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World taking notice of the West

State BLM director tells local audiences that interest in agency's western landholdings on rise

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Whether it's the infamous "Area 51" or the famous bouldering area north of Bishop, the entire country is starting to notice the diverse range of recreational sites and wild, wide-open lands in Inyo County, California and the West managed by Bureau of Land Management.

"You're not alone out there anymore," Mike Pool, California state director of the BLM, told a local audience at the recent Inyo Associates meeting in Death Valley.

The agency's California Web site records about 70 million hits a year, so the word is out that the agency's 15 million acres of land in the state offer every type of outdoor experience, whether it's a trip to the beach, a hike in the desert or hills, or bouldering on the Volcanic Tablelands outside of Bishop, he noted.

Unfortunately, he couldn't clear up the status of one of the most interesting BLM sites, which has assumed mythological status in the nation's collective conspiracy theory data bank.

While perusing the Web site information, Pool noticed that various military organizations seem to be hitting the site a bit too frequently (one million hits) to be explained by enlisted men looking for a campsite. Pool, a 30-year BLM veteran who put in a tour of duty in Washington, D.C., called up some of his contacts in the Pentagon to ask why the military was so interested in the BLM's Web site.

"All I got was the standard statement: 'We can neither confirm nor deny' anything about Area 51," Pool reported, which put a new perspective on his "you're not alone out there anymore" comment.

Coming back to Earth, Pool pointed out that land has been the BLM's main business even before it was the BLM. The agency has its roots in the General Land Office, created in the 1800s to essentially dispose of the vast tracks of land in the West. At that time, the Land Office had one billion acres to deal with, Pool noted, and it played a key role in getting the West settled by getting that land in homesteaders' hands and getting the Transcontinental Railroad built, primarily by giving the railroad companies doing the building every other section of land along the line.

After the creation of the U.S. Forest Service at the start of the 20th century, the BLM ended up with all the empty, federal land not claimed by the Forest Service or the National Park Service and other federal and state agencies.

That's how the BLM ended up with 265 million acres of what was once thought to be pretty much useless land in the West and Alaska.

With the nation filling up, opening up the minerals below those lands, in Death Valley for example, or the timber and grazing pastures atop them, became the agency's main thrust, Pool said, even while it kept trying to dispose of as much land as possible.

The Range Wars of the 1930s took place primarily over grazing on BLM land, and led to the groundbreaking Taylor Grazing Act, which is still the primary law governing grazing on public lands in the West.

Finally, the environmental movement and sensibility caught up with the BLM, which was dismissed as the "Bureau of Logging and Mining" by its detractors.

In 1976, the "Federal Land Management and Policy Act" set a new course for the BLM, one that sought to balance the extractive side of its mission with recreation and environmental protection and enhancement.

Although the BLM is a "latecomer" to the recreation and conservation game, Pool said the agency, and especially the California office, has worked diligently to become a more effective manager of the varied lands under its protection.

One unique management challenge faced more often by the BLM than other federal land-holders is that the BLM has substantial holdings around or near communities, noted Pool. That means his office has stressed the need for local BLM offices to work together with local governments to find appropriate and logical solutions for managing those lands.

He singled out the Bishop BLM Office, headed by Bill Dunkelberger, as one of the best examples in the state of a local BLM office taking a cooperative, inclusive approach to land management strategies that affect multiple governments and multiple users.

That sort of collaborative effort will become even more important in the future, as the state's population increases and puts more pressure on public lands and the agencies that manage them to balance competing and sometimes conflicting mandates, Pool noted. For example, while the public is pushing for more recreation and conservation, the nation is facing an energy crunch that is prompting more calls for tapping the coal, natural gas and oil. The BLM is caught between those conflicting realities, Pool said.

While tough decisions loom, Pool noted that, "I'm a very process-oriented individual," and even if that means taking more time to take action, he's willing to have regional offices spend that time to reach a decision based on "quality science."

With the agency being pulled in several directions and the state's population expected to keep increasing by a half-million people a year, Pool said the BLM will be looking to achieve a "sustainable" future for its lands and the people who live near them or visit them.