



Position Statement

Recreation Use on the Public Lands

Executive Summary

The past two decades have seen a dramatic expansion of recreational use on public lands. According to a report by The Center for American Progress published in 2023, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recorded more than 80 million visits to its lands in 2021 contributing an estimated \$11.4 billion in economic activity. During the Covid pandemic, there was an explosion in visitor use on the public lands and is still increasing. Static funding has exacerbated the BLM's ability to provide safe and quality recreational opportunities and experiences. There are also some areas of public land that have potential to provide recreational opportunities but are currently inaccessible. The BLM could help meet this growing demand by adding public land acres currently unavailable because access to parcels with prime recreational opportunities is currently blocked by private land. The BLM needs to evaluate these parcels to prioritize easements or acquisition for public access to support increased public use.

The PLF recommends the BLM consider the following areas to resolve the situation:

- 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 the BLM's capacity to process land exchanges, acquisition of easements and land purchases to benefit the recreation and public access programs. (See also PLF's position paper on Public Access.)

The PLF recommends significant increases in both funding and personnel capacity for the BLM recreation and acquisition programs.

Background

Recreation use throughout the west has expanded significantly. 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, etc. 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, or 10% of the land area of the United States.

The BLM receives funding and support from three primary sources to manage recreation use — Congressional appropriations, recreation use fees at intensively developed locations, and support from partnerships with local communities and governments. Congressional appropriations have not been able to keep pace with the increasing demand for recreation on BLM-managed public lands so BLM has come to depend heavily on the other two sources.

User Fees

Entrance fees to National Parks and many other State and Federal recreation facilities are an accepted practice. Users are generally expected to pay reasonable entrance fees as well as specific user fees for additional amenities and services, e.g., parking, restrooms, concessions, trash collection, and maintenance.

With the huge increase in recreation visitor use over the past 20 years, the BLM should continue to evaluate visitor use at all existing fee locations and 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 be established. Absent enhancing existing sites and establishing new developed areas, unmanaged dispersed areas due to lack of funding will continue to have increased impacts and, in many areas, cause significant resource damage and enforcement issues.

Positive Examples of Partnerships

The Grand Junction Field Office in Colorado has worked with local communities to implement user fees that address management issues at the popular recreation sites of North Fruita Desert, Ruby-Horsethief Canyon and Rabbit Valley. The fee system provided resources for more invasive tree species removal, cottonwood planting, and general dispersed campsite improvements along with increased law enforcement and ranger patrols. Some revenue is being used to help fund facilities like event areas as well as construction and maintenance of dispersed area trails adjacent to the campgrounds. The communities in these locations are fully engaged with BLM managing some of the highest quality recreation opportunities nationwide.

In Utah, the Moab Field Office used the fees to install fire pits at new campgrounds, fund trash removal and build permanent toilets. Additionally, the revenue has enabled the BLM to alleviate damage caused by the approximately 3 million people who visit the area between Moab and Bears Ears National Monument each year. Many visitors pull their vans and camp trailers off backcountry dirt roads resulting in environmental degradation, with some visitors leaving behind human waste and trash.

Dispersed Use (non-fee) Recreation

The BLM generally limits user fees to popular and well-maintained developed locations and high use dispersed recreation areas but not large, dispersed landscapes. The BLM goal is to provide recreation opportunities in remote settings with minimal restrictions. This leaves most of the public lands available for recreation use without user fees but this still requires monitoring, operations and maintenance, signing and law enforcement.

Activities such as primitive camping, hunting, fishing, hiking, mountain biking, snowmobiling, river running, rock climbing, horseback riding, target shooting and bird watching do not require fees so, the BLM relies on appropriated funds to handle land management needs including road and trail maintenance, trash removal, repair to damage by vandals, removal of exotic plant species, law enforcement, providing information, interpretation, maps/signage, and processing recreation permits for commercial guides/outfitters, competitive event sponsors, and other events and uses. This dispersed activity has increased in the past two decades so that some of the areas are now so popular that site specific use fees could help improve these sites.

An example can be found in Caja del Rio Plateau just southwest of Santa Fe, NM where an inadequate BLM presence has resulted in illegal trash dumping, poaching, unregulated shooting, and the destruction of sacred sites to the area's surrounding Pueblos. 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, the 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

The BLM could help meet growing recreation demand by evaluating lands of high recreational value that are currently inaccessible to the public because they are blocked by private landowners. In 2019, Congress passed the John D. Dingle, Jr. Conservation, Management and Recreation Act, which identified the problem of access and required federal land management agencies to provide biennial reports on priority access needs. The BLM's most recent report identified 821 areas in 12 states that are "legally inaccessible" (almost 1.8 million acres) and sites that have "significantly restricted" access (almost 2.5 million acres). Easements across or purchase of adjacent private land would help resolve this situation.

Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)

While not yet a primary source of funding, Congress recently made the LWCF permanent and it presents an opportunity for the BLM. However, the agency has not yet been able to take full advantage of it due to lack of staffing to apply for funds. (See the PLFs Public Land Access position paper.)

Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act (EXPLORE) Act

The Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences (EXPLORE) Act (Public Law 118-234) was signed on January 4, 2025. This legislation is intended to improve recreation opportunities on, and facilitate greater access to, Federal public land. This bill sets forth policies for the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture related to recreation on the public lands. This Act presents a real opportunity to expand recreational opportunities on public lands across the country.

PLF Position

1. The BLM should continue and enhance its Connecting with Communities Strategies by developing new and expanding current community partnerships. The Foundation for America's Public Lands (Foundation) can play a key role in this process.
2. The BLM should develop new recreation sites paid for by user fees throughout the western states. Additionally, existing developed sites need upgrading and expanding as appropriate. The BLM should develop funding proposals to support these initiatives.
3. The BLM should seek an appropriated recreation funding increase to deal with managing dispersed and/or casual recreation management outside of the fee sites.
4. The BLM should strategically increase the overall number of developed recreational fee sites on the public lands, especially in high use dispersed recreation areas where current maintenance and operations cannot keep pace with use.

5. The BLM needs to create and expand programs that leverage funding and stretch or save appropriated dollars. i.e. Friends groups, state grant programs and volunteers.
6. In addition to common performance measures like “acres achieved” by appropriated funds, there should be widgets for number of “dollars leveraged by partnerships” and the “number of community partnerships” that include local and state governments.
7. The BLM needs to provide guidance and encourage BLM Field Offices to work closely with the newly established Foundation for America’s Public Lands.
8. The BLM should continue to appropriate funds for the Foundation for America’s Public Lands to leverage funds with industry, community partners, local and state governments.
9. Places like Moab, Fruita, Ruby-Horsethief and Rabbit Valley, areas should be considered as demonstration sites for other areas across the nation.
10. The BLM needs to rebuild the agency’s capacity to process land exchanges, acquisition of easements and land purchases to benefit the recreation and public access programs. (See also PLFs Public Land Access position paper.)

February 2025