

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

Fact Sheet – April 2024

“In the development and revision of land use plans, the Secretary shall... give priority to the designation and protection of areas of critical environmental concern” – FLPMA Sec. 202(c)



Bering Glacier ACEC, Alaska.

The Bureau of Land Management has a responsibility to manage public lands for multiple uses –from renewable energy development to wildlife habitat and recreation–while ensuring that those uses and the benefits they provide are available for future generations. One important tool in meeting these responsibilities is the identification and management of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, also known as ACECs.

ACECs are the only land management designation unique to BLM and the only one that BLM is directed to prioritize. They arise from the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, which directs BLM to give priority to the designation and protection of ACECs in land use planning. These site-specific designations, informed by public comment and input, help the BLM protect special and important resources across the public lands through carefully tailored management approaches.

What is an ACEC?

ACECs are areas where special management is needed to protect important resources, such as wildlife habitat, cultural, historical, or scenic values, or to protect human life and safety. Not all areas with these resources are designated as ACECs. In fact, before BLM designates an ACEC, the Bureau ensures not only that important and relevant values are present, but that these values require special management attention. The BLM only designates ACECs through public processes with input from local communities, Tribes, state and local governments, and other stakeholders.

ACECs are often a conservation designation, elevating the protection of exceptional and important resources in need of special management, such as the protection of a habitat important for a threatened species. These designations always protect valid existing rights, and because they are an especially flexible and site-specific tool, they can often work alongside or together with other uses on the landscape.

How are ACECs different from other land management designations?



Toolik Lake ACEC, Alaska.

ACECs allow BLM to protect a wide range of resources—they protect everything from important subsistence hunting and fishing areas in Alaska to indigenous cultural sites in Arizona and New Mexico to safely recreating in proximity to asbestos-containing soils—while accommodating other important uses on the landscape. Each ACEC is unique, with unique management prescriptions and goals based around the resources that ACEC protects and the special management attention it requires.

The flexibility of ACECs means they can remain open to other uses, as long as the uses are consistent with the protection of the important resources the ACEC protects. In many cases, ACECS can be managed to accommodate activities like recreation and tourism; they can also serve as appropriate sites to offset the impacts of development elsewhere on public lands. ACECs can also be designated within other units, such as within a national monument, to highlight and protect unique resources in need of special management.

Across all our ACECs, BLM works to ensure during the land management process that these important sites help the Bureau meet land management objectives and local needs, while preserving the important resources under our care.

What can I do in an ACEC?

ACECs provide exceptional opportunities to explore the wide variety of resources BLM-managed public lands have to offer, from important habitats along migration corridors to sites that protect and preserve the full history of our public lands.

In general, ACECs are managed to protect the sensitive resources they contain. In many cases, this management will not impact uses like outdoor recreation, but we may ask hikers, bikers, and off-highway vehicles to remain on designated trails. To ensure we are protecting the

resources these sites contain, BLM may ask for additional information regarding proposed development in an ACEC, but these processes may continue, when consistent with BLM's management of the site.

Across the ACECs we manage, BLM works to ensure public access as appropriate, while protecting identified resources, but if you have any questions on how to visit or appropriately use one of these sites, you can contact your local [BLM office](#).

How are ACECs Identified?

The BLM primarily considers potential ACEC designations during the [land use planning process](#). At the beginning of a land use planning process, BLM solicits ACEC nominations from the public, state and local governments, Tribes, and other federal agencies, and will review internal data to identify potential ACECs for consideration. When deciding whether to designate an ACEC, BLM incorporates the best available science, information, extensive public comment and Tribal consultation. If a nominated ACEC has relevant and important resources that require special management, a BLM planning team develops management options that could be incorporated into BLM management.

BLM sometimes receives ACEC nominations outside of the land use planning process. In these situations, the Bureau determines the best response for each specific situation. For example, if an ACEC nomination with relevant and important values is submitted covering an area under consideration for a development project, BLM would analyze potential impacts to those values and consider how they might be minimized, offset, or avoid, but would not halt review for the project. In rare cases, BLM might establish temporary protections to an area until an ACEC nomination can be fully considered during a land use planning process.

Get Involved:

You can find a [list of ACECs near you](#) on our website, and view photos of some of these beautiful places on our [Flickr account](#). If you are interested in participating in our land use planning, including offering comment on ACEC nominations and designations, you can find our ongoing planning efforts on BLM's National NEPA Registry.

Turn to the next page to see some spotlights of BLM ACECs across the country!

Spotlights:

Amargosa River Basin ACEC (California)



The Amargosa River flows in a part of the Mojave Desert declared an "Area of Critical Environmental Concern" by the BLM to protect plants and animals listed under the Endangered Species Act. The Amargosa vole, least Bell's vireo and southwestern willow flycatcher are listed as state and federally endangered, and the state of California lists the yellow-billed cuckoo, Swainson's hawk and Amargosa niterwort as threatened. Two desert fish species—the Amargosa pupfish and the Amargosa speckled dace—also occur in these segments and are designated as sensitive species by the BLM.

Serpentine ACEC (California)

Miner's Delight ACEC (Wyoming)



This 30-square-mile area was a focal point for the discovery of gold in 1842 and the resultant 1867 gold rush that settled this part of Wyoming. By 1868, about 1,500 people lived in the District towns of South Pass and Atlantic City, but by 1872 the boom was over and the area was all but abandoned. BLM maintains 2 campgrounds and the ghost town of Miner's Delight in the area. Other attractions in the vicinity are the South Pass City State Historic site, the Wild Iris world-class rock-climbing site, remnants of five National Historic Trails (the Continental

Divide, Oregon, Mormon Pioneer, California, and Pony Express Trails), and a Volksmarch Trail. This area is near historic trails.

Blanca Wetlands ACEC (Colorado)



The Blanca Wetlands Area of Critical Environmental Concern, or Blanca Wildlife Habitat Area, serves as a refuge for birds, fish and other wildlife. The wetlands had been destroyed by pumping and diversion of water for irrigation. By the mid-1900s the basins had completely dried up, and the area became known as "Dry Lakes." Starting in 1965, BLM began to restore them, and they have become an increasingly important ecological habitat for shorebirds, water birds and other wildlife and native plants. The wetlands are one of the most important areas for birds in Colorado since it provides habitat for migrating water birds or shorebirds. It hosts thirteen threatened, endangered and sensitive species.

Serpentine ACEC, California



The Serpentine ACEC, designated in the Hollister Resource Management Plan, is located within the Clear Creek Management Area. The broader area is a popular location for a wide variety of

recreation, including off-highway vehicles, hunting, rock-hounding, wildlife watching, and hiking. The ACEC's unique geology and serpentine soils support a suite of rare plants and wildlife, but also contain naturally occurring asbestos. During the dry season, the risk to the public from airborne asbestos caused by recreation activities leads to short-term closures, as well.