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New Mission For Bureau Of Land Management Expected To Restore Lands, Benefit National Parks

By *Kurt Repanshek* - April 18th, 2024



King Range National Conservation Area/BLM, Bob Wick

A refined mission for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, one directing the agency to manage its public lands portfolio with less emphasis on resource extraction and more on restoration and conservation, is expected to provide benefits to units of the National Park System.

"For the first time, conservation stands shoulder to shoulder with extractive uses on public lands, empowering the BLM to monitor landscape and wildlife health for informed management decisions," said Matthew Kirby, senior director for energy and landscape conservation at the **National Parks Conservation Association**.

Under **the final Public Lands Rule** released by the Interior Department on Thursday, the BLM will focus on land management "to help improve the health and resilience of public lands in the face of a changing climate; conserve important wildlife habitat and intact landscapes; facilitate responsible development; and better recognize unique cultural and natural resources on public lands."

For instance, the rule:

- Directs land managers to identify landscapes in need of restoration and develop plans to put restoration into action;
- Creates a framework for restoration leases, a new tool for investment in the health of public lands. Under this provision, a third party can apply for a lease to help restore the health of public lands and waters;
- Creates a framework for mitigation leases, an important tool to offset the impacts of development on public lands. Often, companies are required to offset their impacts by investing in restoration or protection of land, a process known as compensatory mitigation;
- Mitigation leases would, for the first time, create a clear and consistent mechanism for those investments to happen on BLM-managed public lands;
- Leverages science and data, including Indigenous Knowledge, to guide decision-making;
- Conserves healthy public lands;
- Supports locally-driven conservation;
- Supports locally-driven and locally-led conservation, enabling communities, through the land management planning process, to help identify lands for restoration and protection and to provide input on where development may be most appropriate.

Across the West, elected officials applauded the approach to prioritize natural resource stewardship with a focus on restoration and conservation.

"Protected public lands support our quality of life, valued wildlife, local economies, tourism, and outdoor recreation. I support the BLM's Public Lands Rule because it puts conservation on equal footing with other uses of public lands for a more balanced 'multiple-use' approach," said Angenie McCleary, a Blaine County, Idaho, county commissioner.

In New Mexico, Santa Fe Mayor Alan Webber said, "[T]he climate crisis continues to have a severe and ongoing impact on Western communities. The Bureau of Land Management is the largest land manager in the nation, and its final Public Lands Rule will play a leading role in protecting our public lands for the future and mitigating the impacts of climate change."

Kathy Chandler-Henry, an Eagle County, Colorado, commissioner, said the new direction for the BLM comes at a time when "[O]ur public lands are challenged by the impacts of a changing climate, continued population growth, and increased demand for natural resources, development, and outdoor recreation. The Public Lands Rule empowers BLM to deliver on its multiple use mandate by placing conservation values on equal footing with other uses on our public lands. The rule will allow the BLM to create management plans that benefit rural economies like ours, while establishing a guiding principle that BLM manage for resiliency in public lands through protection of intact, native habitats, and restoration of degraded habitats. The management of public lands has a significant impact on our local communities."

An Interior Department release said the rule "applies the existing fundamentals of land health across BLM programs, establishes restoration and mitigation leases, and clarifies practices to designate and protect Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs). The rule will help to ensure the BLM continues to protect land health while managing other uses of the public lands, such as clean energy development and outdoor recreation."

"As stewards of America's public lands, the Interior Department takes seriously our role in helping bolster landscape resilience in the face of worsening climate impacts," said Interior Secretary Deb Haaland. "Today's final rule helps restore balance to our public lands as we continue using the best-available science to restore habitats, guide strategic and responsible development, and sustain our public lands for generations to come. Complemented with historic investments from President Biden's Investing in America agenda, we are implementing enduring changes that will benefit wildlife, communities and habitats."

NPCA staff said the new rule will help parks by adding buffers to their landscapes and resources. In a release the organization said that, "[T]he Public Lands Rule strikes a balance between conservation and extractive land uses. This rule provides the bureau with leverage to allow for more complete consideration of land uses, including conservation uses or restoration projects, that could protect important places like national parks." For example:

- Culturally rich landscapes, including those near **Chaco Culture National Historical Park** and **John Day Fossil Beds National Monument**, stand to benefit from the Public Lands Rule. By allowing for conservation and restoration efforts, the bureau can protect the cultural resources and rich heritage of these places, to tell the full story of America for generations to come.

- The Public Lands Rule establishes better guidelines for what makes an “intact landscape,” giving BLM the tools it needs to make informed decisions for land management, benefiting critical wildlife habitat. In Wyoming the rule can ensure the Red Desert to Hoback migration corridor remains intact to better support wildlife that migrate in and out of **Grand Teton National Park**.
- Diverse ecosystems like those near **Joshua Tree** and **Canyonlands** national parks are poised to benefit from stronger collaboration and conservation efforts that safeguard areas just outside of national parks, helping to preserve the wildlife, water, and natural resources inside parks.

At the National Wildlife Federation, David Willms, the organization's associate vice president for public lands, said the new direction for BLM provides the agency "with new tools to restore and conserve degraded lands, while supporting robust local economies. The rule will help the agency identify intact landscapes that wildlife depend on for survival, which will ensure that they thrive for decades to come. The benefits from this rule are numerous: enhanced connectivity for migrating big game, reduced risk of megafires, control of invasive species, increased forage for wildlife and livestock, improved watershed health, and a landscape that is more resilient in the face of drought and a changing climate.”