

## **CASPER STAR TRIBUNE**

**Editorial: April 18, 2005**

### **BLM shouldn't curb comments**

Computer problems always seem to come at the worst time.

So it was for anyone wanting to make last-minute comments on the proposed Jonah Infill Drilling Project.

The Bureau of Land Management's Web site went down nationwide on April 8, and was still down when the comment period for the project's draft environmental impact statement ended at midnight on April 12.

Despite the Web site outage, the BLM decided to not extend the deadline.

If it's truly interested in gathering public comments, the BLM should reverse its decision and offer a five-day extension -- the same length of time the Web site was down before the original deadline -- when the Web site is back in operation.

BLM officials said the Web site was shut down because technicians in Washington, D.C., discovered potential weaknesses in the system that could lead to a breach.

Government agencies have an obligation to provide access to public documents. They can't guarantee convenience, but more people rely on access through the Internet than ever before. And many of them wait until shortly before the deadline.

Examining a document of more than 1,000 pages, as the Jonah Infill DEIS is, once meant either having a hard copy of the document mailed -- at substantial expense to taxpayers -- or hoping the local library had a copy.

Now it's a few clicks away, assuming the Web site's working. The result is far greater public participation at a much smaller cost per person.

The BLM's decision to stick to the original deadline seems to imply that people should order hard copies if they don't want to take the chance that a Web site may be down.

It doesn't make sense to adhere to the original deadline while ignoring the intent of the comment period.

The BLM already has decided to extend the comment period for issues related to air quality, and for good reason. Air quality impairment in the area is already far worse than expected, and the BLM doesn't have regulatory authority to enforce air quality standards. If the Department of Environmental Quality's Air Quality Division is to ensure Clean Air Act compliance, the BLM needs to undertake more air quality monitoring, modeling and

analysis than it originally planned. The BLM plans to write a supplemental study on air quality issues for the DEIS.

The BLM's Web site outage is a good reason to extend the general comment deadline, too.

Eighteenth-century writer and dictionary author Samuel Johnson wrote, "Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information on it."

In this case, the public's expectation was that information could be found via the Internet, and up until the deadline elapsed. Because those expectations turned out to be untrue -- through no fault of those wanting to comment -- the BLM should give people a second chance.