

The BLM's Proposed Landscape Approach for Managing Public Lands

Introduction

The BLM recognizes that the public lands are facing increasingly complex and widespread environmental challenges that transcend traditional management boundaries. These challenges include managing wildfire; controlling weeds and insect outbreaks; providing for energy development and urban growth; and addressing pervasive impacts from the effects of climate change. The BLM is developing a landscape-scale management approach to better understand these challenges and support balanced stewardship of the diverse natural resources of the public lands.

Landscapes are large, connected geographical regions that have similar environmental characteristics, for example, the Sonoran Desert and the Colorado Plateau. These landscapes span administrative boundaries and can encompass all or portions of several BLM field offices.

A landscape approach examines such larger areas to more fully recognize natural resource conditions and trends, natural and human influences, and opportunities for resource conservation, restoration, and development. The approach seeks to identify important ecological values and patterns of environmental change that may not be evident when managing smaller, local land areas.

A landscape approach informs and enhances local management. The BLM's field offices maintain their central role in managing public lands. They continue to prepare land use plans, authorize land uses, conduct monitoring, and work with partners and stakeholders to develop and implement local management strategies. The broader perspective provided through a landscape approach will help focus and integrate these local management efforts. A landscape approach also provides an important foundation for developing coordinated management strategies with partner agencies, stakeholders, and American Indian Tribes.

A Landscape Approach Responds to Secretarial Direction

The BLM's proposed landscape approach supports Secretary Salazar's key directions and priorities for the Department of the Interior (DOI). In February, 2010, the Secretary issued orders establishing direction for the DOI on climate change and renewable energy development. The Secretary's Climate Change Order (Order 3289) states that the realities of climate change require changes in how the DOI manages land, water, and fish and wildlife resources; the Order directs DOI agencies to consider climate change in planning and decision-making. The Renewable Energy Order (Order 3285) establishes the development of renewable energy as a DOI priority. The Secretary's priorities challenge managers to consider natural resources from a broader viewpoint, and to integrate a landscape perspective with local management efforts.

The BLM's Proposed Landscape Approach

The BLM's proposed landscape approach builds on land management concepts and experiences that have been evolving for nearly three decades. BLM managers recognized in the early 1980's that western forests and rangelands were beset by widespread wildfires and weed and insect infestations that could no longer be managed effectively by local offices alone, or through

traditional management practices. Scientists, land managers, and stakeholders have been working since then to understand these wide-ranging impacts, develop shared strategies, and implement collaborative management efforts. These collective experiences and partnerships underpin the BLM's proposed landscape approach.

The BLM's proposed landscape approach consists of five interconnected components that provide a framework for integrating science and management. The five components are:

1. Rapid Ecoregional Assessments (REAs)

REAs synthesize the best available information about resource conditions and trends within an ecoregion. They highlight and map areas of high ecological value, including important wildlife habitats and corridors, and gauge their potential risks from climate change, wildfires, invasive species, energy development, and urban growth. REAs also map areas that have high energy development potential, and relatively low ecological value, which could be best-suited for siting future energy development. In addition, REAs establish landscape-scale baseline ecological data to gauge the effect and effectiveness of future management actions.

Ecoregions are large landscapes defined by their ecological characteristics. The BLM has piloted REAs in three ecoregions: the Northern Great Basin, Wyoming Basin, and Chihuahuan Desert. REAs were initiated in 2010 for seven additional ecoregions: the Central Basin and Range, Mojave Basin and Range, Sonoran Desert, Northwestern Plains, Middle Rockies, and Colorado Plateau in the continental U.S., and the Seward Peninsula-Nulato Hills-Kotzebue Lowlands in Alaska. These ecoregions vary in size from 11.5 million acres (Seward Peninsula ecoregion) to 88.3 million acres (Northwest Great Plains ecoregion).

2. Ecoregional Direction

Ecoregional Direction uses the results of the REAs, with input from BLM staff, partner agencies, stakeholders, and Tribes, to identify key management strategies for the public lands within an ecoregion. Ecoregional Direction will identify strategies for conservation and development, including key focal areas for conserving wildlife habitats and migration corridors, and focal areas for potential energy development and transmission. Ecoregional Direction will also provide a blueprint for coordinating and implementing these priorities at the BLM's state and field-office levels.

The BLM, with the assistance of the Udall Center for Environmental Conflict Resolution, is currently discussing the landscape approach with management partners and public land stakeholders, and developing "lessons learned" from past landscape-level management efforts. This input will be used to craft Ecoregional Direction that can best foster and guide successful collaborative management actions.

3. Field Implementation

Field implementation puts the management priorities and strategies identified in ecoregional direction into practice on-the-ground. This will be accomplished by:

- Amending the BLM's land use plans, where necessary;

- Revising and implementing mitigation measures for authorized land uses, including Best Management Practices;
 - Analyzing and implementing proposed projects and treatments, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA);
 - Performing monitoring; and
 - Developing budgets that focus and share management resources.
4. Monitoring for Adaptive Management
Consistent, high-quality monitoring information is essential for adaptive management. The BLM is modernizing its monitoring and mapping programs to meet this critical information requirement. The BLM's Assessment, Inventory, and Monitoring (AIM) Strategy will standardize data collection and retrieval so information is comparable over time, and can be readily accessed and shared. The goal of the AIM Strategy is to provide the information needed to understand resource conditions and trends, and to evaluate and refine implementation actions. In addition, the BLM is implementing its Geospatial Services Strategic Plan, which will provide the high-quality mapping products needed to develop and support resource management strategies and decisions.
5. Science Integration
Science informs sound land management decision making. The DOI is establishing eight regional Climate Science Centers to provide scientific information and tools to help land managers anticipate, monitor, and adapt to climate change impacts. In addition, a wide range of science research is conducted regularly on the public lands, in cooperation with universities and state and Federal agencies. This landscape approach is being designed to more closely link science research with public land management issues and needs, and to more fully integrate science information into resource planning and decision-making.

The Importance of Partnerships to a Landscape Approach

Partnerships are critical to successful resource stewardship. At the local level, partnerships develop shared management strategies, foster public awareness and support, and harness the volunteer assistance needed for effective implementation. Partnerships are equally vital at the broader, landscape level, where the diversity of land ownerships (Federal, Tribal, state, county, municipal, and private) can complicate effective responses to widespread environmental issues, including climate change impacts. The DOI recognizes the importance of resource management partnerships at the local and landscape levels. To encourage partnerships and expand their role and capacity, the DOI is establishing a national network of Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs).

LCCs are management-science partnerships composed of private, state, Tribal, and Federal representatives who will work toward a shared vision of landscape health and sustainability. The LCCs will facilitate collaboration, provide science information and tools needed for developing resource management strategies, and promote coordinated partnership actions at the landscape and local levels. The LCCs and the BLM's proposed landscape approach are complementary efforts that will become more fully integrated as they progress.