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THE BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT: A HALF-CENTURY OF CHALLENGES AND CHANGE

*Al Pierson**

RETROSPECTIVE

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), an agency of the Department of the Interior, may be little known outside the West. But the fact is, the BLM manages more land than any other governmental agency in the United States—264 million acres. The BLM manages the public lands on behalf of the American people, who own these lands and can be proud of their lands' extraordinary beauty and vast array of benefits, including public access for recreation, revenues from mineral extraction, and the conservation of significant cultural and natural resources.

The BLM, which turned fifty-years old last year, has a history that has included challenge, change, and, far too often, controversy. A half-century ago, the BLM's predecessors at the U.S. Grazing Service were caught up in a controversy over raising federal grazing fees from a nickel to fifteen cents per animal unit month. The controversy led to a compromise that resulted in a two cent fee increase and the merger of the General Land Office and the Grazing Service. These two agencies became the BLM.

Of even greater importance, the 94th Congress passed the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) in 1976. That law defined the BLM's core mission, which is to manage the public lands in a "harmonious and coordinated" manner "without permanent impairment of the productivity of the land and the quality of the environment." In addition, FLPMA:

- Declared that public lands would remain in public ownership.
- Explained BLM's multiple-use mandate, including the application of the Wilderness Act to public lands.
- And required that the BLM make resource decisions in the best interest of the American people.

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CHANGE AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Burt Silcock, a former Director of BLM, said that back in 1946 the only thing the BLM had to worry about was keeping the sheepmen and the cattlemen from each other's throats. Then, in the winter of 1947, severe cold and snow stranded antelope along fence lines, killing thousands. This prompted the BLM to create a wildlife program, starting a long transition to multiple-use management. The transition continued with the establishment of the King Range National Conservation Area in 1969. And an historic development occurred in 1996, when President Clinton designated the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in Utah the first national monument to be placed under BLM management.

This snapshot of BLM history shows how, in the course of only fifty years, BLM-managed lands have gone from "the lands nobody wanted" to the lands everybody wants. And the agency is working hard on key initiatives that underscore the environmental and economic value of the public lands.

- In the Pacific Northwest, the BLM and the Forest Service are implementing the 24 million-acre Northwest Forest Plan, which is scientifically credible, legally defensible, and socially responsible. It is also the world's largest ecosystem restoration plan.
- The BLM is implementing new rangeland regulations aimed at restoring 100,000 acres of riparian areas and bringing 20 million acres of uplands into properly functioning condition.
- Through a strategy called PACFISH, the BLM is restoring and conserving hundreds of miles of riparian areas and critical habitat for salmon and steelhead.
- The BLM is improving land-ownership patterns by working with the Western States Land Commissioners. This includes trading land desirable for development for land with high conservation values. The Bureau is also working to improve land-ownership patterns for Native Americans. For example, in March 1996, the BLM participated in a transfer of 15,000 acres of Federal and State land in New Mexico to the Pueblo of Santa Ana to improve the Pueblo land base.
- The BLM is leading federal efforts to check the spread of noxious weeds and is implementing a fire policy that protects lives and property while recognizing the vital role of fire in nature.

These initiatives will result in healthier, more productive public lands. Nevertheless, these actions tend to be reactive rather than preemp-

tive in dealing with land-management problems. As the 21st century approaches, the BLM needs to do a better job of anticipating problems before they become crises.

EXPANDING OUR KNOWLEDGE BASE

Expanding our knowledge base is one of the ways in which the BLM is trying to foresee and avoid problems. For instance, at this time no one can describe with precision the ecological condition of the public lands. While the BLM knows conditions are improving, the fact remains that we do not have a consistent measure of the land's health.

The BLM's new grazing regulations will help fill this void in our information base. The regulations require the development of standards for rangeland health and guidelines for grazing management. The standards will apply to all uses of the public lands—not simply grazing. Through these standards and guidelines, BLM land managers will be better able to access the condition of the public lands.

As it expands its information base, the BLM is paying attention to social and economic data. Without such data, policy debates can proceed in an arena of misunderstanding and misinformation. The BLM needs to work with local communities and state governments to gain more knowledge about social and demographic changes that may affect the land's health. With this knowledge, land managers and local citizens will be able to anticipate and adjust to changing economies before anyone can raise the false choice of "jobs vs. the environment."

This choice is a false one because BLM-managed lands produce a bounty of economic benefits—in fact, these lands generate more revenue than they cost to manage. The Bureau has an operating budget of about \$650 million a year, yet public lands annually produce about \$1.4 billion in generated receipts, including more than \$523 million from oil and gas production.¹ It is small wonder, then, that BLM-managed public lands are the fourth largest federal revenue generator, ranking behind only the Internal Revenue Service, the U.S. Customs Service, and the Minerals Management Service.

Of the money generated by the BLM, more than \$725 million is returned in direct payments to states and counties.² Included in this are

1. 1997 U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT, BUDGET JUSTIFICATIONS.

2. See *supra* note 1.

more than \$100 million in Payments in Lieu of Taxes, which are distributed to local governments to pay for such things as schools, roads, and fire and police protection. The BLM spends another \$233 million to protect state and private lands and public resources from the effects of fire.

Without the necessary sociological and economic data, policymakers can make ill-informed and unwise decisions. Recent research by BLM and others shows that:

- Over the next ten years, the economies of the Western public land states are expected to prosper and grow faster than those of any other region in the country. The Rocky Mountain Region is projected to be the fastest-growing, with a \$65 billion increase in gross state product.³
- From 1993-2005, job growth in the far West region is expected to increase by 5.6 million jobs; in the Southwest region by 3.4 million jobs; and in the Rocky Mountain Region by 1.3 million jobs.⁴
- The economy of Nevada, with the highest proportion of public land in the lower forty-eight states—over 83 percent of Nevada is public land—is projected to have the highest rate of growth of all states, followed by two other large public land states, Utah and Arizona.⁵
- Annual family income in rural counties adjacent to public land is approximately \$2,000 higher than those rural counties without a public land base.⁶

BLM land managers need that kind of information to make informed decisions, as do community leaders, county commissioners, zoning boards, and other local entities. That's why the Bureau, at a time of rapid social and demographic changes, is helping to develop and share such information.

These changes are evident across the Western United States. Metal mining on public lands now accounts for 1 in 2,500 jobs in the twelve Western states. Public land livestock grazing accounts for 1 in 1,700 jobs. And federal timber lands of the Pacific Northwest provide about 1.5 per-

3. Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Regional and State Projections of Economic Activity and Population to the Year 2005*, 75 SURVEY OF CURRENT BUSINESS 44 (1995).

4. See *supra* note 3.

5. See *supra* note 3.

6. U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE, AGRICULTURAL INFORMATION BULLETIN 710, 1994.

cent of the region's jobs.⁷

At the same time, recreation on public lands is growing steadily. The BLM expects to handle 76 million recreational visitor days to the public lands in 1998, an increase of 1.5 million visitor days over 1997.

Keeping up with change is never easy, of course. There's a story about an engineer who spent a year of his life building a bridge over the Missouri River and the rest of his career trying to keep the river under the bridge. Often that is the way public land management agencies approach both ecological changes and demographic trends. Managers may find themselves saying, "Well, that doesn't really jibe with how it used to be or how I came up through the system." Managers, politicians, and public land users alike then act surprised when we find our bridges no longer cross the river.

That way of thinking needs to change if America is to protect and conserve America's public land legacy. As Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors the prepared mind." If we had taken an anticipatory approach to problem solving, we could have prevented much of the controversy that arose in the Pacific Northwest during the 1980s. Some people at that time said that protection of the Northern Spotted Owl under the Endangered Species Act would make a "new Appalachia" of the region.

But the opposite occurred. Data from 1988 to 1992 show that the economy of the Pacific Northwest was remarkably strong and productive. Why? Because businesses and jobs have been moving to those parts of the country with the healthiest environments.

From 1988-1992:

- Employment in the Pacific Northwest grew 2.4 times faster than the rest of the country;
- Personal income grew 2.2 times faster;
- Average income grew 2.1 times faster;
- And earnings increased 2.7 times faster than the rest of the United States.⁸

This dramatic growth in personal income, job creation, and wages came about, in part, because the Pacific Northwest's healthy environment is attracting employers and families to the region. This shows how a

7. T.M. Power, *The Wealth of Nature*, ISSUES IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, Spring, 1996.

8. Economic Well-Being and Environmental Protection in the Pacific Northwest, (Dec. 1995) in A CONSENSUS REPORT BY PACIFIC NORTHWEST ECONOMISTS, (T.M. Power, ed. Econ. Dep't, Univ. of Mt.) (Dec. 1995).

healthy environment contributes to a region's economic health.

Does this mean that the extractive industries have declined in importance? No. But, the BLM recognizes that the very presence of public lands attracts diverse economic development and community well-being. The BLM needs to better understand and plan for the consequences of such changes. How can we accommodate growing recreation usage of public lands before the mountainside is terraced by tire tracks? How can we better protect rare fishes before excessive grazing puts the stream bank in the stream course?

COMMUNITY-BASED DECISIONMAKING

As it moves into the next millennium, the BLM is taking a collaborative approach to managing the public lands. We are a nation of communities, and communities must work together in adapting to changing conditions. Our collaborative approach to land management is perhaps best exemplified in the citizen-based Resource Advisory Councils that we created under our grazing regulations that took effect in August, 1995.

These councils bring together traditional users of the public lands, local citizens, and conservationists to define and work toward common goals. They help move resource decisionmaking closer to Western communities, whose stake in the public lands is enormous, as is that of all Americans who use or care about the public lands.

For consider this: more than 60 million Americans—about 25 percent of the nation—fish and hunt. Countless more enjoy camping or hiking, birding, or walking in the woods. Many millions more who are usually cramped in tall buildings or locked in traffic jams take solace knowing there remain unspoiled places—places where they can take their families and rejuvenate their souls.

Whether we hunt, ranch, fish, mine, hike, or simply enjoy the outdoors, the common denominator is that we all want the wide-open spaces of BLM public lands to be healthy and productive. Once we realize that we share this value, we can solve a myriad of public land issues that once seemed beyond resolution.

The collective challenge of resource managers, commodity groups, and conservationists is to redirect our focus on the things that draw us together as a nation of communities. We must counter rhetoric with reason, meet ideology with common sense.

WORKING TOGETHER TO CONSERVE AND HEAL THE LAND

All across the country people are awakening to the fact that we can lend our voices and backs to conserve and restore our lands and waters. It is not enough to preserve isolated parts of the landscape—we must reconnect entire landscapes and watersheds. It is not enough to create a local greenway or clean a neighborhood stream—we must connect their health to that of the public lands, the national forests, state parks, national parks and to the wide, ocean-bound rivers. As conservationist Aldo Leopold said: “The only progress that counts is that on the actual landscape of the back forty.”

In recent years, there has been intense debate over environmental and natural resource laws, such as the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act and FLPMA. These laws have been astonishingly effective in our country's efforts to clean our air and water, to improve hunting and fishing opportunities, and to protect our public lands. What is broken is the way we deliver healthy lands and waters. Somehow we have gotten off-track. We have forgotten to make the resources, and the people who depend on them, our top priority.

So, instead of promoting local watershed restoration coalitions, we have expended valuable time and energy in litigation. Rather than focus on our collective obligation to pass on clean rivers to our children, we have spent time debating controversial legislation, including various grazing bills. Imagine the possibilities if land managers, ranchers, and environmentalists had spent that time building respect and understanding among one another. Because when we look beyond the harsh rhetoric, a simple truth becomes clear. All who use or care for the public lands—be they environmentalists or ranchers—share the common goal of protecting open spaces and rangeland health. No responsible livestock operator believes that unhealthy rangelands are good for business. No reasonable conservationist finds subdivisions and ranchettes in the best interest of fish and wildlife conservation.

The Bureau of Land Management's future success depends on:

- Expanding our knowledge of both the ecological systems we manage and the people who use them.
- Improving our understanding of how social and demographic changes are affecting local communities and public land use.
- And getting out of Washington and working through the Resource Advisory Councils, watershed coalitions, and community organizations to improve the health and productivity of the public lands.

The BLM's future success begins and ends with how well we work with the people on the land. That is the only way we can deliver healthy, diverse, and productive ecological systems.

The best measure of our stewardship is the condition of the 264 million acres of public lands that belong to our children. The BLM is committed to passing this public land legacy on, unimpaired.