



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

Land Health

Fact Sheet – Public Lands Rule – April 2024

The Public Lands Rule will help safeguard the health of our public lands for current and future generations by helping ensure we protect our clean water and wildlife habitat, restore lands and waters that need it, and make wise management decisions based on science and data, including Indigenous Knowledge. Americans rely on public lands to deliver food, energy, clean air and water, wildlife habitat, and places to recreate. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) understands the importance of balancing the use of our natural resources with protecting our public lands and waters. The Public Lands Rule will safeguard these lands and waters to help sustain our public lands and make sure they are available for the use and enjoyment of current and future generations.

Successful public land management requires a thorough understanding of the health and condition of the landscape, especially as conditions shift on the ground due to climate change. To promote and sustain the health of our lands and waters, the Public Lands Rule directs the BLM to manage all public land uses in accordance with the fundamentals of land health. This means working to help ensure (1) watersheds support the soils, plants, and water we need; (2) ecosystems provide healthy populations and communities of plants and animals; (3) water quality is safe and healthy; and (4) wildlife habitat on public lands helps protect threatened and endangered species.

The rule sets overarching standards and provides guidance for the BLM to rely on available science and data to manage for land health. In doing so, the rule provides a consistent framework for natural resource management across land uses, in accordance with the Federal Land Policy and Management Act.

How is land health addressed in the Public Lands Rule?

The Public Lands Rule applies the existing fundamentals of land health and related standards and guidelines to all BLM lands and program areas. Until now, the BLM has only applied the land health standards in the context of grazing decisions. The rule does not change any of the four fundamentals of land health as articulated in the BLM's existing grazing regulations, but rather broadens their applicability, so they will further the BLM's ability to protect healthy, intact landscapes, restore degraded habitat, and help ensure informed decision-making.

Applying the fundamentals of land health to all public lands and working to achieve associated standards and guidelines will facilitate 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 the associated benefits to people.

The rule requires the BLM to establish overarching land health standards and indicators that facilitate progress toward achieving the fundamentals of land health. The BLM will complete land health evaluations for BLM-managed lands on a periodic basis, at least every 10 years, relying on watershed condition assessments at landscape scales whenever possible. When land health standards are not achieved, the rule directs the BLM to determine why and take steps toward restoring healthy lands, working collaboratively with permittees, authorized users, stakeholders and the public as appropriate.

To help ensure that sound science underpins public land management, the rule requires the BLM to complete watershed condition classifications in land use planning efforts and to use inventory, assessment, and

monitoring information to inform decision-making across program areas. The rule provides for broad-scale watershed assessments that can 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 rule does not change 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 standards for land health. For example, plans that call for solar development in degraded areas would not require the Bureau to achieve land health standards in those areas, and areas where mineral development or off-road vehicle recreation is authorized may not achieve land health standards.

Land health is already a cornerstone of the BLM's grazing program, and the rule builds on longstanding efforts to maintain healthy public lands that can support well-managed grazing. The BLM's management of public lands, including in the Public Lands Rule, explicitly protects valid existing rights and previously authorized uses, including grazing.

How does the Final Rule reflect public comments on the Proposed Rule?

In response to comments received, the rule clarifies the process for applying the fundamentals of land health to all program areas. The rule requires the BLM to develop overarching land health standards and indicators, which will provide more consistency and transparency in management for land health, while still allowing for local flexibility and needs.

The rule incorporates changes to address concerns about the BLM's capacity to expand its land health efforts, such as analyzing land health at the watershed scale as appropriate and clarifying the BLM's discretion to prioritize landscapes for land health evaluations. For example, the rule directs land health evaluations to be completed at broad spatial and temporal scales based on resource condition and to incorporate watershed condition assessments. It provides additional clarity around the timelines and process for determining causal factors for nonachievement of land health standards and taking action to address those factors as appropriate.