

# Fremont County WPLI Advisory Committee Site Visit

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August 27, 2016

| 9:00 a.m.

| Sweetwater Canyon

Meeting called by Douglas L. Thompson, WPLI  
Commissioner /Coordinator

Type of meeting Site Tour

Note taker Cindy Thompson

Advisory Committee Attendees:

Reg Phillips, Julia Stuble, Nick Dobric, Rick Mickelson,  
Josh Milek, Andy Blair, Ginger Bennett and Gary  
Horton. Travis Becker was absent.

Other Attendees:

Jim Gores, Peter Dvorak, Dick Inberg, Dick & Gail Loper,  
TJ Patik, Shane Sanderson, Rhett Abernathy, Rob Coe,  
Steff Kessler, Travis McNiven, Mark Keiser

## AGENDA TOPICS

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Welcome | Commissioner Thompson

The AC conducted their second site visit on Saturday, August 27, 2016. The AC and members of the public convened at the Hudson-Atlantic City turnoff off Highway 287/789, 20 miles southeast of Lander, in preparation for a site visit to the Sweetwater Canyon WSA.

At the assembling point, attendees introduced themselves and their respective affiliations. Chairman Thompson presented the visit logistics and noted this particular WSA has an eligible wild and scenic river segment within its boundaries, which would be discussed later in the tour.

The first stop was at the Sage Creek Campground. This is a major use area by the LDS Church for their historic trek program and a major use of the area near the WSA. The trail does not go through the WSA, but comes within about a ¼ mile of it. The campground has two permanent toilets and a fenced camp area. Use terms and conditions include: a July 1 – September 15 season of use, 4,000 – 8,000 participants with a 7,000 five-year average; 350 person group maximum with a 200 yearly average; limited motorized support with only food and water vehicles beyond this point,; and various other sanitation, camping, and impact guidelines. Travis McNiven, an LDS Church member, described the cultural and historic significance of this activity. Dick Loper made note of the vegetative “suspended succession” because of historic trail use.

The next stop was at the Lewiston Lake access to the WSA. This overlook viewed the lower third of the WSA. It was noted that access to this point is across the private property of the Woolery Ranch, who has not obstructed public access in the past for WSA users. Landowners Shane Sanderson and Rhett Abernathy described their grazing in this and adjacent areas. In 1998 the area was fenced and became part of a four pasture rotation grazing system. The exterior fence is not on the exact boundary of the WSA. Per an agreement with the permittees, BLM is to maintain the west fence (but has not done a good job according to the permittees) thereby making it difficult to keep cattle out or in during appropriate seasons. The WSA was rested for five years leading to regeneration of willows along the stream. The first two years of use was for 100 head for two weeks, currently it is available for 800 head for two weeks.

Chairman Thompson presented information on the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and associated WSA segment. The segment is totally within the WSA boundary. Its eligibility is based on its free flowing status and “outstandingly remarkable” values. Designation and management criteria are determined by ¼ mile either side of the river or any feature or activity that would affect the river-related values – scenery, geology, view shed, recreation, fish/wildlife,

history, cultural, or botany. There are various road segments present and authorized in the WSA. One goes from the east to west boundary and has some use. Current management and activities are hunting, camping, fishing, grazing and other recreation. There is a locatable mineral withdrawal which would preclude gold mining, but not recreational gold panning, which does occur. The activities are managed to not change the character of the Wild and Scenic River Segment or the WSA.

The Game and Fish provided the following wildlife and fishery information:

- 1) Mule deer, elk, moose and pronghorn frequent the WSA and surrounding areas, moving through at various times of the year. Hunting in the WSA occurs for all four species.
- 2) The WSA is 100% within the Sage Grouse Core Area with six known leks. It provides some nesting and brood rearing habitats.
- 3) Fish species of rainbow and brown trout are in the WSA. Populations are increasing in the Strawberry and Chimney Creek sites and decreasing at the Wilson Bar site. The habitat improves as you go downstream from Wilson Bar with more deep pools and undercut banks. Grazing impacts also lessen as you go downstream from Wilson Bar. Numerous species of chubs and suckers are in the stream also.

Dick Loper, Range Consultant with Wyoming State Grazing Board, observed good range conditions and good wildlife habitat with abundant bitterbrush stands.

Stephanie Kessler asked about grazing practices and available water when the WSA is closed to grazing. It was reported there are abundant lakes, reservoirs and springs. She also asked permittees what they want from the BLM, to which they responded to fix the fence adequately and the ability to use flexibility as determined by resource conditions.

Gary Horton asked permittees if hunting affected possible fall use. They answered no.

Dick Inberg reminded the AC of the Citizen's Wilderness proposal and suggested Harris Slough for consideration, which is several miles south.

Travis McNiven told the AC that they are not limited in what they can recommend that existing guidance can be modified by Congress.

Jason Baldes met the tour when the AC was leaving the Lewiston Lake access and was invited to join the remainder of the site visits.

The group then moved to the Strawberry Creek site in the WSA. This middle point of the WSA is not as canyon-like as the lower Chimney Creek/Lewiston Lake site. Road access is available to the primitive camping areas along the Sweetwater River and a two track road was clearly visible on the east side. The area displayed more recreational impact than the lower site.

Further discussion of grazing and recreation activity took place. Ginger asked permittees about trespass and access. They allow recreational access, but said some restriction is placed on citizens gathering resource information.

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*Adjourned | Commissioner Thompson*

At this point the, site visit concluded at 1:30 p.m. with various committee members individually looking at other part of the WSA as well as surrounding areas.