

Scoping Notice and Formal Comment Period

Environmental Effects Analysis

North Antelope-Rochelle Mine: Antelope Road Relocation
USDA Forest Service (USFS)
Douglas Ranger District
Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests
and
Thunder Basin National Grassland
Campbell County, Wyoming

Proposed Action

The USDA Forest Service (FS) proposes to authorize Powder River Coal, LLC (PRC) to vacate and re-locate portions of Antelope (long segment) and Matheson (short segment) County Roads on FS land.

The proposal comprises new construction of approximately 7 miles for the re-located Antelope Road; 4.4 miles are located on FS land (see project area legal description below and attached map). The relocation is within the North Antelope/Rochelle Mine (NARM) permit boundary, and outside of the existing coal lease area. A significant portion of the relocation is planned to parallel and directly adjoin an existing railway right-of-way. PRC would obtain the FS authorization to construct the road relocation, and Campbell County would acquire a FS easement after road completion. PRC has initiated formal discussion with Campbell County regarding the relocation, and public hearings were held by the County on August 21, 2007 and October 16, 2007. The proposed road vacation and relocation was subsequently approved in County Resolution #1604, dated October 16, 2007. Vacated road segments will be mined through and subsequently reclaimed in accordance with conditions specified in the NARM mining permit. The requested construction corridor is 150-ft on both sides of the planned road center line (approximately 160 acres of impacted FS land during construction), and the finished road will be 44-ft wide, comprising a 28-ft paved width and an 8-ft apron and graded slope on both sides (approximately 23 acres of impacted FS lands after construction).

The road will comprise a sub-base (compacted native materials) and base, overlain by a paved surface with two 14-ft wide travel lanes. The base will be a minimum 8-inch thick layer of compacted, crushed stone. The road will be surfaced with a 4-inch thick plant mix asphalt pavement with a 3/8-inch chip/seal cover coat. Road edges will be flanked by a 2-ft tapered, paved apron and a 6-ft gravel slope shoulder. The road specifications will conform to or exceed current county road standards; the life of the road is projected to be a minimum of 20-years, for the duration of mining activity.

Purpose and Need

The Douglas District Ranger has identified a *need* to continue the use of the roads and satisfy PRC's obligation to fully develop its Federal coal lease (WYW-150210), subject to the Mineral Leasing Act. The existing condition is that portions of Antelope and Matheson roads overlie mineable coal within NARM's federal coal lease boundary. Full development of the federal coal leasing obligation will require that coal lying beneath

those road segments be mined. The desired condition is to mine the coal beneath the roads, yet maintain travel services provided by the roads. The *purpose* of this action is to relocate those segments of Antelope and Matheson roads outside of the area to be mined in advance of mining, so that the underlying coal can be mined and road services remain uninterrupted.

Affected Environment

The project is in the administrative boundary of the Thunder Basin National Grassland, Douglas Ranger District, approximately 16.5 miles southeast of Wright, Campbell County, Wyoming.

The terrain in the project area is gently rolling open grasslands with defined ephemeral (temporary flow) drainages. The terrain is generally flat, with low-lying hills and knolls that are dissected by shallow creeks and drainages.

The project is located in the Highlight Bill Geographic Area. Minerals exploration and development and livestock grazing will be significant management activities in this geographic area. In some areas, there may be restrictions on public use to ensure public safety and to avoid unreasonable interference with mineral operations. In those areas where mining is emphasized, reclamation activities will restore the area to a reasonable level of its pre-mining condition.

Visual Resource Management objectives are to design and implement management activities to blend with the natural landscape. The Visual Quality Objective for the area is modification, a classification that allows management activities to visually dominate the original characteristic landscape. There will be more development and a moderate number of facilities in this geographic area. Facilities and landscape modifications will be visible but reasonably mitigated to blend with natural features. Higher fence densities and intensive mineral development may occur.

Livestock grazing is the dominant land use. Mineral development and facilities such as coal mines, railroads, oil and gas wells, and pipelines will be present and will often dominate the landscape. Recreational use, primarily big game hunting, also occurs. Little camping, hiking, or mountain biking have been observed as occur on the National Grasslands west of Highway 59. Recreation Opportunity Spectrum class for the project area is semi-primitive motorized.

Sagebrush, grassland community wildlife species such as prairie dogs, mule deer, antelope, mountain plover, sage grouse and raptors inhabit the area. Species identified by USFS as management indicator species (MIS) will be addressed in the Biological Analysis.

A cultural resource survey of the area will be completed. Sites identified during the survey must and would be protected in accordance with State Historic Preservation Officer direction.

Management Prescription

The Management Prescriptions for the project area are 6.1 and 8.4 (Grassland Plan p. 3-25, 26). The desired conditions place emphasis on: low to high levels of livestock grazing developments, mineral operations of all types, and roads.

Decisions to be Made

Though the environmental analysis process, the District Ranger will determine whether or not this project will proceed, and if so, where and under what conditions it will proceed.

Relevant Laws and Documents

The proposed project shall meet the requirements of the Thunder Basin National Grassland Land and Resource Management Plan of 2001. The proposal shall comply fully with Forest wide standards and guidelines, the Hilight Bill Geographical area Direction, and the Management Area Direction, including that contained under Management Areas 6.1 and 8.4 (See Chapter 1, pages 1-9 through 1-30, Chapter 2, pages 2-21 through 2-25 and Chapter 3 pages 3-25 through 3-26).

As a part of the effort to develop and describe the proposed action, the District Ranger and the ID team reviewed and discussed all available information and data about the possible effects and/or impacts that this action could have on the physical and biological environments in the analysis area, and the relationship between the proposal and laws, regulations, and agency policy that must be complied with if the proposal would be implemented.

Comments Requested

At this time the Forest Service seeks information, comments and other assistance from Federal, state, and local agencies, and other individuals or organizations that have an interest in or could be affected by the proposed action. Specific comments are the most useful for the identification of issues and development and analysis of alternatives to the proposal.

No public participation other than this request for comments is planned. All persons who provide comment in response to this request will continue to receive information about this project and will be included in any additional public participation effort that may occur. Those who do not respond will not receive additional information. To be able to appeal any person, non-federal agency or entity has to provide comment or otherwise expressed interest in a particular proposed action by the close of the comment period which is 30 days following the publication of the legal notice in the *Casper Star Tribune*. This is the formal comment period. *No other public scoping is planned.*

The name and mailing address of the commenter must be provided with his/her comments for appellant standing and so that future documents pertaining to this environmental analysis and the decision can be provided to them. Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered, however, those persons submitting anonymous comments will not have standing to appeal the subsequent decision under 36 CFR Part 215.

Send written comments to the Responsible Official: Misty A. Hays, Acting District Ranger, Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland, Douglas Ranger District, 2250 East Richards Street, Douglas, WY 82633, Attention: Marilee Houtler. Faxed comments will also be accepted at: 307-358-7107.

E-mail comments may be sent to: **comments-rocky-mountain-medicine-bow-routt-douglas-thunder-basin@fs.fed.us**. Our system will accept email, rtf and word formats. If comments are electronically mailed, the sender should receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive such confirmation, it is the sender's responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means. Comments may be hand delivered to the Douglas Ranger District office between 7:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, except holidays.

Pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27 (d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied, the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with name and address within 10 days.

Contact Person Information

Michael A. Fracasso, Solid Minerals Project Manager, Douglas Ranger District, 2250 East Richards Street, Douglas WY 82633-8922. Telephone 307-358-4690.

This Public Scoping Notice and the project map are available on the Worldwide Web at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/mbr/projects/minerals/index.shtml>

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