

Appendix P: Visual Resource Management Program

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P. Visual Resource Management Program

P.1 Background

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is entrusted with the care of 264 million acres of public lands containing many outstanding scenic landscapes. By law, BLM is responsible for managing these public lands for multiple uses. But BLM is also responsible for ensuring that the scenic values of these public lands are considered before allowing uses that may have negative visual impacts. BLM accomplishes this through its Visual Resource Management (VRM) system, a system which involves inventorying scenic values and establishing management objectives for those values through the resource management planning process, and then evaluating proposed activities to determine whether they conform to the management objectives. BLM has established VRM coordinators in each state and provides training in VRM so that this system is implemented effectively and consistently throughout the Bureau. The Bureau's VRM system helps to ensure that the actions taken on the public lands today will benefit the landscape and adjacent communities in the future.

Responsibility

Over the past several years, the Western States have experienced rapid growth and development, and the public lands have been increasingly used for outdoor recreation and tourism. Many rural communities are reliant on tourism to sustain their economies. As a result, the management of the scenic values of public lands has become a much more important aspect of natural resource management to BLM.

BLM's responsibility to manage the scenic resources of the public lands is established by law:

- **The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA)** states, "...public lands will be managed in a manner which will protect the quality of the scenic (visual) values of these lands."
- **The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA)** requires that measures be taken to "...assure for all Americans...aesthetically pleasing surroundings..."

This responsibility is reinforced by BLM's mission statement:

- "It is the mission of the Bureau of Land Management to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations."

BLM's policy is that it has a basic stewardship responsibility to identify and protect visual values on all BLM lands. This policy is described in BLM Manual Section 8400 - Visual Resource Management. BLM has reemphasized this policy in various other internal directives as well, including Information Bulletin No. 98-135 and Instruction Memorandum No. 98-164.

In order to meet its responsibility to maintain the scenic values of the public lands, BLM has developed a VRM system that addresses the following:

- Different levels of scenic values require different levels of management. For example, management of an area with high scenic value might be focused on preserving the existing character of the landscape, and management of an area with little scenic value might allow for major modifications to the landscape. Determining how an area should be managed first requires an assessment of the area's scenic values.
- Assessing scenic values and determining visual impacts can be a somewhat subjective process. Objectivity and consistency can be greatly increased by using the basic design elements of form, line, color, and texture, which have often been used to describe and evaluate landscapes, to also describe proposed projects. Projects that repeat these design elements are usually in harmony with their surroundings; those that don't create contrast. By adjusting project designs so the elements are repeated, visual impacts can be minimized.

BLM's VRM system provides a way to identify and evaluate scenic values to determine the appropriate levels of management. It also provides a way to analyze potential visual impacts and apply visual design techniques to ensure that surface-disturbing activities are in harmony with their surroundings.

Basically, BLM's VRM system consists of two stages:

- Inventory (Visual Resource Inventory)
- Analysis (Visual Resource Contrast Rating)

P.2 Inventory

The inventory stage involves identifying the visual resources of an area and assigning them to inventory classes using BLM's visual resource inventory process. The process involves rating the visual appeal of a tract of land, measuring public concern for scenic quality, and determining whether the tract of land is visible from travel routes or observation points. The process is described in detail in [BLM Handbook H-8410-1, Visual Resource Inventory](#). The results of the visual resource inventory become an important component of BLM's Resource Management Plan (RMP) for the area. The RMP establishes how the public lands will be used and allocated for different purposes, and it is developed through public participation and collaboration. Visual values are considered throughout the RMP process, and the area's visual resources are then assigned to management classes with established objectives:

- **Class I Objective:** To preserve the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be very low and must not attract attention

- **Class II Objective:** To retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be low
- **Class III Objective:** To partially retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be moderate.
- **Class IV Objective:** To provide for management activities which require major modification of the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape can be high.

P.3 Analysis

The analysis stage involves determining whether the potential visual impacts from proposed surface-disturbing activities or developments will meet the management objectives established for the area, or whether design adjustments will be required. A visual contrast rating process is used for this analysis, which involves comparing the project features with the major features in the existing landscape using the basic design elements of form, line, color, and texture. This process is described in BLM Handbook H-8431-1, Visual Resource Contrast Rating. The analysis can then be used as a guide for resolving visual impacts. Once every attempt is made to reduce visual impacts, BLM managers can decide whether to accept or deny project proposals. Managers also have the option of attaching additional mitigation stipulations to bring the proposal into compliance

P.4 Design Techniques

There are numerous design techniques that can be used to reduce the visual impacts from surface-disturbing projects. The techniques described here should be used in conjunction with BLM's visual resource contrast rating process wherein both the existing landscape and the proposed development or activity are analyzed for their basic elements of form, line, color, and texture (FLCT).

This discussion of design techniques is broken down into two categories:

- **Design fundamentals** are general design principles that can be used for all forms of activity or development, regardless of the resource value being addressed. Applying these three fundamentals will help solve most visual design problems:
 - ▶ Proper siting or location
 - ▶ Reducing unnecessary disturbance
 - ▶ Repeating the elements of form, line, color, and texture
- **Design strategies** are more specific activities that can be applied to address visual design problems. Not all of these strategies will be applicable to every proposed project or activity:

- ▶ Color selection
- ▶ Earthwork
- ▶ Vegetative manipulation
- ▶ Structures
- ▶ Reclamation/restoration
- ▶ Linear alignment design considerations

The fundamentals and strategies are all interrelated, and when used together, can help resolve visual impacts from proposed activities or developments.

The techniques presented here are only a portion of the many design techniques available to help reduce the visual impacts resulting from surface-disturbing activities or projects. Further research into planning and design references and/or consultation with professional designers and engineers will help to further reduce the visual impacts of any development.