Opportunity to Comment
Modifications to Federal Coal Leases COC-1362 and COC-67232
Paonia Ranger District, Gunnison County, Colorado

The Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests (GMUG) are inviting you to comment on two federal coal lease modifications.

The Bureau of Land Management Colorado State Office (BLM) notified the GMUG that ArkLand Company applied to modify existing federal coal leases, COC-1362 and COC-67232, by adding about 800 and 922 acres, respectively, to them. Coal in the existing leases is mined by Mountain Coal Company (MCC) from their West Elk Mine near Somerset in Gunnison County, Colorado. The applications were made to prevent bypass of federal coal reserves.

The coal lease modification areas lie in portions of sections 10, 11, 13, 14, 22, 23 of T.14S., R. 90W., 6th PM. The modification areas include National Forest System (NFS) surface lands managed by the GMUG. The coal estate is administered by the BLM Uncompahgre Field Office.

The BLM is required by law to consider leasing Federally-owned minerals for economic recovery. With respect to lands managed by the Forest Service, the agency considers consenting to the BLM leasing coal reserves underlying lands under its jurisdiction, and prescribes conditions (as stipulations) for the protection of non-mineral resources. In this instance, the Forest Service is considering consenting to BLM modifying ArkLand’s existing federal coal leases COC-1362 and COC-67232 by adding 1,722 cumulative acres to them. The FS will also identify any needed stipulations to protect non-coal (surface) resources. If FS consent is given, the BLM would offer the modifications by non-competitive bid.

If the lease modifications occur, the coal in this area would be accessed and recovered by underground longwall mining methods. The coal would be transported using MCC’s existing coal transportation system and surface facilities. At the leasing stage, the federal agencies evaluate the effects of subsidence (i.e. the land surface lowered as a result of mining) on surface resources, and identify where surface resources may require specific protection from subsidence or foreseeable surface uses. Under a foreseeable mine plan scenario, surfaces uses on these modifications may include methane drainage wells (MDWs) and associated access roads required to safely mine the coal resources. Specific locations of the MDWs and roads are not known at the leasing stage, and will not be known until the time specific mine plans are approved by the State, BLM, MSHA and the federal Office of Surface Mining during the subsequent permitting process. However, the surface uses are reasonably projected for cumulative effects analysis purposes in the NEPA at the leasing stage.
Approximately 1,450 acres of the modification areas are within the West Elk Inventoried Roadless Area (equates to approx. 1,540 acres in draft Colorado Roadless Area). The lease modifications have been reviewed by USDA’s Office of the Secretary, which informed the Forest Service to begin environmental analysis.

If the lease modifications are approved, temporary roads and timber cutting may be needed to construct, operate and maintain MDWs. This leasing action itself does not authorize any surface disturbing activities, however it does evaluate the need for conditions for subsequent use of the land surface. In this case, conditions on the existing leases would apply to the modifications, and include a condition for activities in roadless areas, which states that lands in the leases may be subject to restrictions on road-building pursuant to rules and regulations of the Secretary of Agriculture applicable at the time any roads may be proposed on the lease.

The GMUG Forest Supervisor is the Responsible Official for this discretionary consent decision on these coal lease modifications. Given the purpose and need, the Responsible Official will review the proposed action, the other alternatives, and the environmental consequences in order to decide the following:

- Whether or not to consent to the BLM modifying existing federal coal Lease COC-1362 by 800 acres;
- Whether or not to consent to the BLM modifying existing federal coal Lease COC-67232 by 922 acres;
- Prescribe conditions (stipulations) needed for the protection of non-coal resources.

It is anticipated that the environmental analysis will be documented in an Environmental Assessment (EA). A No Action alternative and other alternatives that may develop during the public comment period will be considered. The analysis will consider the effects of leasing on the following: the socioeconomic benefits of mining (local and regional/national implications), wildlife (including threatened, endangered, sensitive and management indicator species), land stability, soils, and geologic hazards, subsidence, vegetation (including impacts to riparian vegetation and associated habitat if present), cultural resources, existing land uses, including recreation, existing roads/facilities, visual resources, livestock management, air quality, safety, cumulative effects including anticipated mine activities, along with other issues that may be raised by the public. The BLM Uncompahgre Field Office and the USDI – Office of Surface Mining, Western Regional Coordinating Center will participate in the analysis as cooperating agencies.

This opportunity to comment serves two purposes:

1) As scoping for this project under the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act, and
2) As the comment period required at 36 CFR 215.3.

The opportunity to comment on the Proposed Action ends 30 days following the date of publication of the legal notice of opportunity to comment in the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel. Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted. In order to be eligible to appeal the Forest Service final decision on this project, individuals must comment during this 30 day comment period per 36 CFR 215.6(a)(3).
Comments are defined in 36 CFR 215.6(a)(3). Also, for appeal eligibility, each individual or representative from each organization submitting comments must either sign the comments or verify their identity upon request.

Mail your comments regarding Federal Coal Lease Modifications C-1362 and COC-67232 to:

Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests
ATTN: Forest Supervisor
2250 HWY 50
Delta, CO 81416

Fax comments to: 970-874-6698

Electronic comments will be accepted, and must be submitted as an ANSI compatible format (e.g. *.doc, *.txt, *.rtf) or .pdf. Please note in the subject line that the comments are for Federal Coal Lease Modifications COC-1362 and COC-67232. If the sender does not receive an automated acknowledgement of the receipt of comments, it is the sender’s responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means. Electronic comments should be sent to: comments-rocky-mountain-gmug@fs.fed.us

Hand delivered written comments will be accepted at the GMUG National Forests, 2250 HWY 50, Delta, Colorado between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, except for federal holidays. Oral comments will also be considered (see contact information above).

If you have questions, please contact Liane Mattson at (970) 874-6697, or Nicole Mortenson, at 970-874-6616 or nmortenson@fs.fed.us.

Sincerely,

/s/ Charles S. Richmond
CHARLES S. RICHMOND
Forest Supervisor