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have nothing to hide. Why not be open?" he said. "I'm frustrated in my ability to get information in all sectors of the public. You hear from special-interest groups that have staff to lobby for a cause, but it's the average citizen I'm not hearing from. I don't think they're aware of what's going on," he said.

Cooperators must sign an agreement with the BLM promising not to disclose information called "pre-decisional information," a restriction some say prevents them from having substantial conversations with constituents.

That is absolutely the wrong perception that should be coming out of this," Wilson said.

He said the agency will hold workshops with elected officials in the next few weeks to clarify what information may be shared with the public.

Sumley said his fellow commissioners in Hot Springs County share his concerns, and he plans to ask at the next meeting to draft a resolution calling on the BLM to limit the meetings to the public.

Heridan County commissioners wrote a letter on Feb. 4 to Gov. Dave Laramie encouraging him to "continue to work to open these meetings so that the people of Wyoming may have discussions that will impact each of us for the future to come."

Ryan Lance, deputy director of staff for Freudenreich, said the governor has advocated opening operator meetings with tribal agencies, and that the commission has been a leader in exploring how to improve the process.

By opening the planning process to the public, before the public comment phase, distrust and apprehension will relax as the public will have a better understanding of the reasoning behind certain decisions," Lance said in 2005 as part of testimony to Congress on federal environmental policy.

Elder honored for foster efforts

By CATHY ULRICH
Of The Gazette Staff

Myrna Burgess has seen a lot of Northern Cheyenne culture disappear. Like many in her generation, she was discouraged from speaking her native language at school. She remembers having her hands slapped by ruler-wielding teachers and being made to stand in a closet or kneel in a corner.

"We were punished severely for it," she said. "The English language was forced on us in a real severe way."

Because of those experiences, she says many of her contemporaries did not pass on their knowledge to their own children.

"They didn't want them to go through the same consequences that we went through," Burgess said.

Now Burgess is working to bring her culture back. As a foster grandparent for the Lama Deer Head Start, Burgess helps the young students with their everyday school work and passes on her knowledge of Cheyenne culture.

"I have a mixture of stories that I tell them," she said. "A lot of them have been passed down from our grandparents, nighttime stories, and a lot of them are folklore stories, traditional."

From her, the children have learned how to count to 10 in Cheyenne and how to answer the roll call in Cheyenne. From her, the children have learned their history.

For her work as a foster grandparent, Burgess was honored with a ServeMontana Award, given by the Governor's Office of Community Service and the Montana Commission on Community Service during a ceremony in Helena on Feb. 11. The nomination letter that was sent from the St. Vincent Foster Grandparent Program says, "We believe that Myrna's vision and drive to see a bright future for all children serves as a model for other elders and for the children she serves."

Barb Brady, the program's director, calls Burgess a mentor.

"She teaches values and life lessons as an elder in the schools," Brady said. "She teaches stories and history."

Before becoming a foster grandparent, Burgess served



Courtesy photo

As a foster grandparent for the Lama Deer Head Start, Myrna Burgess shares her knowledge of Northern Cheyenne culture with the children, including teaching them the Cheyenne language and sharing stories that have been passed down for generations.

the Lama Deer community as a foster parent. She opened her home to more than 1,800 children over the years, many times in emergency care situations.

"It was like a revolving door," Burgess said. "They came and went and came. If they told me they were going to leave a child with me for two, three days, they meant two, three months. 'Just a little while' meant a year. A month meant five years."

In addition to being a state emergency home care provider, Burgess also fostered disabled children.

"I kept this one child that was completely disabled," she said. "He couldn't walk or talk, but I had him walking within a month. He still couldn't talk. He was brain-damaged from having rheumatic fever. No one wanted to take him, so I took him in."

Burgess was previously honored for her work with disabled children as well.

"They honored me and gave me a plaque," she said. "He was the most severely disabled one that I had taken, but I had taken a lot of children that were disabled in other ways and abused."

It was after she received that award that Burgess finally learned exactly how many children she had fostered.

"When they gave me the number of foster children that I had had, do you realize how tired I got?" she asked. "I actually quit taking so many

children after that. It just exhausted me to know how many children I'd taken."

Exhaustion aside, Burgess didn't stop contributing to her community. She served as the tribal secretary and secretary for the Northern Cheyenne Utility Commission. She is a member of the Wisdom Keepers and served as district chairwoman for the Lama Deer district. On Sundays, she serves as a Eucharistic minister for her church. During the holidays, she and her children and grandchildren distribute goodie bags to the elderly.

"All my kids, they volunteer," she said. "They help me to make food baskets and pick up all the supplies that I need. They drive me everywhere. I just had eye surgery, so now I'm kind of more dependent on my son."

Burgess had cataract surgery and received an implant so her glasses will no longer be necessary.

"I've never had good vision since I was a little kid," she said. "The clearest I've ever seen was through my

glasses. Never in my life have I been able to see all the colors I can see now. I never knew that the world was so bright!"

But she has always done her best to share her world with the Northern Cheyenne children, whether it was bright or not. And she encourages other elders to become involved in the foster grandparent program, introducing a handful of people who now work at the Boys and Girls Club, Lama Deer High school and at her side at Head Start.

"I think it's a great program to get involved with," she said. "It helps you to be able to do things for the younger generation and to share your history and culture with them. Even if you think they're not listening, there's some that really listen. You keep talking, even if you think they're not listening. It's going to pay off. Because once they learn to listen, they start respecting their culture and themselves. That's really important, not just to these Cheyenne children, but to all the children."

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