



Position Statement

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RECREATION USE ON PUBLIC LANDS

The Public Lands Foundation recommends significant increases in both funding and staffing for the Bureau of Land Management's recreation and land acquisition programs. The past two decades have seen a dramatic expansion of recreational use on the public lands. The recent Covid-19 pandemic has further accentuated the explosion in visitor use and static funding has exacerbated BLM's ability to provide a safe and quality recreational experience. The BLM could help meet this growing demand by improving public land access in areas with prime recreational opportunities. The BLM needs to evaluate and prioritize easements or acquisitions for public access to support increased public use.



River Recreation, MT – Bob Wick photo

The PLF recommends BLM consider the following areas to address increased recreation use of the public lands:

- Increase the overall number of developed recreational fee sites.
- Enhance existing developed recreation fee sites.
- Increase funding to support the management of dispersed recreational use.
- Rebuild BLM's capacity to process land exchanges, acquisition of easements, and land purchases to benefit the recreation and public access programs.

BACKGROUND

Recreation use throughout the west has expanded significantly. Western communities are growing and recent national trends toward a more remote workforce allows employees to locate nearer public lands. One of the attractions of public land is the broad spectrum of activities they offer, ranging from driving for pleasure to large organized (commercial and competitive) events attended by thousands, to non-motorized recreational activities such as hiking, fishing, bird watching, recreational shooting, etc. (*See the PLF's Recreational Shooting position paper.*) Some users prefer developed sites while others enjoy the back country. This dispersed use, as its name implies, is scattered and interspersed across 245 million acres of public lands. While difficult to numerically count, there is no question recreational use of public lands is significant and growing each year. The BLM receives funding from two primary sources to manage recreation use: annual appropriations and recreation use fees BLM collects at intensively developed locations, which are re-invested directly to the sites.

The Public Lands Foundation advocates and works for the retention of America's Public Lands in public hands professionally and sustainably managed for responsible common use and enjoyment.

User Fees

Entrance fees to many State and Federal recreation facilities are an accepted industry practice. Until 2004, with the introduction of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, BLM and the U.S. Forest Service could not charge user fees. Now, under this fairly new regulation, agencies can charge both standard and expanded amenity fees, but most of the revenue must be used to fund and maintain the sites where they are collected. The BLM Recreation and Fee Handbook describes a system of site-specific passes that can be implemented as well. These can be for single day use for BLM multi-entity, interagency or State sites on an annual basis. Users are willing and expected to pay reasonable entrance fees as well as specific use fees for additional amenities and services, e.g., parking, restrooms, concessions, trash collection, and maintenance. The BLM has historically chosen to limit user fees to only popular and well-maintained developed locations as opposed to dispersed and remote landscapes because of the costs and challenges in collecting these fees. This leaves most of the public lands open to recreation use without user fees. The BLM could explore use of standard amenity annual passes to help provide funding for these types of areas



Red Rock Canyon NCA, NV – BLM photo

With the huge increase in recreation visitor use over the past 20 years, it is past time for BLM to evaluate visitor use at all existing fee locations to identify where expansion of facilities and services is needed. The recreating public is growing and more sophisticated in its needs. Some drive expensive motor homes and camper trailers, many access rivers for whitewater and lake experiences, others look for improved and developed boat ramps, while many seek developed sites to access mountain bike and off-road vehicle trails. Establishing new fee sites will accommodate this growing need and use. New developed fee sites will require travel and transportation planning, along with construction and development funds to get established. Absent enhancing existing sites and establishing new developed areas, the recreation users will deplete what is available and, in many areas, cause significant resource damage and enforcement issues.

Dispersed Use (non-fee) Recreation

Dispersed recreational uses on the public lands include primitive camping, hunting, fishing, hiking, mountain biking, snowmobiling, river running, rock climbing, horseback riding, target shooting, bird watching, etc. These uses do not require fees but require BLM funding through appropriations. This funding supports road and trail maintenance; trash removal; repair of vandalized or damaged lands; removal of invasive plant species; law enforcement; providing information, interpretation, and maps/signage; and processing recreation permits for commercial guides/outfitters, competitive event sponsors, and other events and uses. This dispersed recreation activity has increased in the past two decades to the point that some areas are so intensively used that developed fee sites should be constructed to improve and protect these overused sites.



OHV Use, CA – BLM photo

In 1993 the BLM recreation resource management budget was \$47 million. Adjusted for inflation the 2021 budget should have been at \$86 million; however, the 2021 recreation budget line item was \$58 million (a \$28 million deficit). The recently proposed 2023 President’s Budget for Recreation Resources Management identified only an increase of \$9.7 million to enhance recreational opportunities and improve infrastructure. If passed, this increase will help but will be insufficient. Without adequate, sustained increases, the adverse impacts on the public lands will continue to be significant and increasingly the recreational visitor will have less than positive experiences.

An example is the Caja del Rio Plateau just southwest of Santa Fe. Insufficient BLM law enforcement and recreation staff have led to illegal trash dumping, poaching, unregulated shooting, and the destruction of sacred sites for the area’s surrounding Pueblos. Just recently, the La Cieneguilla Petroglyphs containing cultural resources more than 8,000 years old were vandalized. With increased funding for law enforcement officers and cultural resource specialists, BLM would be better equipped to prevent these criminal activities. In Bears Ears National Monument in Utah, increased visitation paired with a lack of Federal agency resources has led to human waste issues that are impacting public health, sanitation standards, and water resources for local residents and wildlife, as well as the integrity of important cultural sites to Tribal communities.

Access to Isolated Parcels of Public Land

A significant number of public land parcels managed by BLM do not have legal or physical access preventing the public from enjoying recreational use of these lands. Easements across or purchase of adjacent private lands would resolve this situation. With sufficient funding, BLM staff could focus on such efforts. Another source of funding is the Land and Water Conservation Fund recently made permanent by Congress. While this will make available tens of millions of dollars, BLM is at a considerable disadvantage in applying for these funds due to lack of staffing. *(See the PLF’s Public Land Access position paper.)*



Hiking, NM – BLM photo

PLF POSITION

1. New recreation sites paid for by user fees should be developed on the public lands throughout the western states. In addition, existing BLM recreation developed sites need upgrading and expanding as appropriate.
2. The BLM should seek an increase in recreation funding to deal with managing dispersed and/or casual recreation management outside of the fee sites. The BLM should develop funding proposals including the use of annual passes to support this effort.
3. The BLM should reestablish the land acquisition program staff in State Offices and the BLM Headquarters Office in Washington, D.C., to assure the agency’s ability to secure easements, land purchases, and land exchanges to enhance the public’s access to inaccessible parcels of public land.

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