



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Custer National Forest

1310 Main St.
Billings, MT 59105
406 657-6200

File Code: 1950/2760

Date: July 9, 2008

Route To:

Subject: Big Ice Cave Mineral Withdrawal - Recommendation

To: Regional Forester

Big Ice Cave was originally withdrawn on February 5, 1982 for twenty years. On February 1, 2000, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) notified the Forest Service the withdrawal order would expire February 4, 2002. In reply, February 29, 2000, the Forest Service notified BLM of its intent to request an extension of the withdrawal. On November 25, 2001, the Regional Forester requested BLM extend the withdrawal for Big Ice Cave area. On November 27, 2001, the BLM Montana State Office forwarded the withdrawal extension request through various internal offices from November 2001 until February 2002. The withdrawal action expired on Feb. 4, 2002. The Montana State Office was notified February 19, 2002, that the extension could not be processed after expiration of the withdrawal. A new application to withdraw the area from mineral entry was filed with BLM (serial number MTM91636). On August 22, 2002, a Federal Register notice was published calling for comments or public meeting requests. The comment period ended September 23, 2002; no comments or requests were received by the Forest Service or the BLM.

The Forest has now completed an Environmental Assessment and a Finding of No Significant Impact in connection with this action. A notice of availability to review and comment was published on May 9, 2008 in the *Billings Gazette*, *Missoulian* and *Great Falls Tribune* newspapers. The comment period ended June 9, 2008. Additionally, the proposed mineral withdrawal was listed on the Custer National Forest quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions notifying the public of this proposal. The Forest received five comments all in support of this proposed withdrawal.

Big Ice Cave qualifies as a feature protected by the Cave Resources Protection Act of 1988. Custer National Forest and National Grasslands Land Resources Management Plan (1986), Forest Plan Amendment Number 8 dated March 29, 1991, adopted forest-wide management standards for protecting caves subject to the Act and identifies this area to be withdrawn from location and entry under the United States Mining Laws.

World-wide, ice caves in limestone are fairly unique occurrences. There are numerous limestone caves in the Pryor Mountains, but only a few of these develop significant quantities of perennial ice. Big Ice Cave has the best and most unique ice development of any of these known ice caves in the Pryor Mountains making it the most visited of the caves in the Pryor Mountains. The entrance opens into an immense room of ballroom proportions of which the floor is heavily underlain with ice year round. The ice floor is 25 feet thick at the left rear of the cave where a vertical passageway provides access to other chambers below. If not protected, the area would



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****FOREST REQUEST****

be open and vulnerable to prospecting, location and mining which would irrevocably destroy Big Ice Cave. Based on the analysis in the Big Ice Cave Withdrawal Environmental Assessment and the Finding of No Significant Impact, I request that you recommend approval of the withdrawal by the Bureau of Land Management.

When Public Land Order No. 6119 was published February 5, 1982, 170 acres were withdrawn from locatable mineral entry; however, when the Forest Plan was signed June 10, 1987, only 90 acres were indicated as having been withdrawn. Therefore, a correction is needed to Forest Plan Appendix IV, page 167. There is no evidence as to why the acreage in the appendix is different than that in the public land order, except that it was an oversight. Upon notice from the BLM that the withdrawal has been approved, a correction to the Forest Plan will be made. Notice of this factual correction to the Forest Plan will be posted to the Custer National Forest internet page.

If you have questions regarding this matter, please contact Lisa Subcasky, Zone Lands Leader, at 406-657-6205x217.



STEVE E. WILLIAMS
Forest Supervisor

Enclosures:

- BLM application for withdrawal
- Decision Notice, Finding of No Significant Impact, Environmental Assessment, and supporting documents
- Mineral Evaluation Report, March 2008
- Copy of Federal Register Notice published August 22, 2002

CC: RO EAP, Pete Zimmerman