

BLM'S DROUGHT POLICY

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Extreme drought conditions over the last several years have impacted most of the West, including Montana. Current data supports concern about an increasing hydrologic drought, which would impact rivers, streams, springs and wells. The current agricultural drought, especially in the southern half of Montana, raises concerns for soils, vegetation, wildlife, recreation and animals grazing on BLM rangelands.

ISSUES:

Because of the widespread and extreme effects of the drought of 1988, Montana BLM developed and issued BLM's first draft drought policy in October 1988. After incorporating comments from the public, academia, and Montana stockgrowers, we adopted that policy in January 1989 and update it every year or as needed. In 2003, BLM's Washington Office issued a bureauwide policy to reflect changes in regulations related to drought or grazing.

Field assessments verify and augment data collected from remote automated electronic instruments about rainfall, snowpack, stream flow, reservoir water supplies, and vital soil moisture at frequent intervals. Information from several agencies is summarized and discussed monthly by the Governor's Drought Advisory Committee. Field personnel continue to observe weather conditions and collect appropriate data. Current data indicates a high concern for most of Montana, especially the southern half of the state.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The Montana BLM's policy, which is supported by the bureauwide drought policy, presents existing laws and regulations used to guide livestock grazing in Montana and the Dakotas during periods of drought. The BLM has provided copies of this policy to grazing lease holders in the three states several times during the last decade. Montana's Drought Policy may be viewed at <http://www.mt.blm.gov/faq/DroughtPolicy.pdf>

Under the drought policy, BLM assesses soil moisture levels necessary for plant growth, effective precipitation, environmental demands, plant vigor, and the amount of available water and forage prior to and during the grazing season. Emphasis is placed on allotments having multiple resource values, grazing problems, and a high percentage of federal land. If resource assessments indicate a need to delay livestock turnout, reduce livestock numbers, or close areas to grazing, BLM works closely with livestock operators to minimize impacts to their operations. Adjustments in fee payments, including any appropriate refunds, will be made on a case-by-case basis. By providing guidance during winter and spring months, the BLM helps land managers and permittees avoid last-minute economic surprises, improve grazing strategies, and reduce land use impacts.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Most livestock operators, Montana Stock Growers' Association, local and state grazing districts, and all resource advisory councils support the BLM policy on grazing during periods of drought. Montana BLM is an active participant in the Governor's Drought Advisory Committee as well as local drought advisory committees and groups. When available and applicable, the BLM provides soil moisture and soil temperature conditions from remote automated weather stations (RAWS) located throughout the state. This information, combined with weather and climate data from other agencies and when used with GIS soil survey data, assists Montanans in making decisions affecting their farms and ranches.

Montana drought information is available from the state's Natural Resource Information System (NRIS) at <http://nris.state.mt.us/drought>. Information on a national scale may be obtained at <http://drought.unl.edu>

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