

## **BLM releases draft plan for future land uses**

By Andy Dennison  
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Prohibit or promote oil-and-gas production? Add land-use protections or leave them as is? Sell off or purchase more public lands?

These are the types of questions that faced Bureau of Land Management planners in 2006 when they were charged with revising a 22-year-old plan to direct the federal agency's actions into the future.

After four years of preparation, the Taos Field Office of the BLM has released a draft plan that will guide the agency on how to manage some 600,000 surface acres — and 1.5 million acres underground — in Northern New Mexico.

Nearly 800 pages long, the soup-to-nuts “resource management plan” gives the Taos Field Office its first update on public land management since 1988 — including a full-blown environmental impact statement.

Presented in four alternatives, the plan outlines general practices and specific “prescription” for each — with the plan that is “preferred” by the Taos Field Office. The alternatives reflect a gradation of management and restrictions on BLM lands:

- No Action, which leaves many 1988-era management practices in place.
- Alter native A, which would “balance” use of resources and protection and is the office’s “preferred alternative.”
- Alter native B, which maximizes protection of ecosystems.
- Alternative C, which emphasizes use of resources and production of commodities, such as wood products and minerals.

The public comment period runs until Sept. 8, and agency officials hope to produce a final version within six months that will undergo a 30-day protest period and 60-day alignment with state law before enactment.

The complete document can be found at the Taos Field Office, 226 Cruz Alta Road, or at [www.blm.gov/st/en/fo/Taos\\_Field\\_Office/taos\\_rmpr.html](http://www.blm.gov/st/en/fo/Taos_Field_Office/taos_rmpr.html).

“It’s been a huge planning effort that incorporated isolated parcels and a wide variety of landscapes,” said Brad Higden, planning and environment coordinator for BLM.

Indeed, the Taos Field Office’s scope of responsibility ranges from Clayton in the east to Chama in the west, including all of eight counties and portions of Rio Arriba County. The area includes every ecosystem from high plains to alpine tundra, a diversity that made the environmental assessment a particularly complex task, Higden said.

In addition, the BLM is charged with overseeing the use of 1.5 million acres of sub-surface minerals in the area. Those potentially marketable resources sit beneath private, tribal, state and federal surface lands.

Once completed, the plan will usher in a new era of land management strategies in the following areas:

- land use and tenure (exchange, sale, purchase);
- mineral resources, specifically oil-and-gas development and sand-and-gravel operations;
- recreation, from urban parks to wilderness uses;
- renewable energy, including solar, wind and geothermal;
- special designations, such as areas of environmental concern or wild and scenic rivers;
- travel management, specifically for off-road vehicles; and
- visual resources, such as views from vantage points.

### **Two decades since original legislation**

Since 1988, much has changed in the legislative and land-use arenas. The Taos region has added Wild and Scenic River designations for the Rio Chama and Rio Grande; wilderness designation for the Sabinoso mesa country; and protection for the archaeological sites in the Galisteo Basin.

In addition, a concerted emphasis on energy production — both fossil fuel and renewable — has altered the political landscape for BLM planners.

One issue of concern to Taos County residents will be restrictions on off-road motorized travel. The 1988 plan listed the activity as having an effect on BLM lands but did not designate specific routes. Therefore, ATVs and motorcycles have had virtual free rein on BLM lands.

While the 2010 draft plan does not designate routes, it requires BLM to develop a travel management plan — similar to what the Carson National Forest just completed — after the plan is finally approved.

Also in the proposal are a dozen “areas of critical environmental concern” that would require stricter management, including restriction of off-road travel.

In this Taos valley, these areas include the Rio Grande Gorge, Ojo Caliente and Rio San Antonio.

Grazing allotments and fire-wood collection would be only minimally affected by any of the four alternatives.

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