



# NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

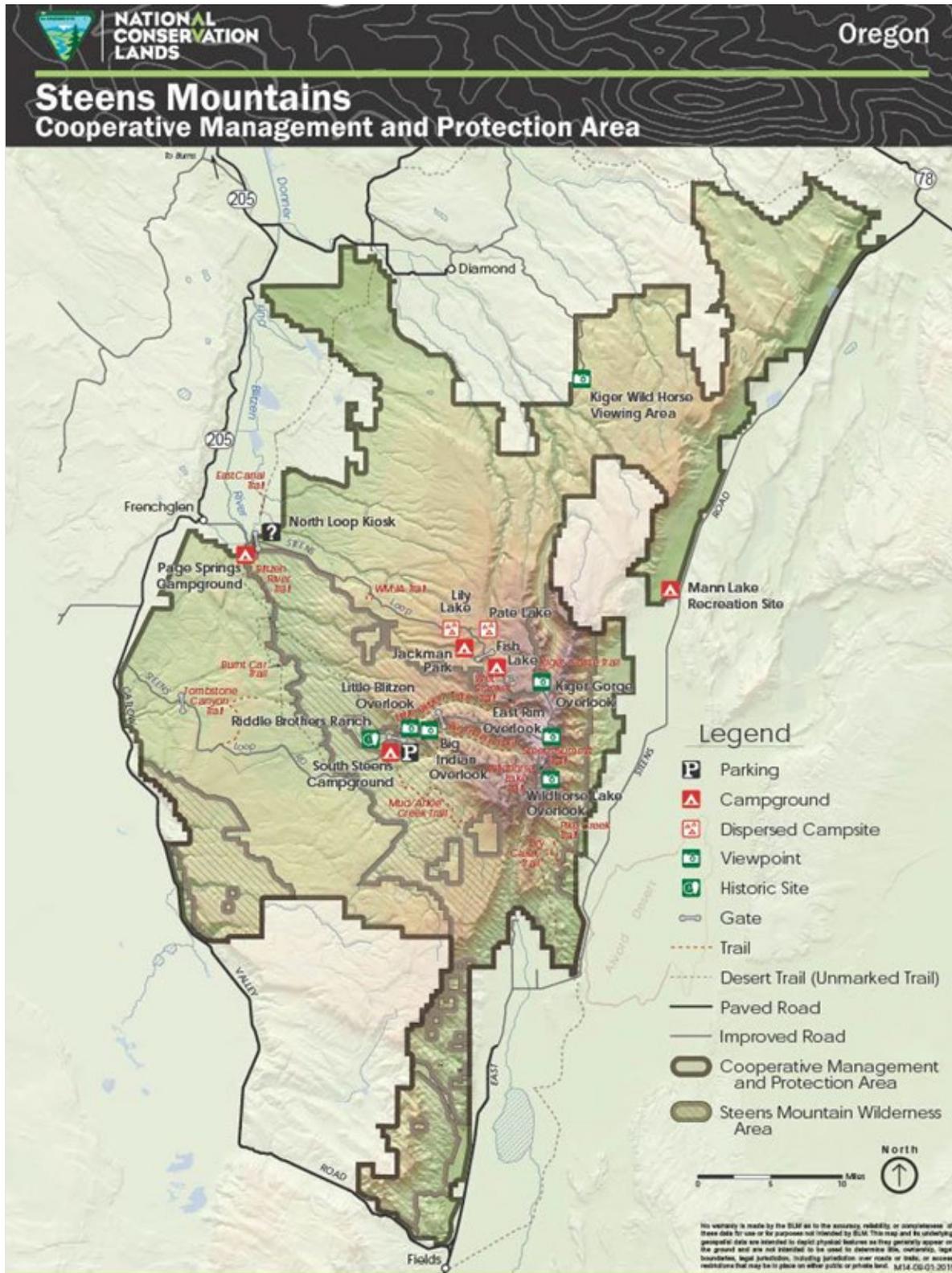
Oregon-Washington  
2024: Annual Manager's Report

# Steens Mountain

Cooperative Management and Protection Area



# Map



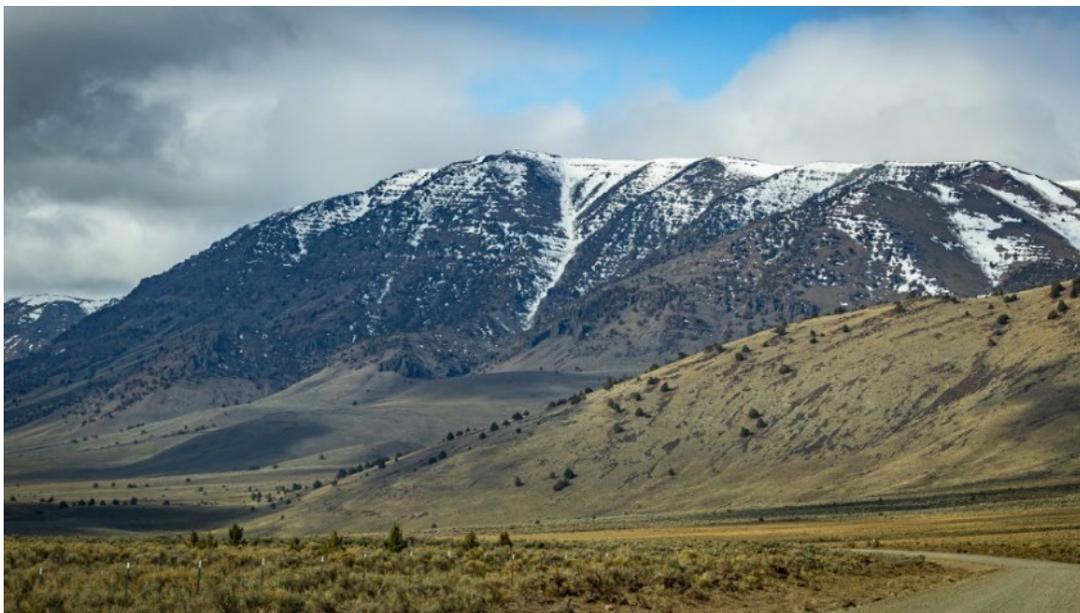
# Accomplishments

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In 2024, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Burns District, often working with partners, accomplished numerous projects in the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Area (CMPA). Northwest Youth Corps and Idaho Conservation Corps crews completed a variety of work in the CMPA, including maintenance of the Blitzen and Little Blitzen Gorge trails. District recreation staff also updated and repaired portal signs at the CMPA's Fish Lake and Jackman Park campgrounds and replaced the kiosk at Page Springs Campground. The new kiosk allows the BLM to post valuable visitor information such as trail descriptions, maps, fire restrictions, and area history.

Fuel treatments are an important component of managing the dynamic ecosystem of Steens Mountain. They allow the BLM to mitigate the effects of juniper encroachment, enhance habitat for sage grouse and other important species, and reduce the likelihood of catastrophic wildfire. In 2024, the BLM completed 5,820 acres of juniper cut and pile treatments, 594 acres of prescribed fire, and 100 acres of seeding on pile burns. In 2024, the BLM aeri ally treated 13,313 acres and ground-treated 52 acres of the CMPA for a wide variety of invasive plants. It also seeded approximately 10 miles of rehabilitated bulldozer lines that were created during the containment of the 2024 Soloman Fire.

In addition, the BLM worked with the Harney Soil and Water Conservation District to construct a riparian enclosure in Stonehouse Canyon. It also conducted utilization and compliance checks and rangeland monitoring for approximately seven pastures in the CMPA and removed 870 wild horses from the South Steens Herd Management Area.



**Stonehouse Wilderness Study Area in the Steens Mountain CMPA**

# Challenges

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The South Steens Loop Road, also called the Steens Mountain Backcountry Byway, was partially closed for FY 2024 due to dangerously unstable boulders identified following a rockfall incident in 2023. This year, the BLM completed the Steens Mountain Backcountry Byway Stabilization Environmental Assessment and minimum requirements analysis. Following the decision supported by these documents, the BLM stabilized the rockfall and cleared debris, which allowed it to reopen the entirety of the road in October 2024.

The Steens Act requires the removal of the Page Springs Weir from the Steens Mountain Wilderness if removal “is scientifically justified and funds are available for such purpose.” The weir was constructed in 1937 and has been determined to be eligible on the National Register of Historic Places. In 2024, a consulting firm was contracted to support the BLM in developing a National Environmental Policy Act document analyzing the removal or modification of the weir.

The CMPA has several distinct wild horse populations. Viewing and photographing these horses is a popular activity. Balancing competing interests and managing herds at sustainable levels is a challenge facing the BLM throughout the 10 western states.

Recent years have seen dramatic changes in the CMPA’s surface streams and lakes. Mann Lake, formerly a popular fishing destination, is now mostly dry and no longer supports a fishery. While the alteration of Mann Lake is primarily due to changes in private land management, reservoirs and natural water sources are depleted across the region.

Data show a recent increase in invasive grasses in the CMPA’s higher elevations. Juniper distribution also continues to expand. The BLM is working to address these challenges, including within the Juniper Management Area that was designated under the Steens Act.



**Rockfall on the Rooster Comb section of the South Steens Loop Road**

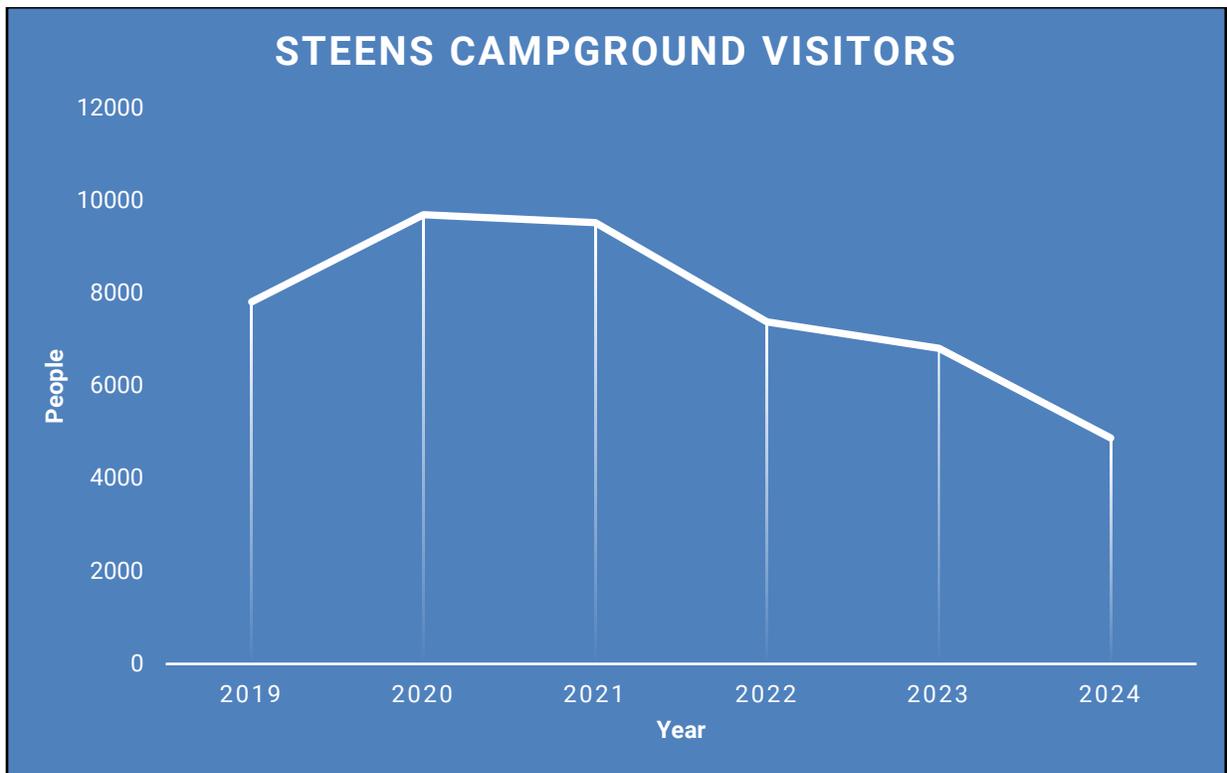
# Visitors

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In 2024, visitation to the Steens Mountain CMPA was down slightly from 2023 and well below the uptick in visitation that occurred in 2020. This may have been due to the heavy wildfire smoke that cloaked the area for most of the summer.

The BLM Burns District issued 14 special recreation permits and 16 winter recreation permits for activities in the CMPA in 2024. These included permits for hunting outfitters and guides, birding groups, running camps, outdoor education, horseback rides, youth programs, driving tours, and cross-country skiing, among other activities.

Campground visitation in the CMPA declined slightly from 6,811 visits in 2023 to 4,878 visits in 2024 (see graph, below). There was also a slight reduction in use of the Steens Mountain Backcountry Byway and a 20 percent reduction in use of CMPA trails. This is likely a result of the rockfall closure on the South Steens Loop Road and smoke in the area.



**Steens Mountain CMPA campground visitation from 2019 through 2024**

# Partnerships

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Partnerships are a vital part of the Steens CMPA. The BLM maintains a strong partnership with the Eastern Oregon Visitors Association, which promotes responsible recreation in the Steens Mountain CMPA.

In 2024, the BLM Burns District continued partnering with the Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA) on a trail monitoring and maintenance stewardship program focused on the CMPA's Donner und Blitzen Trail. ONDA stewards completed maintenance on approximately three miles of trail. The BLM Burns District also partnered with Northwest Youth Corps out of Eugene, Oregon, and the Idaho Conservation Corps out of Boise, Idaho, for recreation maintenance projects around the district, including in the CMPA. Projects included maintenance of campgrounds and wilderness trails. Self-supported crews camped on site for a week at a time. BLM staff provided project oversight and talked to the youth and young adult crews about the importance of land management and internship and career opportunities. In 2024, crews completed maintenance on the Blitzen River, Pike Creek, Little Blitzen Gorge, Nye, and Wet Blanket trails.

BLM Burns District management and staff meet quarterly with an official Burns Paiute Tribe representative to discuss upcoming projects, exchange ideas, and listen to Tribal concerns. The BLM values and respects Tribal views and the connection of the Burns Paiute Tribe to Steens Mountain. Connecting youth and communities to the landscape is a goal of the BLM, and consulting with local Tribes is an important part of that work. The Burns Paiute Tribe also has a designated membership position on the Steens Mountain Advisory Council (SMAC). The Steens Act created the SMAC to advise and consult with the BLM on management activities. This SMAC meets quarterly and includes local community leaders, business groups, environmental groups, hunting/fishing advocates, and grazing advocates.



**Volunteers in the Steens Mountain CMPA**

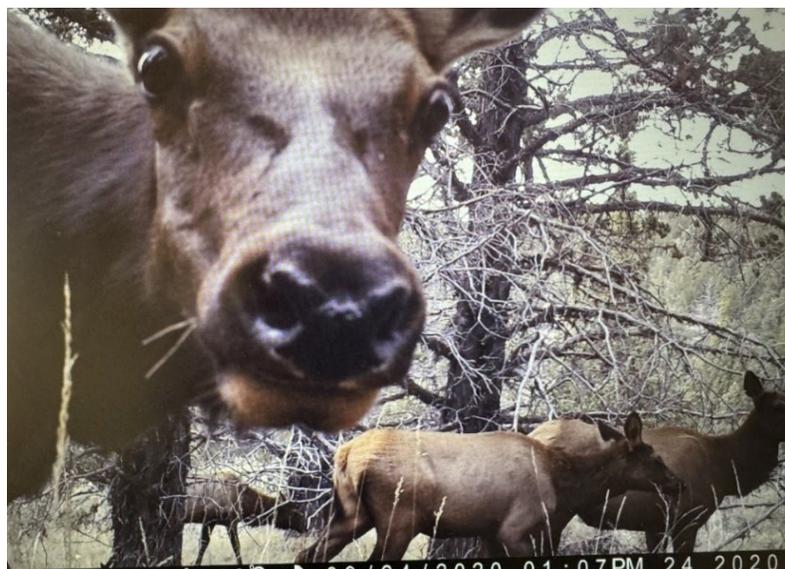
# Science

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In 2024, 13 temperature monitors were deployed along Wild and Scenic Rivers and other streams in the CMPA, mostly for monitoring temperature in streams on the east side of Steens Mountain that provide habitat for Lahontan cutthroat trout.

This year also saw the completion of the 5-year Steens Wildlife Project. The project focused on five aspen and mountain mahogany units in the CMPA identified for juniper removal to preserve hardwood and riparian stands, improve habitat for big game (mule deer, elk, and pronghorn), and maintain/improve migratory songbird biodiversity. The BLM cooperated with Oregon State University (OSU) to conduct scientifically rigorous monitoring of the treatment areas. The project provided the BLM with data to evaluate treatment effects and investment return for future projects. It included vegetation sampling and analysis from a variety of plant communities, remote camera monitoring of big game species, and songbird point count surveys and remote acoustic monitoring. The effort documented at least 75 species of wildlife within the treatment areas and the study control area. Vanessa Schroeder, a faculty research assistant at the OSU Extension Office, supervised the project, and field operations were led successively by two graduate students. Both graduate students conducted vegetation and wildlife/songbird monitoring and used the data to inform their master's theses. In addition to providing material for two master's theses, data from the project informed at least three peer-reviewed publications, with additional papers expected over the next several years.

The BLM continues to encourage citizen science within the CMPA through a cooperative agreement with ONDA. Volunteers with ONDA provided valuable assessments of wilderness study areas while doing important tasks such as wilderness boundary sign installation and increasing public awareness of wilderness values.



**Elk captured by an OSU remote camera near Bridge Creek**

# Outreach and Special Events

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The BLM Burns District hosted several events in the CMPA in 2024. These included the Steens Mountain Running Camp and two separate National Public Lands Day events. For decades, the Steens Mountain Running Camp has provided high school athletes with week-long, high-altitude running camps in the Steens Mountain area.

The BLM partnered with ONDA on two 2024 National Public Lands Day events in the CMPA. Both offered volunteers an opportunity to improve trails while experiencing firsthand the beauty of the CMPA. One event focused on maintaining the Little Blitzen Trail, which traverses a stunning glacially carved gorge in the Steens Wilderness. The other worked towards the restoration of the Big Indian Trail, which had been rendered indistinguishable from its surroundings due to a lack of use and maintenance during the pandemic. Volunteers and BLM staff re-established approximately 1.5 miles of trail, with more work scheduled for 2025.



**Participants in the Steens Mountain Running Camp**

# Welcome to the BLM Burns District

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In 2024, the BLM Burns District welcomed the energy and expertise of four new employees who included Casey Dooms, a new park ranger, and:



**Heidi Lowery, Andrews/Steens Field Office Manager**, grew up in Lakeview, Oregon, and earned her degree from OSU's College of Agriculture. With a long history in land management, Lowery has worked for the BLM and the U.S. Forest Service in Lake, Malheur, and Modoc counties where she has served as a Range Management Specialist, District Ranger for the Modoc National Forest, and the BLM Grants Pass Field Manager. Lowery enjoys gardening, hiking, and camping, and has always felt a connection to Harney County's high desert landscape. She appreciates the small-town atmosphere and is drawn to the region's peaceful, snowy winters.



**Ashley Hillis, Outdoor Recreation Planner**, is a 2010 graduate of Northern Arizona University and has been an outdoor recreation professional for the last 15 years. Her federal career began with the U.S. Forest Service in 2018 as a seasonal Recreation Technician in Mesa, Arizona, followed by a permanent positions in Globe and Sedona, Arizona. While at the Coconino National Forest, Hillis oversaw the Red Rock Recreation Pass program. After working in one of the country's busiest recreation areas, Hillis is excited to experience the quieter public lands in Harney County and looks forward to enjoying the county's hiking, fishing, and snowboarding opportunities.



**Vanya Pryputniewicz, Outdoor Recreation Planner**, brings nearly three decades of experience with the National Park Service, where she has worked as a Trail Crew Laborer, Mule Packer, Outdoor Recreation Planner, Public Affairs Specialist, and Safety Officer in iconic locations such as the Grand Canyon, Olympic National Park, Mount Rainier, and Hawaii Volcanoes National Parks. Pryputniewicz has found a new home in Harney County, where she enjoys the expansive skies and rugged desert landscapes. Pryputniewicz is passionate about managing public lands for the benefit of all and is looking forward to exploring the area in her downtime.



**NATIONAL  
CONSERVATION  
LANDS**

## **Steens Mountain Cooperative Management Protection Area**

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**Report compiled by:** Ashley Hillis, Outdoor Recreation Planner

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