**Land Use Planning – Final Rule**

**Qs & As**

**What is Planning 2.0?**

Under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is required to manage the public lands for multiple use and sustained yield, and to do that through development of resource management plans. That requires the BLM to balance various, often competing land uses for both present and future generations. Any BLM action or decision to allow the use of the public lands must be in accordance with the relevant land use plan. The BLM prepares land use plans, known as Resource Management Plans (RMPs), through a structured planning process. Planning 2.0 is shorthand for BLM’s effort to improve this planning process through updated regulations and, following the final rule, a handbook to guide implementation of the rule.

The primary goals of Planning 2.0 are to make the planning process more efficient and thus improve the Bureau’s ability to respond to environmental, economic, and social change in a timely manner; make the planning process more collaborative and transparent by strengthening opportunities for other Federal agencies, State and local governments, Indian tribes, and the public to be involved in the development of RMPs earlier and more frequently; and allow for planning at an appropriate scale.

The BLM developed the final planning rule through years of outreach and discussion with state and local governments, communities, stakeholders, other governmental partners, and the public. As part of this process, the BLM is also revising its land use planning handbook (H-1601-1).

**Why did the BLM propose changes to the planning regulations?**   
The BLM proposed changes to the planning regulations to improve and modernize our planning process and incorporate the best practices we have learned over the last 30-plus years of planning. The back-bone of the regulations that governed land use planning prior to this final rule had not been updated substantially in over 30 years. Over that time, pressures on BLM lands have increased due to growing demand for use, more competing uses, and resource issues such as invasive species and wildfire. With the average plan revision taking more than eight years to complete, this bogged-down process wasn’t effectively addressing that increased pressure. In addition, the process was not sufficiently transparent and accessible to many members of the public. State and local government officials approached us asking for earlier involvement and a more efficient process. The goal of the rule is to respond to those concerns about the current planning process. Furthermore, in the past 30 years the BLM has gained experience and developed more effective approaches to planning, including in the ways we work with our government partners and the public. The final rule incorporates these practices so that they will be applied consistently across the agency.

Earlier and more frequent public input in the planning process has many benefits. It will make it possible to create a more transparent and accessible process in which the public understands how and why certain planning decisions are made. It also helps the BLM by making sure we receive public input when it is easiest to incorporate – early in the process.

The final rule will also help the BLM apply a most appropriate scale approach to public lands management. The challenges we face in managing natural resources, as well as the opportunities to better manage our public lands, can occur at geographic scales larger than a single BLM field office. Planning at the most appropriate scale requires that the BLM develop tools and processes to consider resource issues at different scales, to effectively collaborate with diverse stakeholders, and to apply science-based approaches to land management, while continuing its longstanding tradition of working at the local level and with local partners.

**How will the final rule improve the Bureau’s ability to respond to environmental, economic and social change in a timely manner?**  
One of the reasons the planning process takes so long is that when new information or issues arise late in the process, the BLM often must publish new draft plans, which takes time and resources. The final rule establishes a new upfront assessment of baseline conditions in the planning area before drafting a resource management plan. This new step is called the planning assessment. The planning assessment provides an opportunity for the BLM to work with state and local governments, tribes, stakeholders, and the public to gather all of the relevant information, understand the issues and conditions, and identify the planning area. The planning assessment will shorten the time it takes to complete a plan or plan amendment by avoiding the need to publish new draft plans. It will also result in better plans.

**One of the goals of final rule is to strengthen opportunities for public involvement. How will that work?**   
The BLM takes seriously its responsibilities to manage the public lands for multiple use and sustained yield and to provide for public involvement. It’s our responsibility to provide the best planning process available for the management of public lands.

One lesson learned over the years of land use planning in the BLM is that the most effective RMPs are developed through consistent dialogue with our partners and stakeholders. Because of the importance of public input, the rule establishes several new opportunities for early public involvement during the planning process.

The public will have new opportunities, through the planning assessment and otherwise, to submit data and information and to review preliminary versions of key planning documents including a preliminary statement of purpose and need, preliminary alternatives and their rationale, and preliminary procedures, assumptions, and indicators to be used in the effects analysis. Additionally, the BLM will work with the public to identify public views in relation to the planning area early in the process during the planning assessment, as well as during identification of planning issues and scoping, to ensure these views are considered when developing the draft RMP.

**Under the final rule, the planning process has several new steps. Won’t this make the planning process slower, not faster?**

The final rule does add new steps, including an upfront planning assessment and new opportunities for public involvement. We believe that the additional time and resources needed to complete these steps will be well spent. While these new steps may lengthen the timeline for an individual planning effort to get to a draft RMP, the investment will shorten the average timeline for finalizing RMPs.

Under the final rule, the planning assessment will ensure that the BLM gathers data and information pertinent to the RMP to establish the baseline conditions up front. The information will inform all subsequent steps, such as scoping and alternatives development. The public will be provided an opportunity to share data and information on baseline resource conditions and current uses with us long before we get to a draft RMP. The public review of preliminary alternatives and their rationale will ensure that we have captured a full range of alternatives, and the public review of the basis for analysis will ensure that we have a robust effects analysis based on the best available science.

While these new steps will likely add some time to the planning process, we believe that overall this will result in a better RMP and, we hope, will save time later in the process. For example, we expect that the public review of the preliminary alternatives will ensure we produce a robust draft resource management plan and EIS and would need to make fewer updates before producing the proposed resource management plan and final EIS.

**What does a landscape approach to land use planning mean?**

This phrase has been used by a variety of people to mean a variety of things and is therefore easily misunderstood. BLM’s goal is simply to carry out planning at a scale that makes sense. When developing future management direction, a scaled approach to planning allows the BLM to consider the full context of resource values, the uses that people make of those resources, environmental and ecological conditions, and social and economic needs and concerns. These different components occur at different geographic and temporal scales and the BLM needs to consider these multiple scales during the planning process. With this approach, the BLM will use high quality information, including the best-available science, to develop clear management objectives for resources, values, services, and functions at scales appropriate for the resources being managed.

The BLM will select the planning area boundary that best addresses the issues to be considered, the geographic extent of the resources, and the interests of national, regional, and local communities. In some situations, the BLM’s traditional administrative boundaries may be the most appropriate planning area boundary. For example, if a BLM district or field office boundary adequately encompasses relevant landscapes and management concerns, the new planning rule provides flexibility to select the BLM district or field office as the planning area boundary. In other circumstances, the planning area boundary may be smaller or larger than administrative boundaries.

**How does the updated rule improve the BLM’s ability to address landscape-scale resource issues?**   
The new planning regulations enhance the agency’s flexibility to determine appropriate planning area boundaries. In addition, the new early planning assessment step will ensure that the BLM has access to pertinent high quality data, including the best-available scientific information, to inform the development of RMPs and address landscape-scale resource issues. The planning assessment also will help to ensure that planning area boundaries are appropriate to address landscape-scale resource issues. A new emphasis on the development of robust, specific, and measurable objectives will help the BLM and the public to understand and track the success of the plans to ensure landscape-scale issues are fully addressed.

**With the move to a “landscape” or most appropriate scale approach to planning, are local interests being cut out of the process?**

Active engagement and partnership with local communities is critically important to the management of the public lands, and the BLM will continue to work with our local partners and communities as key stakeholders in the planning process. In fact, we expect that with the increased opportunities for early public involvement in the final planning rule, local communities will be better able to engage in the planning process. We welcome suggestions on how to make these new public involvement opportunities most effective.

**Will the emphasis on potentially larger planning areas and consistency across administrative boundaries mean local concerns will not be addressed?**

Under the final rule, the BLM aims to increase the consistency of the planning process, consistency of RMP components, and compatibility of management across administrative boundaries. However, the rule also provides the flexibility to consider and address local concerns and conditions. Often, local concerns require a contextual perspective to be addressed adequately. For example, the spread of invasive species or wildfire can affect local communities and local livelihoods, but addressing these resource issues requires consistent management direction across administrative boundaries. Similarly, subsistence communities often depend on wide-ranging big game species that cross administrative boundaries. In developing planning area boundaries and planning decisions, the BLM will continue to be guided by the resources to be managed and the interests of local communities.

**Does the final rule change the agency’s existing RMP boundaries?**  
The final rule retains the agency’s flexibility to determine appropriate planning area boundaries. This does not change the agency’s existing RMP boundaries. Although updated planning regulations have been finalized, the BLM’s existing land use plans remain in effect. When the need to amend or revise the plans arises, the new regulations will apply, and depending on the issues driving the revision or amendment, the planning area may be larger or smaller than the customary field office planning area.

**Does the final rule change the BLM’s requirements to coordinate and seek consistency with state and local land use plans?**  
The Federal Land Policy Management Act (FLPMA) mandates State and local coordination and consistency requirements by which the BLM must abide. The final rule clarifies these requirements in the planning regulations to ensure consistency with FLPMA and reduce confusion while improving the BLM’s ability to work with our State and local partners to address resource issues. The BLM remains committed to working closely with state, local, and tribal governments, and other Federal agencies to effectively manage resources on public lands.

The final rule establishes several new opportunities for coordination between the BLM and our governmental partners. For example, during the planning assessment, the Responsible Official will coordinate with state, local and tribal governments and other Federal agencies to collect data and information to inform the planning process, as well as existing plans to consider in the planning process. The BLM recognizes that our state, local, and tribal partners often have the best available data related to a resource issue, and the updated rule ensures that the BLM considers this data.

**Does the final rule change how the BLM will work with cooperating agencies?**

The new rule does not change the special relationship and opportunities provided by statute for cooperating agencies. It preserves and enhances the BLM’s partnership with state, local, and tribal cooperating governments. In fact, the rule provides new opportunities for involvement and engagement by cooperating agencies, since they function as BLM’s partners at every phase of planning with access to the process and materials not available to the general public. This is particularly true during the planning assessment phase when cooperating agencies are encouraged to share pertinent data and information and identify state, local, and tribal plans that may inform the BLM plan.

**By creating these new opportunities for all the public to be involved in the planning process, don’t you undercut the special role afforded to state, local and tribal governments? Won’t all public participants have the same access and input as the governmental entities?** New opportunities for public input expand rather than contract the work the BLM will do with our governmental partners. All existing opportunities for partnership will continue under the new rule, and the additional work up front will provide new opportunities for the BLM to receive information and input from state, local and tribal governments. We strongly believe that local input and information are vital to our planning effort and always will be.

**What does high quality information mean, and why did you choose such a confusing term?**

High quality information is defined in the rule as information that is accurate, reliable, and unbiased, is not compromised through corruption or falsification, and is useful to its intended users. Basically, this means that the BLM will only use data and other information that meets the government’s standards. This includes using the best available scientific information, but quality standards are not limited to science. There are other types of information that are useful and relevant to inform planning, and this information must also meet quality standards.

For example, public views around an issue would be relevant to planning, and any information gathered around public views would need to meet high quality standards, including accuracy, reliability, and freedom from bias. Similarly, “Traditional Ecological Knowledge” acquired by indigenous and local peoples through direct contact with the environment is a type of high quality information that may inform the planning process, so long as it is relevant to the planning effort and documented using methodologies designed to maintain accuracy and reliability and to avoid bias, corruption, or falsification.

**Where will the BLM find the high quality information, and who decides what “high quality” means?**

High quality information may come from many different sources: BLM staff, other Federal agencies, researchers, state or local governments, tribes, non-governmental organizations, citizen science, or citizen expertise. High quality information includes the best available science and the best available information.

The BLM decides what constitutes “high quality” information consistent with existing policies and standards, such as the Data Quality Act, on information quality. In situations where there is competing and/or conflicting information, the BLM maintains the discretion to decide which information represents the best available for use in the planning process.

**What happens if my local BLM office is mid-way through a plan revision or amendment now that the final planning rule is completed?**  
Under the final rule, RMPs that are already in development will be able to continue using the regulations that were in place when the notice of intent for the RMP was published in the Federal Register. The local office would be encouraged to incorporate the elements of the new rule to the extent possible and practical, such as early and active public involvement.

**What is the difference between Planning 2.0 and ePlanning?**Planning 2.0 is a policy initiative to improve the BLM’s land use planning process. Planning 2.0 includes changes to the planning regulations and a revision of the land use planning handbook. ePlanning is a web application to manage planning and NEPA documents. ePlanning provides a national register for land use planning and NEPA documents and allows the public to review and comment online on BLM NEPA and planning projects. ePlanning is not part of the Planning 2.0 initiative.

**What else is BLM doing under Planning 2.0? Do you have other changes or plans that will affect local or other interests that you haven’t identified or discussed?** Planning 2.0 is the shorthand for our work on improving the planning process. It refers to the rule just finalized and the implementing handbook, which will be developed in the coming months. No other policy initiatives are in the works.

**Where can I find more information on the final rule?**  
Please visit the BLM’s Planning 2.0 webpage at www.blm.gov/plan2.