

Questions and Answers: Rapid Ecoregional Assessments

What are Rapid Ecoregional Assessments (REAs)?

REAs are a synthesis and analysis of the best available information about natural 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 four key environmental “change agents”: climate change, wildfires, invasive species, and development. 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.

What are ecoregions?

Ecoregions are large landscapes defined by their characteristics. Examples of ecoregions include the Sonoran Desert and Colorado Plateau. Ecoregions span administrative boundaries and typically encompass areas much larger than those managed by individual BLM field offices. The ecoregions under assessment range in size from 11 million to 91 million acres.

Where are REAs being conducted?

REAs were initiated in 2010 for seven ecoregions in the western United States and Alaska that contain substantial amounts of public land. The ecoregions being assessed are: 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.

When will the REAs be completed?

REAs take about 18 months to complete. Four REAs were initiated in July, 2010 and three REAs were initiated in September, 2010. All seven REAs are scheduled for completion in 2012.

Why are they called “rapid” assessments, if they take about 18 months to complete?

Rapid assessments are a category of assessment, recognized by natural resource scientists, which synthesize existing information rather than conduct research or collect new data. They are relatively “rapid” in comparison to assessments that conduct research or collect new data, or in comparison to the preparation of a BLM land use plan, which typically take from 36 to 48 months to complete.

Why is the BLM preparing REAs?

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 REAs are being prepared to help land managers and stakeholders better understand these challenges, and to provide science-based information to support balanced stewardship of the diverse natural resources of the public lands.

What do REAs do?

REAs look across an ecoregion to more fully understand ecological conditions and trends; natural and human influences; and opportunities for resource conservation, restoration, and development. They seek to identify important resource values and patterns of environmental change that may not be evident when managing smaller, local land areas. The REAs provide regional information that will inform and benefit local management efforts.

More specifically, REAs:

- identify and answer important management questions;
- document key *conservation elements*, with a focus on regionally-significant terrestrial habitats, aquatic habitats, and species of concern;
- describe influences from four environmental *change agents*: climate change, wildfire, invasive species, and development;
- assess the collective effects of projected trends;
- identify and map key opportunities for resource conservation, restoration, and development;
- identify science gaps and data needs; and
- provide a baseline to evaluate and guide future management actions.

What are conservation elements?

Conservation elements are key resource values of conservation concern within an ecoregion. Conservation elements include important terrestrial and aquatic ecological communities, and representative or vulnerable plant and animal species. REAs assess the current status and forecast the future condition of these key resource values.

What are change agents?

Change agents are disturbances on the landscape that can influence ecosystem health. They can have natural causes, such as wildfire; human causes, such as energy development; or result from the synergistic interaction of both, such as climate change. REAs examine the potential effects of important change agents on conservation elements, which are key resource values of conservation concern within an ecoregion.

Do REAs make resource management decisions?

No. REAs do not make management decisions or allocate resource uses. They provide science-based information and tools for land managers and stakeholders to consider in subsequent resource planning and decision-making processes.

How will the BLM use the REAs?

The BLM will use the REAs to inform resource management at the local and ecoregional levels. At the local level, the REAs will enhance the quality of land use planning and environmental analysis conducted by BLM field offices. The information, maps, and tools provided by the REAs will strengthen analyses of the potential and cumulative effects of climate change and other environmental disturbances on important ecological values.

At the ecoregional level, the BLM will use the REAs, along with input from partner agencies, stakeholders, and American Indian Tribes, to develop broad-level management strategies, called “ecoregional direction”, for an ecoregion’s BLM-managed lands. Ecoregional direction will be prepared after a REA is completed.

What is “Ecoregional Direction”?

Ecoregional direction uses the information from the REAs, along with input from partner agencies, stakeholders, and American Indian Tribes, to develop a broad-level management strategy for an ecoregion’s BLM-managed lands. This broad-level management strategy will identify focal areas on BLM-managed lands for conservation and development, including focal areas for conserving wildlife habitats and migration corridors, and focal areas for potential energy development and urban growth. Ecoregional direction will also provide a blueprint for coordinating and implementing these priorities at the BLM’s state and field-office levels.

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

No. REAs synthesize available data about the ecological values of all land within an ecoregion. All land ownerships are considered in order to understand how important wildlife habitats may be interconnected, and where the best opportunities may exist for conserving and restoring key ecological values.

Because REAs synthesize the best available information, they can potentially benefit all landowners and managers within an ecoregion. The REAs will provide science-based information that any landowners and manager can consider in managing their lands. In addition, the REAs present an opportunity for interested land managers to share information and discuss resource management conditions and needs. In this way, 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.

How are REAs prepared?

REAs begin as a list of *management questions* from an ecoregion’s resource managers. The questions identify management issues or concerns that cannot be resolved by individual offices alone and have regional importance. Here are some example management questions for sage-grouse, a wildlife species of concern in several ecoregions:

- What is the current distribution of occupied habitat and movement corridors for sage-grouse within this ecoregion?
- What change agents are affecting this habitat and movement corridors?
- Where are sage-grouse populations at risk?
- Where are potential habitat restoration areas?

A REA is designed to answer these and similar management questions regarding an ecoregion’s key resource values and change agents.

REAs are prepared in two phases. The first phase is the *pre-assessment*, which refines the management questions and identifies the data available for analysis. The second phase is the *assessment*, which conducts the analysis and prepares the assessment report, maps, and supporting documents.

The phases of the REA are organized into the following seven tasks:

Phase	Task #	Product
Pre-assessment	1	Refine management questions
	2	Identify and recommend datasets for analysis
	3	Identify and recommend analytical models and tools
	4	Prepare REA work plan
Assessment	5	Synthesize datasets
	6	Conduct analyses and generate findings
	7	Prepare REA report, maps, and supporting documents

Who manages the REAs?

An Assessment Management Team (AMT) led by the BLM, and composed of Federal and state managers and technical specialists from within the ecoregion, oversees each REA. The AMT guides the assessment and oversees the work of the contractors who perform the REA’s technical data management and analysis tasks. The contractors have been hired by the BLM for their special expertise in natural resource assessment, data management, and conservation planning.

Can the public participate in the REAs?

Yes. When a REA is initiated, the public can provide input into the draft management questions the REA is being designed to answer. The draft management questions are presented in the initial workplan that is prepared for each REA. The workplan is available for review on the BLM’s website (www.blm.gov) and comments on a REA’s draft management questions can be submitted through the website.

Once an assessment is underway, the public can track its progress on the BLM’s website and read the REA’s periodic task memos, which are prepared for each of the REA’s seven key tasks. The REA final report will also be available on the BLM’s website.

Can the public provide comments on the REAs’ final reports.

No. The REAs are science documents that, like other science documents, will undergo a science peer review process rather than a public comment process. The science peer review will be managed by the United States Geological Survey (USGS), which is the lead science agency of the Department of the Interior. Science peer review will occur throughout the REAs and on the REA’s final reports.

Will the REAs assess livestock grazing, wild horse grazing, or the use of Off-Highway Vehicles (OHVs) as change agents?

A REA may assess these or other change agents, depending on the concerns identified by resource managers and the availability of data at the ecoregional level. Change agents are identified through the management questions asked by resource managers, which is the first task in preparing a REA. The next tasks are to determine if sufficient data and appropriate analytical models are available to enable analysis at an ecoregional level. If sufficient data and appropriate analytical models are available, the identified change agents will be assessed in the REA.

Why aren't cultural resources being assessed as important resource values?

Cultural resources are important resource values. They are not being assessed in the REAs partially due to funding constraints, and partially because it is unclear how to identify and evaluate cultural resources at the broad, ecoregional level. However, the BLM is interested in addressing cultural resources in a future REA and would like to work with State Historic Preservation Offices and American Indian Tribes to identify potential data analysis models and techniques.

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

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 DOI is in the process of establishing 21 LCCs across the United States. The LCCs are self-directed partnerships which, once established and fully functioning, could become involved in or assume management of future REAs. The LCCs and the BLM's REAs are complementary processes that will become more fully integrated as they progress.

What is the relationship of the REAs to similar efforts being undertaken by the Western Governors' Association (WGA)? The WGA's efforts include:

- Establishing a Decision Support System (DSS) for crucial wildlife habitat and corridors in the western states. The purpose of the DSS is to provide a consistent source of landscape-scale mapped biological information that decision makers and the public can use to identify wildlife habitats and corridors, prepare conservation plans, and site development infrastructure.
- The WGA and the U.S. Department of Energy released a joint report in 2009 (Western Renewable Energy Zone, Phase 1 Report) that takes the first steps toward identifying areas in the Western Interconnection that have the potential for large scale development of renewable resources and low environmental impacts.

The BLM's REAs and the WGA's wildlife and energy planning efforts are complementary efforts that share common goals. The BLM is participating, along with other DOI and Federal agencies, in the WGA's wildlife and energy planning initiatives. The information developed by the WGA through the Decision Support System will be incorporated into the BLM's REAs, and the information produced through the REAs will be available to the WGA.

Although these efforts share common goals, they are different in some key aspects. One of the main differences is that the BLM's REAs will examine the effects of climate change, wildfire, and other environmental disturbances on key ecological values. In this way, the REAs will provide predictive modeling of potential future environmental changes that will be informative to the WGA and other land managers and stakeholders. Another difference is that the REAs will examine a somewhat broader scope of resource values. In addition to key wildlife habitats, the REAs will also assess, for example, the availability of and potential changes in water resources and supply.

The efforts underway by the BLM and WGA are both important and needed. Both are working to provide scientifically-grounded information needed to conserve crucial wildlife habitats in an era of complex and widespread environmental challenges. The BLM and the WGA recognize the importance of renewable energy development to help address climate change, and enhance the nation's economic development and energy security. In addition, the BLM and the WGA are both taking a broader, landscape approach to integrate and achieve these interconnected goals. The BLM will coordinate closely with the WGA to ensure they are well integrated.