

Remarks of  
The Honorable  
Rebecca W. Watson  
Assistant Secretary, Land and Minerals Management  
Bureau of Land Management  
Recreation Forum  
Las Vegas, NV  
January 28, 2004

## Introduction

Good Afternoon. It is a pleasure to be here today to discuss recreation. I strongly believe that recreation will be the critical management issue that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I want to discuss three important factors that will affect BLM's recreation management this century: demographics; technology; and life styles.

## Demographics

First, the demographics of the West have significantly changed and will continue to change throughout this century. The West of the wide open spaces is becoming urbanized. Nine of the twelve BLM public land states are the fastest growing states in the U.S. According to the 2000 Census, Arizona and Nevada were the fastest growing states. Today, an estimated 22 million people live within 25 miles of public lands.

## Technology

The second factor is technology. It has dramatically changed what people can do and the way people relate to one another. Space-age materials, micro chips, and good old American ingenuity have improved the American standard of living. Americans have witnessed the transfer of technology to recreation – reducing the cost of, and increasing the variety and access to new “toys”:

- 4-wheel drives are now relatively inexpensive all-terrain vehicles (ATVs);
- speed boats are now jet skis and downhill skiers increasingly give way to snowboarders;
- sail boats are windsurfing boards;
- desert donkeys morphed into dune buggies; and

- snow coaches are now souped-up snowmobiles.
- Even climbing, back-packing and camping equipment have become more high tech.

And, the technologies of the cell phone and GPS locators have encouraged folks to go further than maybe they should! The internet has also transformed the way the public gets information about recreation opportunities, makes reservations and finds like-minded recreationists. In sum, technology offers more people, more affordable recreational opportunities, in more places.

## Life Styles

This brings me to the third factor, life styles. Thanks to these technological advances, Americans have a higher quality of life, have more disposable income, are much more mobile, and have more leisure time than they have ever had before. With less need to focus on mere survival – food, shelter, and clothing – Americans are increasingly turning to recreation. This is especially true in the West. Today, 73% of westerners say they regularly participate in outdoor recreation – the highest rate for any region in the U.S.

We know that recreation is different for different people. Some people find the more “primitive”/quiet types of recreation to their liking – back-country hiking, cross-country skiing, horseback riding, canoeing, bird-watching, hunting, fishing, seeing wilderness vistas, or rock hounding. Some people like the more “extreme”/adrenalin pumping types of recreation – racing cross-country with an ATV, dune buggy, dirt bike, or anything with a lot of horsepower; “marking” hills in their snowmobiles; jet boat racing; rock climbing; bungee jumping; or white water rafting. Of course, there is everything in between – mountain biking, camping, windsurfing, dog-sledding, investigating historical sites, GPS treasure hunting, and concerts and Burning Man festivals.

Outdoor recreation and nature, adventure and heritage travel are the fastest growing segments of the travel and tourism industry. Adding to the recreation challenge is a whole generation of baby boomers, one of our most affluent and healthiest generations, on the verge of “retiring”.

## Public Lands

How will these three factors – demographics, technology, and life styles – affect recreation on public lands? As Americans see once rural farms, ranches, and landscapes turning into subdivisions of McMansions and gated communities, they look to public lands for what they have lost. These urban populations are placing new and different demands on our public lands – demands for simple solitude, recreation, and open space. Remember the estimated 22 million people who live within 25 miles of public lands? Well, they consider public lands to be their back yards.

### Land Management Conflicts

Over 60 million visitors recreated on BLM lands in 2003. Because “recreation” covers such a broad range of activities they may not always be compatible with each other. Think of riding down the mountain trail on your horse only to be faced by a group of hikers with pack llamas or billy goats or think about being in a wilderness and looking out over the horizon to see in the far distance multiple dirt bikes criss-crossing paths and hearing the drone of their engines. Recreation choices can create conflict.

Over the last few decades, the popularity of off-roading has dramatically increased. The annual sales of off-highway vehicles in the West is double the national average, and has increased by 154% in 5 years. Motorized recreation has become a focus of environmental litigation – as we’ve seen in the California Desert with the clash between motorized recreationists and the Endangered Species Act or in Wyoming and Montana with the litigation over snowmobiles, not just in Yellowstone National Park, but on national forest land.

And it’s not just conflict among recreational uses and the environment, but conflict with other multiple uses. Hunters, fishers and wildlife lovers are concerned about the impacts on fish and wildlife related recreation from grazing, mining and wind and oil and gas development. How to manage these conflicts? That is the challenge.

Congress mandated that public lands be managed for multiple uses. Historically, America looked to BLM lands for timber, minerals, energy and forage for domestic animals. In those days, the gravel pits to build the city’s roads and the oil and gas wells to provide the city’s energy were on “remote” BLM lands – “out-of-sight and out-of mind.” With the urbanization of the West that is no longer true.

Now this commodity activity is in the West's own "backyard." Can BLM's multiple use philosophy meet the challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Can America prosper if public-land energy resources are no longer produced because their production conflicts with recreation? What about grazing; wind energy facilities; sand and gravel; timber; or communication, pipeline and transportation rights-of-way? What about the varied recreational uses? Will non-motorized recreation trump motorized recreation? Is wilderness the only way we can protect the values of America's natural treasures? How do we strike an appropriate balance?

I would like to suggest a thought for you to consider over the next 3 days:

### My Vision – Sustainable Rural Economies

How BLM manages these varied uses will have the most profound impact, on public land dependent rural communities. Secretary Norton and I recognize the critical role our public land management plays in the well being of western communities. Because the federal government manages 30 – 90% of a western state, what **we do** on public lands greatly impacts rural communities.

I've lived in the West for 23 years. I was attracted to the West because of its mountains and big skies, but stayed because of the sense of community I found in those landscapes. I strongly believe rural communities contribute to the diversity that makes our country strong. They nurture some of the human qualities that made America a great nation.

At Interior, we believe that BLM public lands should be managed for multiple-use. This means that economic use is not only compatible with conservation, but conservation and communities depend on a healthy vibrant economy. Healthy lands, dynamic economies and thriving communities support one another.

### Citizen Stewardship

Secretary Norton and I also believe there is a more effective way to manage public lands than the paradigm of "expert" decision-making, formalized National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) participation followed by the inevitable litigation. President Bush, Secretary Norton, and

I foresee a 21<sup>st</sup> century of citizen stewards – Americans who move beyond formal process to fully engage to take care of the land where they live.

This Administration has put in place an important tool for citizen stewards. The Council on Environmental Quality has directed that counties and communities are now equal partners in the NEPA process. No longer are communities left to passively comment on Federal land use or activity plan environmental impact statements (EIS), but now can sit at the table with federal agencies as a cooperating agency. This is a Big Change -- take advantage of it.

### Shared Community Stewardship

Similarly, BLM has changed its stewardship focus as it moves into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The BLM views itself as part of the community not merely as a gateway to some place else. Building upon BLM's longstanding commitment to communities and partnerships, BLM is moving to the next generation in the collaborative management of public lands – shared community stewardship. Rich Whitley of Oregon BLM is leading this effort and I urge you to talk to him about what this can mean for your community.

Shared community stewardship is the flagship of citizen-centered conservation. This means that BLM will not work in isolation but will work with communities of both place and interest to set land management goals, to develop problem-solving solutions, and implement land-use decisions. This does not mean that BLM will abrogate its decision-making responsibility, but it will mean a move away from formalized communication to interactive, evolving, responsive engagement with the “folks who live on and love the land.”

This Secretary and this President believe that there is a lot of wisdom outside the Beltway and that citizen stewards working together can find common ground through common sense solutions that work for your community. It is in working together, understanding one another that we can find that balance among the many resources that we value.

### Conclusion

The Recreation Forum is an excellent example of citizen stewardship and the Secretary's 4 C's of conservation through cooperation, consultation

and communication. I applaud Kathleen Clarke's efforts to provide a forum in which BLM can hear from you. There are two things that I ask you to consider as you continue your discussion regarding the future of recreation on public lands.

First, I ask you to consider the implications to the rural economies. Tourism is an important part of a diversified rural economy, but it can not be viewed as a silver bullet. Service jobs, many of which are part-time, simply do not pay the wages and provide the benefits that oil and gas, timber jobs or white collar professional jobs pay.

In my home state of Montana, wages have been declining for over 20 years. The average wage has been one of the lowest in the nation for several years. Montana ranks first in the Nation in the number of jobs held by one individual. Many rural couples hold down 3 to 4 jobs – just to make ends meet. Unlike their urban neighbors, folks in our rural communities may not have the luxury of time for recreation or community involvement because they are still focused on the basics of survival.

Our challenge – your challenge is how to build a rural economy that works to preserve that sense of western community we all treasure.

Second, I ask you to consider what the consequences are of recreational activity on the environment and how those impacts can be mitigated. How should BLM manage recreation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to meet the growing and varied needs of an urbanized, high-tech citizenry yet sustain the public lands and their resources for the 22<sup>nd</sup> century?

I submit that a shared vision of healthy lands, dynamic economies and thriving communities can be our lodestar.

Thank you.