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Wildlife refuge looks to change ag rules

By Jeff Gearino

GREEN RIVER -- The small Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge in southwest Wyoming is a relative newcomer to the state. The little-known refuge was established just over a decade ago, but has no visitor facilities yet and is not open to public use.

So about the only folks who get out and about on the closed refuge boundaries are local ranchers and farmers who get to hay, graze and occasionally farm refuge lands.

Federal officials are working on a plan to make those agricultural activities a bit easier to permit and institute, Cokeville Meadows NWR Manager Doug Damberg said.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is accepting public comments through May 2 on proposal to simplify and speed up the special-use permitting process for haying, grazing and farming at the refuge. For years, local ranchers and refuge managers have worked together on a variety of projects at the refuge, including irrigation, weed control, tract cleanup, fence maintenance and the conversion of marginal croplands to permanent native vegetation.

Damberg said under the original agreement that led to the creation of the refuge, ranchers were given the opportunity to provide food plots for wildlife and to implement selective haying and grazing activities. In exchange, ranchers receive hay, crop and grazing shares.

"We use those (activities) as a tool to manage habitat and the haying and grazing we do specifically in a more prescriptive sense... We're trying to maintain the health and vigor of some of the vegetation, especially in those vast, wet-meadow areas," Damberg said.

"And the farming can provide some lure, or food plots, for critters, plus in some of those fallow lands it's a good way to keep weeds at bay," he said.

By law, only uses that are compatible with the purpose of the refuge are allowed there. The agency conducts a compatibility determination for each request from a rancher for a special use permit. Following a comment period, the agency determines whether the proposed activities are compatible.

"We've been writing these for years and doing individual compatibility determinations for each permit ... and now we're trying to go to a blanket compatibility determination for all these activities that will cover us for a certain time period," he said. "This should enable us to do this with less paperwork, less administration, and we can also respond a little more quickly in issuing permits when certain scenarios come up."

Seedskadee satellite

Cokeville Meadows NWR was established in 1993, in part with a \$1 million congressional appropriation.

While the approved acquisition boundary for the refuge totals 26,657 acres, Damberg said to date, only 8,106 acres have been purchased or protected through conservation easements. He said land acquisition is ongoing and comes from willing sellers only.

The first public hearing on the refuge was held in Cokeville in 1987, and the Fish and Wildlife Service proposal called for a 50,000-acre refuge. But area residents at the time expressed alarm over a feared shrinking tax base and an increase in what they called excessive federal control of area lands.

A year later, Fish and Wildlife Service officials presented the smaller, 26,000-acre proposal, which received a better reception from area residents. The proposal included allowing the current haying, grazing and farming each year by area ranchers.

The refuge is currently operated with limited staff. Damberg said since its inception, the refuge has been managed as a satellite of the Seedskeadee NWR, located about 75 miles to the east in Sweetwater County.

About the Refuge

* **Where:** Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge is located south of Cokeville in southwest Wyoming's Lincoln County. Cokeville is located about seven miles northeast of the Idaho, Utah and Wyoming tri-state boundary.

* **How to get there:** To reach the refuge, travel south from Cokeville on State Highway 30. The refuge boundary begins about one mile south of Cokeville and continues 16 miles to the south. Highway 30 forms the eastern boundary of the refuge.

* **Purpose:** The refuge was established in 1993 and is centered on a 20-mile stretch of the Bear River and its associated wetlands and uplands. The refuge was established to protect wetland and riparian habitat associated with the Bear River's importance to a diversity of migratory birds.

* **Use:** The refuge supports one of the highest densities of nesting waterfowl in Wyoming, provides nesting habitat to colony nesting bird species, and provides habitat for resident species, including sage grouse, mule deer, elk and antelope. Haying, grazing and farming are permitted at the refuge and are used as a tool to manage habitat.