

## **Column of Nov. 13, 2013. Editor's Headline: "Local Lands Need Gov't are"**

Twenty years ago Laramie artist Linda Lillegraven produced a gorgeous painting of a landscape. It's oil-on-linen (28 x 44 inches), and it was sold at the Kneeland Art Gallery in Ketchum, Idaho. The artist's chosen subject lies just west of the center of southern Wyoming's Hanna Basin. The view is southward across the North Platte River to the northeastern flanks of St. Mary's Ridge. With a touch of irony, the artist titled it, "BLM Visual Resource Management Class IV."

Irony, because the BLM designation of "IV" is the lowest of the agency's rating in its perceived hierarchy of visually pleasing resources. "Class IV" is equivalent to "ugly, worthless." Today, the landscape chosen by the Laramie artist bears the self-same VRM status, i.e., a BLM assigned "Class C" Scenic Quality Rating, a "Low" Sensitivity Level, and an overall Visual Resource Inventory status of "Class IV." Somewhere in the echelons of agency functionaries someone makes decisions that result in differentiations of Wyoming landscapes (and landscapes elsewhere).

However, we're talking visuals, i.e., aesthetic sensibilities, i.e., "taste." If visual aesthetics lie in the gaze of the beholder, how can a government entity like BLM presume to judge a certain fold of the Earth more aesthetically pleasing than another? And, worse, impose its taste on all of us who happen to fall within its domain? The Chinese government tried this with its Cultural Revolution, an unmitigated disaster. If Wyoming ranchers or farmers were to protest a demeaning designation of their little bit of heaven, would their objections be overruled?

Recently the BLM drafted an amendment to their decades-old definitions of what's visually attractive, presumably with an eye to industrialization. The document consists of the 244-page "Visual Resources Management Plan Amendment and Environmental Assessment," and it covers the vast planning area established by the Rawlins Field Office. It reflects BLM's intensified emphasis on "multiple use" at the cost of Wyoming's diverse landscapes.

In the proposed Rawlins Land-Use Plan Amendment, almost all open-basin settings are ranked "VRI Class IV." That is, based upon visual quality, most of these landscapes hold BLM's lowest rankings. The current draft amendment dramatically increases the Class IV designations.

The Rawlins Field Office is immense. It stretches from west of Wamsutter all the way to the Nebraska border, and from the Colorado border north as much as 100 miles.

In my view, the BLM's proposed amendment is woefully inadequate. It would give 57 percent of the landscapes under consideration the lowest level of visual resource protection. Even scenic areas like Vedauwoo get short shrift.

I believe the provisions of alternative 3, which are specified in the agency's environmental assessment, should be adopted instead. This would provide for VRM Class I and II designations in the Adobe Town area and in the area surrounding the Medicine Bow National Forest, east of Laramie (the Vedauwoo area). I think BLM should improve visual protections for Adobe Town area and the Laramie area, not lower it.

Here's how Bruce Pendery of Wyoming Outdoor Council speaks to the issue:

“The visual resource designations have the potential to greatly advance—or set back—the environmental protections on these public lands. Your comments are critical.” An email to [BLM\\_WY\\_RL\\_RMP\\_VRM@blm.gov](mailto:BLM_WY_RL_RMP_VRM@blm.gov) “can help ensure that some important changes are made before the amendment is final.”

**Vedauwoo** is one of the most cherished and well-used recreation areas in southeastern Wyoming. It is hugely important to the local economy and quality of life. If the area were to be harmed by industrial development, it would be a major blow to Laramie and Cheyenne's long-term economic health. The BLM should make VRM Class III designations within at least 5 miles of major roads like I-80, I-25, U.S. Highways 30 and 287, and Wyoming Routes 77, 230, 487, and 789. These are thoroughfares of key visuals that are viewed by thousands of people. They are important travel, tourist, and recreation conduits; hence, greater visual resource protection would help safeguard Wyoming's second-largest industry, the travel, tourism, and recreation economy.

**The Shirley Basin area should be designated VRM Class II.** No current alternative provides for this, yet this iconic area deserves much greater visual resource protection than what BLM proposes. It's a popular destination with Laramie recreationists and hunters; it's an incredible, largely undeveloped wide-open expanse of grasslands, and it provides important habitat for pronghorn, mule deer, elk, hawks, and sage-grouse, as well as for a population of the critically endangered black-footed ferret. The BLM's environmental analysis shows that some of this area has a “Class A Scenic Quality” rating and a “High visual sensitivity level.”

**There are many special places that do not receive adequate protection under the BLM proposed plan.** These include an ACEC, Wildlife Habitat Management Areas, Special Recreation Management Areas, the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail and the Cherokee and Overland Historic Trails, National Natural Landmarks, Wild and Scenic River Eligible Segments, and crucial wildlife habitats. We need to ask for improved protections for all of these areas—or any that are especially important to us personally or to our local communities.