



Position Statement

Recreational Shooting on BLM Public Lands

Executive Summary

Recreational shooting is a significant use of the public lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) which, for a variety of reasons, has not historically been a featured element in land use management plans. 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 allowed in the future. The BLM should partner with state wildlife agencies who have access to Pittman-Robertson funding, authorized by the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937, for the purpose of constructing shooting ranges. Recreational shooting on the public lands should also be restricted or prohibited by land management decisions 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 widespread in the United States with an estimated one in three households owning one or more firearms. Sales of firearms and ammunition continue to increase, with an estimated 5.4 million first-time gun buyers in 2021 and an additional 4.3 million in 2023. A 2023 NBC News poll found that more than one-half of American voters said they, or someone in their household, owns a firearm.

However, there are insufficient sites on public land to meet the demand for recreational shooting, with only about 50-60 locations where it is a designated use. Most of these sites were created by historic leases and sales under the Recreation and Public Purposes Act. The majority of recreational shooting on public lands is site specific and typically concentrated in places providing legal access relatively near population centers and often have hilly or mountainous terrain for a backdrop. These sites are often eyesores because of shooting debris, dumped trash -- often riddled with bullets -- and discarded targets, many of them of inappropriate material (e.g., plastic and glass bottles).

As part of the effort to address growing demands for recreational shooting, in early 2007, the Public Lands Foundation (PLF) and 39 other organizations entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the BLM, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and U.S. Forest Service (FS) that resulted in the creation of the Hunting and Shooting Sports Roundtable. The purpose of this group has been "...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 complement the respective missions of the Parties and serve the mutual interests of the Parties and the public." The Roundtable has been instrumental in speaking for the interests of recreational shooters on federal land.

Federal land management plans, for the most part, have not addressed recreational shooting so that it has kept pace with other recreational activities for several reasons, including:

- little or no proactive participation in the land use planning process by affected individuals and organizations,
- management of recreational shooting activities by the agency is a complex and complicated issue for staff and/or managers, and additional guidance or support may help them be successful,
- reluctance on the part of agencies to deal with the complexities of environmental and liability issues associated with recreational shooting, and
- insufficient resources to build and manage recreational shooting sites and ranges.

The 'Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act' (EXPLORE Act), Public Law 118-234, was signed on January 4, 2025. This law, which is discussed in more detail in the PLF position paper on Recreation Use, calls for each BLM District, with some exceptions, to identify and construct, subject to funding availability, a recreational shooting range.

Similar to the early negative view of off-highway vehicles (OHVs), recreational shooting has not been widely embraced within the BLM. But like OHV use, that is changing. Concerns about lead contamination have been significantly mitigated through improvements to shooting range construction, design and location (i.e. in areas with non-acidic soils, low precipitation, and far from water tables). Together, these improvements have helped make shooting sports one of the safer forms of recreational activity, comparing favorably with OHV use, rock climbing sites and hiking and biking trails.

Evidence of these new approaches to recreational shooting can already be seen. The BLM Phoenix District has begun to plan and construct five shooting ranges at or near sites that had been previously used for informal recreational shooting. The Arizona initiative has been groundbreaking in a demonstration of what is possible in proactively managing recreational shooting on the public lands, just as with other recreational uses. The BLM's Santa Fe office has also taken the initiative to build shooting ranges on public land, working closely with all interested parties and have identified options for development. In Idaho, the BLM Twin Falls office has engaged with the public to improve management of recreational shooting in the area. Additionally,

several state wildlife agency leaders have expressed interest in working with the BLM to develop recreational shooting ranges on the public lands

State wildlife agencies have access to funding that is specifically available for building shooting ranges. The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937, most often referred to as the Pittman–Robertson Act (P-R) for its sponsors, instituted an 11% excise tax on the sale of firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment. Proceeds are distributed to state governments for wildlife projects, including shooting ranges. The Act resulted in nearly \$1 billion being apportioned to state wildlife agencies in 2024. In recent years a significant majority of the P-R money has been coming from non-hunting purchases. Thus, there is an emphasis on P-R money being made available for construction of shooting ranges. In 2019, the Target Practice and Marksmanship Training Support Act was signed into law. It raised the P-R limit on the use of federal funds for shooting ranges from 75% to 90% of the cost. State wildlife agencies need to fund 10% of the cost.

PLF Position

1. Recreational shooting should be considered a use of the public lands administered by the BLM and should be given consideration with other land use activities or projects that are managed within the context of land use planning.
2. Consistent with the EXPLORE Act, 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. The BLM should seek partnerships with state wildlife agencies to access Pittman-Robertson money to construct shooting ranges on the public lands.
3. Recreational shooting on the public lands should be restricted or prohibited by land use management decisions 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 the public lands.
4. The BLM's planning for restrictions or closures to recreational shooting should consider options for mitigating the loss of other areas that have previously been available for recreational shooting.

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