

Acquisitions & Conveyances – The Last 25 Years

How did we get here?

Up through the 1970s, BLM's policy was to divest ownership of all federal public (BLM) lands in the State of Washington. But in 1980, at the height of the Sage Brush Rebellion (a movement to give control over federal lands to the states and local authorities), Washington voters told BLM they wanted public lands in their state to remain under federal management.

In the 1980 general election, the state put a measure on the ballot asking voters if the state constitution should "be amended to provide that the state no longer disclaim all rights to unappropriated federal public lands." Approximately 60% of the people and the majority in every county voted no, signaling to BLM that there was strong support for continued federal management of their public lands.

In response to this vote, the Director of BLM approved a proposal by the District to begin a process of consolidating BLM lands. At the time (1980) lands managed by the District, consisted mostly of small parcels scattered across Eastern Washington. Most of these parcels lacked public or administrative access.

Forging a "New" District

With this new direction in hand, and a new District Manager, Joe Buesing, who arrived in 1983, the stage was set for change in the District. "The first step was to develop a resource management plan to provide direction for accomplishing the consolidation," Buesing said.

For the next several years, the District staff focused on the RMP, and a record of decision was signed by the Oregon-Washington State Director in 1987.

Although the RMP provided management direction for use and protection of all BLM-administered resources on public lands in Eastern Washington, the main emphasis of the plan was on land tenure and consolidation.

Just as the District was completing the RMP and preparing for implementation, a major setback occurred when the opportunity for exchange of federal lands was put on hold by a court injunction.

In 1981, BLM had begun a major national review of classifications and withdrawals of public lands for the purpose of removing or revoking those that were no longer warranted. In 1985, the National Wildlife Federation challenged this review and revocation program in court.

The District Court issued an injunction halting the review and suspended related reclassifications and withdrawal revocations. A large amount of the public lands in Washington were encumbered with classifications or withdrawals, many of which were no longer justified, but could not be removed due to the Court injunction. As a result, although the Spokane District completed the RMP in 1987, most of the lands proposed for exchange could not be made available for disposal or conveyance.

BLM appealed the District Court decision, and in 1990, the US Supreme Court reversed the decision, lifting the injunction.

Finally, in 1991, more than a decade after the citizens of Washington had told BLM that they wanted continued federal management of public lands in their state, the Spokane District was truly able to begin the process of consolidation.

Within a short time, the success of the initial land exchanges began to build momentum and support. Backed by county commissioners, environmental groups, and state agencies, the District was eventually able to acquire Land and Water Conservation Funds and make direct purchases of some lands with high value wildlife habitat.

The last of the major assembled land exchanges concluded on October 22, 2008. This marked the end of the era of major land consolidation by the Spokane District, and the start of managing the retained and acquired lands for present and future generations.

Transformation through Cooperation

Although there was direction from the people of Washington and approval from the Director of BLM to begin consolidating federal public lands in the state, little to no funding was available to accomplish this task. So, from 1991 to completion of the most recent transactions in 2008, the District stretched its limited budget, partnered with organizations like the Nature Conservancy and the Washington Departments of Fish and Wildlife and Natural Resources, and worked with an independent exchange facilitator to orchestrate major exchanges which would forever change the landscape of Eastern Washington.

Acquisitions & Conveyances Since 1983			
County	Acres Acquired	Acres Conveyed	Total Acres Managed
Adams	8,251	-----	9,958
Asotin	-----	-----	946
Benton	1,008	3,641	11,012
Chelan	-----	200	21,406
Columbia	-----	-----	441
Douglas	16,877	320	54,543
Ferry	-----	3,868	9,058
Franklin	4,515	3,679	23,804
Garfield	----	----	165
Grant	16,518	3,614	53,958
Kittitas	5,340	1,060	15,915
Klickitat	1,680	263	18,286
Lincoln	70,163	641	79,130
Okanogan	5,278	2,406	58,875
Pend Oreille	-----	389	1,732
San Juan	365	77	903
Skagit	-----	50	0
Spokane	2,067	-----	2,075
Stevens	4,566	10,623	25,074
Walla Walla	-----	-----	390
Whatcom	-----	-----	56
Whitman	7,691	-----	9,236
Yakima	2,736	1,402	28,510
	147,055	32,233	425,473

Working with partners afforded the opportunity to block up large parcels of high value habitat by acquisition of lands adjacent to those owned or managed by the Nature Conservancy and WDFW.

The San Juan Connection

The Spokane District established a somewhat congenial relationship with environmental advocacy groups by listening to their concerns regarding management of some small parcels of BLM land on the other side of the state.

Many people are unaware that the Spokane District manages 800 acres of public lands in the San Juan Islands, an archipelago in Northwestern Washington at the entrance to Puget Sound (see map). Some of these lands have always been in federal ownership, others were acquired by the District through direct purchase, and others reverted to BLM management when the US Coast Guard relinquished sites previously withdrawn for lighthouse facilities.

In the late 1970s, the Washington Department of Parks and Recreation asked BLM to grant them a lease to manage some of the lands in the islands as State Parks. However, the local public and several environmental groups were against managing these lands as parks. They felt that, with the existing National Park and other State Parks, there was enough opportunity for recreational visitors. The locals and environmental groups preferred that BLM manage the lands to preserve their natural condition and provide wildlife habitat. BLM supported the interests of the locals and environmental groups when, in 1990, it designated two of the largest BLM holdings on the islands as areas of critical environmental concern to preserve their natural character.