

***BLM Interactive Townhall Meeting
Remarks by Secretary Bruce Babbitt
Phoenix, Arizona, March 24, 2000***

I've been wanting for some time to come talk directly with the BLM staff to share a few thoughts on the BLM's past, present and future. I believe we find ourselves in a moment the likes of which we haven't seen for many years: the opportunity for multiple, major, lasting land conservation achievements. The BLM now has an opportunity to play a lead role in this moment of conservation history, and I want very much to work with you to make sure that we do not let this opportunity slip away.

Before getting started, however, I want to retire that bureaucratic mule that I trotted out in my Denver speech a few weeks ago. My scrambled metaphor brought not a little criticism, including one BLMer who told me, "That dog won't hunt. Put it away," which I hereby do. Although I am going to return throughout this speech to the important issues behind the metaphor - the institutional history of the BLM and, more importantly, its future in generations to come.

The public lands, more than six hundred million acres in all, are a unique and priceless part of our American heritage. Of the public land agencies, the BLM is the largest - it manages nearly twice as many acres as the Forest Service, three times as many as the Park Service or the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The BLM is the steward of many of the great landscapes of the American West. Having such an extraordinary set of resources under its care requires us to think far into the future about managing those resources.

In the 21st century, the BLM faces a choice. It can become the greatest modern American land management agency, the one that sets the standard for protecting landscapes, applying evolving knowledge and social standards, and bringing people together to live in harmony with the land. Acting with public and private partners, the BLM can be the paradigm of the Interior Department's 150th anniversary motto: Guardians of the past, stewards of the future.

Or it can become a relic, a historical artifact, its most desirable lands carved up and parceled out to other land management agencies, with the remainder destined for the auction block of divestiture.

Lest anyone think this alarmist, I invite you to consider the record of the past half century:

Unlike the National Park Service with its beginning around the mythic campfire in the heart of Yellowstone, and unlike the National Wildlife Refuge system initiated by Theodore Roosevelt at Pelican Island in Florida, the BLM began life at a bureaucratic confluence. As

most of you know, the BLM came to life in 1946 in an administrative merger of the old General Land Office and the Grazing Service which came out of the Taylor Grazing Act. Lacking a general mandate derived from an organic act, the BLM simply carried forward under a new name the old resource exploitation traditions of the nineteenth century.

Practically from the beginning, a pattern developed - each time a local movement sprang up to protect a piece of the BLM landscape, the newly discovered crown jewel was eventually pried away from the Bureau and pasted onto the crown of the National Park Service. For half a century, from 1946 to 1996, every single large new national monument established under the Antiquities Act was taken away from the Bureau of Land Management.

Forty-five years ago the BLM managed more than 500 million acres of public domain. Today, two generations later, that number is down to 264 million acres. Were this process to continue at the rate of the recent past, the BLM would be out of business in the year 2047.

I think it's time to think more directly about the land conservation mission of the BLM, about systems and approaches that can bring together the agency's specially-protected units across the landscape in a way that is appropriate for these lands, this agency, and this time in history. It's not only appropriate - it's an absolute necessity that this be done. The inescapable truth is this - for the BLM to keep its special areas within the agency and not ultimately have them transferred to others, the BLM must show it is committed to, and capable of delivering on the conservation part of its existing legal mandate. The American people are, after all, the ultimate arbiters of whether a vast expanse of America's greatest heritage and crown jewels shall remain and flourish with the direct descendent of the old General Land Office.

The search for a vision comes down to this - the landowners, the American people, want their lands held and managed for clean water, the protection of endangered species, for abundant wildlife, for productive fisheries, for open space, for the protection of our heritage and God's creation. If we manage our lands primarily for these purposes we will have public support, if not we will neither have nor deserve their support.

The new BLM must have at its core a system of specially protected and managed conservation units, including landscape monuments and National Conservation Areas. It is a system that both protects our own crown jewels and interprets them to the public. It is a system that stands proudly alongside parks and refuges as part of our national heritage. And this system of BLM conservation units is the main subject of my remarks to you today.

The idea of a BLM system of specially protected areas is hardly new. In fact it is already taking shape. Witness the establishment of new BLM national monuments, National Conservation Areas, wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, and other designations. Our task is to recognize what is happening, to embrace the concept and by our management vigilance, to bring this conservation system forward for public understanding and acceptance.

The seeds of a BLM land protection system were planted in 1970 when Congress created King Range National Conservation Area on the Pacific coast of northern California. Then in 1988 Congress created another important NCA - the San Pedro River National Conservation Area in southern Arizona. Congress has created seven other NCAs including such areas as Red Rocks in Nevada and the Birds of Prey NCA in Idaho. In many cases these areas came to the attention of the Congress through the inspired efforts of BLM managers - such as the leadership of Ed Hastey and Jim Ruch in the California desert and the initiative of Dean Bibles in assembling the San Pedro NCA.

With these designations a pattern emerged - the NCA is a special area where conservation and restoration of the landscape and its biological diversity is the overriding objective. The lands are withdrawn from mineral entry, grazing is subordinated to biological restoration, and appropriations are authorized (if not always made) to provide for more intensive management, visitation and interpretation.

It remained for President Clinton to give this evolution a dramatic push forward, with the bold stroke of establishing the first national monument administered by the BLM and the largest national monument in the continental United States - the Grand Staircase-Escalante Monument. Although its beginnings were controversial, the monument has proven to be a great success by almost every measure. Consider what happened within three short years of its creation:

- Extensive development rights within the monument have been purchased, traded or cancelled.
- Every acre of state lands within its borders (some 180,000 in all) have been exchanged in the largest such swap in United States history.
- Congress has in effect endorsed the President's action by making minor boundary adjustments, and
- A unified land conservation strategy in the form of a comprehensive management plan has been developed after an intensive public participation process.

With a lot of commitment, partnerships, and good old-fashioned effort, BLM is making it work.

To build on this success, the President asked me in 1998 to recommend to him other areas of predominantly public land that might be suitable for special conservation protection. As you know, I responded in December of 1999 with a recommendation for three new BLM national monuments - Agua Fria National Monument, an archaeological wonder just north of Phoenix; the Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument on the western part of the North Rim of the Grand Canyon; and the California Coastal National Monument, a string of rocks and islands off the coast of California of prime importance for nesting seabirds and other wildlife. While we continue to cast a careful eye across the landscape, and look at other areas in need of protective

measures, the BLM is already in the spotlight to show what it can do as a manager of National Monuments. History is being written and all eyes are upon you.

While to some extent the management of each of these areas is crafted individually to fit the needs of protection and longstanding community uses of that place, BLM conservation areas share some common themes:

As with parks and refuges, the designation of a BLM conservation area removes that location from the operation of the Mining Act of 1872 and various other general lands laws that are incompatible with long term protection of our natural environment. And similar to parks and refuges, the designation makes permanent the primacy of conservation of natural values. But unlike most units of the park and refuge systems, BLM areas typically permit the continuation of such traditional uses as hunting and grazing, recognizing that in many instances they can be compatible with good wildlife management, protection of biodiversity and natural values.

As we all know, the proliferation of roads and use of off road vehicles is increasingly recognized as a major cause of the degradation of fragile arid western landscapes. We can expect monuments and conservation areas to include within their boundaries wilderness areas and wilderness study areas where motor vehicles are and should remain excluded under the provisions of the Wilderness Act. Outside such areas, the maintenance of roads and use of motor vehicles will be carefully regulated and off road use prohibited to prevent the destruction of fragile soils, riparian areas and other plant communities and wildlife habitat.

A BLM monument (and its legislative cousin, the National Conservation Area) will be managed in partnership with surrounding communities. The BLM will not provide food, lodging and visitor services within the monument. Instead, visitors will be encouraged to see the landscape in the context of the history and tradition of the entire region.

Yet the fact remains, although much of BLM's land is today in some kind of special conservation status, that reality is not reflected in the organization, the budget, or sometimes even the self identity of the agency.

In order to guide and shape this emerging system of conservation units, we must now make some important management adjustments and changes. Interim guidance is needed immediately, and ultimately new management plans should be prepared, or existing plans reviewed and updated, to reflect the paramount importance of the conservation principles for which the place has been recognized.

Special areas also need special budgetary recognition if sufficient support is to be provided. And they need backup and support all the way up the chain of command.

In short, the BLM must reflect the importance of this growing part of its portfolio in the organizational management and structure. Accordingly today I am asking BLM Director Tom

Fry to create an office of special areas to coordinate the management of the monuments, National Conservation Areas and other important conservation areas. It is time we formally recognized, in BLM's institutional structure, that you have a system of land that can be managed in a special way.

Let me hasten to add that recognizing a system of conservation lands will not have a detrimental impact on how the BLM manages its other lands. Rather it recognizes that the BLM has a special opportunity and responsibility for areas that have been designated for conservation purposes. The office of this national landscape conservation system will report directly to the Director of the BLM, and will ensure consistency between special areas where appropriate, ensure that special areas receive appropriate budget consideration, ensure that problems and issues particular to these areas have an advocate, and increase the profile and recognition of the areas.

An annual meeting for conservation unit managers is clearly appropriate, and I understand that one is currently scheduled for the first week of June. Establishment of "friends" groups and separate donation accounts is also an idea whose time has come. Finally, now may also be a good time to review the management plans for all existing National Conservation Area units, and other special categories, to be sure their quality reflects the reasons they were established and that the promise is being carried out on the ground.

The creation of an office of special areas is important to BLM's conservation system, but is not nearly as important as the actual management which will be done in your states, your area offices, your communities. The Director and his colleagues in Washington can set the tone, pull people together, provide encouragement, direction and support. But each of these places is different, and each of the State Directors needs to provide leadership and accountability to meet the test of time, to fulfill the aspirations and expectations of the public and supporters of public land everywhere.

It will take time, and resources, and commitment and good faith. But we've proved it can be done, and I believe BLM can prove that it can be counted on to protect the marvelous landscapes it has been entrusted with. In the long sweep of history, the BLM is just beginning to meet the challenge. As you do so, you need to keep some sense of urgency about seizing the opportunity that is before you, so that one day everyone in America and around the world will know and appreciate your skills at managing conservation systems.