

INTRODUCTION

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA, 1976) states that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will give priority to the designation and protection of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs) in the development and revision of Land Use Plans (LUP). LUPs in the BLM are known as Resource Management Plans (RMPs), and the Cottonwood Field Office (CFO) is currently in the multi-year process of developing such a plan. This RMP will replace the Chief Joseph Management Framework Plan (MFP) that was approved in 1981 and predated BLM's current planning system. In 1981, the BLM did not identify specific areas for ACEC designation. In 1989, the BLM completed a land LUP amendment which designated ten areas as ACECs or Research Natural Areas (RNAs)/ACECs.

This report will evaluate existing ACECs and identify proposed changes to reflect changes in management and resource conditions and if such designation is still warranted and will also evaluate new proposed ACECs. This report summarizes the relevance and importance evaluation for 15 nominated ACECs (includes 10 existing ACECs) located on land administered by the BLM's CFO. These evaluations have been completed in accordance with guidance provided in *BLM Manual 1613 – Areas of Critical Environmental Concern*. Five of the existing ACECs are proposed for modification because of changed conditions. A total of 15 existing and new nominations will be considered further in the RMP to determine whether they warrant designation as ACECs.

WHAT IS AN AREA OF CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN?

BLM regulations (43 CFR part 1610) define an ACEC as an area “within the public lands where special management attention is required (when such areas are developed or used or where no development is required) to protect and prevent irreparable damage to important historic, cultural, or scenic values, fish and wildlife resources, or other natural systems or processes, or to protect life and safety from natural hazards.” Therefore, private lands and lands administered by other agencies are not included in the boundaries of the ACECs. The ACEC designation indicates to the public that the BLM recognizes that an area has significant values and has established special management measures to protect those values. In addition, ACEC designation also serves as a reminder that significant values(s) or resource(s) exist which must be accommodated when future management actions and land use proposals are considered near or within an ACEC. Designation may also support a funding priority.

ACECs differ from other special management designations such as Wilderness Study Areas in that designation by itself does not automatically prohibit or restrict other uses in the area. The one exception is that a mining plan of operation is required for any proposed mining activity within a designated ACEC. The ACEC designation is an administrative designation that is accomplished through the land use planning process. It is unique to the BLM in that no other agency uses this form of designation. The intent of Congress in mandating the designation of ACECs through FLPMA was to give priority to the designation and protection of areas containing unique and significant resource values.

This document will not evaluate specific RNAs, however, in 1989 several areas were designated RNA/ACEC. RNA designation must meet one or more of the following characteristics: (1) A typical representation of a common plant or animal association; (2) an unusual plant or animal

association; (3) a threatened or endangered plant or animal species; (4) a typical representation of common geological, soil, or water features; or (5) outstanding or unusual geologic, soil, or water features.

THE AREA OF CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN PROCESS

There are several steps in the identification and evaluation of ACECs. These steps include: (1) Evaluation of existing ACECs that need modification because of changed conditions which affect the relevance and importance criteria; (2) Nomination of new areas that may meet the relevance and importance criteria; (3) Evaluation of the nominated areas to determine if they meet the relevance and importance criteria; and (4) Consideration of the potential ACECs as alternative management scenarios are formulated and effects are analyzed in the Draft RMP/EIS. When released, the Draft RMP/EIS will contain recommendations on which potential ACECs are proposed for designation and public comment will be requested. Public comments are reviewed and considered and adjustments are made as necessary before the Proposed RMP/Final EIS is released. Designation of ACECs will then occur in the ROD approving the RMP. Each of these steps is briefly described below.

Identification/Nomination

ACECs can be nominated at anytime, but are only designated through the BLM's land use planning process. Nominations from the public are generally solicited as part of the scoping process during development of a RMP for a particular area. BLM requested that ACEC comments and nominations to be considered in the Cottonwood FO planning process be submitted by November 15, 2004. However, ACEC nominations can continue to be submitted after this deadline and those received early enough in the process will also be reviewed. Nominations received after the end of the 90 day public comment period on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) will not be considered in this planning cycle.

Evaluation of Nominations for Relevance and Importance

Nominations are evaluated to determine whether they meet the relevance and importance criteria. The relevance and importance criteria are detailed in Appendix A. A nomination must meet one or more of both the relevance and importance criteria to be considered a potential ACEC. Potential ACECs are then considered further in the planning process.

Consideration of Potential Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

Potential ACECs are considered as the RMP alternatives are being developed. Each potential ACEC is proposed for designation in at least one of the RMP alternatives. The need for special management and the resulting effects from applying such management are assessed in the environmental analysis. After completing the analysis of the effects of each alternative, the preferred plan alternative identifies which potential ACECs are proposed for designation.

Comment on Proposed Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

A notice of any areas proposed for ACEC designation is published in the Federal Register along with a Notice of Availability of the Draft RMP/EIS in which public comments are requested. The public may comment on any aspect of the ACEC analysis at this point in the planning process. These comments are then considered in preparation of the Proposed RMP/Final EIS. After a 30-day protest period, a ROD is prepared, and the plan is approved.

Designation

A potential ACEC is proposed for designation if the area requires special management. Special management is defined as management outside of standard or routine practices, and usually includes more detail than other prescriptions contained within the plan. Special management is usually needed when one of the following conditions is met:

- Current management or management activities proposed in the alternative are not sufficient to protect the relevant and important resource.
- The needed management action is considered unusual or outside of the normal range of management practices typically used.
- The change in management is difficult to implement without ACEC designation. If analysis determines that special management is required, the area is recommended for designation. Designation of ACECs occurs when the ROD is signed approving the RMP.

BACKGROUND

Upon approval in 1981, the Chief Joseph MFP did not identify or evaluate areas for ACEC designation. A plan amendment was completed for the Chief Joseph MFP in 1989, and 10 areas were designated as Research Natural Areas (RNAs) and/or Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs). The 10 designated RNAs and/or ACECs are identified in Table 1.

Table 1. Designated RNAs/ACECs in Cottonwood Field Office Area

Name	Acres	Designation
1 - Wapshilla Ridge	400	RNA/ACEC
2 - Lower and Middle Cottonwood Islands	14	RNA/ACEC
3 - Captain John Creek	1,241	RNA/ACEC
4 - Long Gulch	45	RNA/ACEC
5 - Lucile Caves	438	RNA/ACEC
6 - Skookumchuck	28	RNA/ACEC
7 - Craig Mountain	3,901	ACEC
8 - Elk City/American Hill Lake	30	ACEC
9 - Lower Lolo Creek	3,464	ACEC
10 - Lower Salmon River (Confluence to White Bird Creek)	13,452	ACEC
TOTAL ACRES	23,013	

The current RMP effort solicited nominations from the public as specified by BLM policy on areas that should receive consideration under the ACEC guidance. Scoping for the Cottonwood FO RMP was initiated with publication of the Notice of Intent in the Federal Register on September 3, 2004. Subsequent mailings and public meetings occurred in the fall of 2004, and comments were solicited from the public on issues and planning criteria as well as nominations for consideration in the BLM's ACEC and Wild and Scenic River review process. As the planning process moved beyond the early stages of scoping toward alternative development, the public was notified that nominations received after the close of the 90 day public comment period on the DEIS would not be evaluated in the current RMP, but would have to be addressed in a later amendment. As part of the analysis of the management situation, BLM planning team members also submitted areas for consideration. ACEC planning team meetings were held in December 2004 and January 2005, where additional areas were submitted for consideration and evaluation.