

BLM Wild Lands Policy – Question and Answers

Q: What is the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) announcing today?

A: Today, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) issued policy guidance that defined and clarified how public lands with wilderness characteristics are to be inventoried, described, and managed, in conformance with an order issued by Interior Secretary Ken Salazar in December.

Secretarial Order 3310 directed the BLM, based on the input of the public and local communities through its existing land management planning process, to designate appropriate lands with wilderness characteristics under its jurisdiction as Wild Lands and to manage them to protect their wilderness values.

The policy guidance was initially issued as two manuals: 6301, Wilderness Inventory Manual and 6302, Consideration of Lands with Wilderness Characteristics in the Land Use Planning Process Manual. As a direct result of the internal review, guidance on how BLM will consider lands with wilderness characteristics for project-level decisions in areas not previously analyzed in accordance with BLM manual 6302 was separated out and included in its own manual section (6303).

Q: What feedback did the BLM receive on the draft Wild Lands guidance?

A: The BLM received numerous comments from staff throughout the organization. The BLM reviewed the comments and recommended several changes to the policy guidance.

Q: What changes is BLM proposing to make to the guidance?

A: As a result of the BLM's internal review, the BLM proposed a number of changes to the manuals, including the creation of a third manual which separates the guidance on project-level decision making from the guidance on the land use planning process.

The creation of the third manual is intended to be the primary reference for project-level decisions when the BLM has not previously inventoried and analyzed an area in a land use planning process in accordance with the Secretarial Order.

Among the specific revisions recommended by the BLM are:

- clarification that livestock grazing is ordinarily consistent with protection of wilderness characteristics;

- language clarifying that limited or existing motorized or mechanized access may be consistent with protection of wilderness characteristics; and
- clarification that the Director will be briefed on project-level decisions that could impair wilderness characteristics.

Q: Why did the Secretary issue Order 3310; why is it necessary?

A: This Secretary's Order provides balance to the management of public lands by affirming that the protection of the wilderness characteristics of public lands is a high priority for the BLM, and is an integral component of its multiple-use mission.

The Order affirms the BLM's obligation to maintain wilderness resource inventories on a regular and continuing basis for the public lands under its jurisdiction. It further directs the BLM to protect wilderness characteristics through land use planning and project-level decisions unless the BLM determines, in accordance with the Order, that impairment of wilderness characteristics is appropriate and consistent with other applicable requirements of law and other resource management considerations.

Since the controversial out-of-court settlement between then-Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton and the state of Utah and other parties (Norton-Leavitt Settlement) on wilderness in 2003, the BLM has been without comprehensive long-term national guidance on how to inventory and manage lands with wilderness characteristics.

Q: Why is it necessary for the BLM to issue new wilderness guidance?

A: The BLM is currently without comprehensive national guidance on how to inventory and manage lands with wilderness characteristics as a result of the Norton-Leavitt Settlement, making new internal guidance necessary. The guidance will bring consistency across the BLM and provide a process for conducting wilderness inventories and considering lands with wilderness characteristics in land use planning and project-level decisions. These new policies will support the Secretary's Order and provide BLM State Offices with the structure needed to determine where wilderness characteristics exist on public lands and how to manage lands determined to have those characteristics.

Q: Will this new policy require the BLM to do a national wilderness inventory or "re-inventory"?

A: No. The new policy provides a process for updating existing inventory information and for inventorying lands that have not previously been inventoried (e.g., acquired lands).

Q: What will the BLM call newly identified areas with wilderness characteristics?

The wilderness inventory process will identify which lands should be classified as “Lands with Wilderness Characteristics (LWCs).” The land use planning process will consider a range of alternatives of protection and non-protection of LWCs.

Q: What will the BLM call LWCs that are protected under a land use plan decision?

A: When the BLM decides to protect LWCs through a land use plan decision, it will designate these areas as “Wild Lands.” This determination will be made through a public land use planning process, consistent with requirements of law and other resource management considerations.

Q: What happens to WSAs that are released by Congress?

A: When Congress releases a WSA, the BLM will consider the Congressional action when making subsequent land use decisions for the released lands. Land use determinations will be made through a public land use planning process, consistent with requirements of law and other resource management considerations.

Q: Does this policy affect existing land use plans?

A: The Secretary’s Order directs the BLM to submit a report to the Secretary, within six months of the date of the Order, that describes the BLM’s plan for considering wilderness characteristics in existing land use plans consistent with the Order. The BLM will initiate a land use plan conformance review to identify which existing land use plans are inconsistent with this policy. After completion of the conformance review, the BLM will determine the most appropriate means to update those plans.

Q: Aren’t the “Wild Lands” described in the Secretary’s Order and in this guidance just WSAs under another name?

A: No. Lands with Wilderness Characteristics will be identified through a wilderness inventory by the BLM. If the BLM concludes that lands have wilderness characteristics, it will consider these lands through an open and transparent land use planning process with full public participation and input. If the BLM concludes through this process that protection of wilderness characteristics is appropriate, the BLM shall designate these lands as Wild Lands. Wild Lands will be managed under this new BLM policy guidance and through protective measures that are identified in a land use plan, again as part of the BLM’s public process.

Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) are managed under the BLM’s WSA Interim Management Policy (IMP, Manual H-8550-1), last revised in 1995. The BLM manages WSAs, as units within

the National Landscape Conservation System, to retain their wilderness characteristics until Congress makes a decision to designate the areas as Wilderness or to release the areas for non-wilderness uses. The Interim Management Policy is the basic reference for WSA management and provides detailed direction on management of activities within WSAs.

This new policy does not change the management of existing WSAs pending before Congress or congressionally designated units of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Q: Will the BLM be identifying new WSAs?

A: No. The BLM will not be identifying new WSAs. However, through its public land use planning process, the BLM will determine whether lands with wilderness characteristics should carry the new designation of Wild Lands and be managed to protect their wilderness characteristics.

Q: Is the BLM going to designate more wilderness areas as a result of this new policy?

A: No. Only Congress can designate Wilderness or make determinations regarding the status of WSAs pending before it. The BLM may develop recommendations, with public involvement, regarding possible Congressional designation of lands into the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Q: How will the BLM manage the newly identified lands that possess wilderness characteristics?

A: Decisions on whether or not and to what extent to protect lands with wilderness characteristics will be made in an open and public process. For proposed projects that are consistent with existing land use plans, the consideration of newly identified lands with wilderness characteristics will be a part of the environmental (NEPA) analysis for the proposed project. Consideration of whether to protect the wilderness characteristics as Wild Lands will be accomplished through the BLM's open and public land use planning process. When the decision is to protect such lands as Wild Lands, the decision will identify what actions will be taken to protect those areas.

Q: What is the difference between a Wilderness area and a WSA?

A: The 1964 Wilderness Act (P.L. 88-577) established the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). A Wilderness is an area that has been included in the NWPS by act of Congress. WSA is the term the BLM uses to describe lands that were identified under the FLPMA Section 603 wilderness review process as possessing wilderness characteristics but have not been designated by Congress as wilderness areas. There are also some WSAs identified under Section 202 of FLPMA that are pending before Congress. These WSAs are managed to

maintain their wilderness characteristics until Congress determines whether or not to designate them as Wilderness or to release them.

Q: What are wilderness characteristics?

A: Wilderness characteristics are defined in Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act as size, naturalness, and outstanding solitude or primitive recreation, and may include other supplemental values, such as ecological, geological or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

Q: How many acres does the BLM manage as Wilderness and WSAs?

A: Less than 9 percent of the land managed by the Bureau of Land Management consists of Wilderness and WSAs. The Bureau of Land Management is the steward of 221 Wilderness areas totaling over 8.7 million acres and 545 WSAs totaling nearly 13 million acres.

Q: How will the BLM use the wilderness inventories conducted by many public groups in their land use planning process?

A: When public groups submit wilderness inventory information, the BLM will review and consider that information when updating its wilderness inventory.