

## Commissioners Comments

By Terry Stevenson

Usually we talk about what is going on locally, but this time I thought I would take the opportunity to discuss some of the things the commissioners have engaged in that have a statewide impact. We recently received a letter from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) director for the state of Wyoming, Don Simpson. To be very clear, Mr. Simpson is a federal employee of the BLM assigned to cover the BLM assets in Wyoming. The letter from Mr. Simpson solicited input from the commissioners in each county as to areas that might be recommended as ready to be declared wilderness. He asked for a response by August 19. At our August 16 meeting we took action to send a response letter to Mr. Simpson.

The letter emphatically stated our position that we are committed to multiple use of public lands, and that we had no areas we believed should be put in consideration for wilderness designation. In fact, we suggested that existing wilderness areas of our state be considered for removal from the wilderness designation. Several other counties around the state wrote similar letters.

Fortunately, compared to the rest of the state, Platte County has very little BLM land. But we are willing to make our point and to lend our voices to the other counties that have had grave difficulties resisting the federal encroachments on the abilities of local citizens to put BLM land to good and proper use. Statewide, this is a major issue. The Commissioners of Platte County have coordinated our efforts with other counties through the Wyoming County Commissioners Association (WCCA). The WCCA is a private, non-profit organization consisting of the county commissioners of all 23 Wyoming counties. The organization meets 4 times a year. Since I have been a commissioner, I have attended every meeting. The WCCA coordinates county effort on issues they have in common, and also lobbies the legislature on issues affecting counties.

I want to talk about a couple of the coordinated efforts accomplished by counties through the WCCA. In January, the WCCA held a meeting in Cheyenne during the legislative session. This is a normal practice. The purpose of the meeting is to review all legislation introduced into the legislature that might affect counties and to take a position on it. Just prior to our meeting, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar issued Secretarial Order 3310. This order attempted to designate certain federally owned lands as "Wild Lands". On the first day of our meeting the WCCA drafted a letter objecting to the Secretary's action. The letter was strongly and perhaps even harshly worded. The action to send the letter easily passed, with only one dissenting vote from a commissioner that thought the wording was too harsh. We also decided that each county would contribute to a fund to hire an attorney to write a brief opposing the order. The next day Governor Mead spoke to our group. As he spoke he mentioned the need to oppose Secretarial Order 3310. He was quickly informed as to what we had done the previous day and expressed his pleasure at our action. Ultimately, the governor's office joined the WCCA effort as we led the charge opposing the order. Eventually, Secretary Salazar rescinded the order. Another example of county coordination through the WCCA also involves interaction with the federal government. As I mentioned before, many counties across the state have a great deal of difficulty wrestling with the federal government over multiple use issues. Federal law provides that the federal government must work with local governments

(counties or towns) that wish to participate when a Range Management Plan (RMP) is being produced. A RMP is a document that is relied upon as a basis for the use of federal land, whether it is for grazing, hunting, logging, or other activities. Therefore a RMP is very important for a local government to be involved in. It greatly affects the local economy and local citizens.

A few years ago the state legislature set up a fund called the Federal Natural Resource Policy Account (FNRPA). Counties can use money in this fund as a resource when arguing with the federal government over federal land use issues. While this money has been used often and effectively, it became evident that expertise as well as money was needed. Therefore, at the WCCA meeting in December 2010, the members unanimously agreed to ask the legislature for a provision for that needed expertise. The legislature responded positively. As a result, the WCCA hired attorney Ron Opsahl. Mr. Opsahl was previously on the staff of the Mountain States Legal Foundation and has had much experience opposing federal actions. His sole purpose now is to be a resource for all Wyoming counties when it comes to interacting with the federal government on multiple use issues.

In closing, I would like to note some interesting things about the WCCA. It is made up of a diverse group of individuals from across the state. They are male and female, old and young, Democrat and Republican, and they are all very accustomed to giving their opinions in open meetings. Opinions differ on many legislative issues. But there are two important consistencies. The members of WCCA are very willing to help and share information with other commissioners all over the state. Secondly, every single WCCA member is resistant to federal encroachment on local land use decisions. It makes no difference whether the federal administration is Democrat or Republican, or whether the local administration is Democrat or Republican, they all want decisions made locally. To that end the WCCA has committed resources that will help accomplish it. And the Platte County Commissioners consistently support that effort.