

BLM LEARNING  
LANDSCAPES

# Public Lands: America's Big Backyard

**DID YOU KNOW** that there are millions of acres of land in the United States that belong to you? In fact, more than 500 million acres of land are yours. These lands are not owned by any person or company. Instead, they are Federal lands that are owned by the American people...and that means you!

Federal lands are located in every State and are cared for by the U.S. Government. They include national parks, national forests, wildlife refuges, and public lands. A government agency called the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) takes care of more Federal land than any other agency—about 260 million acres. That's almost equal to all the land in the States of Texas and California put together. BLM lands are managed for many uses. They supply natural resources, such as coal, oil, natural gas, and other minerals. They also provide habitat for plants and animals and open spaces for people to enjoy. And they contain evidence of our country's past, too—from fossils to Indian artifacts to ghost towns.



# BLM Public Lands



BLM lands are found mostly in the Western United States and Alaska. In the East, the BLM manages about 30,000 acres—mainly small, isolated areas scattered through 31 States. The BLM is also responsible for minerals that are found beneath 700 million acres of Federal and privately owned lands throughout the country.

## A Little History of the BLM

**WHEN THE UNITED STATES WAS YOUNG**, the entire area from the Appalachian Mountains to the Pacific Ocean—about 1.8 billion acres—was public land. Most of it was unexplored wilderness. Over time, the Federal Government gave a large portion of this land away or sold it at very low prices to encourage settlement of the West. Much of the remaining land was kept for national forests, national wildlife refuges, national parks and monuments, and Indian reservations.

The BLM was created in 1946 to manage the public lands that were left over. Many of these lands were used by mining and timber harvesting companies and ranchers. In 1976, a new law was passed, called the Federal Land Policy and Management Act. This law required that the BLM manage the public lands for many uses. It also recognized the value of the public lands

for the present and the future and required that the BLM hold onto these lands for the benefit of all Americans.

In recent years, the BLM has established the National Landscape Conservation System to highlight some of the most remarkable and rugged landscapes in its care. These include national conservation areas, national monuments, wild and scenic rivers, national scenic and historic trails, wilderness areas, and other special places.

About 10,000 people work for the BLM, and they have a big job to do—managing nearly one-eighth of the land in the United States. Thousands of volunteers also play an important role in getting that job done. If you're looking for a volunteer project and want to help take care of America's big backyard, consider volunteering for the BLM! After all, it's your big backyard too.



## Many Acres—Many Uses

**WHILE YOU WON'T FIND SCHOOLS,** towns, or shopping malls on BLM lands, you will find many natural resources—from minerals and timber to lakes and streams to a wide variety of plants and animals. The BLM manages these lands and resources for many different uses:

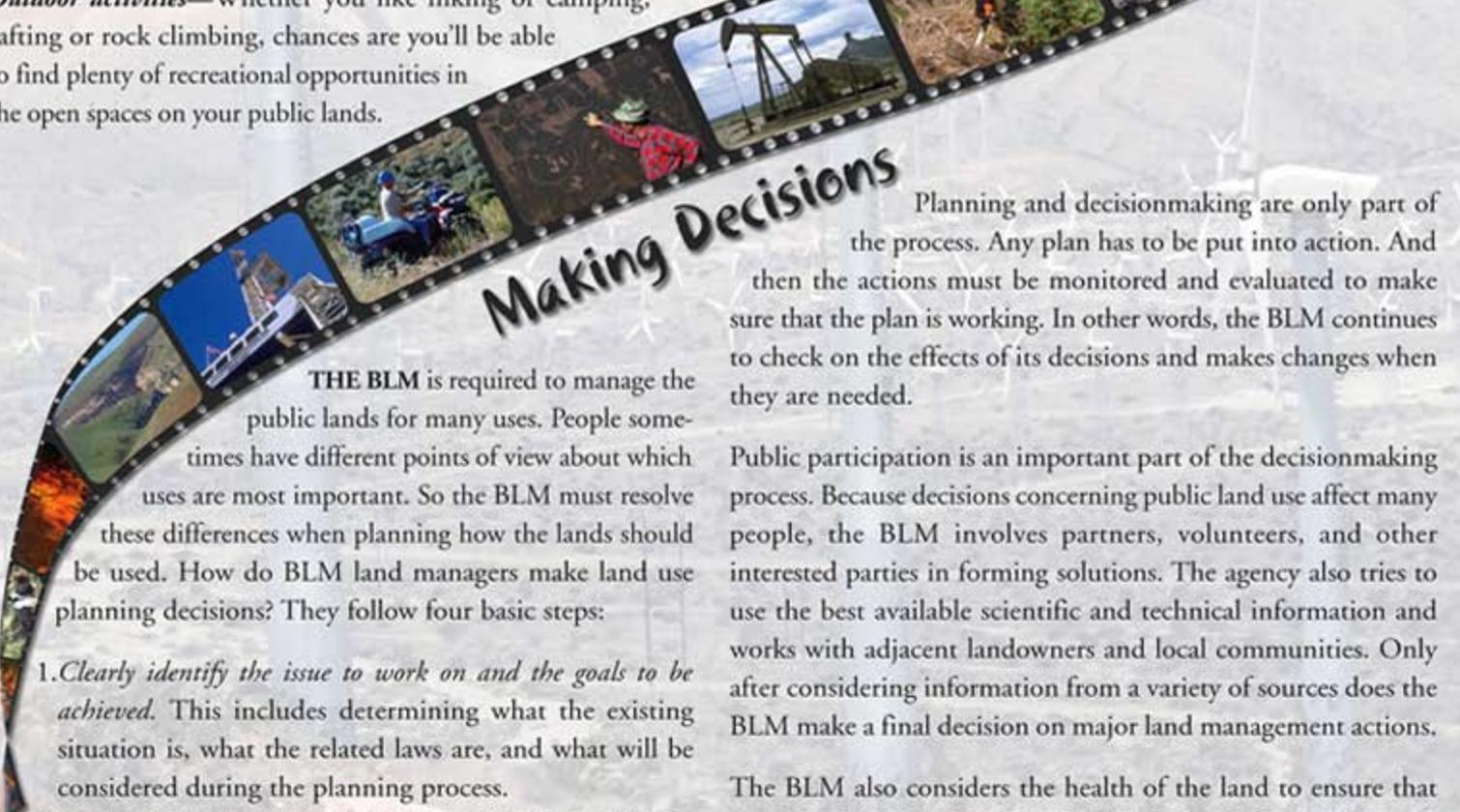
**Coal, oil, gas, and other mineral extraction**—Large quantities of oil and natural gas, as well as about 38 percent of the nation's coal, are found on public lands. Many pipelines and powerlines also cross BLM lands. And did you ever think about where products such as gravel, sand, asphalt, and even kitty litter come from? Many of these are mined on BLM lands as well.

**Plant and wildlife habitat**—The public lands contain a wide variety of plants. More than 3,000 wildlife species find food, water, and shelter and make their homes on BLM lands.

**Outdoor activities**—Whether you like hiking or camping, rafting or rock climbing, chances are you'll be able to find plenty of recreational opportunities in the open spaces on your public lands.

**Grazing for cattle, sheep, and other animals**—Most BLM land is not suitable for farming, but ranchers can pay the BLM for permission to use land in approved areas for grazing their livestock. Wild horses and burros and other wildlife also graze on public lands.

**Prehistoric and historic site preservation**—BLM lands contain fossils of dinosaurs and even sea creatures that give us clues about what the land was like millions of years ago. They also contain objects made by ancient peoples and buildings from the pioneer era that tell us about more recent times.



## Making Decisions

**THE BLM** is required to manage the public lands for many uses. People sometimes have different points of view about which uses are most important. So the BLM must resolve these differences when planning how the lands should be used. How do BLM land managers make land use planning decisions? They follow four basic steps:

1. *Clearly identify the issue to work on and the goals to be achieved.* This includes determining what the existing situation is, what the related laws are, and what will be considered during the planning process.
2. *Gather information.* Investigate the physical and biological characteristics of the land, as well as the social and economic aspects of the situation.
3. *Develop possible solutions.* This includes considering the short- and long-term impacts of each possible solution.
4. *Decide on the best alternative.*

Planning and decisionmaking are only part of the process. Any plan has to be put into action. And then the actions must be monitored and evaluated to make sure that the plan is working. In other words, the BLM continues to check on the effects of its decisions and makes changes when they are needed.

Public participation is an important part of the decisionmaking process. Because decisions concerning public land use affect many people, the BLM involves partners, volunteers, and other interested parties in forming solutions. The agency also tries to use the best available scientific and technical information and works with adjacent landowners and local communities. Only after considering information from a variety of sources does the BLM make a final decision on major land management actions.

The BLM also considers the health of the land to ensure that the natural resources of the public lands will be available for years to come. In fact, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 requires that the BLM not only consider the effects of its actions on the quality of the environment, but also report on the effects of those actions.

# Special Challenges

THE BLM STRIVES TO KEEP PUBLIC LANDS HEALTHY and productive. That's not always easy. Human activities, as well as natural forces, can have an impact on the public lands. Here are just a few examples of challenges the BLM faces.

## Managing Wildland Fire

Every year, fires burn in wildlands all across the country. Fire can keep natural systems healthy by helping to recycle plant nutrients into the soil, for example, and reducing competition from other plants in a forest. But with more people moving into wildland areas, fires pose more of a threat to people and their belongings. When fires are not allowed to take their natural course, downed trees and other fuels for fire can build up, which can lead to even more catastrophic fires in the future. The BLM uses several methods to confront this challenge, including:

- thinning—removing brush and cutting down trees, especially in areas near where people live
- prescribed burning—the planned use of fire to reduce the amount of natural fuels in an area
- education—teaching homeowners how to improve the chances that their homes will survive a wildland fire

When catastrophic fires do take place, the BLM works quickly to stabilize burned areas and then follows up with rehabilitation—repairing fire-damaged lands that are unlikely to recover naturally.

## Controlling Invasive Plants

Invasive plants are spreading at an estimated rate of 4,300 acres per day on public lands. At this rate, they will cover an area larger than the State of Delaware in just 1 year. Invasive plants are harmful to native plants and the animals that depend on them and cause other problems as well. The BLM takes an integrated pest management approach—using biological, chemical, and mechanical means or, more often, a combination of methods to control invasive plants.



## Maintaining Healthy Habitats

Public lands belong to all Americans, but they are also home to a wide variety of plants and animals. As use of the public lands increases, there is an increased risk that habitat for wildlife will be lost, fragmented, or damaged. Even recreational activities can add to the problem. Off-highway vehicles, for instance, allow people to travel into remote areas, where they can see—and also disturb—wildlife. To protect wildlife habitat, the BLM sometimes declares certain areas off limits to motorized vehicles or restricts their use to a certain time of year or a certain number of users. The agency also tries to eliminate barriers to wildlife migration and movement.



## Managing Wild Horses and Burros

About 37,000 wild horses and burros roam the public lands. They have no natural predators and people are forbidden by law from harming them. As a result, their population is growing by 20 percent each year. BLM strives to ensure that there is enough food and water for wildlife, livestock, and the wild horses and burros. To manage herd levels, BLM gathers excess wild horses and burros from the public lands and offers them for adoption to good homes.



## Additional Resources

Fire:

[www.blm.gov/education/LearningLandscapes/teachers/fieldtrip/index.html](http://www.blm.gov/education/LearningLandscapes/teachers/fieldtrip/index.html)

[www.fire.blm.gov](http://www.fire.blm.gov)

[www.nifc.gov](http://www.nifc.gov)

Invasive species:

[www.blm.gov/weeds](http://www.blm.gov/weeds)

[www.invasivespecies.gov](http://www.invasivespecies.gov)

[www.weedcenter.org](http://www.weedcenter.org)

Habitat:

[www.blm.gov/education/LearningLandscapes/teachers/science\\_children.html](http://www.blm.gov/education/LearningLandscapes/teachers/science_children.html)

[www.blm.gov/education/LearningLandscapes/teachers/fieldtrip\\_04/index.html](http://www.blm.gov/education/LearningLandscapes/teachers/fieldtrip_04/index.html)

Wild horses and burros:

[www.blm.gov/education/00\\_resources/articles/wild\\_bunch](http://www.blm.gov/education/00_resources/articles/wild_bunch)

[www.wildhorseandburro.blm.gov](http://www.wildhorseandburro.blm.gov)

# Student Activities

## *Get Involved: Try Your Hand at Decisionmaking!*

You probably make dozens of decisions every day—what to eat for breakfast, what to wear, which sport you'll play next season. Some decisions are easy to make, while others are more complicated. In this exercise, you and your classmates will identify a land use goal for your school or community and decide on a project that will help achieve that goal. Even if it is not possible to see the project through, you will be able to follow a process similar to that used by land managers when they make a decision.

### **Procedure**

1. *Clearly identify the issue to work on and the goals to be achieved.*

Look around your school grounds or your community. Talk with other students, teachers, and parents. Is there a land use issue that needs attention? For instance, do students your age need more places for recreation? Is your school's arrival and dismissal area as safe as it can be? Could your community be doing more to help native plants and wildlife? Perhaps you and your classmates could hold a brainstorming session to come up with a list of issues that need attention. Depending on the size of your class, you may want to divide yourselves into groups and work on several land use goals.

2. *Gather information.*

The goal you're trying to achieve will guide you in your information gathering. For instance, if you are trying to expand recreational opportunities for students, you might want to conduct a survey about what kinds of activities the young people in your community enjoy. Or you might want to create a map showing where opportunities exist. To deal with traffic safety at your school, you might want to observe arrivals and dismissals over several days. Think carefully about who can supply you with the information you need. As you consider the existing situation, make sure you learn about any laws that might apply. Don't forget to ask for ideas from community members, particularly those who have been involved in similar projects or who have expertise about your issue. Check other sources of information as well, including Web sites and articles.

3. *Develop possible solutions.*

As you gather information in step 2, make a master list of possible solutions and their potential impacts. Then you can begin to narrow down your list of possible solutions. Consider such factors as the cost involved and the steps required to pursue each of them. If something needs to be built, for example, ask such questions as: where will it



be located, what permissions will you need, what supplies will have to be acquired, and who will do the actual construction? Be sure to think about the short- and long-term work involved. A schoolyard habitat for wildlife, for instance, will require some maintenance when the school is closed. In addition, consider the impact that each possible solution will have on the environment and the community. How would neighbors feel, for example, if a skateboarding park were built nearby?

#### 4. *Decide on the best alternative.*

Once the research has been done and public opinion has been considered, it's time to make a decision. At this point in the process, the BLM issues a draft plan and allows a certain period of time for the public to comment. Once the public comments are received, the BLM reviews and addresses them and then issues its final plan. Will your group take the same approach?

### **Followup and Followthrough**

Once decisions are made, if possible, your group can take the next steps and begin to work on a new set of plans and schedules to put your plan into action. Once the plan is implemented, you will need to monitor the situation to make sure the plan is working as intended. And don't forget, even after your group leaves the school, some followup work may need to be done. It will be important to leave a record of what has been done and what work will need to be done in the future. To complete this activity, hold a discussion on how your planning and decisionmaking process compared and contrasted to BLM's process.

### ***Research and Debate Special Challenges***

The "Special Challenges" section of this brochure provides background information on some of the major issues BLM faces. You and your classmates can choose one or more of these issues to research in greater depth. Use the suggested Web sites to find out more about the topic. Try to obtain information on the environmental, social, and economic aspects of the problem you're researching. Make an effort to distinguish between facts and opinions. After your initial research, come up with a list of groups that have a particular interest in your issue. Different groups of students can take on the roles of these various groups and research their positions on the issue. Then hold a town-council-type debate on the issue. (An example of how to conduct such a debate can be found at [www.blm.gov/education/high\\_plains/ferretintro.html](http://www.blm.gov/education/high_plains/ferretintro.html).)



# For the Teacher

This brochure introduces students to some of the issues associated with the public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Whether your students live in the East or the West, in an urban or rural environment, they all have a stake in how the public lands are managed. Because the BLM is required by law to manage the nation's public lands for multiple uses, conflicting opinions about how best to manage the lands often arise. Studying some of these public land management issues will give students real examples of how conflicts are resolved and decisions are made on controversial issues. By looking at some of the issues and studying the decisionmaking process, students will learn to:

- conduct research and communicate an informed point of view
- distinguish between fact and opinion
- consider several sides of an issue (environmental, economic, social, cultural, and political)
- balance conflicting issues to negotiate a solution to a complex problem
- understand cause and effect (how land use activities affect natural systems, for example)

The brochure includes two possible approaches to studying public land management. The first approach is to use the student activity "Get Involved: Try Your Hand at Decision-making!" This group activity, which is intended for middle school students, introduces the complexities of the decision-making process by having students plan to achieve a land use goal in their own community. Students are also encouraged to examine similarities and differences between their planning and decisionmaking process and BLM's process.

The second approach is to use the "Special Challenges" section as a starting point for research projects and classroom debates. This section includes some Web sites to get students started on their research. The issues involved are often controversial and

can spark lively debate, giving students a chance to creatively express themselves and to interpret and share their research findings.

For younger students, additional background information and activity pages on a wide variety of BLM-related issues can be found at [www.blm.gov/education/00\\_kids/contents.html](http://www.blm.gov/education/00_kids/contents.html).

## Education Standards

The information and activities in this brochure align with the following **National Science Education Standards** for Grades 5-8:

**National Science Education Standard F:** Science in personal and social perspectives—populations, resources, and environments; natural hazards; science and technology in society

They also align with the following **National Geography Standards:**

**Standard 4:** The physical and human characteristics of places

**Standard 14:** How human actions modify the physical environment

**Standard 16:** The changes that occur in the meaning, use, distribution, and importance of resources

## Additional Resources

Bureau of Land Management:  
[www.blm.gov](http://www.blm.gov)

BLM Learning Landscapes:  
[www.blm.gov/education](http://www.blm.gov/education)

Hands on the Land:  
[www.handsontheland.org](http://www.handsontheland.org)

BLM National Landscape Conservation System:  
[www.blm.gov/nlcs](http://www.blm.gov/nlcs)

BLM volunteer opportunities:  
[www.blm.gov/volunteer](http://www.blm.gov/volunteer)  
[www.volunteer.gov/gov](http://www.volunteer.gov/gov)

BLM recreational opportunities:  
[www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov)  
[www.blm.gov/education/LearningLandscapes/menuBLM\\_Adventures.htm](http://www.blm.gov/education/LearningLandscapes/menuBLM_Adventures.htm)  
(for information about BLM's guide to recreation on public lands, *Adventures on America's Public Lands*)





Jerry Villa-Lobos in OSORN MEXICO PLANTS Database

With the help of local communities, the BLM makes decisions about many issues—from leasing land for coal mining to protecting wildlife habitat to building bike trails. In southwest Utah, mountain bikers played an important role in deciding where to build a mountain bike trail on public lands. They helped build the trail and put up signs alerting riders to dangers and to the presence of the endangered dwarf bear-poppy plant. And now that the trail is built, bikers continue to play a role in monitoring it—to make sure that everyone enjoys their ride without harming the land or the poppy.



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