

PART 6

PUBLIC HEALTH, SAFETY, AND RESOURCE PROTECTION

Besides preserving and protecting natural and cultural resources, BLM's stewardship role extends to protecting public health, safety, and property. The Bureau is responsible for maintaining facilities and infrastructure, reducing health and safety risks to employees and the public, and protecting public lands from illegal dumping of wastes, theft and destruction of Federal property, misuse of resources, and wildland fires.

Table 6-1 summarizes the numbers of wildland fires and acres burned on BLM lands and lands protected by BLM through cooperative agreements with local fire protection agencies. The 2001 fire season had a high potential to be quite severe. The winter snowpack fell short of normal levels in the West. Consequently, the spring snow melt was below normal. Drought conditions persisted in many areas due to record high temperatures and extended periods without precipitation. Nevertheless, the number of fires and the acres burned were close to the 5-year average. Timely breaks in the development of weather patterns gave some areas an average or below-average fire season. Other areas, such as the Northwest and Northern Rockies, had a notably active fire season. Four states – Florida, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington – accounted for over half of the acres burned nationwide.

Large fires in California, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming attracted national attention in early summer. By mid-August, there were so many large fires in Montana, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington that national preparedness reached its highest level – Preparedness Level 5 – and the Modular Airborne Firefighting Systems were engaged from the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve. Canadian firefighters and aviation specialists also joined in. The summer ended with cooler temperatures and ongoing management of existing fires.

Table 6-2 identifies the major types of capital investments on public lands. Roads, trails, recreation sites, and other improvements give the public access to public lands. The Bureau completed the fourth year of an aggressive re-inventory and condition assessment program to update its Facilities Inventory and Maintenance Management System (FIMMS) database, reduce the maintenance backlog, and improve the overall physical condition of its facilities and infrastructure.

Congress created a new 6-year Land Conservation, Preservation, and Infrastructure Improvement program in Title VIII of the Appropriations Act for the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies, 2001. Title VIII provided \$25 million to “address critical maintenance backlogs” and tripled the BLM's deferred maintenance workload. In addition, the BLM had six new visitor centers underway. The Casper National Historic Trail Center in Wyoming will open in early 2002. Office and visitor center spaces for the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in Utah will be ready for occupancy by the end of 2002. Pompeys Pillar Visitor Center in Montana will be completed in time for the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial celebration (2003 - 2006). The Coldfoot Visitor Center in Alaska, Fort Benton Visitor Center in Montana, and California Trail Interpretive Center in Nevada are currently in the design stage.

Table 6-3 summarizes releases of hazardous substances and other pollutants and contaminants discovered on public lands. Historically, approximately 60 percent of all hazardous substance releases on public lands have been related to authorized commercial uses, mainly landfills, mines and mill sites, airstrips, and oil and gas sites. The other 40 percent have been caused by illegal activities, such as midnight

dumping of agricultural and industrial wastes, wire burning, and illicit drug production. In recent years, about 90 percent of the hazardous substance releases found on public lands were illegal dumping incidents involving debris or drums of biomedical, chemical, and petroleum wastes; pesticides; paints; batteries; asbestos; and illicit drug labs. The number of discarded methamphetamine drug labs increased substantially over last year. Moreover, these highly toxic and explosive wastes were found far afield of the usual locations and in regions not previously plagued by this problem, such as the Idaho panhandle and Montana. The remaining 10 percent of the hazardous substances releases had to do with fuel spills, mining wastes, and military accidents.