

**Bureau of Land Management Colorado and New Mexico  
Ecoregion Landscape Assessment  
Qs and As Roll-out for the  
San Luis Valley-Taos Plateau Ecoregion Landscape Assessments**

**What is an Ecoregion Landscape Assessment?**

BLM Colorado is using a modified Rapid Ecoregional Assessment (REA) approach for the San Luis Valley – Taos Plateau Ecoregion Landscape Assessment. This Ecoregion Landscape Assessment covers an Environmental Protection Agency defined Level IV Ecoregion (approximately 25,346 km<sup>2</sup>), while other REAs are prepared at a scale of Level III Ecoregions (generally greater than 100,000 km<sup>2</sup>). The San Luis Valley/Taos Plateau Ecoregion Landscape Assessment is an assessment of resource trends and conditions in the geographic area covering Colorado's San Luis Valley and New Mexico's Taos Plateau (~6,115,000 acres or 9,550+ square miles).

**What are Rapid Ecoregional Assessments (REAs)?**

REAs are assessments aimed at sustaining the health and productivity of America's public lands. They use existing scientific information to identify resource conditions and trends within an ecoregion. REAs are designed to increase our knowledge and understanding of our natural resources and to establish baseline conditions needed to assess changes over time.

REAs gather and synthesize existing data for all the lands in an ecoregion. They help us to identify important habitats for fish, wildlife, and species of concern, and to understand the extent to which change agents such as wildfire, development and climate change may affect those habitats. REAs also help reveal patterns of human impacts and other disturbances. Their large-scale approach is designed to examine patterns of environmental change that may not be evident when managing smaller, local land areas. In contrast to more traditional BLM studies, the REAs do not assess the conditions of specific areas, such as grazing allotments, nor do they set objectives or management goals.

**What are ecoregions?**

Ecoregions are large geographic areas defined by their shared ecological characteristics. They contain the same types, qualities, and quantities of natural resources. Ecoregions cross traditional administrative boundaries such as county and state lines and typically encompass areas much larger than those managed by individual BLM field offices.

The BLM adopted the geographic boundaries used in the Environmental Protection Agency's "Level III Ecoregions," which are widely accepted by other federal and state government agencies and academic researchers. The North American continent contains 182 Level III Ecoregions; examples include the Middle Rockies, Northwestern Plains, Sonoran Desert, and canyon lands of Colorado Plateau. The ecoregions the BLM is assessing in the lower 48 states range in size from 13 million to 89 million acres. The REAs underway in Alaska are considerably larger. Level IV Ecoregions further subdivide Level III Ecoregions, and mapping is still underway for these ecoregions. As of December 2011, there are 968 unique Level IV Ecoregions.

The San Luis Valley – Taos Plateau Landscape Assessment covers a Level IV Ecoregion, with an area of 9,553 square miles with lands managed by the San Luis Valley and Taos field offices.

**Do REAs only consider data about the public lands within an ecoregion?**

No. REAs use information about the natural resources of all the lands within an ecoregion when it is available. Therefore, the REAs can provide a foundation for formulating coordinated strategies that can respond more effectively to climate change, wildfire, and other environmental challenges that transcend land management boundaries. Including all the lands in an ecoregion also helps us understand how important wildlife habitats are connected, recognize opportunities to strengthen or maintain connections, and identify potential habitat threats. In short, REAs can help us locate key areas for conservation and restoration.

**Where are the REAs being conducted?**

The draft San Luis Valley – Taos Plateau Ecoregion Landscape Assessment is now available for public review. A final is expected in late Summer 2016, which will be published online at: [www.blm.gov/5zld](http://www.blm.gov/5zld). The information, tools and maps provided by the San Luis Valley – Taos Plateau Ecoregion Landscape Assessment will be available for the public, BLM and other land managers to use in future decision making processes.

**Why are they called “rapid” assessments, if they take several years to complete?**

These studies are rapid because they use existing information as opposed to collecting new information. When compared to studies that conduct inventories or collect new data, or to the preparation of a BLM land use plan, which typically take from 36 to 72 months to complete, REAs are relatively rapid.

**Who else did you invite to participate when creating your REAs?**

For the San Luis Valley - Taos Plateau Ecoregion Landscape Assessment, the BLM led an Interdisciplinary Team that includes other federal and state land managers. In particular, biologists from the Colorado Parks and Wildlife and New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, as well as scientists from the U.S. Geological Survey actively participated. The BLM Colorado Renewable Energy Team directed the assessment and oversaw the work of the contractors who performed the technical data management and analyses.

**Does the Ecoregion Landscape Assessment make resource management decisions?**

No. The SLV-TP Ecoregion Landscape Assessment does not make management decisions or allocate resource uses. It provides science-based information and tools for land managers and stakeholders to consider in subsequent resource planning and decision-making processes, such as Resource Management Plans (RMP) and Environmental Impact Statements (EIS), which are used to make resource management decisions. In contrast to more traditional BLM studies, it does not assess the conditions of specific areas, such as grazing allotments, nor describe desired future conditions.

**When will the BLM issue specific findings on the SLV-TP Ecoregion Landscape Assessment?**

The SLV-TP Ecoregion Landscape Assessment does not contain findings and recommendations. The data will, however, be used by the BLM in the development and analysis of RMPs, EISs, and other documents that will make resource management decisions.

### **How will the BLM use the SLV-TP Ecoregion Landscape Assessment?**

The BLM will use the information, maps and tools provided by the SLV-TP Ecoregion Landscape Assessment in the management of resources at local and regional levels. At the local level, it will enhance the quality of land use planning and environmental analysis conducted by BLM district and field offices. The information, maps, and tools provided by the Ecoregion Landscape Assessment will strengthen analyses of the projected and cumulative effects of climate change and other environmental modifications on important natural resources.

The BLM will use the information, maps and tools provided by the Ecoregion Landscape Assessment – along with input from partner agencies, stakeholders and American Indian Tribes – to inform or develop broad-level management strategies. One example of how information from the SLV-TP Ecoregion Landscape Assessment is used is the recently released Solar Regional Mitigation Strategy. The Solar Regional Mitigation Strategy provides recommended mitigation locations and actions to lessen the impacts of large-scale solar energy development on Solar Energy Zones in the San Luis Valley.

Other federal agencies, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, and the National Park Service are considering using the information from the SLV-TP Landscape Assessment in their planning processes. In addition, individuals, groups, local government, non-government organizations and business are also interested in accessing the information provided by the Landscape Assessment.

### **How confident are you in the Ecoregion Landscape Assessment’s depictions of future ecological conditions?**

The information and maps developed in the SLV-TP Ecoregion Landscape Assessment are the product of geospatial modeling. They are “snapshots” based on the best available data at the time they were prepared. They depend on both the assumptions that went in to developing the model itself and the quality of the data that was used in running the model. For each conservation element and change agent examined in the SLV-TP Ecoregion Landscape Assessment, there is a discussion of uncertainty based upon quality of the available data used and assumptions used in the modeling exercises.

Anyone applying the results produced by the Ecoregion Landscape Assessment should look closely at the model designs and assumptions as well as the data that was used within the model itself. This more detailed information is available on the REA website and in the written reports.

### **What is the relation of the REAs to the Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCC) that are being established by the Department of the Interior (DOI)?**

The DOI is in the process of establishing 21 LCCs that span the nation. These LCCs are composed of private, state, Tribal, and federal representatives who will work toward a shared vision of landscape health and sustainability. The LCCs are generally based on the Environmental Protection Agency’s “Level II ecoregions,” which encompass multiple “Level III ecoregions.” The LCCs and the BLM’s REAs are complementary processes that will become more fully integrated as they progress. The LCCs are engaging in reviewing REA results and developing “Challenge and Opportunity” reports.

### **Are other organizations conducting large-scale assessments similar to BLM’s REAs?**

Yes. We are aware of several ongoing assessments, including work by The Nature Conservancy

and the Western Governors' Association (WGA).

### **How do these other assessments relate to BLM's REAs?**

These multiple assessment efforts are important and needed, and in some cases, build on each other. For example, the WGA's Landscape Integrity mapping effort was incorporated into the Northern Great Basin REA, creating consistency between the REA and the WGA's Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool. They are working to provide scientifically grounded information needed to conserve crucial natural resources in an era of complex and widespread environmental challenges. Although these efforts share common goals, they are different in some key aspects; some focus on different environmental stressors, while others cover different geographic areas. The BLM encourages people who use the REAs to consider the results of these other assessments at the same time.

### **How can I access REA information?**

The REA data are being hosted by the BLM Operations Center Data Portal ([http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/more/Landscape\\_Approach/dataportal.html](http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/more/Landscape_Approach/dataportal.html)). The REA Data Portal is a one-stop source for geospatial data, maps, and models produced by BLM's REAs. You can access these products through the catalogs listed on the Data Portal web page. You can also download REA reports to learn about the key components of each REA such as the management questions, conservation elements, and change agents. DOI personnel or REA Collaborators can visit the REA SharePoint site. The SharePoint site provides access to all the products listed in the REA Data Portal plus other REA products such as the final reports, task memos, presentations, reference tools, and more. The SharePoint site also offers additional functionality within the data, map, and model catalogs that facilitates searches such as sorting, filtering, and cross-referencing.