U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Frequently Asked Questions
Land Health in the Proposed Public Lands Rule

To ensure landscape health and ecosystem resilience, the proposed Public Lands Rule would provide a framework for the BLM to protect healthy, intact landscapes, restore degraded habitat, and make wise management decisions based on science and data. To support these objectives, the proposed rule would apply existing land health fundamentals and standards to all BLM-managed public lands and uses, and provide guidance for the BLM to rely on available science and data tools to manage for healthy public lands.

What is land health?

The BLM's mission is to "sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations." To achieve this mission, the BLM developed Fundamentals and Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Grazing Management as part of the agency's grazing regulations in 1995. These "Fundamentals of Land Health" are general descriptions of conditions that maintain the health and functionality of watersheds, ecological processes, water quality, and important species habitat, and are implemented through local land health standards. They serve as a baseline against which management decisions can be evaluated. Standards are tailored to different types of vegetation and soils, so that they vary for upland soils as compared to riparian-wetland areas, as shown, for example, in this map of allotments and the accompanying standards posted by BLM Nevada

How does the BLM currently apply the Fundamentals of Land Health?

Currently, the BLM focuses the application of the land health process to grazing authorizations. Under the BLM's existing land health process, when land health standards are not being achieved, the BLM determines why -- the causal factor – and then takes steps to make improvements to land health. The cause may be a land use, or it may be another factor such as wildfire or invasive species. In cases where authorized grazing is causing land degradation and standards are not being met, the BLM works with the permittee or lessee to identify the appropriate course of action.

How would the BLM's land health process change under the proposed rule?

The proposed rule would apply the existing Fundamentals of Land Health—watershed function, ecological processes, water quality and wildlife habitat—and related standards and guidelines to all BLM lands and program areas. The rule would not make any changes to the four Fundamentals of Land Health as articulated in the agency's grazing regulations, but rather would broaden their applicability beyond the grazing program. Broader application of the fundamentals and standards would help ensure the BLM's ability to protect healthy, intact landscapes, restore degraded habitat, and ensure wise decision making.

The proposed rule would require the BLM to establish goals, objectives and success indicators to ensure that land health standards are applied consistently and evaluated periodically, and that appropriate

action is taken when land health standards are not being met. When land health standards are not achieved, the proposed rule would direct the BLM to determine why and take steps toward restoring healthy lands and working collaboratively with permittees, authorized users, stakeholders and the public as appropriate.

How would the proposed rule benefit public land health?

The BLM's ability to manage for multiple use and sustained yield of public lands depends on the resilience of ecosystems across those lands—that is, the health of the ecosystems and the ability of the lands to deliver associated services, such as clean air and water, food and fiber, renewable energy, and wildlife habitat. Applying the Fundamentals of Land Health to all public lands and achieving associated standards and guidelines would ensure ecological function and habitat for species across the landscape. The land health standards and indicators provide a common language and process for understanding and managing for resilient landscapes, healthy habitats and associated benefits to people. In short, the proposed rule would provide a consistent overarching framework for renewable resource management across land uses, as envisioned by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act.

Would the BLM's management of grazing change under the proposed rule?

The proposed rule would not make any changes to the BLM's grazing program. Land health is already a cornerstone of the BLM's grazing program, and the proposed rule would build on BLM and grazing permittee/lessee efforts to maintain healthy public lands that can support grazing well into the future. The BLM's management of public lands, including in the proposed Public Lands Rule, explicitly protects valid existing rights and previously authorized uses, including grazing.

Would the proposed rule prohibit all uses that may impair land health?

No, the BLM would continue managing for multiple uses on public lands. The proposed rule would not diminish the BLM's discretion to permit and approve types of land uses authorized or required by applicable laws and regulations. Through the land use planning process, the BLM can determine that certain uses are appropriate for a given area, even if it means that area is, as a result, unlikely to meet the Fundamentals of Land Health . For example, areas where mineral development or off-road vehicle recreation is authorized may not achieve land health standards.

What science and data would the BLM use to support land health and ecosystem resilience?

To ensure that sound science underpins public land management, the proposed rule would require the BLM to complete watershed condition classifications in all land use planning and to use inventory, assessment, and monitoring information to inform decision-making across program areas. The proposed rule would provide for broad-scale watershed assessments that could then inform evaluation of land health standards within a particular area of management (e.g., grazing allotment, recreation area). These broad-scale assessments enable public land managers to understand the context of a given decision within the larger watershed, as well as the causes of changing conditions on the ground.

The proposed rule would also establish principles to ensure that inventory, assessment and monitoring activities are evidence-based, standardized, efficient, and defensible. The BLM currently maintains inventory, assessment and monitoring data through the agency's AIM program, and makes this data available to the public.

Would the proposed rule require the BLM to undertake additional efforts for land health and watershed condition assessments?

Under the proposed rule, the BLM would incorporate the Fundamentals of Land Health and watershed condition classifications into regular land use planning processes. Integration of land health across programs and scales also presents opportunities for creating workload efficiencies while leveraging new data and technology. In doing so, it may also increase the quality of land health assessments, evaluations, and determinations such that management decisions are more durable. Importantly, it would use existing data to inform decisions beyond the grazing program, which has not been completed with consistency or regularity. It will ensure the BLM is using science and data to drive all management choices. Further, completion of land health assessments at a watershed or landscape-scale also provides workload efficiencies in consolidating assessments, assembling available data, and streamlining interdisciplinary team discussions. The offices that currently complete land health in this manner are up to date on land health evaluations and determinations and experience greater job satisfaction and staff retention.