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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## Missouri Breaks Complex Fires: One Year Later

GARFIELD COUNTY – Specialists from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Miles City Field Office recently met with permittees and agriculture representatives to assess grazing potential for areas burned in the Missouri Breaks Complex (MBC) fires of 2003. The MBC wildfires burned over 130,000 acres of public and private land, of which approximately 62,000 acres were BLM.

Persons representing U.S. Rep. Dennis Rehberg, the Montana Stockgrowers Association, the Montana Public Lands Council and others were among those who toured the burned areas with BLM specialists and permittees and participated in the grazing discussions.

BLM specialists have been monitoring the growth and vigor of forage species, vegetative cover and potential grazing utilization possibilities throughout this year's growing season. Increased levels of precipitation during the winter and spring, combined with minimal run-off provided favorable conditions for plant regeneration.

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The usual BLM post-wildfire policy is to restrict grazing for a two-year period after a wildfire such as this. However, the robust regrowth in the breaks has allowed for other options.

According to BLM Supervisory Rangeland Management Specialist Todd Yeager, a cooperative balance of monitoring and grazing in certain areas was agreed upon utilizing a “dormant season grazing” strategy. Using this method, livestock would be allowed to graze on specific allotments, after the plants have reached their maximum growth levels for the year and had begun their dormant phase. The grazing would be closely monitored by the BLM with follow-up assessments, said Yeager.

Yeager went on to say that the levels of re-growth and re-generation have been interesting and that although some of the areas burned more intensely than others, a varied mosaic of vegetative patterns were the result.

“The fire changed the structure of the vegetation by removing the upper canopy,” said Yeager. “We’re seeing a lot more shrubs.”

“The amount of chokecherry regeneration is amazing,” said Yeager. “We are seeing saplings that are five-feet tall. That was the biggest shocker.”

BLM Wildlife Biologist Kent Undlin also noted that there is excellent forb diversity and production throughout the burn. Undlin indicated that even though the 2003-2004 winter conditions were tough on deer and antelope, current forage conditions look good for wildlife.

“Snowberry recruitment was by far and away the most successful throughout the entire burn area, especially where the snow held longer,” said Undlin. “Although some thermal cover was lost, the increase in shrubs, forbs and grasses should have a positive long-term effect on wildlife and big game.”

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Earlier in April, staff members from the BLM Jordan Field Station and the Miles City Field Office distributed around \$76,000 worth of fencing materials to replace fences destroyed by the Missouri Breaks Complex fires.

The materials were provided by the BLM and distributed out of the Jordan U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service station. Fences re-built using BLM provided materials must be constructed to meet wildlife-friendly standards stipulated by the BLM. Fence construction is still ongoing in some areas.

According to BLM Rangeland Management Specialist Jeff Gustad, the materials represent approximately 45 miles of fence. Dollars for the materials became available through fire rehabilitation funds.

David Jaynes, Associate Field Manager at the BLM Miles City Field Office applauded the cooperative efforts of those most affected by last year's blaze. Permittees have been responsive to balancing use with need to ensure the resource's future, a task not so easily accomplished given pressures from the current drought, said Jaynes.

"With the help of the Garfield County commissioners and private landowners, the recovery period has been about as good as we could have hoped for," said Jaynes. "Assuming weather conditions continue to cooperate, there should be some limited grazing allowed next year, as well."

The BLM's Todd Yeager summed things up.

"We're lucky," said Yeager. "Mother Nature dealt us a great hand."