public lands for a generation to come. Eleven million acres of public lands in Utah – many of wilderness quality – will be governed by Resource Management Plans (RMPs or plans) currently being developed by the Bush Administration. Exploitation of oil and gas resources, and biases toward motorized recreation have been hallmarks of this administration – from the shadowy Cheney Energy Task Force of 2001, to the administration’s rejection of its authority to identify and protect previously overlooked wilderness areas, to its ongoing failure to protect public lands from increasing Off Road Vehicle (ORV) damages.



Desolation Canyon © Ray Bloxham.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) released the Vernal Proposed RMP on August 22, 2008, for a 30-day protest period – the fourth such proposed plan to be released in the past 5 weeks. The Vernal Field Office of the BLM manages approximately 1.7 million acres of public lands in northeastern Utah, including Tavaputs Plateau, the northern slopes of the Book Cliffs, the White River, Bitter Creek, Brown’s Park and lands surrounding Dinosaur National Monument. The BLM’s proposed plan would slash proposed wilderness areas and adopt an off-road vehicle plan with designated routes in BLM-inventoried roadless areas.



Bitter Creek © Scott Braden

This fatally flawed proposed plan would negatively impact these amazing lands for decades and reflects the current administration’s single-minded focus on roads and energy development:

- The plan “protects” only 106,178 acres of the 227,596 acres outside of existing Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) that have been identified by the BLM as possessing wilderness characteristics (naturalness and outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation) – only 38%. However, the plan fails to provide real protection for even this 38%, as it will allow ORV use in these very areas that BLM is purporting to “protect.”
- The plan allows for development in the remaining 62% of the lands that the BLM, itself, determined to have wilderness character, including Bitter Creek, Cripple Cowboy, Hell’s Hole Canyon, Rat Hole Ridge and a large portion of the White River area. The plan acknowledges that the naturalness currently present on these lands will be destroyed during the lifespan of this RMP.
- The ORV Travel Plan designates 4,860 miles of routes (one-fifth of the earth’s circumference), many routes carving up BLM-inventoried roadless areas and other lands in



America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, pending before Congress. This represents another BLM failure to protect resources while also meeting transportation needs. Instead, these route designations are a giveaway to ORV special interests.



White River © Ray Bloxham

- The plan allows oil and gas development in 89% of the 1.7 million acres managed by the Vernal BLM office, including Bitter Creek, Sweetwater Canyon, Dragon Canyon, and Seep Canyon in the Book Cliffs and iconic lands surrounding Dinosaur National Monument.
- Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs) are an important management tool the BLM can use to protect specific threatened resources (e.g. archaeological, riparian ecosystems, endangered plants & animals, scenic vistas). The BLM has identified 15 potential ACECs totaling 759,901 acres. However, the plan designates less than 18% of those, accounting for only 122,400 acres. This is a step backwards from the existing plan. This would un-designate over 34,000 acres of current protections.
- The BLM has identified 216 miles of eligible rivers and streams segments for inclusion in the Wild & Scenic River System. The plan recommends less than a quarter of these (52 miles along the Lower and Upper Green River) as suitable for Wild & Scenic protection. The White River, one of the West's most beloved and scenic waterways, was dropped even though it was included in the preferred alternative of the draft RMP.

The BLM has taken the last seven years to prepare the six draft plans affecting much of Utah's public lands. Now the BLM is releasing these six plans in rapid succession before the Bush administration times out. Unfortunately, the public has only 30 days to review the plans and submit protest letters to BLM with concerns about the decisions made in the plans.

These public lands must be managed to provide for the long-term health of the land and ecosystems. SUWA is advocating for BLM to revise its plans to provide a more balanced management approach for the next 20 years. A balanced approach includes designating new Wilderness Study Areas, protecting the natural and cultural resources, and reducing ORV use and oil and gas development in proposed wilderness areas.

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