

**TESTIMONY OF MARY JO RUGWELL, PRESIDENT  
PUBLIC LANDS FOUNDATION**

**HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED  
AGENCIES; COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS**

**SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED  
AGENCIES; COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS**

**PUBLIC WITNESS TESTIMONY  
FISCAL YEAR 2027 BUDGET – BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT**

**July 3, 2026**

We thank you for this opportunity to present the Subcommittee with our views regarding the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) budget for FY 2027. As a national, non-profit organization comprised principally of retired BLM employees, the Public Lands Foundation (PLF) has a unique body of experience, expertise, and knowledge of public land management. We believe we offer an objective and non-bureaucratic view of what is currently happening on the public lands managed by the BLM. The PLF supports the BLM and its programs, but we are independent in our views and requests. We strive to improve the effectiveness of the BLM by: 1) encouraging professionalism of its employees; 2) increasing the public's understanding of and support for the management of the public lands; and 3) promoting scientific management of lands administered by the BLM.

**Bureau of Land Management Overview**

The BLM manages the most diverse landscapes in the Nation's portfolio; providing stewardship to approximately 245 million acres of land and 700 million acres of mineral estate from the north slope of Alaska to Jupiter Inlet in Florida, and from tundra to old growth forests to desert landscapes. These lands consist of many attributes, habitat for thousands of species of plants and animals, clean water, cultural resources, scenic beauty, solitude, and special places. They also provide the Nation with wealth from its many resources including oil and gas, coal, renewable energy, critical and strategic minerals, all forms of recreation, livestock grazing, timber, and wild horses and burros. The economic value of these lands to the American people is immense; according to *The BLM: A Sound Investment for America 2025* publication, during Fiscal Year 2024 these lands generated \$245 billion in economic output and 884,000 jobs. These lands are important economically to all taxpayers and are especially vital to the many rural communities throughout the West that are intermixed with these lands and whose citizens work and recreate on the lands. The BLM manages for a balance between energy and mineral development and other programs such as wildlife, livestock grazing, forest management, and recreation to provide for the diversity of uses and maintenance of healthy, resilient landscapes.

### **Historical Impacts to the Agency**

Adjusted for inflation, the BLM funding has decreased by 36 percent from 1980 to 2024. The number of BLM employees has decreased from 11,000 to fewer than 6,000 since 1980. The recreation use on the public lands is now one of the dominant uses, up 50 percent since 1980 to 8.4 million recreation days in 2025. During the last 20 years the population of the western states has increased 15-18 percent, with states like Nevada, Idaho, and Utah increasing by as much as 30 percent. Most of these new residents live within 30 miles of public lands administered by the BLM.

In the last 5 – 10 years the agency lost nearly all of its senior headquarters staff, closed down its training center, moved fire employees to a new agency, transferred administrative and technical support to the Department, and lost nearly all of the employees who process realty transactions, i.e. rights-of-way, permits, sales, and land exchanges. Inspection, enforcement, and inventory work is at an all time low. The growth of the western states is putting pressure on the BLM to authorize infrastructure rights-of-way, develop additional recreation opportunities, and manage the inevitable conflicts caused by this additional population. The funding and staffing of the agency has dropped at a faster rate than the increased infrastructure needs and recreation demands on the public lands. Both the public lands and the public are suffering.

### **FY 2027 Recommendations**

These trends demonstrate that the BLM is being asked to manage increasingly complex responsibilities with fewer personnel and resources. To address these challenges and position the agency for future success, the PLF offers the following recommendations for FY 2027.

1. Established by Congress in 2017 and formally launched by the Department of the Interior and BLM in 2022, the Foundation for America's Public Lands was created to leverage private-sector partnerships and philanthropic investments in support of BLM-managed public lands. Since 2023, the Foundation has achieved a 1:1 match of non-federal to federal funding, directing over \$11 million to projects that benefit the public lands, strengthen local communities, support partners, and advance the mission of the BLM. We would fully support the additional \$5 million FY 2027 funding request to help the Foundation expand its capacity to attract outside resources and deliver tangible benefits to public land users.
2. Congress should consider increases in appropriations for the BLM of at least 10 percent per year for the next 4-year period. This should especially focus on those programs that support public use of the public lands, especially the ever-increasing outdoor recreation use of the public lands.
3. One interesting idea to explore is to consider legislative authority for a Federal Recreation Tax, similar to the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act that collects an 11 percent excise tax on firearms, ammunition and archery equipment to fund wildlife conservation, habitat restoration, and hunter education programs. The Federal Recreation Tax could collect an excise tax on outdoor recreation equipment, including offroad vehicles and Ebikes, to support outdoor recreation facilities and management on the public lands. Congress could also provide legislative authority for the retention of various public land revenue sources from the public lands for the benefit of the BLM and the future management of those public lands. One example is the potential for the retention of a portion of the rental revenues from FLPMA and Mineral Leasing Act (MLA) right-of-way authorizations on the public lands. Revenues from right-of-way authorizations on the

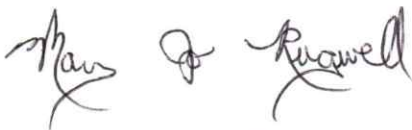
public lands in 2024 exceeded \$63.9 million (BLM Public Land Statistics). This potential BLM funding source, which could be authorized by Congress, would be similar to permanent operating funds that the BLM currently uses, such as the oil and gas permit processing improvement fund, the forest ecosystem health and recovery fund, and the White Pine County special account.

4. There has been a significant reduction in employees and funding over the past 40 years. The PLF is hearing that another BLM reorganization is being considered, however, we believe that these efforts are counterproductive and take employees away from the critical work they do for the American people. If the BLM intends to initiate another reorganization, a comprehensive review of its organizational structure is needed before any further changes are made. The workload is greater than ever with increased recreation use, energy development, infrastructure permitting, and stakeholder engagement. Senior BLM managers and staff should be utilized as members of any evaluation team before proceeding ahead with any reorganization proposals. We recommend that FY 2027 funding be available to support both the review and the initial implementation of any organizational improvements.

#### **A Good Investment for the Public**

The BLM is suffering from a significant workforce capacity issue. Unique to the agency, 97 percent of its employees are located in western offices where the public lands are located, not in far away regional or national offices. The agency has been appropriated roughly \$1.5 billion per year over the past few years, yet generates \$8.5 billion per year in revenues. This is a good value to the taxpayer. Any reductions in FTE or appropriations from the FY 2026 level will only further erode the agency's ability to produce income, meet the energy needs of the country, as well as provide for the ever growing recreation needs and resource management of the public lands. These public lands are the lifeblood of many communities and contribute to the well being of the American people.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the PLF's thoughts for the BLM FY 2027 Budget.



Mary Jo Rugwell, President

Public Lands Foundation