

**Outcome Focused Management Focus Group Report**  
**BLM-Newcastle Field Office**  
**Northeast Wyoming**  
**2021-2022**



**BLM – Public Lands Recreational Research Partnership Report #18**  
**Colorado Mesa University and the University of Alaska Fairbanks**

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The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as representing the opinions or policies of the U.S. Government. Mention of trade names or commercial products does not constitute their endorsement by the U.S. Government.

## Characteristics of the Newcastle Field Office

Located in northeast Wyoming, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Newcastle Field Office is responsible for the management of nearly 300,000 acres of federal public land in Crook, Weston and Niobrara counties. It is also responsible for an additional 6,600 acres in Nebraska, but this study is focused on the field office lands in Wyoming. These BLM managed lands are interspersed with a variety of public and private lands including state lands, ranches, small communities, Devil's Tower National Monument to the northwest and the Black Hills National Forest to the east. The landscape includes prairie grasslands, rolling hills and some forested foothills near the South Dakota border. Although some parts of the field office have been developed for recreation such as the Mallo Trail and the Stateline Recreation Area, the recreation infrastructure is modest across the rest of the field office. The BLM Newcastle Field Office is in the process of revising its Resource Management Plan (RMP) which is the guiding document on all aspects of management for the public lands under its management. Part of the process of such a revision is to collect data on the current management situation and the public's desires for future management. Although the RMP revision covers a wide range of BLM management areas, this report was confined primarily to the question of recreation on the lands managed by the field office. Colorado Mesa University (CMU) and the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) were asked to help gather and analyze the data regarding outdoor recreation and its impact on surrounding communities to support the BLM recreation planners in the RMP process. UAF and CMU are part of a national research partnership with the BLM to provide recreational data for BLM offices around the country through an assistance agreement under the Public Lands Recreational Research Partnership. Dr. Peter Fix is the principal investigator for the survey efforts on this project that are detailed in another report. Dr. Tim Casey is the principal investigator for the focus group efforts on this project described in this report. Data for both projects was collected from the spring of 2021 until the spring of 2022.

Figure 1- BLM Newcastle Field Office Map

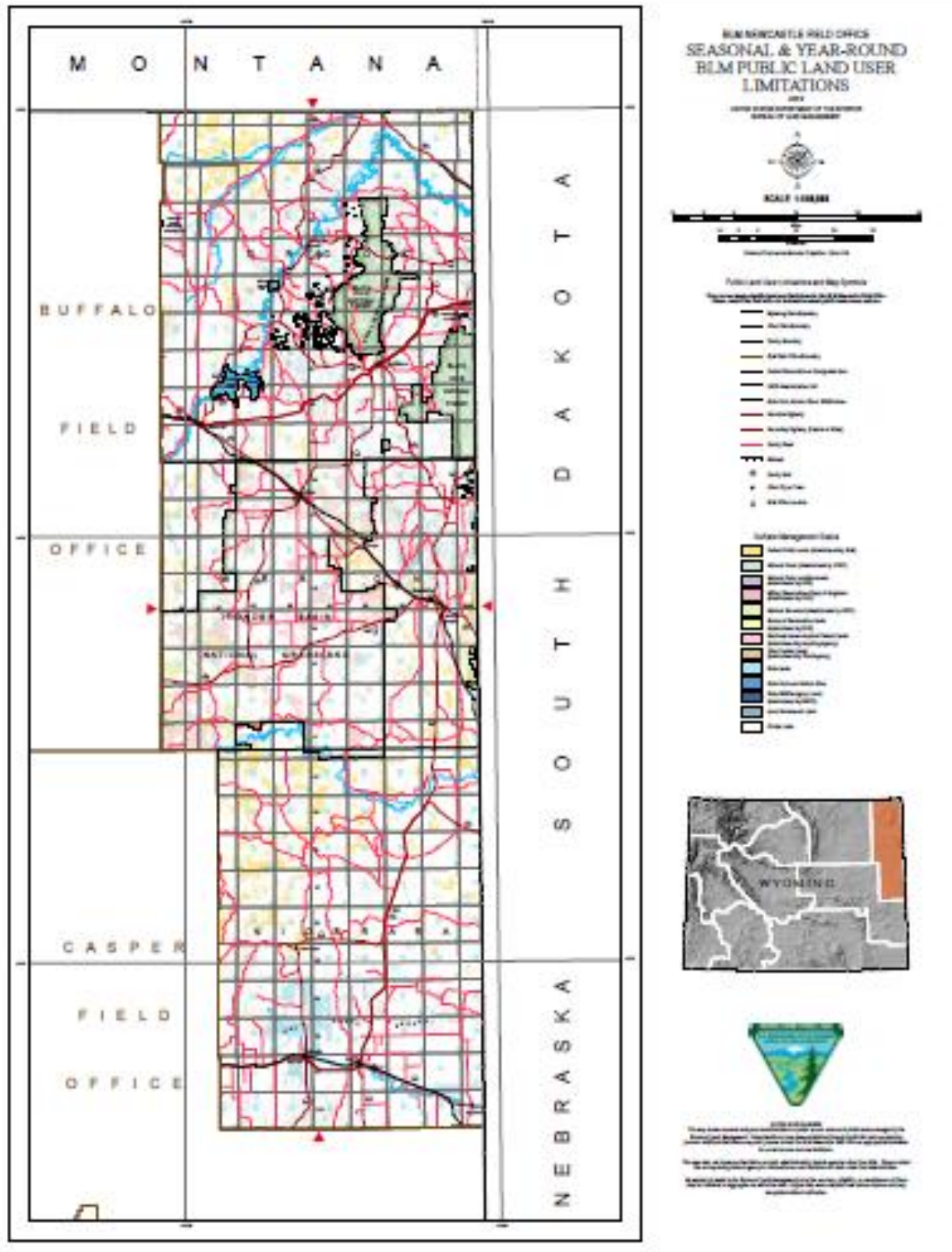


Figure 2- Map of Stateline Recreation Area

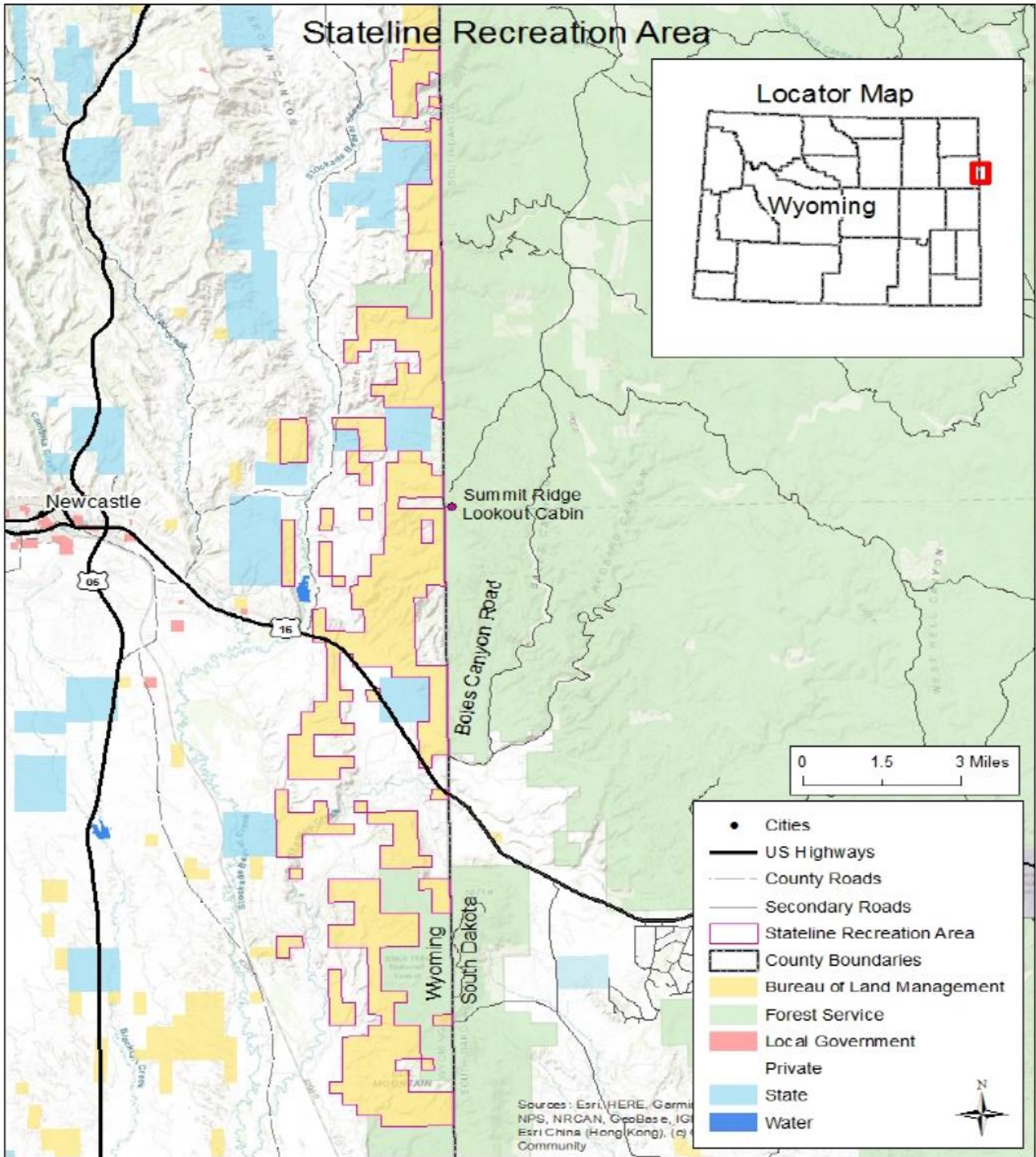




Figure 3- Map of BLM land in Niobrara County, WY

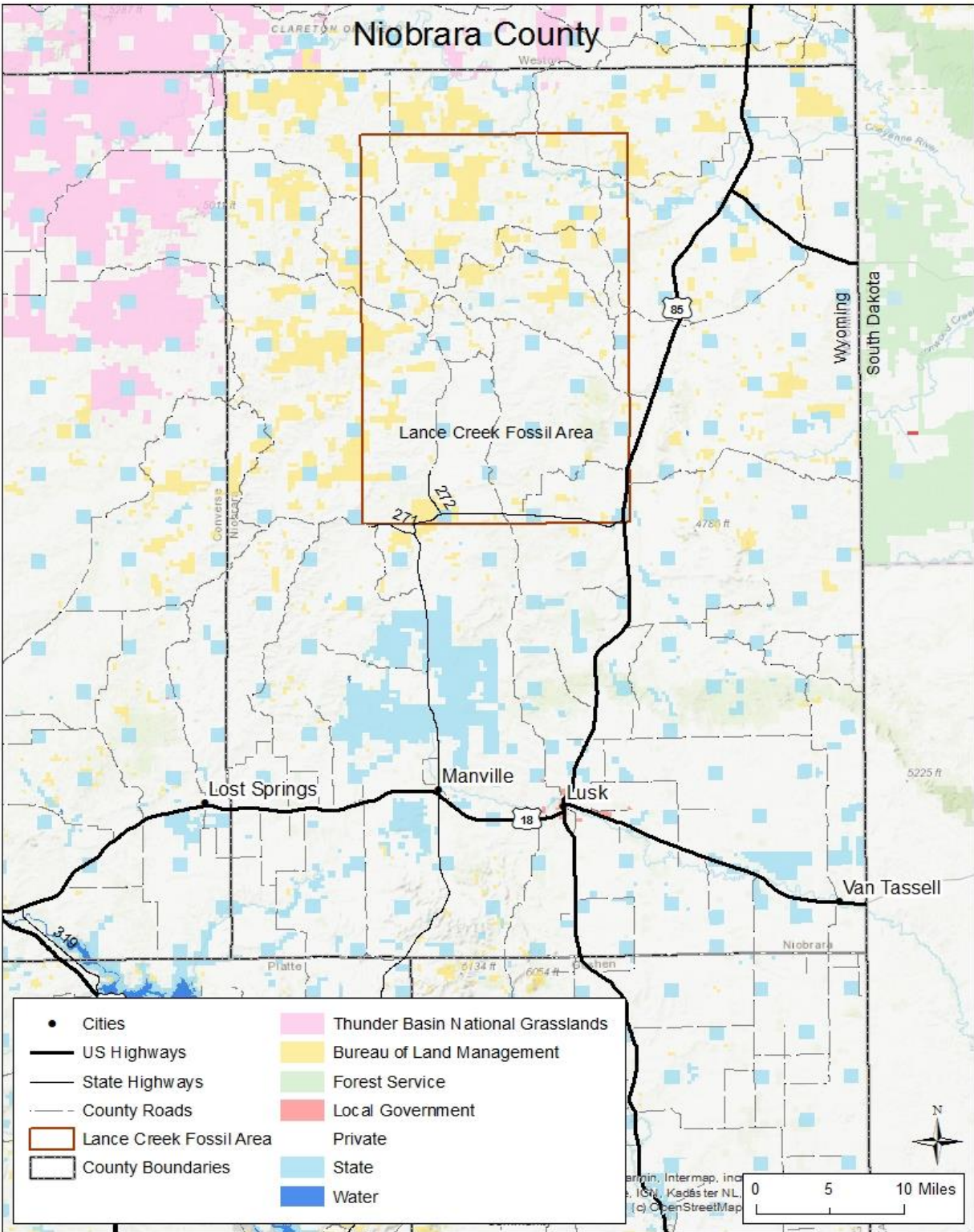


Figure 4- Mallo Trail Ara Map

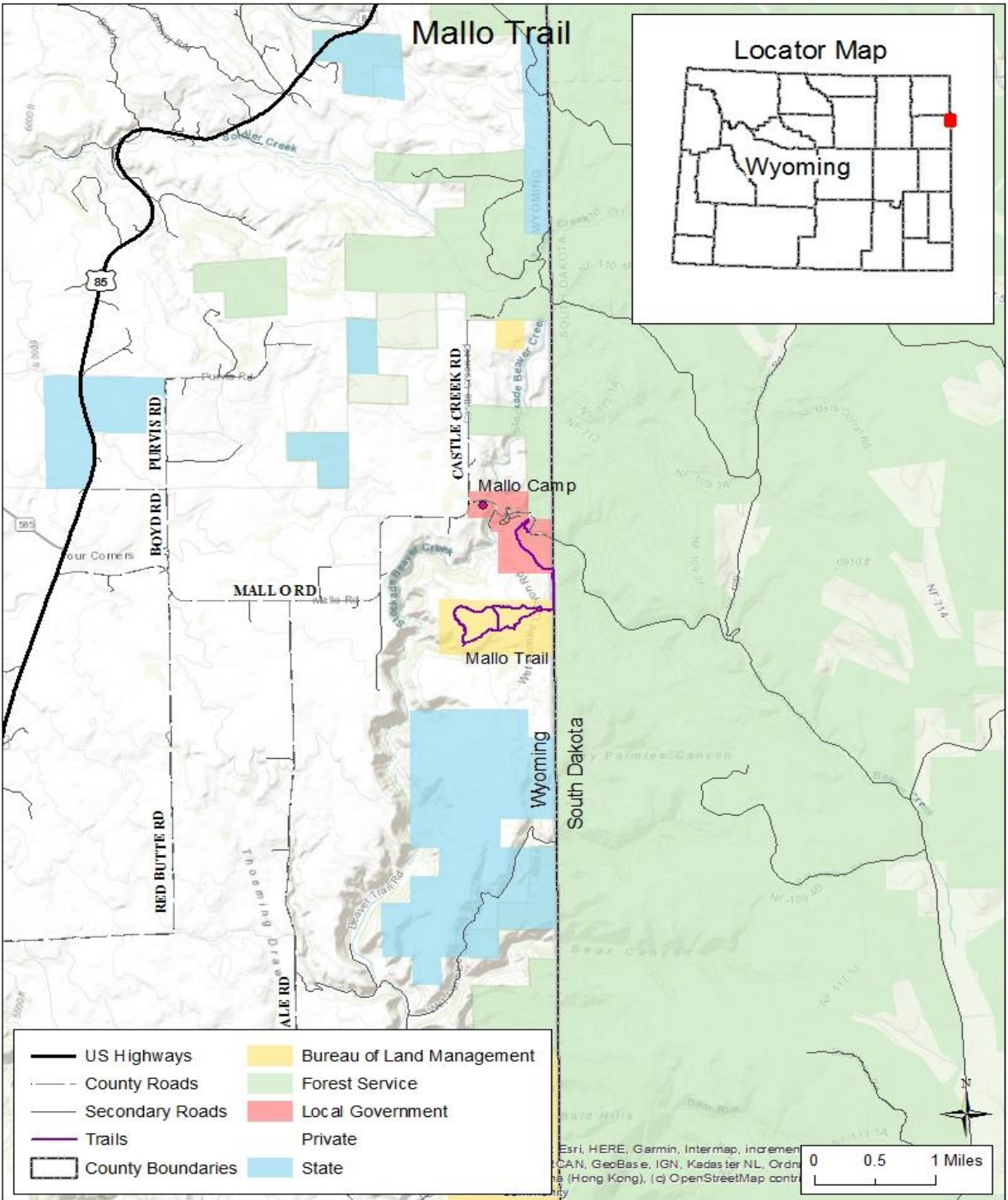


Figure 5- Map of BLM lands in Crook County, WY

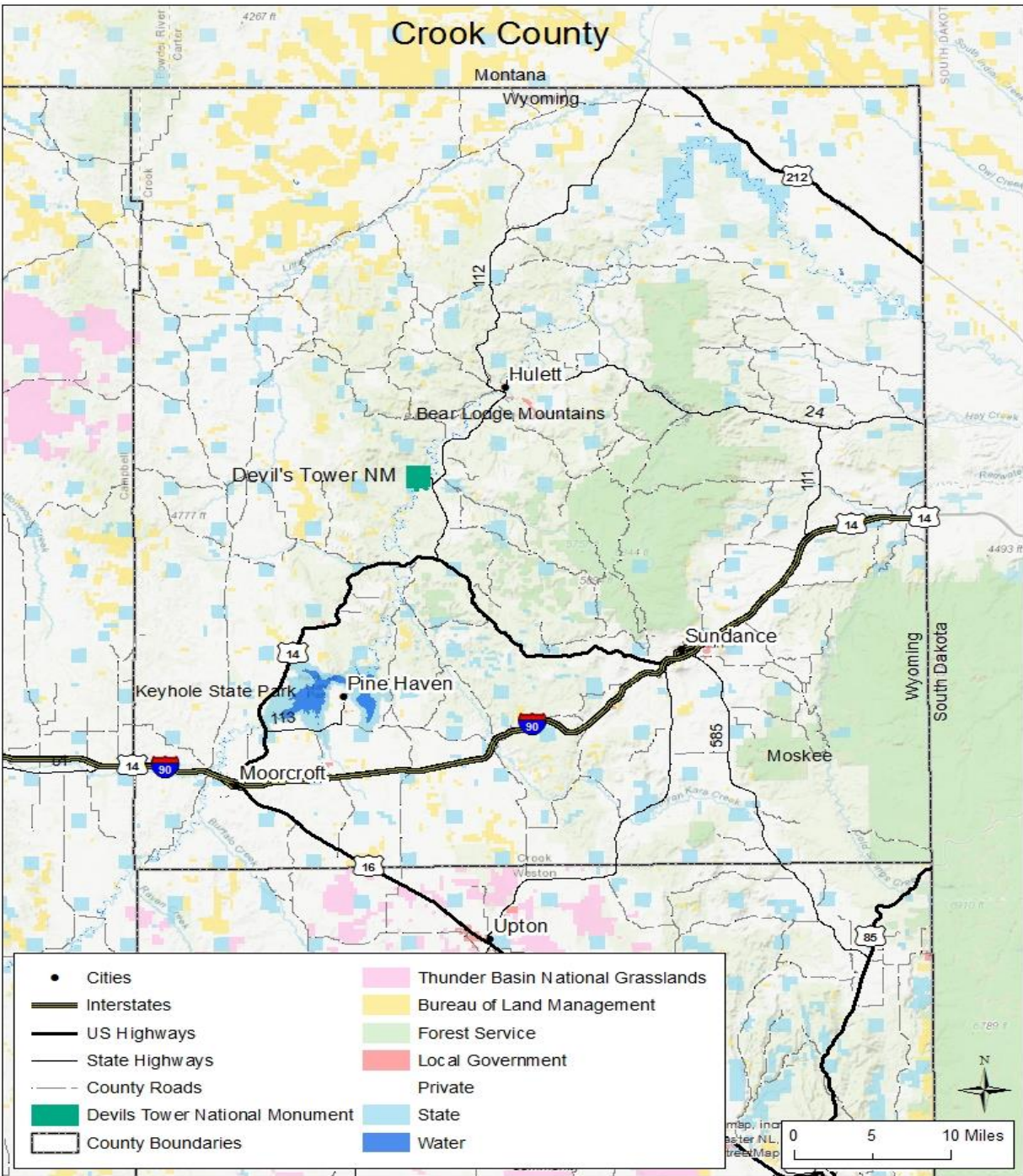
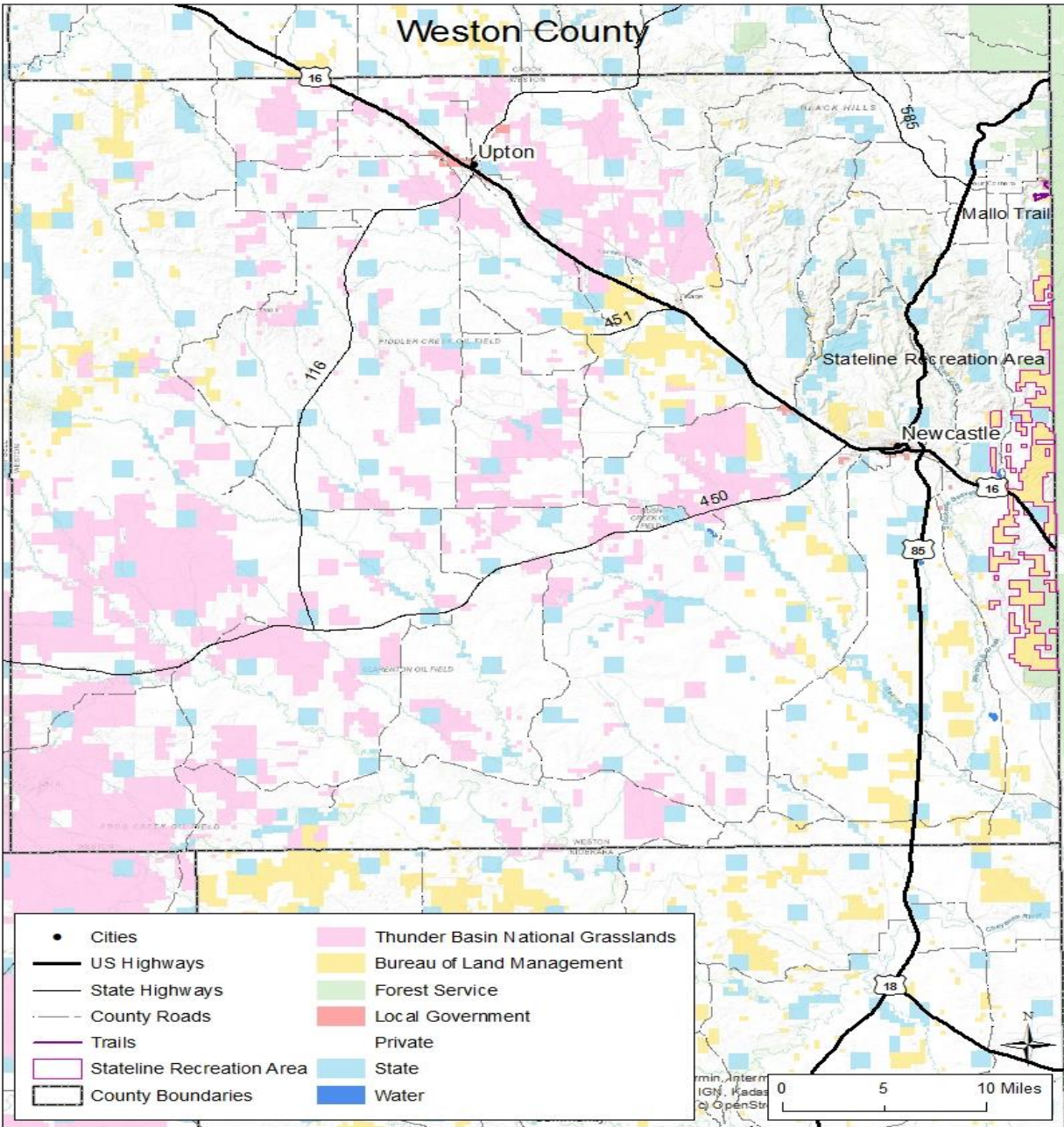


Figure 6- Map of BLM lands in Weston County, WY



## Methodology

For the focus group part of the study a mixed methodology model was determined to be the appropriate approach to establish the recreation experience baseline needed for the planning process. The mixed methodology focus group uses audience handouts to record individual responses anonymously in addition to engaging participants in open dialogue. This methodology captures both a complete set of responses from each participant using the handouts with maps as well as documenting a rich set of notes from the group dialog that gives

context and depth to the handout responses to set questions. Either approach used alone would leave an incomplete picture of the broad and deep relationships people have with this landscape.

The design of the focus group for data collection entailed a series of discussion questions intended to engage participants in open dialogue about their preferences, interests, and expectations so responses could be captured in their own words, followed by a list of choices that represented a spectrum of possible responses to the discussion questions that could be responded to via anonymous handouts given to every participant and collected at the end of the focus group so their responses can be recorded for a larger database. The open dialogue comments were documented with audio recording equipment as well as by the facilitator taking notes on flip charts at the front of the room.

The focus group script covered all the major elements needed in planning for recreation on public lands: preferences for outcomes and experiences, interests and expectations, setting characteristics, activities, and the services needed to support the recreation experience. Additional questions encouraged participants to express their preferences for management practices. It included eighteen questions, eight were open-ended, and ten had prepared responses for audience polling recorded on the handouts. All questions with prepared responses included an “other” option so participants weren’t constrained by the prepared responses. Of the open-ended questions, one included a mapping exercise where participants noted special places on a series of 4 different maps corresponding to the four parts of the field office (See Appendix 1 for a copy of all questions on the handout including the maps). The number of questions included in the script was tailored to allow for a 90-minute focus group.

A total of four in-person focus groups were conducted in the summer of 2021 in various towns adjacent to the public lands in the field office. The participation rate in these in-person focus groups was particularly light. This might have been a lingering effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and people’s reluctance to go to meetings in person. Because of the low turnout, an additional digital focus group (hosted in the on-line platform Adobe Connect) was conducted in the Spring of 2022. There were a total of 13 participants in the 5 focus groups. The participants were allowed to remain anonymous; although their responses were tracked and collated by the use of the handouts they filled out and turned in. Their participation in the study and on every question was voluntary and they were reminded that they were free to participate or not as they wished, but that if they did speak up or write something down, that was taken as their consent to participate in the study. Some basic demographic information was collected at the beginning of each session. Participants were asked to provide home zip codes in order to identify how representative this study was of the overall population. The table in Figure 1 indicates the dates, locations, and number of participants for each focus group.

Table 1- Focus Group dates and locations

Focus Group #	Date	Time	Location
1	7/7/2021	10 am	Newcastle, WY
2	7/7/2021	7 pm	Newcastle, WY
3	7/8/2021	10 am	Upton, WY
4	7/9/2021	10 am	Sundance, WY
5	3/28/2022	10 am	Online

Outreach to populate the focus groups was largely a BLM effort due to their knowledge of the area and the most effective communication to get the word out in an open invitation to participate in one of the focus groups. These approaches included:

- Direct outreach to partners and key stakeholders such as county and city governments, local conservation districts and state agencies responsible for surrounding lands and wildlife, as well as local activity-oriented recreation groups,
- Press releases in local newspapers, radio interviews
- Flyers – put up at community centers, on trailhead kiosks, etc.

The methodology of audience polling through the use of handouts to record responses allows each participant the opportunity to weigh in on every area of the research. This is important to avoid a wide variety of social setting dynamics that arise in traditional focus group settings, such as only hearing from extroverted participants who dominate a conversation. The polling also minimizes the undue influence of peer settings in small communities. If an individual is worried about the repercussions of their responses mentioned aloud in a focus group within their community, they are not likely to respond, or not as accurately. However, if they can anonymously record their preferences, they may feel more liberated to express their true opinion. The audience polling using written responses on handouts preserves participants' anonymity while being able to link all of their answers together for the purposes of analysis. The advantage of using audience polling and open-ended questions in a focus group setting is that participants are allowed to clarify what they mean when they select certain responses.

It is important to note the limitations of using this data. Because the sampling of participants was not random or large, it would be difficult to suggest this analysis is generalizable to the

preferences of the entire population that might be interested in the area, and there is no attempt to do so here. This is particularly true when there is a small number of participants in the focus group study. More generalizable data will be produced from the recreational surveys conducted by UAF as part of this project. However, effort was made to hear from a broad sample of groups who have a connection to the landscape including both locals and visitors that were willing to spend 90 minutes participating in the conversation.

## Topic Area 1 - Demographics

The thirteen participants in this focus group study were all from communities surrounding the public lands in the BLM Newcastle Field Office, or at least in that area of Wyoming as indicated by Table 2 below. One of the benefits of focus groups in the communities surrounding the landscape is the ability to have a longer conversation with local residents about the impact of outdoor recreation on their communities. Combined with the outcomes focused management survey research done in the field office at the time, these studies provide a rich picture of the public’s preferences for outdoor recreation in the area. Because of the low participation in this focus group study, it will be important to balance this information with the results of the recreation survey conducted by University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

*Table 2- Participant zip codes and locations*

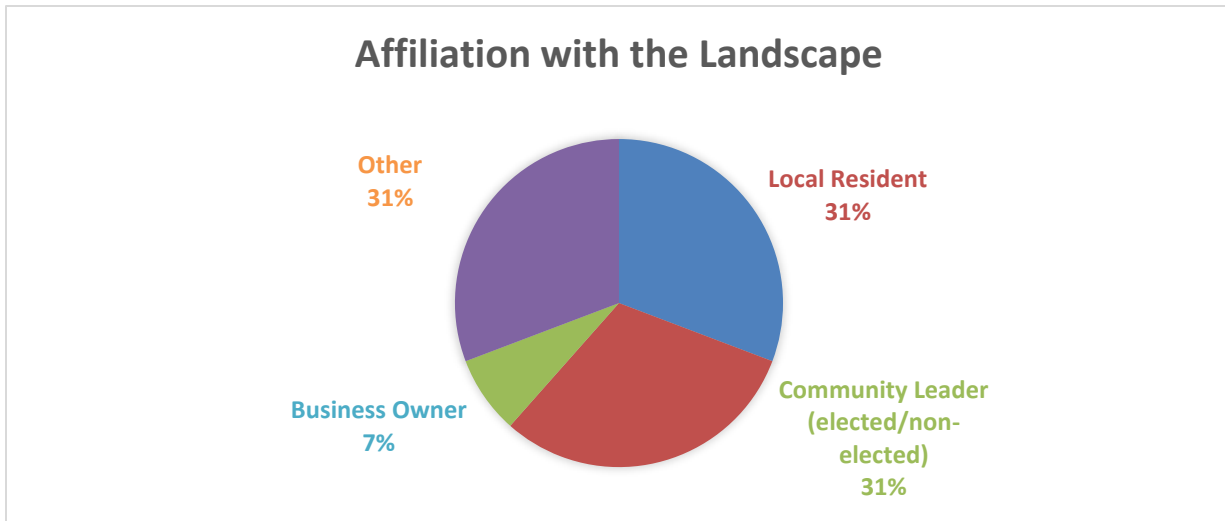
82730 - Upton, WY	7.7%
82729 - Sundance, WY	15.4%
82701 - Newcastle, WY	53.8%
82604 - Casper, WY	7.7%
82225 - Lusk, WY	15.4%
Total	13

The participants were asked to identify their primary affiliation with the landscape. Although they might wear many hats, they were encouraged to adopt only one of those roles and use it as a lens to answer the rest of the questions<sup>3</sup>. As indicated in Figure 7 below, the participants were almost evenly split by affiliation with a large segment choosing “other”. Most of those “other” responses indicated that they were public employees responsible for the management of natural resources (land or wildlife or water).

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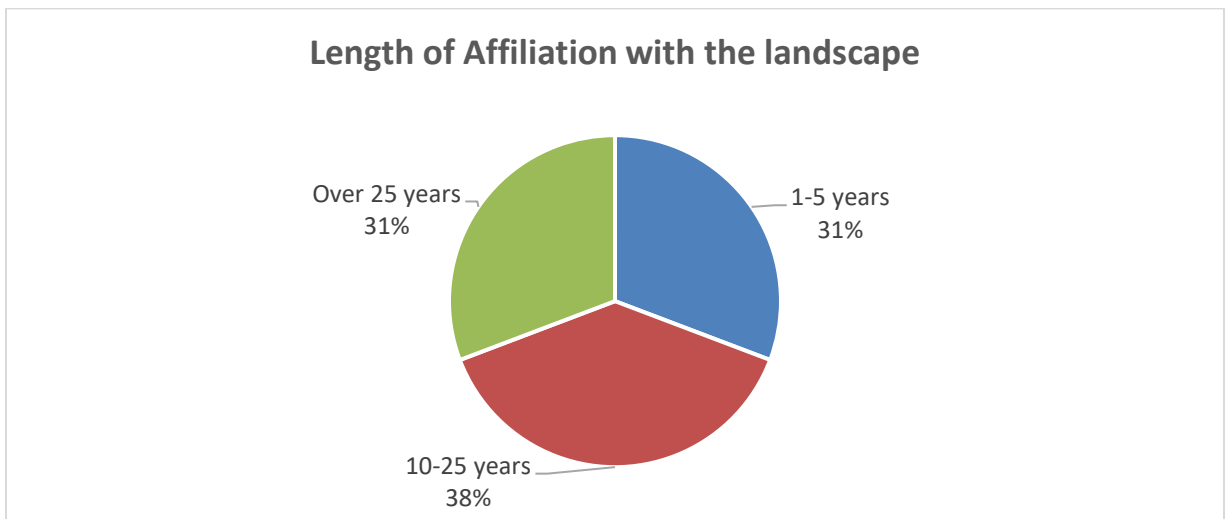
<sup>3</sup> Some of the choices (such as Visitor or Outfitter/guide) were not selected by any participant, so they were left off the graph in Figure 2. In subsequent graphs, if a variable has a value of 0%, it will be left out of the display.

Figure 7- Affiliation of participants to landscape



Participants were also asked how long they have been affiliated with the landscape in the BLM Newcastle Field Office. As the graph in Figure 8 below indicates, the majority of participants have a long-term affiliation with the landscape in the study. Almost 1/3 of them have been connected to the landscape over 25 years, and almost 70% of them have been affiliated with the landscape for at least a decade.

Figure 8- Length of affiliation with landscape



## Topic Area 2 - Management of New Castle Field Office

Next, participants were asked to imagine themselves as a land manager for the day. They were asked to set priorities for the lands in the field office in an open-ended question in which their responses were



captured on flip charts for the in-person meetings, and through a chat box in the online version of the meetings. The most common responses asked for a preservation of the current characteristics of the landscape, in particular the open and scenic qualities, the wildlife habitat and the natural resources in the area. Other frequent priorities included a number of comments on the access to the public lands, and the multiple use characteristic of the lands as managed. Education, communication with the public, infrastructure and recreation were other priorities mentioned in response to the manager for the day question.

Participants were then asked about the wide variety of management boundaries across the landscape from BLM lands to private lands, conservation lands to state lands. They were asked if they were generally aware of these administrative boundaries and whether they made a difference in their thinking about the land, or in what they did there. The most common response was that they were generally unaware of the boundaries and different management prescriptions. A few participants indicated that the boundaries did not make that much difference other than the difference between public and private land. Private land raised issues of respect and access. Some participants also indicated that they must be aware of other administrative boundaries because their activities might change between BLM and other public lands. They often rely on maps and digital media to be aware of boundaries because some complained that the boundaries are not well marked on the ground. A suggestion of more signage was expected to alleviate this problem. One participant indicated that the habitat and wildlife might differ between administrative units due to differences in management practices while another worried that visitors might be unaware of boundaries and expectations.

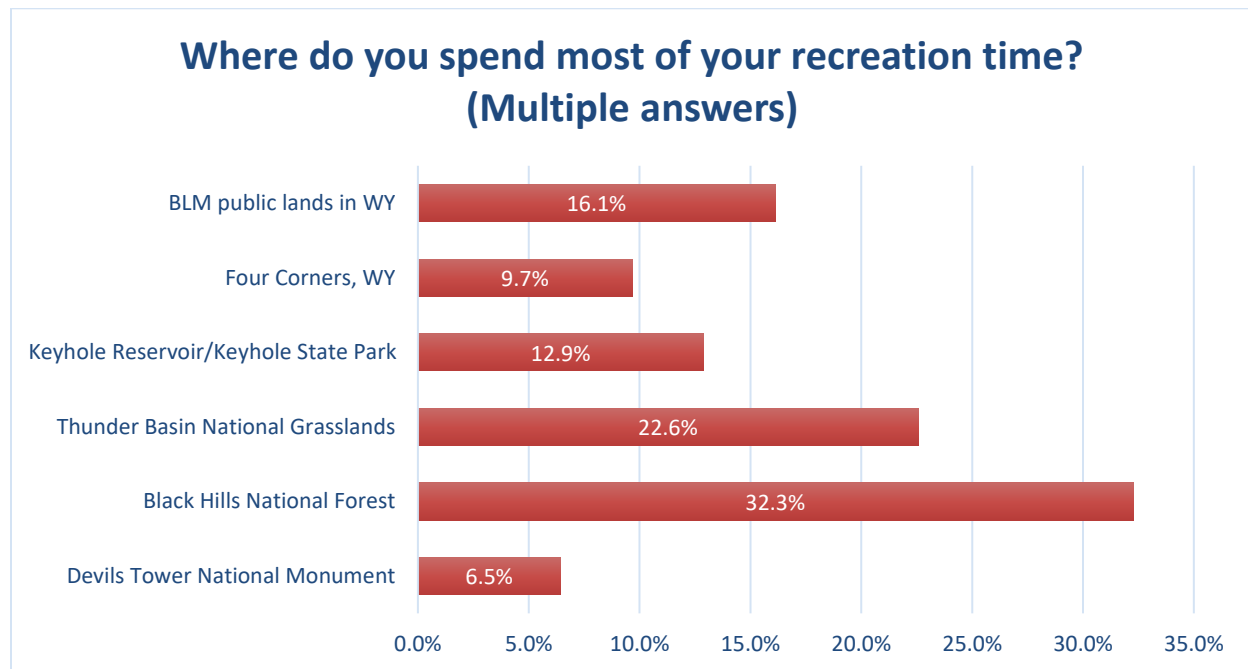
Finally, the participants were asked to identify improvements that they wanted to see in the management of BLM lands in the area. By far the most common response was the need for more trails and other recreation infrastructure such as road maintenance and signage. The need for more trails throughout the landscape were identified, but trails in the Stateline Recreation Area were of great concern from several participants. Several participants suggested the need for education about the resources and the expectations for recreation on the land. This could include event planning that would connect people to the outdoors, or even a passive education effort through more signage. A few participants indicated they liked the landscape the way it is and there was no need for improvements at this point. Based on the participants responses, there seems to be a problem with dumping carcasses, appliances, etc. on public lands as well as some vandalism that diminishes the value of the land. Interestingly a few participants called for an emphasis on increasing the diversity of stakeholders and visitors.

In general, the participants seemed to be pleased overall with the management of public lands in the area but saw room for improvement on signage and education as well as the development of recreation infrastructure, primarily trails. Beyond these additions, participants indicated they would like to see on-going maintenance of the resources that already exist in the landscape.

## Topic Area 3 - Locations

In order to better understand how recreation in the region affects local communities and the BLM planning process, participants were asked to identify up to three areas beyond the BLM Newcastle Field Office lands where they spend most of their recreation time when not recreating in the field office. Figure 9 below indicates the percentage of responses for each of the major surrounding public landscapes. The Black Hills National Forest, just over the border in South Dakota was the most frequent choice followed by Thunder Basin National Grasslands. Of the options that were chosen, Devil's Tower National Monument was the least likely to be selected. This information can be useful to BLM recreation planners as they begin the planning process because it helps identify the surrounding land agencies that share recreationists. There is a potential for collaboration and trail connectivity, especially with the Black Hills National Forest that already must be used to access some of the BLM lands in the field office. Trail connectivity was a priority for several participants when they discussed the Stateline Recreation Area which borders the Black Hills National Forest.

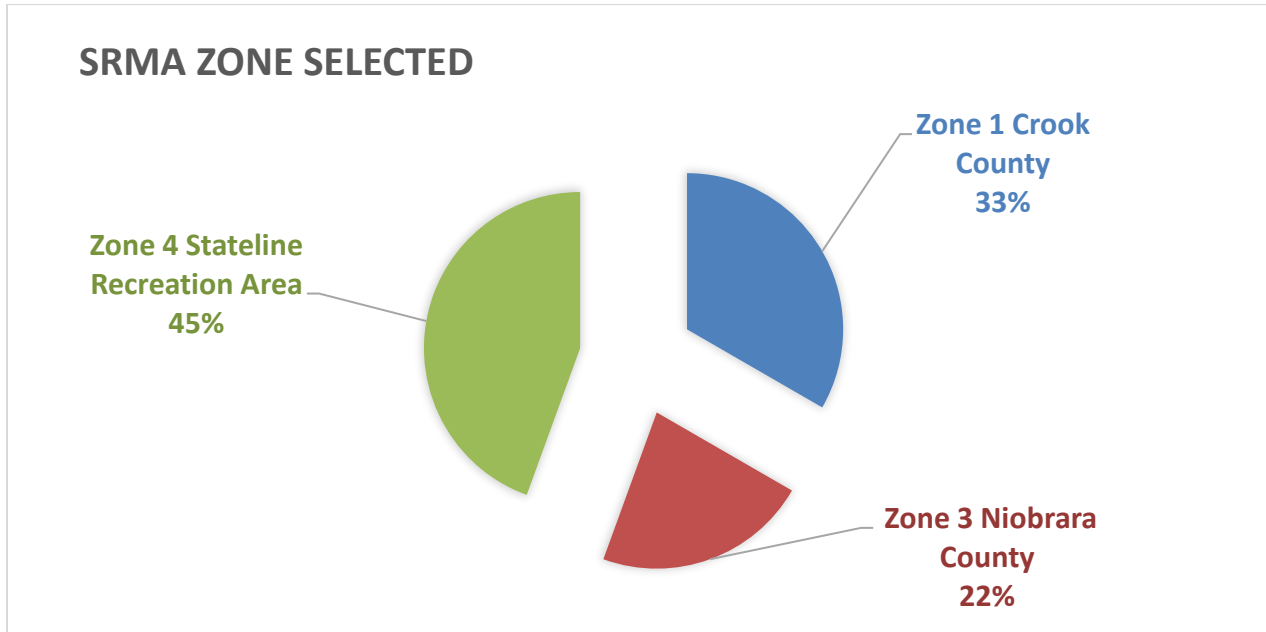
Figure 9- Other public land recreation destinations in the area



The BLM managed lands in the field office were divided into five zones for the purposes of planning, one for the BLM lands in each county, (Crook, Niobrara and Weston) as well as the Stateline Recreation Area and the Mallo Trail along the state line with South Dakota. Participants were asked to select one of those five areas that they wanted to offer more information about. They were informed that their choice would be connected to their answers for subsequent questions as a way of geographically locating their comments to a particular area. Some participants chose not to select any of the areas and preferred that their comments be applied to the entire field office. Two of the areas (Weston County and Mallo Trail) were not chosen by anyone in the study, so they have been left out of the results that are displayed in Figure 10. During the open-ended discussions and in their written comments,

participants were encouraged to identify the specific area they were referring to, or to indicate if it was a general comment for the field office as a whole. Those comments are recorded in Appendix 2 and the locations are identified as applicable.

Figure 10- Field Office Zone selected



Participants were given an opportunity on the map to identify particular places (not necessarily in their zone of choice) that have special meaning or qualities for them and to identify those qualities that make them special. In Crook County, Bear Lodge was singled out for the recreational opportunities of motorized activity, hunting and fishing, camping and horseback riding. In Weston County, the Thunder Basin Grasslands were valued for their close proximity to home and their motorized recreational opportunities. No area of Niobrara County was singled out. The Stateline Recreation Area had by far the most special places identified including several participants naming the Rock Pit and quarry area as well as the Flying V, Bowls Canyon and the Serenity trail. These areas are prized for their potential for mountain biking as well as the hiking and hunting that goes on there. All of these areas in the Stateline zone are valued for their close proximity to the population base in Newcastle and for their seasonal qualities (less snow than in many places allowing longer recreation for biking and hiking as well as access for winter recreation). Sherwood Canyon was also mentioned as a potential place to ride in the future if trails were developed, but also for its value as a hiking, exploring and bird watching area. Many participants mentioned the value of this area for spending time together as a family. Although the Mallo Trail as a zone was not selected in the zone question, it was commented on as a special place. It is particularly valued for the educational opportunities there with youth and school groups as well as the opportunity to recreate with family and celebrate special events including weddings. The trail itself is prized for the opportunity to hike with family and friends.

## Topic Area 4 - Settings

### Special Qualities of New Castle Field Office and surrounding area

In an open-ended question, participants were asked to identify the qualities that make a particular part of the field office a special place. Comments made aloud were recorded on flip charts, but participants also had the option of writing their comments in the chat box or handouts provided. They were encouraged to identify what zone the comments applied to. Some indicated that their comments would apply to all areas. For those comments, the field office lands were valued because of their multi-use mandate and because they were places where the participants spent time with family making memories.

The most frequent comments were recorded for the Stateline Recreation Area. This area was highly valued because it is close to where people live, especially in Newcastle. It is also very accessible public land. Some of the comments indicated that it was particularly valued in the winter for accessibility because of the lower snow levels and the variety of winter recreational activities that could be done there. Several participants valued the Stateline Recreation Area because of its connectivity (or potential connectivity) to other federal and state lands, thus extending the recreational opportunities there. Others valued the area because it provided critical habitat for wildlife which in turn also supports hunting in fall and spring. Comments were also recorded regarding the beauty of the area and the opportunities for mountain biking and hiking in the area.

The BLM managed public lands in Crook County were valued for their scenic beauty as well as the diverse opportunities for recreation in that area. Other participants appreciated the area as a place to get away and to avoid crowds due to its sparse population and visitors. It is considered a good place to spend time with family and it is valued for the interconnection between BLM lands and other public lands such as Keyhole State Park. Similar comments were received for the BLM lands in Niobrara County particularly valued for its open spaces and sparse population as well as the diversity of natural resources. One participant also highlighted the history in Niobrara County as a reason it was special to them. Finally, the Mallo Trail area was singled out for the opportunities it affords to spend time with family and for its educational possibilities for youth and school groups that regularly visit the area. It is a place of learning and discovery as well as an accessible part of BLM lands in the field office.

### Qualities that diminish the specialness of Newcastle Field Office and surrounding areas

On the flip side of the coin, participants were asked what might (or already does) diminish the specialness of the area. Once again, they were encouraged to locate their comments to a particular zone, although many offered general comments they suggested would apply to all zones. Several concerns were expressed about the use of UTVs from a safety perspective and the concern that they would provoke clashes among user groups. Other safety concerns were expressed around shooting on the landscape and the general increase in use, which could result in crowding in particular locations. Across the field office, participants also expressed concern about wildfires and droughts in the future as

well as poor wildlife management that would be made worse by these conditions. Finally, there were general comments about a lack of trail signs in the area, and more broadly a lack of education for the public regarding trail etiquette and private roads.

Referring to specific zones, participants identified crowding and a lack of access as the most common issues in Crook County. Crowding and unmanaged recreation is leading to damage to soils and vegetation while the lack of access is driven by the fragmented nature of the public lands interspersed with private lands. As more residents move to the area, the fear is that the fragmentation and loss of access will worsen. Similar concerns were expressed for the BLM lands in Niobrara County. Participants were worried about change in the historic usage in the area as well as misuse of the landscape through vandalism and off-road travel.

Finally, participants offered several comments related to Stateline Recreation area that primarily suggest the problems that arise from a lack of recreational planning and infrastructure. If there are no designated trails, or they are not well known and advertised then people make up their own social trails off-road. The lack of a solid recreational plan for the area with an established and identified trail system creates a “chaotic” recreation experience. Without regulations, recreation can provide a threat to wintering wildlife in the area according to one participant. Another expressed concerns about evergreen encroachment into the area and vandalism due to a lack of BLM presence there. Finally, they were concerned that access to the area might be limited. They seem to indicate they would like to see a recreation plan and established trail system in the Stateline Recreation Area in addition to the usual concerns about vandalism and litter.

## Topic Area 5 – Outcomes, Interest and Expectations when visiting the Newcastle Field Office

### Interests and Expectations

Research has indicated that people visit public lands to achieve a variety of beneficial outcomes and experiences for themselves, their communities, and the environment, while at the same time trying to avoid adverse outcomes and experiences. Participants were asked to identify in their own words what their interests and expectations were when recreating on public lands in the Newcastle Field Office. They were given the opportunity to identify particular zones to apply their comments, and if they did not, it was assumed that those comments applied to the entire field office. The most common response for the entire field office was that this place offers a tranquil escape from the busy-ness and development of their lives as well as solitude during that break. They also expect to encounter wildlife and to develop a closer tie with natural landscapes. A few identified the freedom of self-reliant adventures while others go to these public lands for the health and fitness benefits that come from outdoor recreation. They appreciate the beauty of the landscape and the presence of water (creeks, rivers, etc.) in the area.

In the Stateline Recreation Area, participants mirrored the general comments on tranquil escapes and the value of that area as a natural landscape. Additionally, they value the experience of surprise, exploration and discovery afforded in that area. A few commented on the value of that area’s open

spaces, wildlife and lack of crowds. Others highlighted the diversity of experiences and recreational opportunities as a major interest and expectation of the Stateline Recreation Area.

The only other area that received specialized comments on interests and expectations was Crook County. This area was attractive because of the expectation of open spaces and no crowding. This setting allows for a peaceful experience in a beautiful place. Productive hunting and fishing were highlighted by one respondent as a great value in that part of the field office.

When asked if their last visit to the landscape met their expectations, or whether they were surprised by anything, most indicated they were satisfied with the landscape relative to their expectations, or that they were pleasantly surprised by some condition they found there. Many of the participants indicated that the area they regularly visited met their expectations and that they weren't surprised by much. For those who did replay about surprise changes, they identified several impacts from changing weather and climate including drought and the increased potential/actuality of wildfire and the decrease in wildlife due to stressed habitat. Others indicated the beauty of a particular moment while on the landscape still surprised them. Finally, a few comments about seeing more people on the landscape, or bringing family and friends to share the landscape with. They were surprised by how much they enjoyed the company, even of strangers. There is an expectation that this landscape is a good place to take the next generation to teach them about nature, recreation and their heritage in the land.

### Benefits of recreation in the Newcastle Field Office

Participants were asked to respond to a series of listed potential benefits of outdoor recreation by indicating which ones were most desirable to them. They were shown three different lists of between 19 and 11 different benefits, each corresponding roughly to the categories of personal benefits, household benefits, and community/environmental benefits. Each participant was asked to select up to four benefits from each list as a way of focusing on those they think are most important for their recreational experience on this area's public lands. The study of benefits that the individual or their community gains from recreation on public lands has become one of the principal tools that the BLM and other land agencies use in managing landscapes for outdoor recreation<sup>4</sup>. The results of all responses to the lists of personal, household, and community benefits are recorded **Error! Reference source not found.** in Figures 11-13. Responses are broken out according to the level of benefit (personal, household or community and environmental) as well as the study area they are associated with based on the study area selected by the participant in an earlier question in the study. A careful reading of the following charts will highlight important distinctions between the areas in each of the categories of benefits. The charts below show the wide variation on a benefit between the different zones. Since

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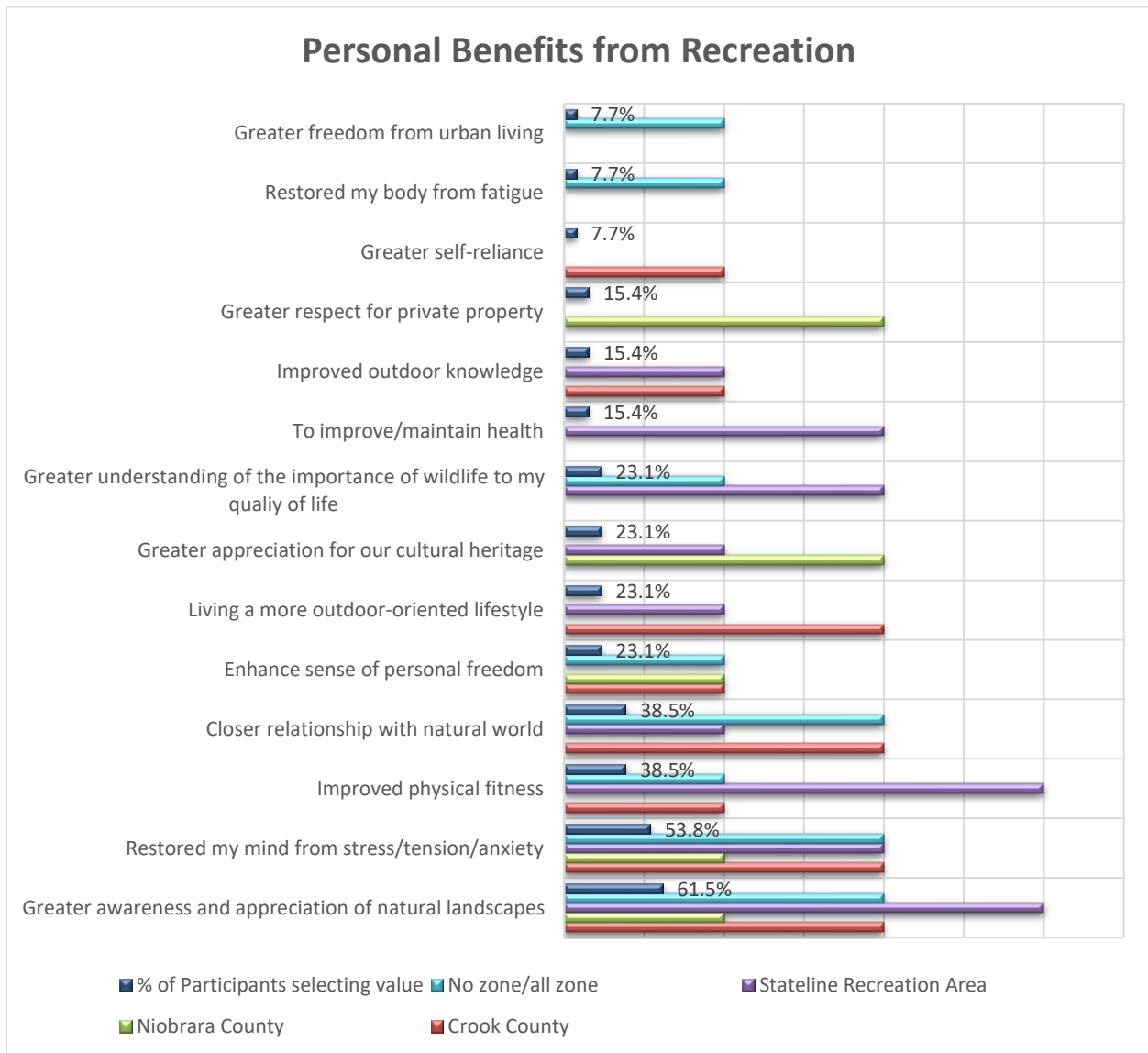
<sup>4</sup> A sampling of the relevant laws, regulations, and guidelines regarding the role of benefits in planning for outdoor recreation would include: The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) (43 U.S.C. 1701 et. seq.), which governs the overall management of public lands including recreation values (Sec. 102(a), 202, etc.); the Outdoor Recreation Act of 1963 (16 U.S.C. 4601-1), which promotes and coordinates the development of programs for outdoor recreation; the Federal Lands Recreation and Enhancement Act of 2004 (16 U.S.C. 6804), which regulates recreation fees and allocation; as well as the BLM Handbook 8320 – Planning for Recreation and Visitor Services (Public), which went into effect 2011. This final document specifically highlights outcomes-focused management (formally known as benefits-based management) as the standard approach for BLM recreation planning.

several participants did not select a specific zone, their responses make up the no zone/all zones part of these charts.

### Personal Benefits

Participants were asked to review a series of personal benefits and circle their top choices in each category (up to 4). This series of questions started with personal benefits because they are the most immediately relevant set of benefits to the individual when they actually recreate on public lands. The results of that poll are listed in Figure 15 below.

Figure 11- Personal Benefits from Recreation in Newcastle Field Office



5

<sup>5</sup> Each square represents one participant selecting that benefit for that particular zone, the dark blue line (Figure 11) and the red line (Figures 12 -14) show the percentage of all participants in the study selecting that benefit.

61.5% of all participants selected “greater awareness and appreciation of natural landscapes” as an important personal benefit to their recreation in the area, followed closely by 54% of all respondents selecting “mental restoration from stress and anxiety.” Several of the benefits selected by at least 23% of respondents identified the benefit of an outdoor lifestyle and physical fitness benefits coming from their recreation. Participants recreating in the Stateline Recreation Area were particularly interested in physical fitness and exercise benefits as well as encounters with wildlife. Niobrara County stands out for its emphasis on personal freedom, cultural heritage and respect for private property.

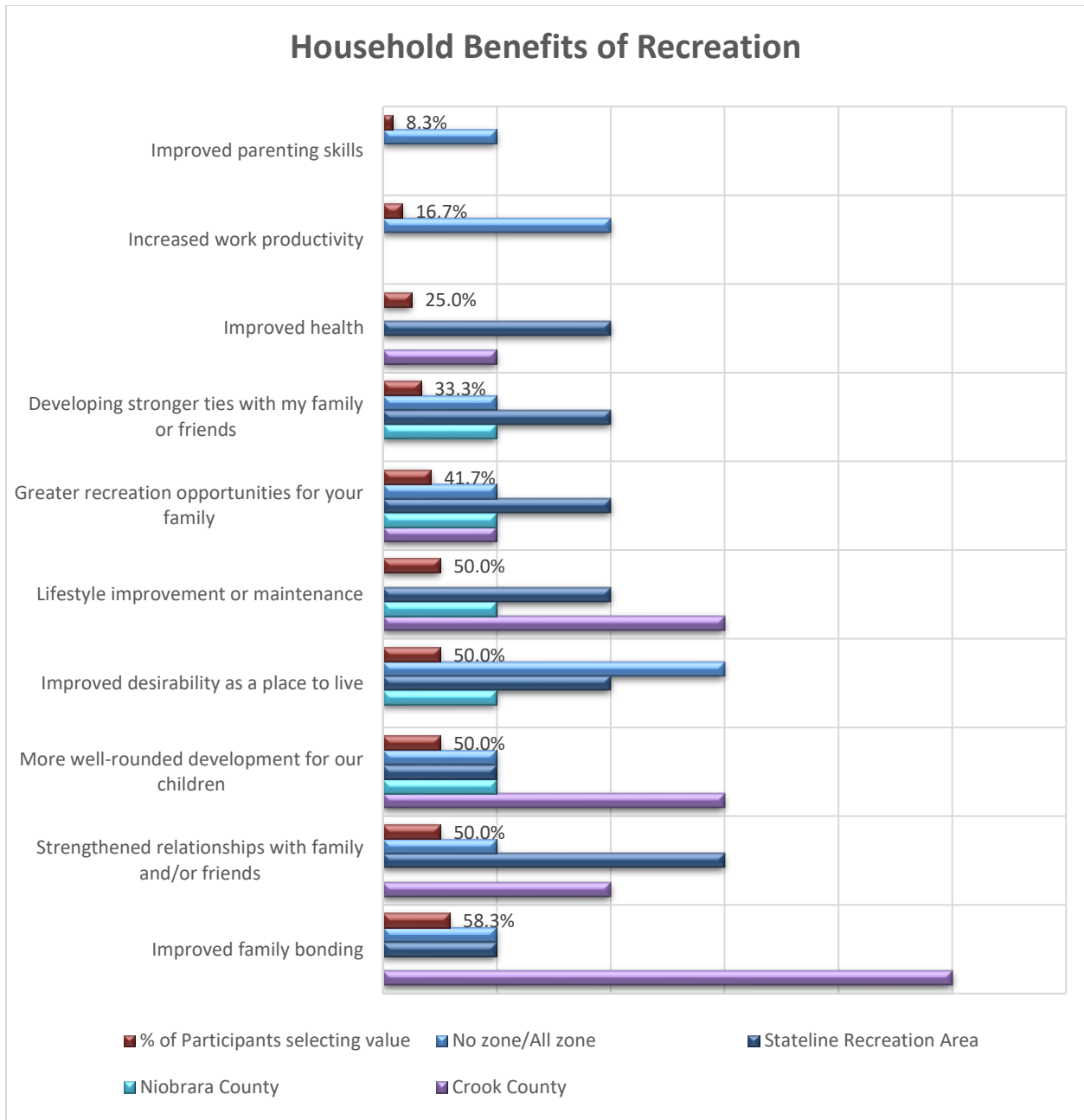
### Household Benefits

The benefits of recreating on public lands are not limited to the individuals who happens to recreate there, they also accrue for families of those engaged in recreation (BLM, 2014; National Park Service, 2011). Although several of the options to select were similar, the conversation around these benefits indicated the close tie between the landscape and a person’s quality of life, particularly family life that is enhanced and supported through outdoor recreation. Experiences are often limited to the time of the recreation, while benefits often last long after the recreation is done and can be obtained by people even if they themselves were not the ones recreating. In fact, most of the household, community and environmental benefits are accrued by individuals who are not direct participants in the recreation. This is an important aspect of outdoor recreation and is not well understood by members of the public when they think about why they recreate in an area.

The results of the household benefits poll are displayed in Figure 16 on the next page. Half or more of all respondents chose several benefits related to family bonding and raising children. These benefits seemed to be particularly strong for the Crook County and Stateline Recreation areas of the field office. These are the places the participants regularly share with their families. Half of all respondents also chose several benefits related to quality of life (Improved desirability as a place to live, lifestyle improvement or maintenance). Combined with the comments throughout the study about the proximity of these public lands to the populations living in these counties, it seems reasonable to conclude that the public lands and the opportunity to recreate on them is an integral part of life in northeastern Wyoming. These lands are a regular part of their lives, and the lives they want to share with the next generation.



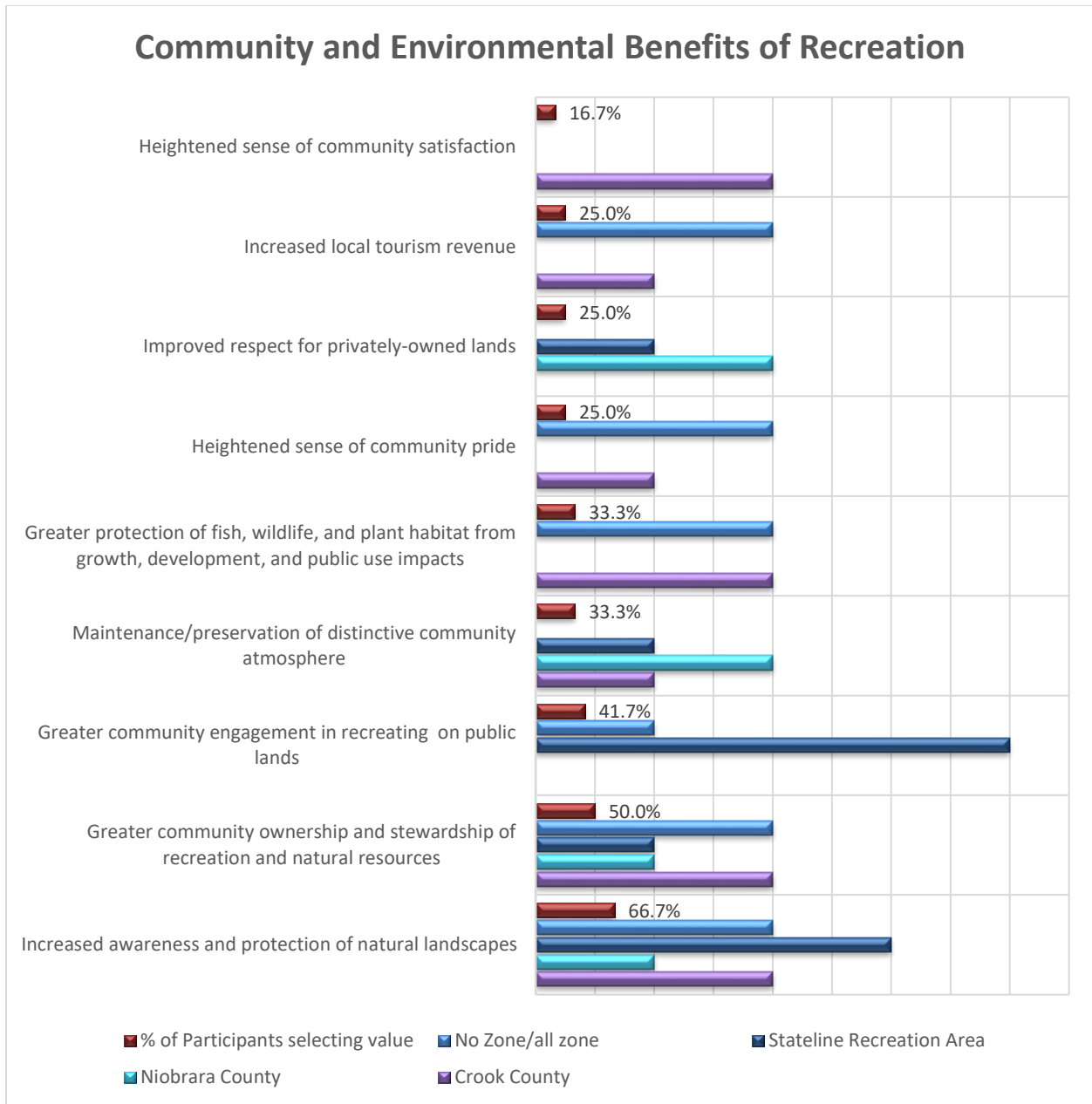
Figure 12- Household Benefits from Recreation in Newcastle Field Office



### Community and Environmental Benefits

Finally, participants were asked about benefits realized for the community or the environment from their recreation on public lands. This was a harder category for them to initially identify, but once they thought about the opportunities for benefit, a good discussion developed around these “side-effects” of individual recreation on public lands in the areas around their community. The results of this poll are displayed on the next page in Figure 13.

Figure 13- Community and Environmental Benefits of Recreation in Newcastle Field Office

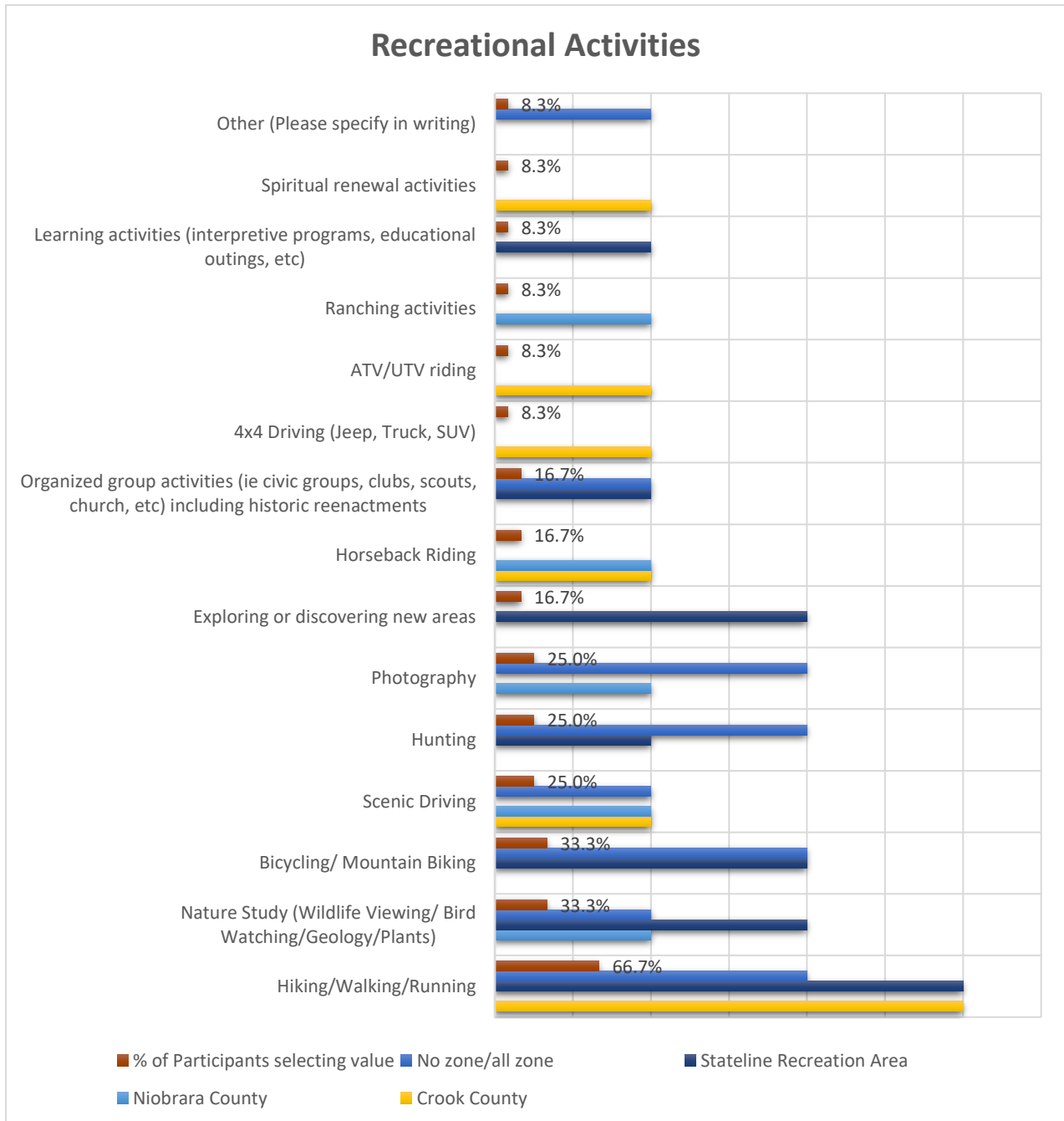


Two thirds of all respondents identified “Increased awareness and protection of natural landscapes” as a benefit of recreation in the field office. The next two most popular benefits relate to community engagement and stewardship of public lands. This suggests the opportunity to build community through outdoor recreation. This value is especially pronounced in the responses relating to Stateline Recreation Area. Once again, Niobrara County stands out for its emphasis on private property and the maintenance of a distinctive community atmosphere. 25% of all participants linked recreation on public lands to a heightened sense of community pride and a potential source of tourism revenue for surrounding communities.

## Topic Area 6 - Recreational Activities in the Newcastle Field Office

After considering their expectations and desired outcomes when recreating in the selected area, participants were asked which activities they engaged in most often when visiting public lands in the area. Because many visitors to public lands combine several activities during any particular visit, participants were allowed to select up to three activities they engage in most often in the area. The results of the poll are displayed in Figure 14 below.

Figure 14- Recreational Activities in the Newcastle Field Office



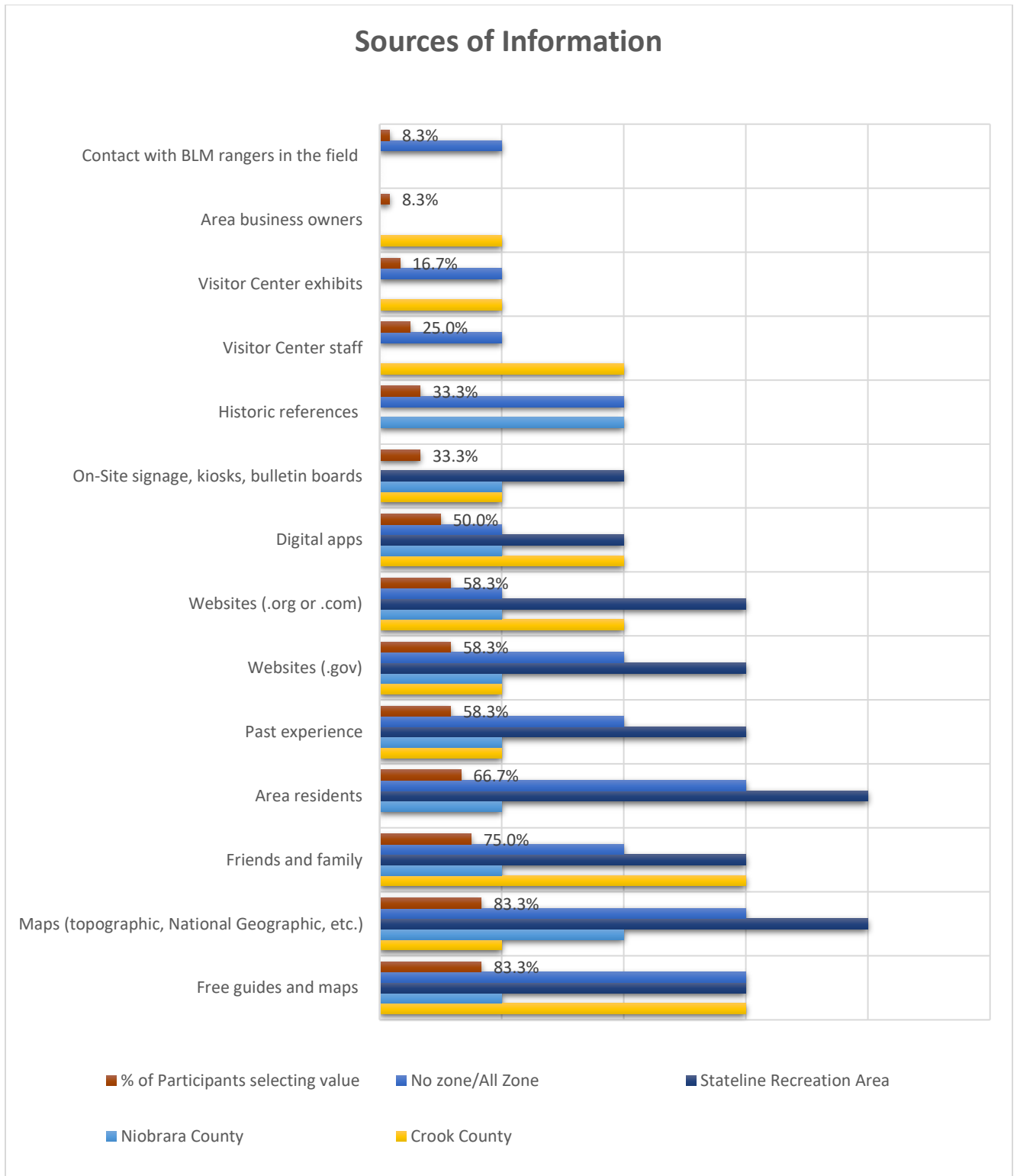
Two thirds of all respondents selected hiking/walking/running making it the most popular activity in the field office. These activities are particularly popular at Stateline Recreation Area and the BLM lands in Crook County. Stateline Recreation Area also stands out for the popularity of Nature Study (bird and wildlife watching as well as geology and plants) and for mountain biking. Based on feedback for Stateline Recreation Area, development of more mountain biking trails and options is likely to positively increase that activity in the area. In addition to nature study in Stateline Recreation Area, there is a strong emphasis from several participants to “explore and discover new areas” in that zone. Several respondents identified Crook County as a great place for motorized activity such as 4x4 driving and ATV/UTV riding. Given its emphasis on private lands in other parts of the study, it is not surprising that respondents highlighted ranching activities as recreational in Niobrara County.

## Topic Area 7 - Services - Information

An important aspect of a successful outdoor recreation experience is quality information used in preparation for the outing. Participants were asked to identify all sources of information and services they rely on. In this particular question they were not given any limits on the number of selections, because it is important for the BLM planners to know all of the sources of information that people turn to when preparing to recreate. These sources of information will help the BLM to develop a communication strategy for recreationists that utilizes the sources they actually rely on.

The responses to the information question are displayed in Figure 15 on the next page. These responses are broken down by zone when individuals had responded to the zone question earlier in the study, if they did not they were clustered into the no zone/all zone category. The red line represents the percentage of all respondents that selected a particular source of information. The vast majority (83.3%) selected both options of maps (free and topographic) as essential information they need for recreation. Beyond that, a majority rely on relational sources of information such as family and friends, local residents and even their own past experiences on the landscape. A majority also selected a variety of digital resources such as websites (both government and non-government) and digital apps. Only a third relied on the on-site signage and kiosks and even fewer indicated they received their information from visitor centers and BLM rangers in the field. Interestingly, those recreating in the Stateline Recreation Area did not rely on either BLM sources (except kiosks) or area business owners and historical references at all to support their recreation in that area. Crook County seemed to be the only area relying heavily on visitor center information and area business owners. Because of the low participation rates, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the sources of information in any particular zone; however, the responses suggest if the BLM wants to support recreation information, they should consider making maps more readily available (there is only one map of the area on the BLM website - shown in Figure 1 - and it lacks detailed information due to its scale) and to offer more information through digital resources such a websites and apps.

Figure 15- Sources of Information for Recreation in Newcastle Field Office



## Conclusions and Recommendations

The biggest challenge for conclusions and recommendations from this focus group study is the small number of participants in the study. Although focus group studies are difficult to use as a tool for generalization, they do provide valuable insight into the nuanced perspectives of local communities regarding recreation on public lands in their area. Because of the challenges of holding public meetings in the time of a pandemic, and the lack of organized recreation user groups in the area to partner with in populating the focus groups, the conclusions drawn here are not as robust and reliable as one might have hoped for. They should be considered in the context of conclusions made from the survey study of the Newcastle Field Office conducted by the University of Alaska, Fairbanks at the same time as this study was conducted. Even though the participation rate in this focus group study was less than ideal, it still offers some valuable insight into local community preferences for BLM public land recreation and its impact on those communities.

In general, the communities surrounding the BLM managed land in the Newcastle Field Office are supportive of recreation in the area, and are active participants in that recreation. These lands, offering access close to home for outdoor recreation contribute significantly to the quality of life for residents in these communities. Interaction with natural landscapes from bird watching to hiking, hunting to mountain biking and horseback riding provide a diversity of opportunities to connect to those landscapes and share that connection with family and friends. Recreation on these public lands enhances the benefits of greater connection to the natural world, family bonding, community engagement, relief from stress, improved physical fitness and an overall improved desirability of northeast Wyoming as a place to live for the residents of these surrounding communities.

The scenic settings and wide-open spaces across the field office enhance the benefits that visitors from local communities experience when recreating in the area. They value the lack of crowds and the excellent habitat for wildlife as additional setting characteristics that support their recreational interests and expectations in the field office. Continued access to these landscapes is of great importance to most of the participants in the study. Concerns were expressed over the increased visitation in recent years that could lead to crowding. Participants were also concerned about the effects of changing weather and climate such as drought and wildfires that might adversely affect the resources that provide a desirable setting for their recreation. Finally, several participants expressed the need for more education efforts by land managers to help visitors understand trail etiquette/expectations and to inform the public about recreational opportunities and BLM action that would affect those opportunities.

With the exception of the Mallo Trail, most of the recreation infrastructure from trails to signage is not well developed in the field office; but the opportunity and desire for more of this infrastructure exists, particularly in the Stateline Recreation Area. The lack of planning in some areas leads to a proliferation of “social trails” cut into the landscape by recreators who make up their own path when one isn’t available to them. These unplanned “social trails” often do a lot of damage to the habitat and resources in the area. More trail networks for a diverse set of recreational activities seems to be a clear takeaway of this study for the Stateline Recreation Area. This Stateline zone seems to lend itself well to seasonal

activities from hiking and mountain biking in the summer, to hunting in the fall, and winter activities in the comparatively lower snow levels that allow for multi-season access. The proximity of the area to Newcastle and other population centers as well as its proximity to the popular Black Hills National Forest in South Dakota suggest that this zone could benefit from the development of connected trail networks to support multi-use recreation. The BLM lands in Crook County are valued for the opportunities to develop family-oriented experiences and memories through recreation including motorized recreation opportunities. Without any specific data in this study on Weston County, and limited information on Niobrara County, it will be important to supplement these conclusions with the data from the OFM Visitor Survey mentioned above.

Certainly, other conclusions and recommendations could be drawn from the data presented in this focus group study. It was designed to complement the Outcomes Focused Management Recreational Visitor Survey conducted at the same time by the University of Alaska, Fairbanks<sup>6</sup>. To maximize the planning value of these studies, the two should be read together for a fuller understanding of the recreational activities and preferences in the BLM Newcastle Field Office. Together they present a solid basis to support recreational planning efforts. They offer a complement to the BLM's own analysis of the recreation in the area, as well as, other opportunities the public will have to offer their perspective such as the scoping and public comment periods in the RMP revision process. At the end of every focus group session in this study, the public was encouraged to stay engaged and continue to contribute to the planning process through these public input opportunities.

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<sup>6</sup> Fix, P. J., Garcia, R. A., Kelley, M., Virden, R. J., & Casey, T. T. (2021). Northeast Wyoming BLM Lands Outcomes-Focused Management Recreation Study, Spring 2021. Project report for the BLM Newcastle Field Office. BLM PLRRP Report #12. Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska Fairbanks, Institute of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Extension, Department of Natural Resources and Environment.

## Newcastle, WY Field Office Recreation Focus Group Study



**Tim Casey, PhD**  
**Colorado Mesa University**  
**BLM Public Land Recreation Research Partnership**  
**2021**

*Contact Information: [nrc@coloradomesa.edu](mailto:nrc@coloradomesa.edu)*





## Participants:

- ✓ Listen, contribute, and stay focused on the subject at hand
- ✓ Feel free to keep or change your opinions in response to what you hear
- ✓ Respect others' right to share their thoughts; do not interrupt
- ✓ The moderator will stop anyone who attempts to block another's views
- ✓ Feel free to get up, obtain refreshments, or visit the restroom
- ✓ Do not engage in separate, private discussions
- ✓ Remember, participation is voluntary on all questions
- ✓ Must sign an informed consent form to continue with the study

## Topic Area 1: Demographics and Characteristics

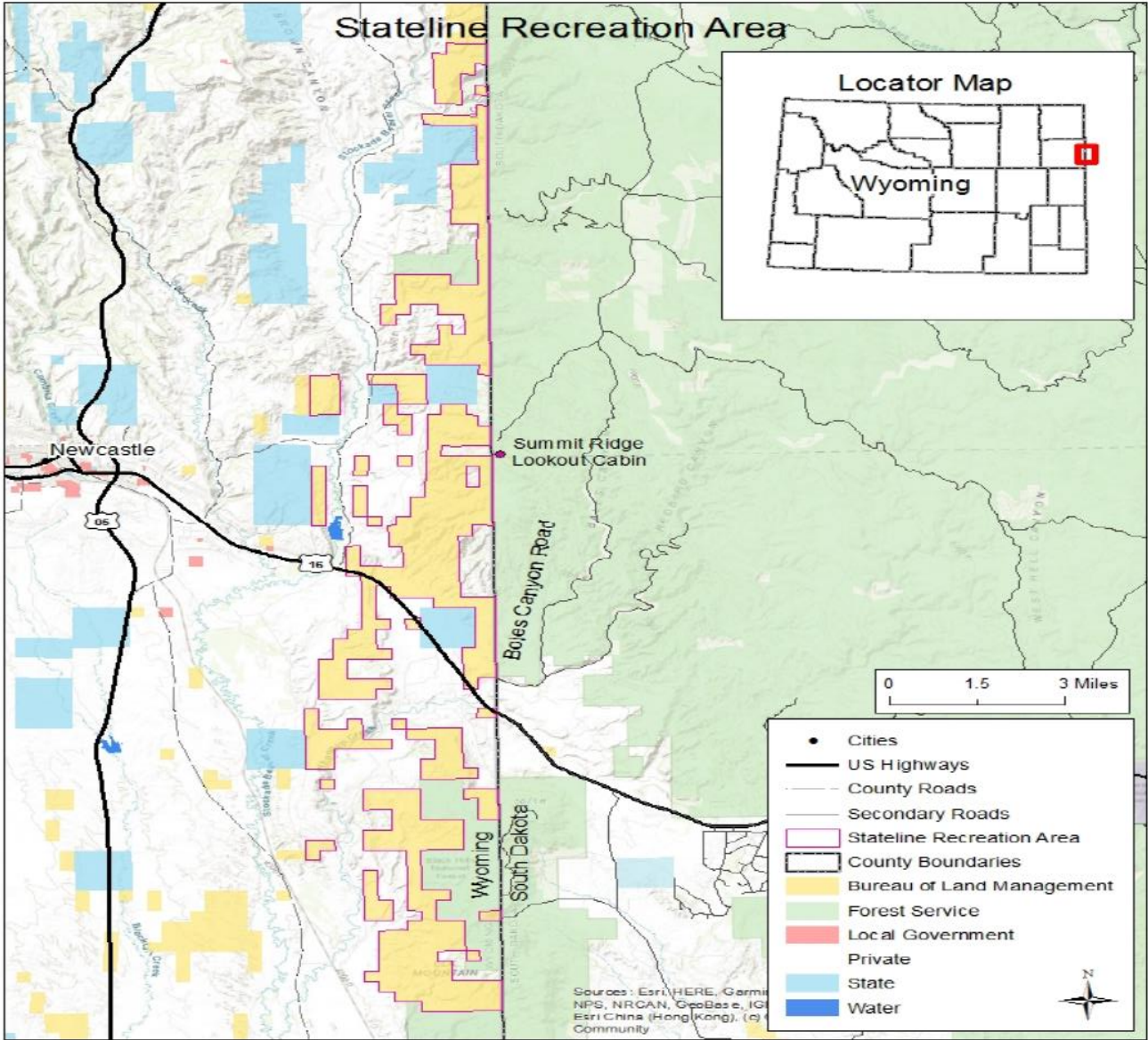
1. What is your **home zip code**? Or country (if you are not a US resident)?
  
2. Which of the following choices best describes your **association with lands** managed by the BLM in Crook, Weston and Niobrara Counties? (circle one)
  - a. Visitor
  - b. Local Resident
  - c. Community Leader (elected/non-elected)
  - d. Outfitter/Guide
  - e. Business Owner
  - f. Other
  
3. **How long have you been connected** to the BLM lands in Crook, Weston and Niobrara Counties? (circle one)
  - a. Less than a year
  - b. 1-5 years
  - c. 6-10 years
  - d. 10-25 years
  - e. Over 25 years

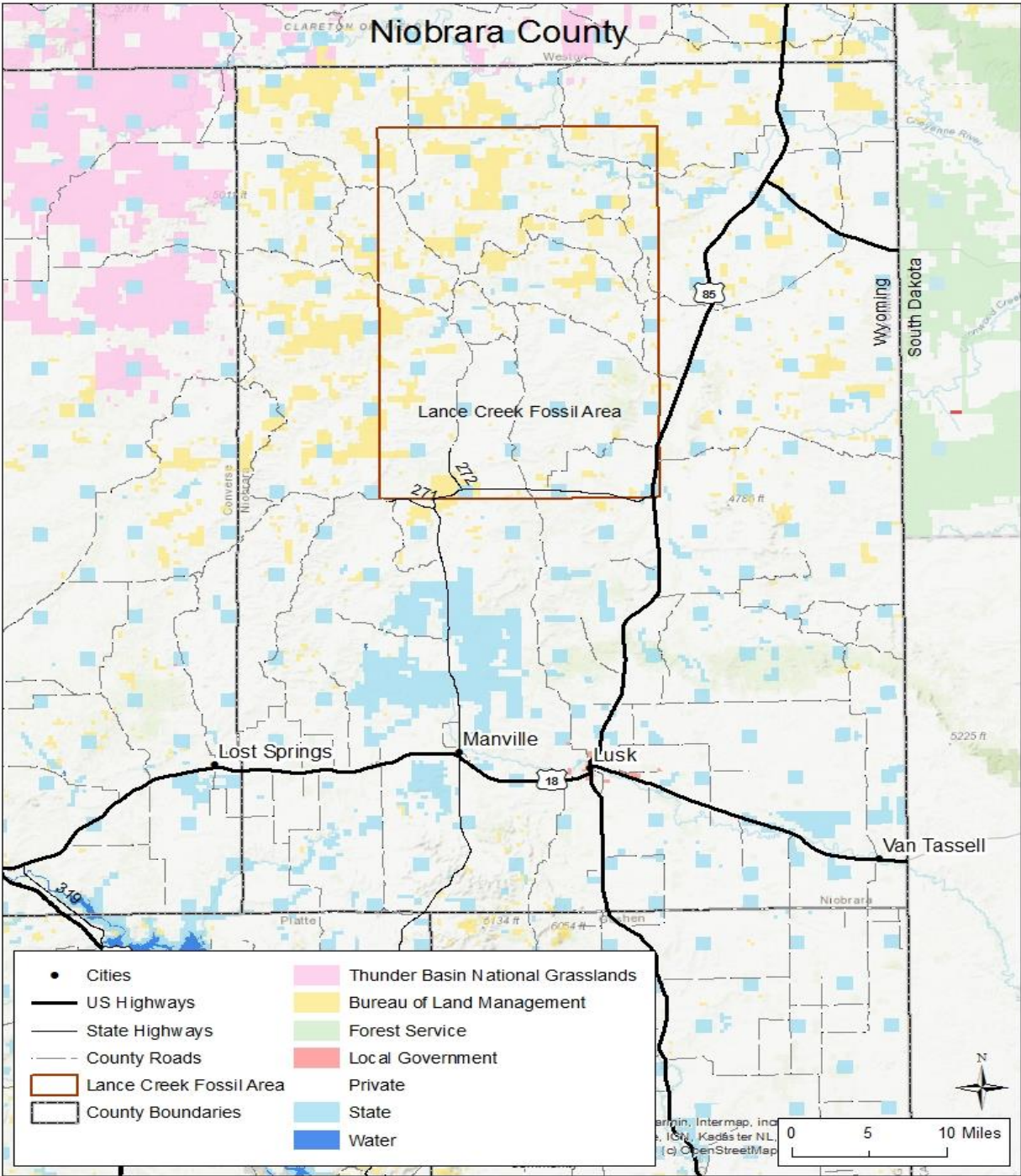
## **Topic Area 2: Management**

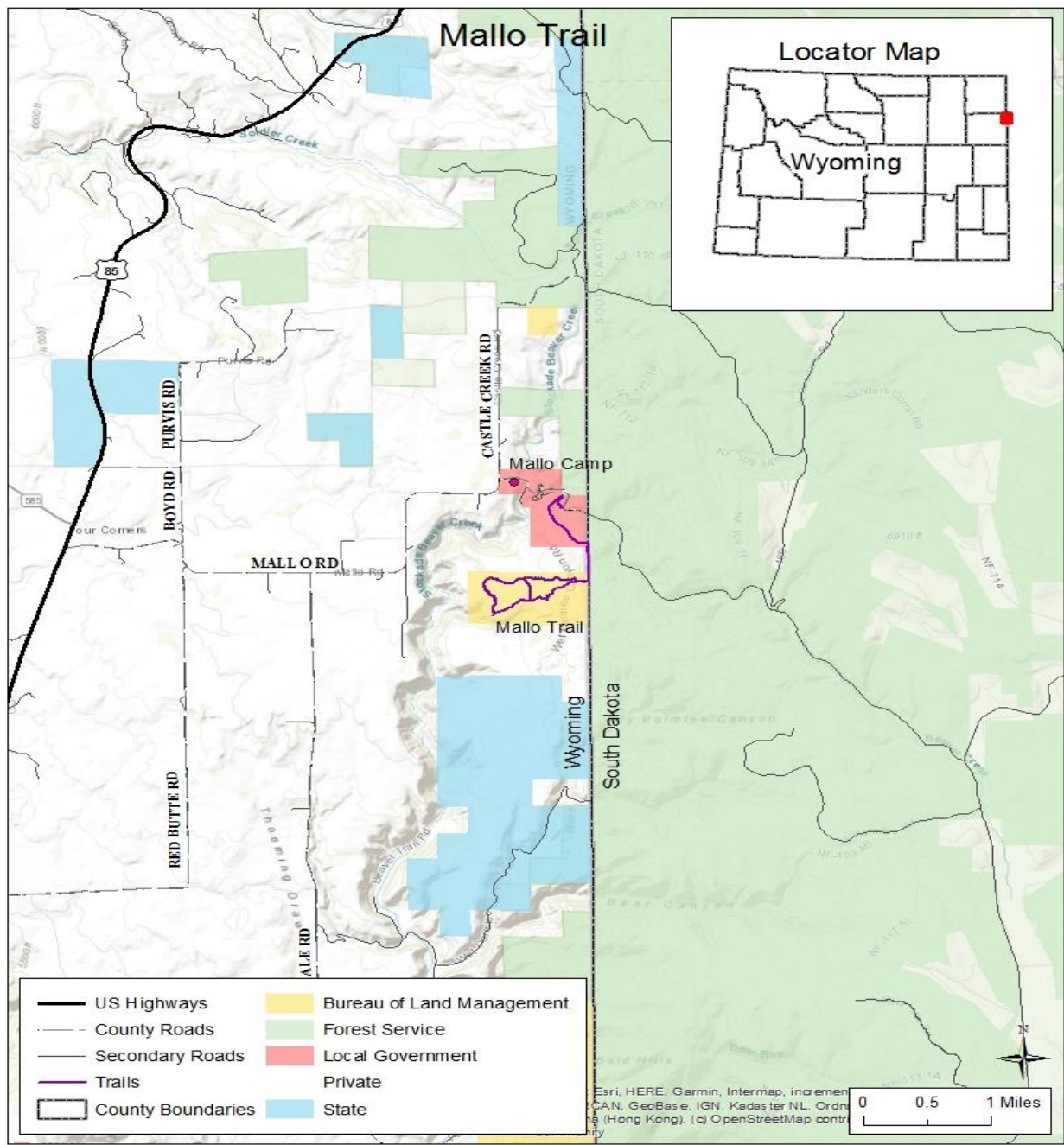
4. If you were the public lands manager for a day and could set **management priorities** for BLM lands in Crook, Weston, and Niobrara counties area, what would your priorities be?
  
5. When traveling in the area are you aware when you travel across **administrative boundaries** (BLM, NPS, USFS, private land, state land, etc.)? If so, how does that influence what you do, your expectations, or your perceptions?
  
6. As you think about this area, what is/are the **most important improvement(s)** that recreation managers could make to enhance your visits in the future?

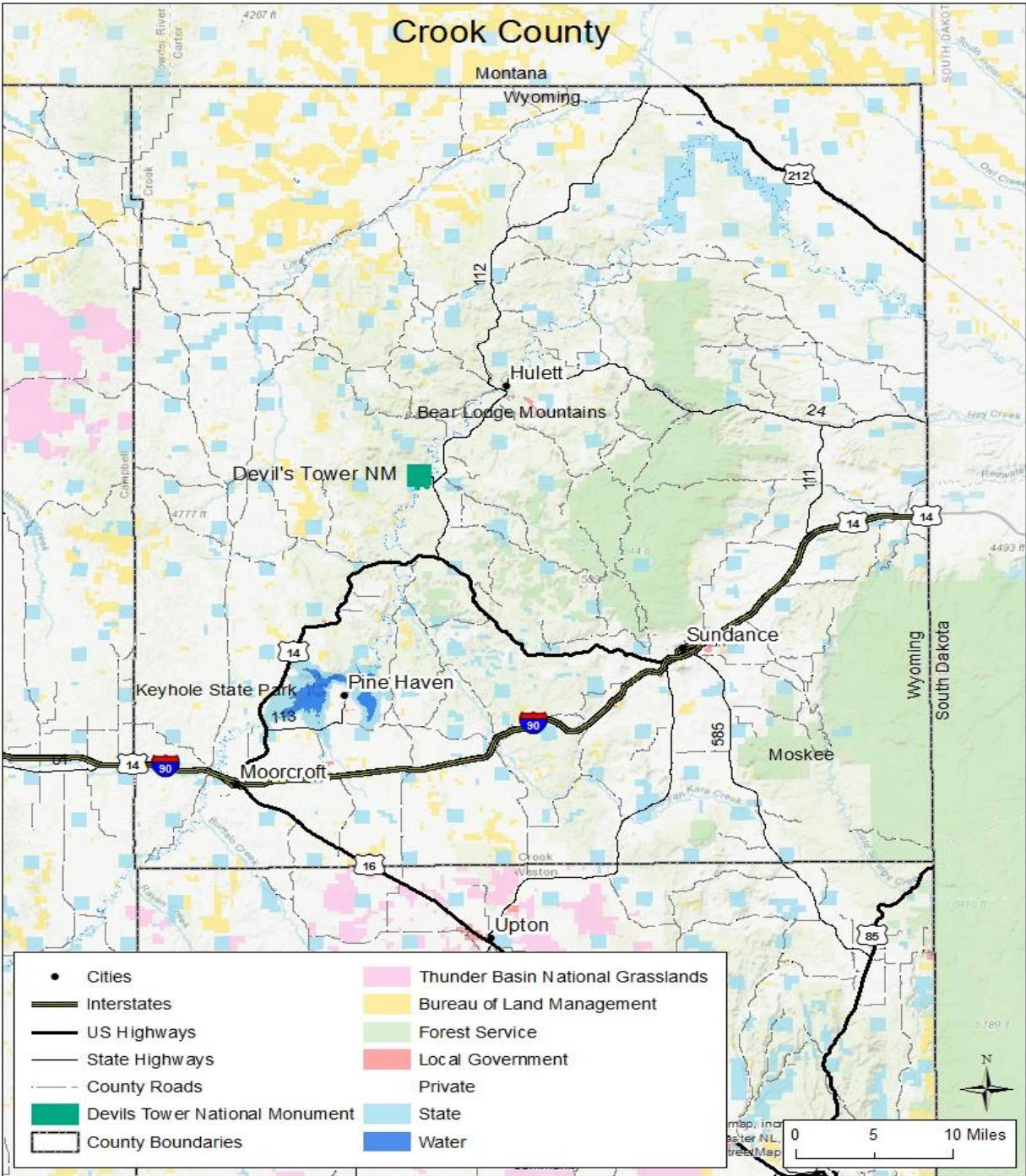
### Topic Area 3: Location

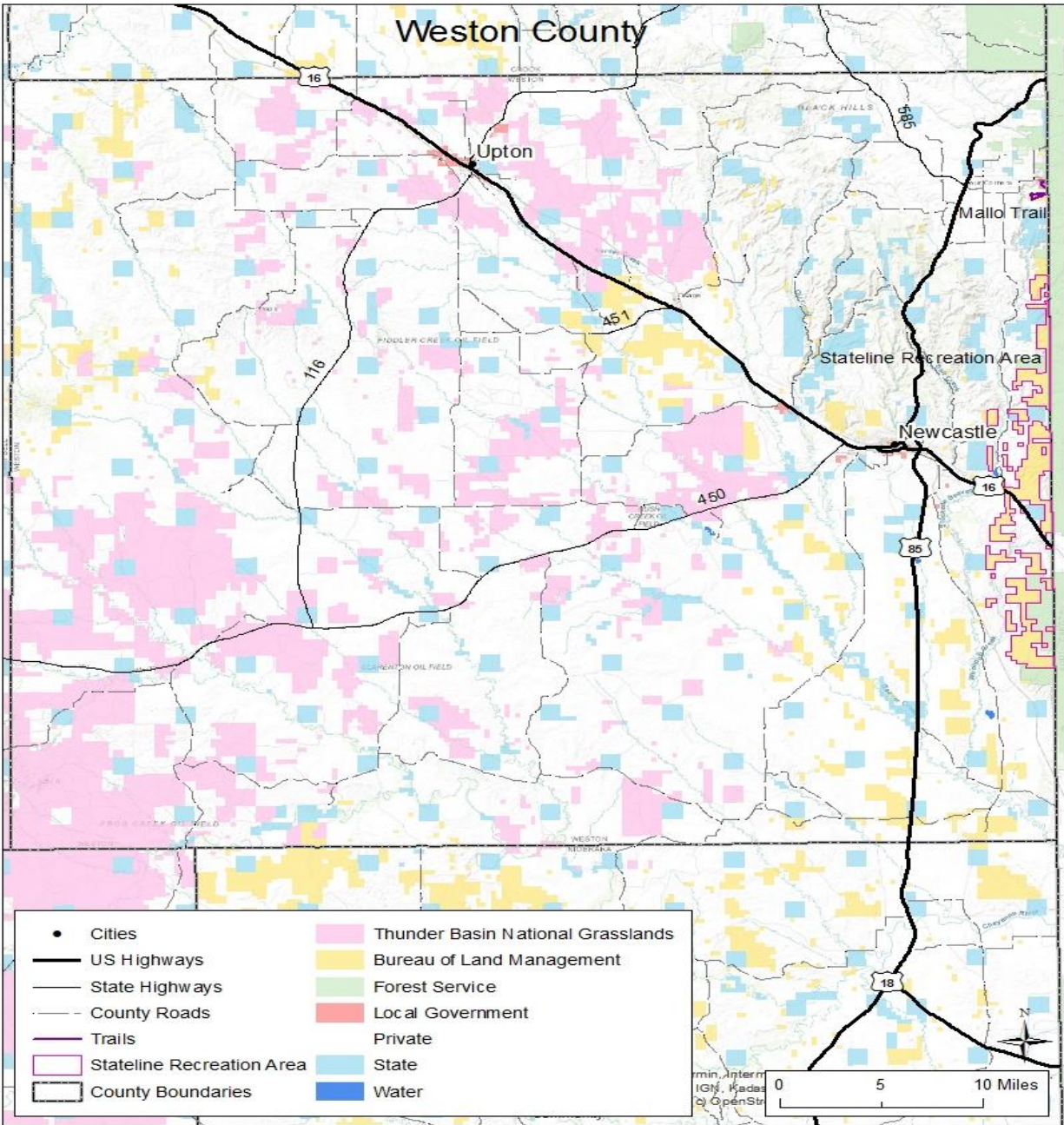
7. When choosing where to recreate in this region, where do you **spend the most time**? (Choose up to 3)
  - a. Devils Tower National Monument
  - b. Black Hills National Forest
  - c. Thunder Basin National Grasslands
  - d. Keyhole Reservoir/Keyhole State Park
  - e. Four Corners, WY
  - f. BLM public lands in WY
  
8. Please take a couple moments to think about a few areas or **places** on BLM managed public lands in the Newcastle Field Office (highlighted on the maps on the following pages) that have **special personal meaning and importance for you**. For each of these places please do the following:
  - a. circle it and number it on one of the 5 attached maps;
  - b. then in writing below name the place;
  - c. indicate the things you do when you visit there;
  - d. indicate the reason that this place has special meaning for you (or is an area of outstanding recreational opportunity)













9. For the purposes of facilitating this discussion, the recreational managers of the area have divided the landscape into several recreation zones (identified by each of the separate maps above), please indicate which **zone** you would like to tell us more about. (Choose one and unless we tell you otherwise, assume that zone as a focus when answering future questions)
- a. Zone 1 Crook County
  - b. Zone 2 Weston County
  - c. Zone 3 Niobrara County
  - d. Zone 4 Stateline Recreation Area
  - e. Zone 5 Mallo Trail

**Topic Area 4: Special Places – Settings**

10. What are the **qualities** of area or zone you just identified in the last question that make it a **special place** for you?

11. What could **diminish** the specialness of the place for you?

## **Topic Area 5: Outcomes, Interests and Expectations**

12. When going to your area of interests, describe the **interests and expectations** you have for your time there? In other words, why do you go there and what do you hope to experience?

13. Did your last recreational outing in the area **meet your expectations**? Why or why not?

14. When visiting the area you identified as your favorite zone, which of the following **personal benefits** are most important to you? (Choose up to 4)

- a. Restored my mind from stress/tension/anxiety
- b. Improved physical fitness
- c. To improve/maintain health
- d. Improved outdoor knowledge
- e. Greater self-reliance
- f. Enhance sense of personal freedom
- g. Improved sense of control over my life
- h. Improved self-confidence
- i. Living a more outdoor-oriented lifestyle
- j. Restored my body from fatigue
- k. Greater appreciation for our cultural heritage
- l. Greater awareness and appreciation of natural landscapes
- m. Greater freedom from urban living
- n. Improved ability to relate to local residents and their culture
- o. Increased personal accountability to act responsibly on public lands
- p. Greater respect for private property
- q. Closer relationship with natural world
- r. Greater understanding of the importance of wildlife to my quality of life
- s. Greater aesthetic appreciation
- t. Other

15. When visiting the area you identified, which of the following **household and relational benefits** are most important to you? (Choose up to 4)

- a. Strengthened relationships with family and/or friends
- b. Improved health
- c. Greater recreation opportunities for your family
- d. Reduced health maintenance costs
- e. Improved family bonding
- f. More well-rounded development for our children
- g. Improved parenting skills
- h. Improved desirability as a place to live
- i. Increased work productivity
- j. Lifestyle improvement or maintenance
- k. Developing stronger ties with my family or friends
- l. Other

16. When visiting the area you identified, which of the following **community and environmental benefits** are most important to you? (Choose up to 4)

- a. Greater community engagement in recreating on public lands
- b. Maintenance/preservation of distinctive community atmosphere
- c. Heightened sense of community pride
- d. Improved desirability as a place to retire
- e. Heightened sense of community satisfaction
- f. Improved respect for privately-owned lands
- g. Increased awareness and protection of natural landscapes
- h. Greater community ownership and stewardship of recreation and natural resources
- i. Greater protection of fish, wildlife, and plant habitat from growth, development, and public use impacts
- j. Maintenance/preservation of distinctive public land recreation setting character
- k. Increased local work productivity
- l. Increased local tourism revenue
- m. Reduced local health maintenance cost
- n. Other

## Topic Area 6: Activities

17. When visiting that area or zone, what **activities** do you engage in most often? (Choose up to 3)
- a. Scenic Driving
  - b. Exploring or discovering new areas
  - c. Hiking/Walking/Running
  - d. Backpacking
  - e. Car Camping
  - f. Picnicking
  - g. Rock Climbing/Canyoneering
  - h. Nature Study (Wildlife Viewing/ Bird Watching/Geology/Plants)
  - i. 4x4 Driving (Jeep, Truck, SUV)
  - j. ATV/UTV riding
  - k. Bicycling/ Mountain Biking
  - l. Horseback Riding
  - m. Organized group activities (i.e. civic groups, clubs, scouts, church, etc.)
  - n. Ranching activities
  - o. Hunting
  - p. Photography
  - q. Learning activities (interpretive programs, educational outings, etc.)
  - r. Art/Writing activities
  - s. Spiritual renewal activities
  - t. Other

## Topic Area 8: Services

18. Which **sources of information** do you depend upon to plan your recreation in the area?

(Choose all that apply)

- a. Friends and family
- b. Past experience
- c. Area business owners
- d. Area residents
- e. Visitor Center staff
- f. Contact with park rangers in the field
- g. Visitor Center exhibits
- h. On-Site signage, kiosks, bulletin boards
- i. Travel and tourism councils and associations
- j. Free guides and maps
- k. Guidebooks
- l. Websites (.gov)
- m. Websites (.org or .com)
- n. Digital apps
- o. Historic references
- p. Maps (topographic, National Geographic, etc.)
- q. Other

*We appreciate your involvement in this important focus group.*

*Your input is an important part of maintaining an ongoing inventory of BLM recreational users' preferences, expectations, and concerns.*

**Thank you very much!**

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(970) 248-1095 or [nrc@coloradomesa.edu](mailto:nrc@coloradomesa.edu)

## Appendix 2 – Flip Chart and written comments

### Q4: Management Priorities

- Increase public access and awareness
- Preserve the qualities
- Multiple use
- Healthy habitats through wise use of the resources
- protecting the resources, while allowing multi use access
- Multiple use as long as the natural resources are protected
- Balancing preservation of natural resources and allowing appropriate multiple use. Also using the opportunity to educate the general public about our natural resources.
- Multi-use
- Diverse use
- Public access
- Road maintenance
- Preservation with access
- Prioritize management from a recreational point of view

### Q5: Administrative boundaries

- Public vs Private – Hunting and Camping – permission to access
- Parks are not as relaxed and BLM lands
- At work for sure. Mostly on my own time. I often note in my head the condition of habitat from a terrestrial wildlife perspective.
- Not visibly aware too much on the ground ... more aware if we have a phone app or similar map that is georeferenced
- Not aware for personal use of land
- Most people are not aware of state lands
- Signage can help
- Only aware of crossing from public to private ownership, no difference between BLM and USFS lands.
- Not knowing where you are

### Q6: Improvements

- Maintain Roads
- Don't miss recreation infrastructure – no need for it
- State line area could have more trails
- Address dumping on public lands – e.g. Old airplanes, hunting carcasses
- Trail design should fit the landscape
- More signage (variety of types), travel management map (if applicable)
- More Signage



- Here (signage) I really notice the difference between this field office and some on the western and south western part of the state as an example, also state lands as well.
- Look for opportunities to educate the public as well through signage
- Education – Importance of natural resources
- Events to connect people with outdoors
- Trails help
- Designated trails
- Trails for different skill/access level
- Trail construction
- Road maintenance
- Areas more used, but not developed
- Vandalism, dumping appliances, carcasses, etc.

### **Q10: Why is it a special place?**

- **Stateline Recreation Area**
  - Proximity and access
  - Winter time access
  - Pretty
  - Access to community and connectivity to other public lands
  - Critical mule deer and white-tailed deer winter range. Home to a bighorn sheep herd (including critical winter and lambing habitat). Southern Hills mtn. mahogany habitat types
  - Significant hunter use (fall and spring)
  - Some good hiking and biking areas, horseback too
  - Proximity to town
  - Winter recreation opportunities because of lower snow levels
  - Proximity and connectivity to other federal lands and state lands provides lots of recreational opportunities in area
  - Different ecological zones
  - Access is easy
- **Mallo Trail**
  - Youth experiences
  - Private parties – weddings
- **Crook County BLM lands**
  - Family connections
  - Diverse activities
  - Beauty
  - Keyhole

- Oasis amongst the prairie... not overly populated, so people come for recreation and to vacation
- The beauty of the area and the diverse opportunities.
- **Niobrara County**
  - Open spaces, sparse population
  - It is rich in history, custom and culture with wide open spaces and diverse natural resources
- **General/All**
  - Family memories and experiences
  - Multiple uses

**Q11: What would diminish the specialness?**

- **General/All**
  - User conflict – do not stop other users, just minimize conflict
  - Shooting Safety issues
  - UTVs can be challenging – should develop single track trails in some areas
  - Safety concerns with fast UTVs
  - Lack of education about trail etiquette and private roads
  - Lack of trail signs to direct use
  - Crowding
  - Fire
  - Drought
  - Poor wildlife management
- **Crook County**
  - destruction of land, loss of access
  - loss of access, over use without infrastructure to protect the resource
  - Our secret is out... lots and lots of visitors who may not respect the land like we do... Threats also include fragmentation of the land from new residents moving in and many subdivisions
- **Stateline Recreation Area**
  - Evergreen encroachment, off road travel, litter and vandalism
  - recreation without direction and loss of access
  - Potential for disturbance to wintering wildlife
  - Social trails because there are few plans of development of trails
  - Chaotic use

- **Niobrara County**
  - Changes in traditional, historical usage
  - Misuse, vandalism, off road travel, damage

## **Q 12: Interests and Expectations**

- **Stateline Recreation Area**
  - Peace and Quite
  - Rush!
  - hunting and wildlife viewing; scenery (peace of mind), exercise too.
  - enjoy the unique landscape we have here, the wildlife, and wide-open spaces
  - Trails that flow through the landscape – feels like it should be there
  - Get to explore and learn about natural resources and landscapes
  - Have a way to explore
  - Challenging trails – diversity of challenges
- **General/All**
  - Wildlife encounters – Bird Sounds, etc.
  - Peace and quiet
  - Wildlife
  - Relaxation
  - Freedom
  - Exercise
  - Beauty
  - Water-creeks
  - solitude
- **Crook County**
  - We go there to get away from populated areas and we hope to experience nature (without disruption)
  - I generally expect a peaceful experience in the outdoors without overcrowding. I don't expect to see a lot of people. The area is beautiful and peaceful.
  - I like to be out in the country- usually riding my horse, or hiking and hunting.

## **Q13: Meet expectations/Surprises on last outing**

- Indiancara (sp?) – snow depth in the winter
- Drought and fire impacts
- Seeing other people out there
- Variety of landscape surprised me – it is different from the road view
- Views of the valley/sunset

- Potential of landscape for public access
- Yes, it met my expectations, except I couldn't find a rabbit in range for my son to try and harvest. Normally yes in this area (Stateline). I have had very few negative experiences here
- Absolutely met my expectation- every day I get out is a good day- and to be able to enjoy this country hardly every disappoints
- My expectations are usually met, because I know the area and have realistic expectations. It is always beautiful and enjoyable to be outside.
- Yes, it met expectations, enjoy the opportunity to share it with my family and the younger generation
- No, it did not meet expectations – lack of wildlife, dry, fire damage

## **Special Places Identified on Handout Maps**

### **Zone 1 – Crook County**

- Bear Lodge – hunting, horseback riding, motorcycle riding, camping, fishing (family favorite)

### **Zone 2 – Weston County**

- TB Grasslands – motorcycle riding – Near home motorcycle trail

### **Zone 3 – Niobrara County**

### **Zone 4 – Stateline Recreation Area**

- Rock Pit – Mountain Biking, hiking, hunting
- Flying V – Mountain biking, hunting
- Bowls Canyon – hunting
- Serenity Trail – hiking
- East of Newcastle – beauty, scenic byway, camping, hunting, fishing (family favorite)
- “Rock Pit” area – bike and hike
- Sherwood Canyon – hike, bird watch, explore, would love to ride on bike
- Quarry – utilize trails, cow trails and 2-track especially in winter, as it is a large south facing slope

### **Zone 5 – Mallo Trail**

- School Trips
- Trail running and hiking with family