

By ROBERT PIERCE

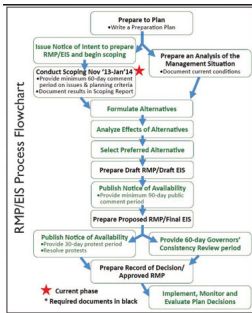
- Leader & Times

The Bureau of Land Management Oklahoma Field Office is seeking public comments to identify issues and concerns that should be analyzed in the Oklahoma Field Office Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement.

The final Resource Management Plan, or RMP, will guide management decisions for public resources in the three-state area of Oklahoma, Kansas and Texas.

BLM is the federal government's largest land management agency, but in Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas, the agency is not as well known due to a lack of federal land in the three states.

“Mainly, what we deal with are subsurface mineral interests by the federal government,” said BLM spokesman Paul McGuire. “We do have small parcels of land here and there that are kind of vestiges of the pre-homestead era that for some reason or another either never left federal domain or have become federal domain for any number of reasons.”



The decision area includes 104,000 acres of BLM-administered surface in the three-state area, as well as 593,000 acres of split-estate land (private land with federal mineral interest), plus 5,270,000 acres of federal mineral estate on or under lands by other federal agencies such as the Corps of Engineers, Forest Service and the Department of Defense.

A notice of intent to prepare the RMP and conduct an EIS was published in the federal register on July 26, 2013, formally opening a 190-day public scoping period which will end Jan. 31.

A total of 17 meetings will take place across Oklahoma, Kansas and Texas through January, including one this Wednesday at Liberal’s Memorial Library.

McGuire said the meetings will not deal with land exactly, but rather subsurface mineral estate.

“We’re talking about leasing federal minerals – oil and gas principally, but also to some extent, we do have some sand and gravel and coal,” he said. “Not so much in Kansas though. Kansas would be mainly oil and gas.”

McGuire said the meetings are a necessary public component to the planning process that BLM is undertaking.

“It’s a multi-year planning process,” he said. “It probably won’t be complete until around 2017, 2018 when the final plan will be in place.”

McGuire said the scoping process is the first step in setting up an RMP, and it is an opportunity for the public to weigh in on concerns they feel BLM should evaluate in developing a land use plan.

“That’s the kind of input we’re looking for so that we can be aware of what citizens are concerned about in regards to public resources,” he said.

McGuire said much of the federal land in Kansas was managed and built by other agencies such as the Corps of Engineers, including many of the state’s lakes, but all of the mineral interests on the property is managed, leased and permitted for development by BLM.

McGuire said the land use plan in place in Kansas was developed about 20 years ago. One of the elements of the plan is the development of federal mineral resources, and this is certain to be an aspect of the plan going forward.

“What’s important is to involve the public early,” he said. “This won’t be the last opportunity for public involvement in the development of this plan, but it is the initial opportunity.”

McGuire said one issue the new plan will definitely address is greenhouse gas emissions.

“How are we going to regulate what permit development while being mindful of the potential consequences of greenhouse gas emissions?” he said.

Wednesday's meeting will start at 6 p.m. at Memorial Library. A meeting is scheduled to take place starting at 6 p.m. Tuesday at the Courtyard Marriott in Salina. McGuire said these are just the latest in a number of meetings which have taken place in Oklahoma, Kansas and Texas.

"There'll be another meeting following the one in Liberal in Amarillo, Texas, the very next day," he said. "We're literally just kind of hopscotching around our whole region and trying to make sure we're giving fair opportunity to people in all corners of the region to weigh in on the plan."

Following the meetings, planners from BLM will take comments from the public and begin to develop alternatives for resource management.

"They're going to evaluate them against a number of criteria – environmental impacts, social impacts, economic impacts," McGuire said. "There's just a number of angles by which they're going to analyze each of these proposed uses. Through that analysis, they will then propose a plan."

McGuire added the RMP can have a shelf life of 20 years or more.

"It's not a rigid plan," he said. "It's a guide. It allows for adaptive management. If you have situations where new science comes along, if it comes for some obligation of how we're developing federal minerals, we can apply that new knowledge to how we go forward. The plan is a guide. It's not something that locks us into a given set of steps. It something that guides the active management of the resources going forward."

McGuire said a developed plan can be amended, something he said takes place frequently.

"The current plan for Oklahoma allows for development of coal in southeastern Oklahoma," he said. "The original plan really only envisioned opening up certain areas of development. In recent years, as you've seen growth and demand for coal in China and other parts of the world, developers have gone in there and said there are areas of coal we might not have thought were previously economically viable, but now, we think they are. We'd like to develop those. They weren't incorporated in the original plan. What we had to do is go in and conduct a plan

amendment.”

For more information regarding the public meetings or the proposed project, call Laurence Levesque at (918) 621-4136.