

**Statement of  
Henri Bisson, Deputy Director  
Bureau of Land Management  
Before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources  
Off-Highway Vehicle Management on Public Lands  
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Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to testify regarding motorized recreational use on the public lands. My testimony today will highlight the ongoing efforts within the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to manage off-highway vehicle (OHV) use and will highlight a 2007 United States Geological Survey (USGS) study synthesizing the literature regarding OHV impacts on the land. The BLM manages public lands to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

**OHV Use on BLM-Managed Public Lands**

The BLM strives to preserve and protect resources for use and enjoyment of future generations while meeting the need for motorized recreational access today. With more than 57 million people living within 25 miles of BLM administered public lands, motorized recreation on these 258 million acres of public land is managed consistent with the multiple-use mandate of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA). Wise management of OHVs and balancing the needs of all the users of the public lands is a continuing challenge.

This challenge has been building over time. What was once the vast and spacious public land of the West that few knew about and fewer actively used for recreational purposes has now become something quite different. Today, with the suburban sprawl of many western cities and the increased pressure for more outdoor recreational opportunities, the BLM has had to adjust its management of these lands to ensure their health for future generations.

Challenges

Some facts and figures help to illustrate the reality of our management challenges: OHV use has been a major recreational activity across the West for the past four decades. The BLM-administered public lands will host 58 million recreation visits from across the country and other nations this year, a number that has nearly doubled in the last 25 years. Many of these visitors will be responsibly riding ATVs or motorcycles. The Motorcycle Industry Council conservatively estimates there are four times more OHVs in the West than there were a decade ago.

The extensive network of roads and trails, now primarily associated with motorized and non-motorized recreation use, has largely been inherited from historical access patterns dating back nearly 200 years. The majority of roads and trails in use today were originally developed for trade, mineral exploration, ranching, forestry and many other purposes.

The combined effect of population increase in the West, unauthorized user-created roads, explosive growth in the use of OHVs, advances in motorized technology, and intense industry marketing have generated increased social conflicts and resource impacts on the public land.

The BLM faces many challenges--protecting resources, minimizing user conflicts, safeguarding visitor safety, and providing reasonable and appropriate access.

Over the last decade, increasing recreational demand has led to an increase in legislation, litigation and intense public interest regarding BLM's management of OHV travel. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) and others have conducted considerable research on the impacts from OHV use on western arid and forested lands. Research continues on the impacts of OHV use. A synthesis of available scientific literature related to the effects of OHV use is available as a USGS Open-File Report ([USGS OFR 2007-1353](#), "Environmental Effects of Off-Highway Vehicles on Bureau of Land Management Lands: A Literature Synthesis, Annotated Bibliographies, Extensive Bibliographies, and Internet Resources"). The report was compiled by the USGS with funding from the BLM National Science and Technology Center.

BLM is addressing travel management as part of a comprehensive approach that considers public access needs for all modes of transportation. BLM has sought extensive public participation and input to designate a travel network that is thoughtfully designed and properly managed and makes the best use of resources. Public participation is essential to the BLM planning process and serves to improve communication, develop enhanced understanding of different perspectives, and identify solutions to issues and problems.

Additionally, in order to help address increased use of BLM lands, the 2009 Budget proposes directing approximately \$8 million from field offices experiencing little or no population growth to field offices in or adjacent to expanding communities. Recreation and law enforcement are among the programs in which these funding shifts will occur.

#### BLM Management and Policy

In 2001, the BLM issued its *National Management Strategy for Motorized OHV Use on Public Lands* to improve our management of this recreation activity. This strategy sets comprehensive direction for planning and managing motorized recreational use in full compliance with Executive Orders, existing regulations, and policy guidance. Through the planning and travel management process, public lands are designated as "open", "limited", or "closed" to OHV use. Open areas are areas where all types of vehicle use are permitted at all times, anywhere in the area. Limited areas are lands where OHV use is restricted at certain times or use is only authorized on designated routes, and closed areas are lands where OHV use is prohibited. This 2001 strategy recognizes motorized recreational use as a legitimate use of public land wherever it is compatible with established resource management objectives.

Building on this strategy, in 2005 the BLM issued a revised "Land Use Planning Handbook," which included specific guidance for "Comprehensive Travel and Transportation Management." It ensures that all new land use plans developed by the BLM will address public access, travel management and OHV area designations. These land use plans guide the management of all of the 258 million acres for which the BLM is responsible.

Finally, in December 2007, the BLM sent guidance to its field offices to further clarify travel management decisions in the planning process. Specifically, the guidance affirmed that continued designation of large areas that remain open to unregulated "cross-country travel" is not

a practical management strategy. Instead, field offices are directed to focus OHV travel on designated roads and trails. Field offices still can and have designated open areas, where unrestricted OHV play is permissible. Additionally, this guidance addresses route planning, inventory and evaluation, innovative partnerships, user education, mapping, signing, and law enforcement. The guidance will result in establishing rational and well-analyzed travel networks, permitting OHV users with continued opportunity to recreate on public lands.

With the completion of new or updated plans, the amount of land designated as limited has increased and the number of acres of open areas has decreased. For example, in the Ely, Nevada, Resource Management Plan (RMP) (2008), the number of acres open to cross-country OHV use declined from 9.8 million acres to zero acres under the preferred management alternative. More than a million acres in the District are closed to OHV use. The closed areas consist of congressionally designated wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas, which is in accordance with the Wilderness Act of 1964 and FLPMA. OHV use on the remaining 10.3 million acres in the planning area is limited to designated roads and trails. This particular area also benefits from a congressionally designated trail system for OHV users.

Open areas have been retained in other RMPs where historical OHV play areas have existed for many years and resource conflicts are minimal. Open areas are appropriate for intensive OHV use where there are no compelling resource protection needs or public safety issues to warrant limiting cross-country use. Examples of areas open to motorized recreational use include El Mirage OHV Area in the Mojave Desert of California, 12,000 acres of flat lakebed used for land sailing and OHV riding, and Hackberry Lake OHV Area in New Mexico, offering 55,000 acres of rolling dunes used for OHV play. These open areas are extremely important local and regional destinations for OHV play with minimal impact.

Closures are sometimes necessary to protect and conserve resources or for public safety in a particular area. Closures can be very controversial. The BLM frequently attempts to work with affected or interested parties to reach agreement on options to address a particular challenge before issuing notices of motorized travel restrictions or temporary closures. Most closures remain in effect until conditions change, impact is reduced or a new decision is addressed in a plan.

For example, to protect public health and safety from exposure to asbestos the BLM issued a temporary closure on 31,000 acres of public land within the Clear Creek Management Area in California on May 1, 2008. The temporary closure order was issued simultaneously with the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) release of the final Asbestos Exposure and Human Health Risk Assessment. The findings of the assessment indicate that the asbestos exposures that EPA measured at CCMA are high and that many of the recreation activities authorized by the BLM pose excess lifetime cancer risks above the EPA's acceptable risk. This closure will remain in effect until the signing of a Record of Decision of the Resource Management Plan for the Clear Creek area. The RMP will incorporate the results of the EPA Assessment and analyze alternatives to minimize and reduce the human health risk from exposure to asbestos from visitor use to ensure public health and safety.

As part of the BLM's commitment to implementing its land use plans and protecting resources, the agency deploys 195 law enforcement rangers and 56 special agents across the public lands, about 1 for every 1.2 million acres. High-use recreation areas, such as sand dunes in Southern California, Utah, Idaho and Nevada, continue to be a challenge, especially on long holiday weekends and during major events, and are a primary focus of BLM law enforcement. Imperial Sand Dunes in California typically has more than 150,000 visitors during winter holidays such as Thanksgiving, New Year's and President's Day. Over the New Year's weekend this year, law enforcement issued 630 citations, arrested 25 individuals. Emergency Medical Services responded to 129 calls. The BLM works closely with local law enforcement agencies on patrols, safety, enforcement and emergency medical responses. We greatly benefit from the strong support of many County Sheriffs and State Highway Patrol organizations throughout the West. The use of short-term work details of BLM officers from other states and officers from other agencies, as well as continued support from local law enforcement agencies through assistance agreements, has proven invaluable.

### Partnerships

The vast majority of OHV users are responsible riders. They share the BLM's commitment to the protection of natural and cultural resources and leave no lasting trace on the land. Working with local, state and national OHV groups, we have improved our ability to inform, train and educate the riding public. Partner organizations such as *Tread Lightly!* and *Leave No Trace* have worked to develop and disseminate stewardship education materials and have worked with industry to encourage responsible use marketing and messaging.

Collaboration with our stakeholders and partners continues to be a crucial piece of BLM's OHV management strategy. In Colorado, OHV groups have stepped forward to assist in the education of OHV users by promoting responsible recreation use. The Stay the Trail program, a joint project between the Colorado Off-Highway Vehicle Coalition and Federal agencies, reinforces and highlights responsible OHV use and seeks to reduce irresponsible use, thus minimizing resource damage. In Oregon, partnerships have formed between user groups, local and state governments and Federal agencies to cooperatively manage OHV use by jointly developing and implementing education, enforcement and trail maintenance programs. This has allowed for more effective use of limited resources to reduce irresponsible use, thus minimizing resource damage. In Idaho, BLM partners with the state Fish and Game agency to implement the CARE/SHARE program to build awareness and user ethics regarding public access across private lands or ranching allotments.

I would like to share with you some before-and-after photos of restoration work being done in Southern California with the Student Conservation Association and the BLM. The projects are primarily focused on restoring areas defined by travel management implementation decisions. The emphasis is to protect the habitat of several endangered species, including the desert tortoise, as well as to ensure the viability of the designated travel network. As you can see, the efforts have been a success. By using a variety of techniques, including vertical mulching and re-texturing the ground surface to erase the impacts, these crews are successfully restoring habitat and rehabilitating degraded trails to prevent erosion.

The BLM is dedicated to improving the health of the land by reducing OHV impacts. Defining a rational network of roads and trails on over 258 million acres of land is an enormously complex task. Over the next decade, the BLM will work with the public to continue mapping the West's public access travel networks. The BLM will continue to prioritize and target resources and funding to develop and implement travel management plans.

Through public land user education, law enforcement, resource monitoring, public-private partnerships, and continued public involvement in the land-use planning process, the BLM will move closer toward this goal.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on this significant issue. I would be happy to answer any questions.

# Jawbone-Butterbredt ACEC Ridgecrest Field Office California

**Before**



**After**

