

# Public Lands Foundation

## Position Statement: 2010-06

### Public Enjoyment of the BLM Public Lands

June 21, 2010

#### **Executive Summary**

The general public in the urban areas of the rapidly growing West view the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) administered lands in the National System of Public Lands as their open space and outdoor enjoyment areas. Over 57 million people now live within 25 miles of these Public Lands. Managing outdoor recreation activities is a major mission of the BLM. The recreating public is potentially a strong advocate for the National System of Public Lands.

The Public Lands managed by the BLM have many times been viewed as a storehouse of natural and cultural resources that need to be protected from overuse by the public. Land use planning has often focused on the impacts of public recreation uses, rather than promoting public use and enjoyment as a value derived from the land. BLM now has a new “public” who wants to enjoy their public lands. There are opportunities for BLM to build partnerships with the broad spectrum of public land users who want their public lands kept in public ownership, and managed for the types and levels of uses that will sustain the recreation attractions they want to enjoy. BLM, in its planning and managing actions, should emphasize managing public lands for sustainable public values, which include enjoyment of recreational activities, within the land’s capability to maintain its natural life support functions.

Giving distinctive names and boundaries to the major blocks of Public Lands would make it easier for the public to find, use, and enjoy their public lands; it would strengthen the BLM’s ability to manage the lands and the land uses; and it would help ensure the permanence of this national outdoor recreation asset.

#### **Background**

The Public Lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management are what is left of the “public domain lands” after 150 years of land disposal policies and activities by the Congress and the federal General Land Office. The land disposal era gradually came to a close in the 1950s after most of the “developable” public domain lands had been acquired by the homesteaders and miners who settled the West.

The passage of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) revoked nearly all of the historic public land disposal laws and set new policies for the “public lands.” Two key policy statements in FLPMA provide that the public lands will:

“be retained in Federal ownership, unless as a result of the land use planning procedure provided for in this Act, it is determined that disposal of a particular parcel will serve the national interest;” and

“be managed in a manner that will protect the quality of scientific, scenic, historical, ecological, environmental, air and atmospheric, water resource, and archeological values; that, where appropriate, will preserve and protect certain public lands in their natural conditions; that will provide food and habitat for fish and wildlife and domestic animals; that will provide for outdoor recreation and human occupancy and use.”

For much of the past 50 years, the BLM managed lands have been the ranching, mining, and logging areas that supported the economies of rural communities, and the sources of energy minerals for the Nation. BLM has been preparing and updating Resource Management Plans (RMPs) for these “public lands” to carry out the directives of FLPMA. These RMPs focus on describing and evaluating the natural and cultural resources on these public lands and prescribing the management actions that should be taken to protect these resources from overuse by lessees, permittees, and the general public.

In these RMPs, the natural and cultural resources on the BLM lands are described and evaluated in great detail by individual resource. Landscapes, scenery, open space, wilderness, wildlife habitat, wild horses and burros, vegetation, cultural/historic resources, and the special areas of the BLM’s National Landscape Conservation System are discussed in terms of what they are, and what is needed to protect them. Often, little is said about what they contribute to the public’s outdoor recreation experiences.

Recreation is typically described in terms of the impacts that the public recreation activities are having on natural and cultural resources, the controls and facilities that are needed to protect the individual resources from damage or overuse by the public, and the areas that are designated for concentrated recreational uses like camping, boat launching, and off highway vehicle activities.

BLM’s recreation programs have placed the most emphasis on the sites where there is intensive recreational use. The dispersed recreational activities like hunting, fishing, birding, wildlife watching, hiking, camping, mountain biking, horseback riding, and the enjoyment of landscapes, nature and the “back country experience” have not been adequately addressed. The recent controversy over recreational shooting is an example. BLM has been more inclined to close an entire area to recreational shooting for reasons of “public safety and resource damage” than to look for places within the area where recreational shooting can be safely enjoyed.

## **Discussion**

There are, of course, many areas where BLM has recognized that recreation is a primary mission, and has done a remarkable job in planning for and facilitating public recreation uses. The California Desert Conservation Area, managed by the BLM in southern California, offers a wide variety of outdoor enjoyment experiences ranging from the Imperial Sand Dune Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) area to desert Wilderness Areas. It is one of the most heavily visited outdoor recreation areas in the Nation. Other examples

include the concentrated water-based recreation activities along the Lower Colorado River, the Long Term Visitor Area campgrounds for winter visitors in the western Arizona deserts, and the Slickrock Bike Trail and the intensive OHV activity areas in Utah.

The BLM recreation management programs in southern California, western Arizona, and Utah have been initiated to accommodate the huge numbers of visitors from the urban areas who were already using the BLM administered lands and waters. The same public recreation pressures have grown tremendously on other BLM land areas in the West. The recreating public is becoming BLM's biggest user group. Recent BLM estimates indicate that there are over 63 million visitor days of recreation use annually on the BLM lands. Many outdoor recreation uses have major impacts on the lands and resources. OHV use is a prime example. Public education and cooperation, coordination, and partnerships with user groups are excellent ways to deal with these kinds of public land issues.

Today, most of the users of the BLM lands no longer live in rural communities; they live in urban and suburban centers. Most of the users of BLM lands no longer depend upon the BLM lands for their livelihood; they use the BLM lands for outdoor recreation enjoyment. There is a new generation of public land users who have been brought up on a steady diet of entertainment and enjoyment activities. They are not particularly interested in "natural resources," but they love "nature" and the "outdoors," and they want to protect and enjoy them.

Changing social values in the West are placing more and more value on the amenities of scenery, wildlife, and outdoor recreation activities. Tourism activities and experiences depend upon the attributes associated with natural and relatively undisturbed landscapes, and tourists are concerned about the degradation of natural resource attractions. The role of the public lands in the West is changing, and the general public now views their public lands as the "outdoors." More trails need to be built because access to the "backcountry" is critical to the public's enjoyment of the "outdoors." The public wants to experience the natural ecosystems, and they want the BLM to provide more trails and well managed trail systems so they can enjoy their public lands. Land in its natural state, which provides sustainable access for visitors, has economic value, and "destination tourism" on BLM lands is becoming the economic base for many local communities in the West.

There are implications for future generations as well. The "Last Child in the Woods" by Richard Louv describes how today's kids are increasingly becoming disconnected from the natural world. They focus on computers and video games and are coming to think of nature as more of an abstraction than a reality. Louv argues for a return to an awareness of, and appreciation for, the natural world. He says that nature needs its children, and asks where else will future stewards come from?

FLPMA provided that individual parcels of the public lands can be disposed of when the land use planning process determines that it is in the national interest. In the past, BLM lands have been sold or traded in many land transactions that were made to acquire non-federal lands in National Parks, National Wildlife Refuges, and National Forests. In such cases, the public benefits of the natural resources, environmental and other values on the BLM lands often were outweighed by the "need" to use these BLM Public Lands to acquire non-federal lands inside the well known and "more important" National

Parks, Refuges and Forests. Protests by the recreating public can be an effective way of stopping this method of privatizing their BLM-administered outdoor enjoyment areas.

Lack of identity has been a major problem for the BLM. The BLM manages about 253 million acres of Public Land, but most BLM land areas have no name and no marked boundaries. It is difficult for the recreating public to identify with the BLM lands and locate them in the field. Names like the “Phoenix District” or the “Bradshaw-Harquahala Area” mean little to the urban public who associate “public lands” with names like “Tonto National Forest” and “Saguaro National Park.”

The 40 million acres in the National Monuments, National Conservation Areas, Wilderness Areas and other units of the BLM’s National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS) illustrate how powerful names and boundaries are in building public support for land management programs. The remaining 213 million acres of BLM multiple use lands, which are enjoyed by the recreating public, remain anonymous and largely invisible to the recreating public.

On December 16, 2009, the Department of the Interior took a major first step toward giving the BLM lands an identity when it issued Secretarial Order 3280, which designated the Bureau of Land Management Public Lands the “National System of Public Lands.”

Now, the major blocks of these BLM 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 public outdoor enjoyment uses.

## **PLF Position**

1. The BLM lands in the National System of Public Lands are open space and outdoor enjoyment areas for the urban populations in the rapidly growing West.
2. Much of the general public in the West now values the BLM lands in terms of the outdoor recreation experiences these lands provide for public enjoyment. The recreating public is potentially the biggest supporter of, and advocate for, the BLM and the BLM lands, because they want these BLM Public Lands kept in public ownership and managed in ways that will sustain the recreation attractions that they enjoy.
3. The BLM’s Resource Management Planning process needs to place greater emphasis on describing the public enjoyment characteristics and outdoor recreation opportunities of the public lands and landscapes covered by the RMPs.
4. Planned recreational uses must fit within the land’s capacity to sustain them and other uses, and to provide ecosystem services in perpetuity.
5. The way in which resource management proposals of the RMPs are presented to the general public needs to be changed. The BLM does not need to change the RMP process of describing the needs of the individual natural/cultural/historic resources. The agency just needs to do a better job of describing the outdoor recreation experiences that these resources and landscapes provide for public enjoyment, and the management

actions that are needed to sustain the recreation attractions that are provided by the natural and cultural resources of the BLM Public Lands.

6. There should be a proactive recreation program for the Public Lands in each BLM District and Field Office. There should be brochures and maps available, and on-line, which provide a clear picture of the outdoor enjoyment opportunities that are available, where they are located, how the public can access them, and how they should be used.

7. The major blocks of BLM Public 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, to strengthen the BLM's ability to manage public outdoor enjoyment uses, and to gain public support for the permanence of this national outdoor recreation asset.

\*\*\*\*\*

Updated from No. PLF 34-08, November 17, 2008.