



Arizonans Asked to Weigh In on Bureau of Land Management's Public Lands Rule

New policies to strengthen stewardship for water, open space and recreation in era of climate change

March 30, 2023 (Phoenix, AZ) – Arizonans welcomed today's [announcement](#) of a plan that shifts the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) focus to prioritize recreation, conservation and protecting public lands and cultural resources. The rule was welcomed as a significant new tool for helping Arizonans prioritize water conservation across the state. As the nation's largest land manager (245 million acres) the BLM plays a critical role in Arizona, managing over 12 million acres of lands across the state that are vitally important to the conservation of water, wildlife, and the growing demand for access to the outdoors.

The plan highlights the need for the agency to work with local communities to focus on the conservation of land, water, and wildlife to ensure communities can protect future access to federal public lands while combating the growing impacts of climate change. It also encourages BLM managers to work more closely with Tribal nations to ensure cultural resource protection in Arizona and across the West.

"The lands currently managed by the Bureau of Land Management help convey histories of ongoing Indigenous stewardship, family and cultural traditions that span generations," **said Skylar Begay, Director, Tribal Collaboration in Outreach & Advocacy, Archaeology Southwest.** "Strengthening and expanding designations of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern are important tools for advancing the protection of tribal cultural sites and landscapes, such as those in Arizona's Great Bend of the Gila."

"BLM's new Public Lands Rule puts Arizona's people and their values first," **said Mike Quigley, Arizona State Director for The Wilderness Society.** "Local communities have worked for years to protect cherished public lands across our state. They've needed a federal land management partner with clear guidance and direction to help make these protections real in the face of intense development, recreation pressures and the looming specter of water shortages. We hope the agency's new plan sets the stage for field staff and leadership in DC to work with Arizonans in a way that meets our needs while addressing the challenges we face from rapid growth and climate impacts."

In a [letter](#) sent last fall to Arizona State Director Ray Suazo, 22 conservation organizations working across Arizona called on the Bureau to use its authority to help protect the state's water, wildlands and outdoor access. The letter recommended four ways the agency could protect Arizona's public lands and advance the America the Beautiful initiative by saving more nature and fighting the climate crisis. These recommendations included updating 30-year-old management plans to meet current challenges; initiating a statewide process to ensure climate resiliency and biodiversity; reviewing citizen-proposed conservation areas before completing travel management plans; and completing an inventory of wildlands in key field offices.

"For decades the BLM has managed our state's wildlands with outdated plans that heavily weighted resource extraction, development, and unregulated recreation that harms wildlife," **said Quigley.** "This new rule will help rebalance the agency's priorities to better address the values that, over and over, Arizonans say are important including conservation of our water, cultural areas and wildlife."

The BLM has identified over 2 million acres of land across the state that should be administratively protected - places like Burro Creek, the Aquarius Mountains, and the Hassayampa River, that local communities cherish. Despite these areas being identified for conservation, the agency has failed to take any meaningful steps towards protecting them. For example, Burro Creek has been identified for protection of its wilderness characteristics since before the current - and outdated - 1995 management plan for the area was developed.

Lawmakers, [businesses](#), and outdoor enthusiasts across Arizona want to see more administrative protections by the BLM. Representative Grijalva recently joined [a letter signed by 40 members](#) of the US House of Representatives calling on Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland to direct the BLM to help western states meet the challenges of the climate crisis by administratively protecting more public land.

City of Flagstaff Council Member, Jim McCarthy said, “Many of our Western communities are being devastated by the impacts of the climate crisis. As a result, many of the areas important to Westerners and visitors are at risk of being unnecessarily degraded or lost, especially since many of the BLM lands in our communities are not permanently protected. We hope that through this rulemaking process, as the largest land manager in the nation, the Bureau of Land Management will play a leading role in protecting more of these lands and waters, and in turn, our communities for the future.”

“[Over 120 local elected officials from western states](#) have called on the Biden administration to protect more Bureau of Land Management lands as part of the administration’s America the Beautiful initiative.” **Anna Peterson, Executive Director of The Mountain Pact** said. “ We look forward to the BLM using this rulemaking process to conserve and protect our nation’s important public lands, [wildlife](#) and waters in tandem with locally-led efforts to advance conservation across the west.”

“In 2023, it’s time that land management agencies like the BLM prioritize recreation and conservation to support healthy communities and Arizona’s \$21 billion annual outdoor recreation economy,” said **Matthew Nelson, Executive Director of the Arizona Trail Association**. “People love Arizona for its deserts, canyons, mountains, and forests, and we are very encouraged to see the BLM taking their responsibility of stewardship of public lands, waters and cultural resources seriously.”

In a [2021 Gallup poll](#) in partnership with the Center for the Future of Arizona, 92% of Arizonans said it was a priority to protect and preserve Arizona’s rivers, natural areas and wildlife. In the [2023 Colorado College State of the Rockies poll](#), 86% of Arizonans support a national goal of conserving 30% of America’s land and waters by 2030.

“Local Arizona officials and the Biden administration have set significant conservation goals, to ensure we stave off the worst impacts of the climate and nature crisis, especially for our vulnerable watershed,” said **Kelly Burke, Executive Director of Wild Arizona**. “We can’t reach these goals without the largest land manager playing a significant role in the effort. This new Public Lands Rule directs the BLM to do just that – making conservation the priority now and into the future.”

The Bureau announced a 75-day public comment period. Public comments will be accepted through a Department of the Interior portal, with several informational public meetings anticipated in the coming months.

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