Bureau of Land Management
New Mexico Resource Advisory Council

Roads and Trails Recommendations
March 2002

Introduction

The New Mexico Resource Advisory Council (RAC) participation has been integral to the development of standards for sustaining the health of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands in New Mexico (NM). *Public land health is defined as the degree to which the integrity of the soil and the ecological processes of public land are sustained. Public land health exists when ecological processes are functioning properly to maintain the structure, organization, and activity of the system over time. Healthy public land is sustainable, thus ensuring their use and enjoyment for future generations* (BLM 2000). Guidelines to meet these standards have been developed for users who graze livestock on BLM lands. Recognizing that other public land users also contribute to rangeland health condition, the NM RAC offers this set of recommendations that apply to roads and trails planning, construction, maintenance, decommissioning and management.

Intrinsically, these roads and trails recommendations tier to the New Mexico Standards for Public Land Health and integrate ecology, social, cultural resource protection, and economic factors appropriate to transportation planning and management. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 - BLM's genesis Act — stipulates that land management be on the basis of multiple use and sustained yield, provide for outdoor recreation, and managed in a manner that will protect the quality of the environment and where appropriate, will preserve and protect certain public lands in their natural conditions

These recommendations are based on two equally important principles: the need to preserve rangeland health and the need to provide access to public lands for all users. When the two principles conflict with each other any decision based on these recommendations will necessarily be a balance which resolves the conflict between the two. This resolution will vary from instance to instance but will always seek the best possible balance between the two principles in a given case.

The building blocks of these recommendations are based on the following tenets:

1 The fundamental consideration for any transportation use is the ability of the "land" to accommodate the proposed activity while maintaining the health[1] and

[1] Ecosystem health – The degree to which ecological factors and their interactions are reasonably complete and function for continued resilience, productivity, and renewal of the ecosystem (USFS 2000)

sustainability[2] of the ecological web. Transportation activities may be unsuitable within some designated land areas either seasonally or year around. For example those areas that substantially contribute to the continued existence of a threatened or endangered species, contain prime wetlands, or are important from a cultural resources context may be adversely and significantly affected from some or all transportation uses and their use should be avoided.

2. Resource management decisions should be based on a watershed approach within the context of the greater landscape. Watershed are natural boundaries that provide a common template for integrating multiple tasks, including ecological resource description, analysis, and management, thereby enhancing efficiency and economy. Landscape considerations would include ecoregion representation, size of habitat area, adjacency to other protected areas, fragmentation, and connectivity.

3. These recommendations are applicable to all roads and trails users groups (i.e.) hikers, bikers, off-highway vehicles, equestrians, etc and activities (i.e.) hunting, ranching, birdwatching, etc. It is important to note that it is not the RAC's intent to needlessly stigmatize or exclude any user group from the use of public lands. Indeed, the RAC gave careful consideration that these roads and trails recommendations are applicable to each user in recognition that all transportation activities impact public lands. Additionally, the RAC recognizes that there are distinct and different planning considerations for each of the various user groups.

4. Effective communication and education has to be a cornerstone of successful transportation planning. Both communication and education strategies have to be specifically tailored to the affected communities and users groups. Miscommunication and the appearance or actual lack of communication with the public regarding management policy and implementation can and does put all participants in a defense mode. As a result it is very hard to establish the trust and cooperative attitude so necessary to effectively manage public lands.

5. The challenges of considering the desires and use requirements for a multitude of groups with often-conflicting philosophies and uses (i.e., birdwatchers and motorcycles) have to be understood. Often time individuals and groups perceive that they represent a more extensive constituency than in fact they do; it is a pitfall agencies often accept. This is why it is important to follow a process designed to provide an opportunity for all individuals or groups to voice their interests. Community involvement can be a cumbersome process but it is better than the potential consequence of creating schisms within and between groups and individuals with more in common than not. The process is to create a trust

[2] Ecological sustainability – The maintenance or restoration of the composition, structure, and processes of ecosystems over time and space. This includes the diversity of plant and animal communities, and the productive capacity of ecological systems and species diversity, ecosystem diversity, disturbance processes, soil productivity, water quality and quantity, and air quality (USFS 2000).

within all effected parties that their voices will be heard. The basic objective of BLM's transportation strategy should be to enhance and implement permanent communication conduits to avoid the impression of only going to groups when a problem arises. The goal of this approach is to build a permanent working relationship based on respect, even within the context of different philosophical views and avoid positional politics - the unfortunate practice of defending positions and not interests.

6. Effective open and honest communication and education at all levels has to be coupled with the timely enforcement of land use policies and laws.

7. Implementation of Roads and Trails strategy must be accomplished at the local level based on national BLM Policy.

8. All users of public lands have a personal responsibility for natural and cultural resource stewardship including knowledge and understanding of appropriate and designated land use.

This set of recommendations is not sacrosanct and they are intended to evolve as our understanding of the issues improves. As such, this set of recommendation incorporates and builds upon the New Mexico RAC's June 26, 1997 "BLM RAC OHV Recommendations" and the October 13, 2000 "Bureau of Land Management New Mexico Resource Advisory Council Off Highway Vehicle Recommendations."

Recommendations:

Planning

- BLM should take an integrated approach utilizing designated representatives from all the RACs to develop a concise and consistent set of recommendations for nationwide BLM transportation planning.
- BLM should develop creative funding mechanisms such as grants, user fees, and/or volunteer services and permit fees in order to help fund the maintenance of transportation routes and open areas, and management practices such as enforcement, inventory, mapping, signage, reclamation, fencing, and gating in these areas.
- Until the process of inventory, evaluation and designation is completed, the status of existing and designated routes and roadless areas shall not be altered, except as needed to complete plans and permits resulting from ongoing management of public lands. Undue and unnecessary resource damage may be sufficient reason to close transportation routes or open areas.
- BLM should consider the design requirements necessary for persons with disabilities to access roads and trails for recreation and other activities such as hunting.

Coordination

- Utilize the Southwest Strategy group to create an agency working group (consisting of representatives from BLM, Forest Service USDA, NM Department of Game and Fish, NM State Parks, and other federal, state, county and local agencies) to cooperate and coordinate the development of policies for transportation management.
- Create a statewide working group consisting of representatives from stakeholder groups to develop standards and guidelines for the inventory, evaluation and designation of transportation routes.
- Consider other options for the development of off-highway vehicle opportunities, such as private lands development and utilizing public/private partnerships.
- BLM and user groups should encourage manufacturers, retailers, and users to minimize noise and air emissions of motorized off-highway vehicles throughout the design, manufacture, sales, and maintenance processes.
- In cooperation with other agencies, develop transportation information and training programs for users and managers. Support Tread Lightly and other educational efforts.
- Create a position for a Volunteer Coordinator to coordinate volunteer activities by route user groups, roadless area advocates and other interested stakeholder groups to inventory existing routes and provide that information to the BLM for evaluation and designation of routes.
- Using agency personnel and volunteers, inventory unpaved routes and trails on public lands in New Mexico, using the services and expertise of state and local associations and clubs representing all route user groups. Designate useable roads, trails and open areas, with standardized signage throughout public lands in New Mexico.

Management

- Change general open transportation designations to limit access to designated roads, trails and specific use locations. Cross-country travel (unmanaged travel not on existing routes) should be limited to designated special use areas.
- Consider scheduling specific use activities, single use designations, and other strategies in high multi-use areas to minimize user conflicts.
- Investigate the practicability of applying an approach similar to California's "Green Sticker" Program to New Mexico.
- Assign higher priority to transportation management, especially during high-use times such as hunting seasons. Work to coordinate and improve enforcement, especially for better hunt management, including more stringent penalties to deter violations. Increase on-the-ground presence during high use times, and encourage the use of volunteer trails patrols. Develop patrol standards and facilitate education of transportation user groups.
- Develop and implement a set of management area site-specific standards to determine the appropriate use of existing or planned roads and trails. Identify the appropriate use of specific roads and trails though employment of signage with non-inflammatory language such as route numbers, color-codes, symbols or other means.

- Consider gating and other options on specific routes to help protect against habitat fragmentation, vandalism and other forms of resource damage.
- Create an education program addressing the threat of non-native invasive flora and fauna species and the role the transportation users group may place in preventing their spread.
- Implement a permanent method and schedule for monitoring all designated roads and trails. The monitoring program would be designed to assess ecological impacts from changing conditions and ensure roads and trails are maintained appropriately to prevent ecological degradation.

The RAC recognizes that these recommendations may not apply to permittees due to the fact that their activities are permitted under other authorizations. However, we recommend that road and trail considerations be addressed during the permit renewal process and, where warranted, access routes modified.

References:

BLM 2000. United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, New Mexico State Office. Proposed Statewide Resource Management Plan Amendment/Final Environmental Impact Statement New Mexico Standards for Public Land Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management. BLM/NM/PL-00-001-1020. January 2000.

USFS 2000. United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. Forest Service Roadless Area Conservation Final Environmental Impact Statement, Volume 1. November 2000.

Respectfully Submitted on March 1, 2002.

Chuck Pergler
President
Resource Advisory Council
Bureau of Land Management

Raye Miller
Vice President
Resource Advisory Council
Bureau of Land Management