



# Public Lands Foundation

## Recreational Shooting on BLM Public Lands

### **Executive Summary**

Recreational shooting is a legitimate component of multiple-use on the National System of Public Lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). For a variety of reasons, this use has not been a featured element in land use plans unless it was to prohibit recreational shooting. The BLM Land Use Planning Process should identify potential shooting ranges or other areas of public land where concentrated recreational shooting activities are currently occurring and where such activities might be directed in the future. Recreational shooting on public lands should be restricted or prohibited by land management decisions only in public land areas where dangers to public safety exist or where restrictions or prohibitions on recreational shooting are needed to prevent damage to valuable resources.

### **Background**

Ownership of firearms is commonplace in the United States with an estimated one in three households owning one or more firearms. Sales of firearms and hunting equipment in 2006 exceeded that spent on golf and are second only to sale of exercise equipment. [National Sporting Goods Association data reported in Bullet Points; March 10, 2008]

The majority of shooters, 95%, is unorganized and merely wants some place to go to shoot. Unlike many other recreational groups, the OHVers (Off Highway Vehicle) for example, recreational shooters are not well organized and have not been diligent in expressing their needs and concerns at public land use planning meetings. Event and competition shooters make up the other 5% of shooters. For the most part, they need and use developed sites or shooting ranges. While the latter category of shooters is organized they are most likely to engage an agency planning process only if their shooting site or facility is threatened.

Since the settlement of the West, recreational shooting has been common on private and public lands. Most recreational shooting has been scattered in occurrence, low in impact and largely unnoticed. As the West became more urbanized and land developed, areas for dispersed shooting declined. Recreational shooters were forced to move more to public lands. Where more concentrated shooting took place, conflicts with other land users became more common.

Uncaring, ill-mannered shooters have given a bad name to recreational shooting in many areas. Sometimes household items such as old cars, refrigerators, TV's and trash

are illegally dumped on public lands. If these items subsequently become targets by recreational shooters, they may be wrongly blamed for the illegal dumping.

Other than some 50 to 60 Recreation and Public Purpose Act leases and sales for shooting ranges issued or authorized by BLM to date, recreational shooting has been largely ignored in the past in BLM land use planning. Conflicts involving recreational shooting were most often viewed as a nuisance with shooting ranges being closed or shooting prohibited in areas where it was concentrated.

The protocols and operational safety of recreational shooting are, for the most part, self-regulated by users. These generally include at least two types of guidance: 1.) shooting safety law and or regulation of a state wildlife or natural resources agency; and, 2.) shooting safety ordinance of local government jurisdiction. In addition, for specific areas of public land, recreational shooting may be governed by additional published BLM regulation.

Recreational shooting, like mountain climbing, rock hounding, wildflower viewing, and hiking, is one of many commonly recognized uses which are legitimate recreation use components among the whole array of multiple-uses of BLM public lands. For a variety of reasons, many such recreational uses have not been featured elements in land use plans. However, the volume of recreational shooting and its legitimacy as a component of public land recreation has been given more recognition recently.

In early 2007 the Public Lands Foundation (PLF) and 39 other organizations entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and U.S. Forest Service (FS). This MOU, The Federal Lands Hunting, Fishing, and Shooting Sports Roundtable MOU, has as its purpose, **“...to develop and expand a framework of cooperation among the Parties at the national, regional, and local levels for planning and implementing mutually beneficial projects and activities related to hunting, fishing, and shooting sports conducted on federal lands. These activities and projects will complement the respective missions of the Parties and serve the mutual interests of the Parties and the public.”**

From the above MOU, a subset Roundtable (Hunting and Shooting Sports Roundtable – HSSR) was established to work on shooting and hunting and shooting access issues. PLF is a member of this Roundtable.

## **Discussion**

Proposed closures of public lands to shooting in early 2007 by BLM were controversial and rose to the BLM directorate level. These include an area near Pahrump, Nevada, and the Ironwood Forest National Monument near Tucson, Arizona. Currently, the Aqua Fria National Monument near Phoenix, Arizona, is proposed to be closed to shooting. While not largely controversial, this proposed closure is seen by many as a trend in closing public lands to shooting based upon status versus need. This belief tends to be confirmed by the more recent proposal to close the Canyons of the Ancients National Monument in Colorado. However, none of the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument is proposed for closure. The FS has closed significant areas of the Tonto National Forest in Arizona, and has closed or put on notice for closure several shooting ranges that had been operated under special use permits. Neither agency has

developed any designated shooting sites, nor developed any new shooting ranges, despite overwhelming evidence that recreational shooting is in high demand on public lands.

Federal land management plans, for the most part, have not historically addressed recreational shooting in ways similar to other recreational activities. There may be a variety of reasons for this. They include:

- little or no proactive participation in planning processes by affected individuals and organizations;
- limited understanding of recreational shooting activities by agency staff and/or managers;
- reluctance on the part of agencies to deal with the complexities of environmental and liability issues associated with recreational shooting;
- insufficient resources to build and manage recreational shooting sites and ranges; and, other reasons.

The land use planning process is the principal tool that land management agencies use to address resource use and allocation. In that regard, the PLF believes it important to state its position with respect to recreational shooting and land use planning and land use allocations and restrictions.

### **PLF Position**

1. Recreational shooting should be considered an appropriate and accepted use of the National System of Public Lands and be given equal consideration with other legitimate land use activities or projects that are evaluated within the context of land use planning.
2. The BLM Land Use Planning Process should identify potential shooting ranges or other areas of public land where concentrated recreational shooting activities are currently occurring and where such activities might be directed in the future.
3. Recreational shooting on public lands should be restricted or prohibited by land management decisions only in public land areas where dangers to public safety exist or where restrictions or prohibitions on recreational shooting are needed to prevent damage to valuable resources. There may need to be more restrictions on recreational shooting in wildland/urban interface areas than in the more remote areas of public lands.
4. The BLM's planning for restrictions or closures to recreational shooting should consider options for mitigating the loss of areas that have been available for recreational shooting.

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