

PLF STATEMENT: RELOCATION OF THE BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT HEADQUARTERS



SUMMARY:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is a Federal agency with no senior leadership in Washington, DC. The BLM is currently unable to conduct critical policy, budget, and oversight work in coordination with the Department of the Interior, Congress, the Office of Management and Budget, and other Federal agency leaders. This must be corrected if the nation's largest federal land manager is to be at the table for key administration and departmental policy decisions that affect public lands.

PLF POSITION:

The PLF strongly opposed the relocation of the BLM headquarters from Washington DC, and believes it has:

- Weakened the BLM's influence in national public land policies in the Department of the Interior;
- Created a weak, disjointed and ineffective BLM management structure;
- Essentially eliminated interdisciplinary collaboration and coordination in development and implementation of national policies;
- Reduced national level coordination with other Federal land and resource management agencies;
- Created a land management organization that is driven more by regional interests rather than the interests of all Americans;
- Constrained the BLM's ability to work with national constituencies whose top leadership is in Washington, DC.

Public Lands Foundation's mission is to advocate and work for the retention of America's Public Lands in public hands. You can find our detailed position paper and more about our work at www.publicland.org





Public Lands Foundation Position Statement Relocation of BLM Headquarters

Executive Summary

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is a Federal agency with no senior leadership in Washington, DC, as a result of the relocation of the agency's Headquarters (HQ) organization to Grand Junction, Colorado, and several other western locations during the last administration. The BLM is currently unable to conduct critical policy, budget, and oversight work in coordination with the Department of the Interior, Congress, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and other Federal agency leaders. This must be corrected if the nation's largest federal land manager is to be at the table for key administration and departmental policy decisions that affect all public lands. If a well-designed and functioning BLM HQ organization is not returned to Washington, DC, the long tradition of the BLM serving western constituents and all Americans is very much in jeopardy.

The BLM Director and HQ senior executive leadership positions (Deputy Director – Operations and five Assistant Directors) who are currently located in Grand Junction, CO, should be immediately returned to Washington, DC. The personal needs of other HQ employees should be considered and impacts to them and their families minimized to the greatest extent possible. Consideration should also be given to those employees whose careers and families were impacted by the relocations to other western locations.

Background

Historically, the BLM's Washington Office (WO) made up only about three percent of the total BLM workforce. Some 97 percent of the BLM workforce is stationed on-the-ground in Field, District, and State Offices, near the public lands managed by the BLM. One of the BLM's greatest strengths is that it has offices and staff in the field that work directly with local elected officials, tribes, stakeholders and the general public to create partnerships, solve resource problems and serve the needs of local communities.

It is this decentralized staff of resource professionals who implement the intent of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) across the many BLM State and Field offices. The multiple use management, protection, development and enhancement of almost 250 million surface acres of public lands all occur at the field level. Because of its decentralized structure spread across 120 western towns, the BLM has an excellent capacity for and a track-record of finding common ground by listening to and cooperating with local interests including municipalities, counties,

tribes, and states in land management planning, permitting and leasing. In doing so, trust has been built for future collaboration.

The role of a WO headquarters organization is to develop consistent national policy and regulations, prepare and manage the President's budget for the BLM, prepare and manage the BLM's implementation of annual appropriations, and provide broad resource program oversight to assure that the national interests of FLPMA are met. This work, which backstops the field organization, requires coordination and daily interaction with the Department of the Interior, many other Federal agencies, OMB, the White House, and Congress – all located in Washington, DC. A strong BLM WO has well-served the agency, the Department of the Interior, and the many public lands users and constituencies since the BLM was established 75 years ago.

The previous administration moved the BLM Director, Deputy Director – Operations, and five Assistant Directors to Grand Junction, CO. Most WO Division Chiefs and senior program managers and specialists (311 HQ positions) were moved to nearly a dozen other western locations. The Deputy Director for Policy and Programs (a political appointee) and a skeletal staff remain in Washington, DC. However, this remaining WO staff lacks the essential policy and program capacity to support the BLM leadership and the administration's priorities. Furthermore, this residual HQ staff is even more isolated and disconnected from the policy and oversight work because of the relocation of the 311 HQ senior resource professional positions. Crippling the agency even further is the fact that over 87 percent of the impacted WO employees retired or took positions with other organizations. Only 41 WO employees actually moved west. This reorganization has created much upheaval, uncertainty, fragmentation, and disruption in the agency and the loss of institutional knowledge within the BLM senior leadership is staggering.

PLF Position

The PLF strongly opposed the relocation of the BLM WO headquarters, and believes it has: (1) weakened the BLM's influence in national public land policies in the Department of the Interior; (2) created a weak, disjointed and ineffective BLM management structure; (3) essentially eliminated interdisciplinary collaboration and coordination in development and implementation of national policies; (4) reduced national level coordination with other Federal land and resource management agencies; (5) created a land management organization that is driven more by *local interests* rather than the *interests of all Americans*; and (6) constrained the BLM's ability to work with national constituencies whose top leadership is in Washington, DC.

Based upon the experience of PLF members, it is our position that the essential functions of a Washington, DC-based HQ of the Bureau of Land Management include: (1) supporting administration budget preparation, hearings, and special initiatives; (2) developing agency annual work plan guidance consistent with Congressional appropriations; (3) maintaining relationships with and responding to requests from Congress, including the critically important role of preparing and delivering testimony for congressional hearings regarding potential legislation and inquiries into issues for which BLM has expertise; (4) collaborating with and assisting NGO constituencies and tribes on public lands topics; (5) communicating with DOI on land, water, energy, and tribal policy and budgetary topics; (6) consulting and replying to OMB, Inspector General (IG) and General Accountability Office (GAO) inquiries, as well as those of any other Federal oversight

entity; (7) fostering cross-program and interdisciplinary dialogue in support of the BLM mission; and (8) coordinating with Federal land management agency leadership within DOI, USDA, DOD and others.

The move of the BLM HQ organization to Grand Junction, CO and relocation of senior resource program staffs to a dozen other western locations is not in the best interests of the public at large, or in the best interests for the long-term management of our nation's public lands. The BLM is a national agency, and should be headquartered in Washington, DC. The new administration should:

1. Return the BLM Director, both Deputy Directors and the five Assistant Directors who are currently located in Grand Junction, CO, to Washington, DC.
2. Establish a small, well-respected and knowledgeable team of career professionals, including a highly respected BLM retiree, to develop a functional statement for the HQ office. Upon completion of this document, the team should develop a table of organization to facilitate the functions established. Duty locations for HQ positions should be recommended as a part of this exercise. It may be that some Divisions could remain in the western locations they were transferred to as a part of this reorganization. This team could employ the services of a third-party facilitator and should examine previous work by the GAO regarding the BLM reorganization.
3. Address the last-minute reorganization of the BLM's law enforcement program as a part of the review team's scope of work. An order was issued and announced in a press release on January 8, 2021, that realigned the supervision of the BLM's law enforcement rangers from Field/District Managers to the BLM's Office of Law Enforcement and Security (OLES). This action was taken without any consultation with BLM senior leadership and serves to separate the crucial on-the-ground work of BLM law enforcement rangers from the oversight of line managers.
4. Engage in a transparent and open outreach with all BLM employees regarding the status of the existing HQ organization, solicitation of suggestions, status of any assessments underway, and decision-making on outcomes.

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