

Public Lands Foundation

Position Statement: 2010-16

The National System of Public Lands

September 9, 2010

Executive Summary

The designation of the BLM Public Lands as the “National System of Public Lands” will substantially enhance public support for the BLM’s multiple use mission and will help keep these public lands in public ownership. The Department of the Interior, by September 30, 2013, needs to complete the internal actions required by Secretarial Order 3280, which made this designation, to make the designation permanent. Congress should be asked to give legislative authorization to the National System of Public Lands. Locally, the major blocks of BLM lands within the National System of Public Lands should be given distinctive names to enhance their public identity, to make it easier for the public to find and use the lands, and to strengthen the BLM’s ability to manage public uses on these National Public Lands.

Background

On December 16, 2008, the Secretary of the Interior issued Order No. 3280 officially designating the Bureau of Land Management Public Lands as the “National System of Public Lands.”

In making the designation, the Secretary stated, “These lands constitute an invaluable recreational, cultural, economic, and environmental legacy for the nation. And yet, those who own the lands – the American people – remain largely unaware of their critical importance to our quality of life, their value to present and future generations, or even the purpose for which these lands are preserved in public ownership.”

BLM Director Jim Caswell said “It’s time these great lands and resources, whose historical roots date back to the earliest days of our nation, are given their due by recognizing them officially. This official designation will ultimately make it easier for the public to identify these lands and more readily understand the multiple-use mission that Congress has given to the BLM.”

The Order also provided that:

“The Assistant Secretary - Land and Minerals Management is responsible for implementing the requirements of the Order. Implementation will coincide with a modification to the BLM emblem to include the designation “National System of Public Lands.” A communication plan has been developed to convey the new designation to the public, interested parties, other interested Federal agencies, and Congress.

The Order is effective immediately. It will remain in effect until its provisions are converted to the Departmental Manual or until it is amended, superseded, or revoked, whichever occurs first. In the absence of any of the foregoing actions, the provisions of this Order will terminate and be considered obsolete on September 30, 2013. The termination of this Order will not nullify implementation of the name change effected herein.”

This National System of Public Lands (NSPL) designation covers 258 million acres of public lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). These BLM lands are what remain of the nation’s original 1.8 billion acres of public domain land. The federal homestead, sale and mining laws facilitated the western expansion of the nation. In the first 200 years of our nation’s history, most of the public domain in the Midwestern States passed into private ownership, along with the arable lands in the valleys of the West. And Congress set aside large blocks of the public domain in the Western States for National Forests, Parks, Monuments, Wildlife Refuges, military reservations, and other special management purposes. The BLM was established in 1946 to manage the remaining public domain lands, most of which are located in the more arid parts of the Western States and in Alaska.

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) designated these public domain lands as “public lands” and directed the BLM to manage them for multiple use purposes. While FLPMA gave no official name to the public lands administered by the BLM, a large number and variety of designations were subsequently assigned to individual BLM land areas by the Administration and Congress. These include a multitude of Wilderness Areas, National Conservation Areas, National Monuments, Outstanding Natural Areas, National Wild and Scenic Rivers, National Scenic Byways, National Historic Trails, and Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). These special area designations, which include over 42 million acres of BLM public land, were named the BLM’s National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS), a designation which was approved by Congress in 2009.

Discussion

Meaningful naming has been a traditional practice used in Government programs to gain public attention and support for public issues, initiatives, and programs. Meaningful names in Federal natural resource programs include the National Forest System, the National Parks System, and the National Wildlife Refuge System. The names have served to connote to the American people a level of protection and management, which their property deserves. Names have influenced the public’s attitude toward the resources and resource uses that the lands support. Names have put the National Forest, National Parks, and National Wildlife Refuges on atlases and road maps that enable the public to identify with the lands and more strongly support land management and protection programs.

The names on the 42 million acres in the NLCS areas of BLM lands have proved effective in gaining public support for protection and management of the special environmental and scenic resources, but there have been drawbacks as well. BLM program management resources were diverted to meet the management needs of the special areas, and the emphasis on special areas has created a public perception that BLM public lands would not be retained and managed in public ownership unless they were given some special area designation.

The other 216 million acres of BLM multiple use public lands outside of the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System are the outdoor recreation areas for the urban populations of the West. They are the habitat of many wildlife species, including over 50% of the remaining sage-grouse habitat. They include the ranges of wild horses and burros, open space and scenic landscapes, valuable stands of timber, range lands for livestock and wildlife, energy mineral reserves, and potential sites for solar and wind energy generation. These other resources and resource uses are as important as the NLCS values, but they don't have the visibility which names have given to the NLCS lands.

The PLF has long advocated for a National Land System for the BLM public lands. The advantages include:

- Greater assurance that these public lands will continue to be retained in public ownership.
- Greater public understanding and acceptance of the vital role that these public lands play in the environment and local economies of the West.
- Greater appreciation by the Congress and the general public that the special designation areas are parts of larger management units that need to continue to be managed for multiple uses.
- Greater appreciation by the Congress and the general public of the need for reasonable continuity of management programs on the BLM lands to meet public needs and to protect the resources.
- Greater assurance to cooperators and other volunteers working with the BLM that their contributions of lands, time, money and efforts will not be wasted.
- Notice to other agencies that the BLM lands have a purpose and mission and that the public interest may best be served by cooperative management of related lands and resources rather than struggles over "turf."
- Facilitation of BLM recruitment of top-notch professionals in the great variety of scientific and management positions required to manage the lands and resources.
- Better understanding of the significant multiple use and other provisions of FLPMA and better focus for the administrative and legislative efforts that will be needed to deal with the current and future issues involving BLM-administered lands.
- Greater sense of permanence for the resources and resource uses that the American people expect the BLM lands to provide for economic, recreational, cultural, wildlife, scenic, open space and environmental protection purposes.
- Greater visibility to the recreating public who are becoming major users of the BLM administered lands.

Now the major blocks of these BLM National Public Lands need to be given distinctive names and boundaries which can be shown on maps and signage on the ground to make it easier for the public to find and use their lands, and to strengthen BLM's ability to manage outdoor enjoyment uses of the National System of Public Lands.

PLF Position

1. The PLF strongly supports the designation of the BLM Public Lands as the National System of Public Lands as provided by Secretarial Order 3280 of December 16, 2008. An official name for the BLM Public Lands will substantially enhance public support of the BLM's multiple use mission and will help keep these public lands in public ownership.
2. The Department of the Interior, by September 30, 2013, needs to complete the internal actions required by the Order to make the designation permanent.
3. Congress should be asked to give legislative authorization to the National System of Public Lands.
4. Locally, the major blocks of BLM lands within the National System of Public Lands should be given distinctive names to enhance their public identity, to make it easier for the public to find and use the lands, and to strengthen BLM's ability to manage public uses of these National Public Lands.

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