

An Interdisciplinary Approach for Watershed-Scale Assessment and Management

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The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Dillon Field Office (DFO) manages more than 900,000 surface acres of public land in scenic, southwestern Montana. These lands vary from the snow-covered Lima Peaks, near the Idaho border, to the sagebrush-covered, rolling foothills near the first Territorial capital of Bannack, Montana, to the grass-covered lowlands in the Madison Valley. Miles of high-mountain streams—inhabited by native, westslope cutthroat trout—flow down to the sagebrush-dominated grasslands that pygmy rabbits and sage-grouse call home. The sheer beauty and diversity of life within the DFO make managing these public lands for multiple use a privilege and constant challenge.

Healthy lands have always been a priority for BLM's land managers. The challenge, though, has been maintaining healthy public lands while permitting a variety of uses and users on them. Managing BLM lands has continuously evolved since 1946, when the General Land Office and the US Grazing Service merged to form the present day BLM. In 1994, Rangeland Reform attempted to bring change to

the BLM's grazing program by addressing the issues of fiscal soundness, public participation in grazing management, and rangeland health. This reform package called for creating citizen-based resource advisory councils (RAC) at the BLM grazing district level and reforming grazing management to improve rangeland health through a series of standards and guidelines aimed at ecosystem management. Rangeland Reform resulted in BLM's adoption of RACs, in all the western states, and the introduction of the Standards for Rangeland Health in 1995, both of which, are still used today. In 1997, the Interior Board of Land Appeals issued the Comb Wash Decision,¹ which stated that the BLM “did not provide any site-specific environmental analysis of the impact of grazing on the resource values in five canyons on the (Comb Wash) grazing allotment.” The decision encouraged BLM to take a more site-specific look at each allotment before renewing term grazing permits. Two years later, in 1999, Congress instructed the BLM to “fully process” all term grazing permits by 2009, which included assessing rangeland health standards, completing the associated National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documentation and changing management to make progress toward meeting Rangeland Health Standards where necessary.

In 2001, BLM issued handbook H-4180 *Rangeland Health Standards*.² This handbook encouraged BLM to conduct assessments and evaluations to ascertain rangeland health on a watershed basis. It urged that, when an office invests its resources in a Watershed Assessment, the end product should substantially meet all assessment needs to avoid conducting multiple assessments for multiple needs. It also included a flow chart showing the process: Assessment, Evaluation, Determination, Implementation, and Monitoring (adaptive management). The manual was a timely document that outlined a proactive avenue to improve the way BLM does business on public lands. However, adopting this guidance and finding the energy and enthusiasm to change the standard work routine was a commitment that not all BLM field offices welcomed.



Big Sheep Creek Watershed, July 2004.