



*Païute El Dorado ACEC, Nevada.
Photo: Mason Cummings*

The Bureau of Land Management Must Take Bold Action *For the Nation to Reach its Conservation Goals*

The Bureau of Land Management must aggressively use the tools they have at their disposal if they are going to help the Biden Administration and Western states achieve their conservation goals.



CONSERVATION
LANDS
FOUNDATION



Introduction

Western communities are experiencing many challenges that come with the ever-increasing popularity of our public lands and growing infrastructure needs on top of devastating and expensive climate impacts from wildfires, floods, mudslides, drought, and heatwaves. All of these negatively impact [tourist](#), [outdoor](#), and [agricultural](#) economies; as well as the west's [health](#), [land](#), [water](#), and [air quality](#).

[Scientific research](#)

warns that if we are going to stave off the worst impacts of the climate and biodiversity crisis we have to [take bold action](#). The Biden administration has made significant commitments towards addressing these challenges. A part of that work must include aggressively using the tools they have already at their disposal to durably protect public lands.



*Amargosa River Area of Critical Environmental Concern, California.
Photo: John Dittli*

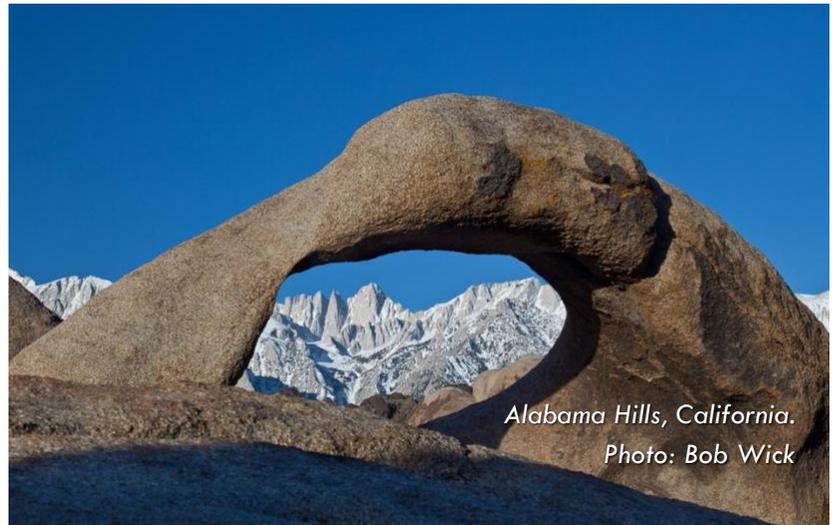


*Molalla WSR, Oregon.
Photo: Bob Wick*

As the [largest land manager in the nation](#), the BLM has a critical role to play in helping the nation meet its conservation goals. The BLM's [mission](#) is “to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.” For years BLM has prioritized oil and gas development and grazing while largely overlooking sustaining the health and diversity of BLM lands.

With the growing need to take action on climate change and its increasing impact on the land, BLM has to do more to bring its mission into balance. Done right, this is a huge opportunity for to address the climate crisis and ensure the health of public lands into the future.

Protecting and sustaining these lands in their natural, undeveloped condition is crucial to combating the effects of climate change as well as providing continued opportunities for outdoor recreation, equitable access to nature, and ultimately ensuring a thriving and livable planet.



*Alabama Hills, California.
Photo: Bob Wick*

Across the West, BLM lands provide real, [quantifiable carbon sequestration and climate adaptation benefits](#) and serve to conserve scarce water resources. These lands also serve as critical climate refugia for wildlife species and play a vital role in ensuring habitat connectivity across the West. In short, conserving Bureau of Land Management lands needs to be at the heart of the Biden administration's [America the Beautiful initiative](#) and administrative actions, like those listed below, should be prioritized in efforts to protect, conserve, and restore more of our nation's lands and waters.



*Handies Peak Wilderness Study Area, Colorado.
Photo: Bob Wick*

BLM Lands Are Vitally Important - Here's Why

Our nation's public lands are tremendous assets to the American people and in particular to Western communities and economies. The [245 million acres of lands](#) managed by the BLM, largely spread across 12 western states, are also the connective tissue between our forests, rivers, parks, and communities. BLM lands make up [10.5 percent](#) of all lands in the country and many of these remain in their natural state, ensuring wildlife habitat connectivity; clean air and water for communities; as well as providing outstanding opportunities for outdoor recreation. These lands include traditional homelands of Indigenous populations and safeguard thousands of cultural and historic sites.

[BLM lands are critical for wildlife connectivity across the West.](#) Researchers have concluded that our existing national parks and other protected areas are not big enough to sustain native wildlife. It is critical that core protected areas be connected by corridors – natural areas that connect vital habitats – to allow animals and plants to move freely across the landscape. Across the West, these vital habitat corridors are found predominantly on lands managed by the BLM - this includes lands identified as “Lands with Wilderness Characteristics” (LWC) and “Areas of Critical Environmental Concern” (ACECs).



*Great Bend of the Gila, Arizona.
Photo: Mason Cummings*

It's no secret that the West is suffering from a climate change driven drought that has made water resources a critical issue for everyone. Here again, lands managed by the BLM have a critical role to play in ensuring water across the west. Millions of Americans depend on waters that flow through lands managed by the BLM and the agency acknowledges that ensuring water quality for these populations is critical. In 2015 the BLM [adopted](#) a “Water Program

Strategy” that was designed to make it a leader in “protecting water resources.” The only clear way for the BLM to meet this commitment is by protecting watersheds - and that means protecting more lands to prevent vegetation loss and soil disturbances, thus ensuring water quality.



*Snake River ACEC, Idaho.
Photo: BLM*

In addition to the conservation value of these lands, they also provide critical economic certainty for rural and gateway communities, so long-term investments can be made to develop local economies and infrastructure. Outdoor recreation is a significant economic driver in the United States each year generating [\\$689 billion in consumer spending and supporting 4.3 million jobs.](#)



*Factory Butte, Utah.
Photo: Marc Adamus*

Conservation Requires Action

The BLM Has The Tools, They Need To Use Them

The BLM has the existing tools and authorities to meet this moment. They must begin using these more widely across the West to accelerate the scope and pace of conservation. Guided by the [Federal Land Policy and Management Act \(FLPMA\)](#), these policies and regulations enable the agency to better restore, conserve, and protect national public lands. Two of the most important tools available to the BLM under FLPMA are Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) and ACECs. Alone, fully using these tools will make real progress to help address the climate and biodiversity crisis.



WSAs are BLM's most durable and important administrative designation. The designation ensures wilderness character is maintained on identified public lands, protecting the agency's wildest places, irreplaceable cultural resources, native species, and world class recreation. There are more than [29 million acres](#) of BLM-identified [LWCs](#) in the lower 48 states that are eligible for WSA designation and millions more acres of community-identified LWCs that should be considered for designation. To truly address the climate and biodiversity crisis and protect our water resources, the BLM must embrace and use this tool to protect more public lands.



[ACECs](#) are perhaps the most versatile tool the BLM has at its disposal. FLPMA directs the BLM to give priority to the designation and protection of ACECs. These are places where special management attention is required to protect and prevent irreparable damage to important historic, cultural, or scenic values, fish and wildlife resources, or other natural systems or processes. For decades,

this designation has gone largely unrealized, with inconsistent identification, designation, and management. To this day there are no national standards or regulations that define what protection means for individual ACECs leading to poor management that in many instances renders the designation meaningless. BLM should address these problems by implementing clear regulations that ensure ACECs are truly protected. There are currently over [1,000 ACECs comprising over 20 million acres in the United States](#) and many deserving places waiting in the wings. FLPMA requires the BLM to prioritize the protection and designation of ACECs as part of their planning processes and if the administration is going to reach its conservation goals, BLM should be directed to meet this requirement.

In addition to WSAs and ACECs, BLM's toolbox is full of other useful management tools that should also be more frequently used to meet the conservation goals set by the Biden administration. Other key conservation tools the administration could use through the administrative process include:

- ▶ [Backcountry Conservation Areas \(BCAs\)](#) can be managed to conserve intact wildlife habitats and support high quality wildlife-dependent recreation.
- ▶ [Wildlife Migration Corridors](#) can be established through coordination with states to enhance and improve the quality of big-game winter range and migration corridor habitat on Federal lands in a way that recognizes state authority to conserve and manage big-game species and respects private property rights.
- ▶ [Wild and Scenic Rivers](#) can be identified by the BLM as eligible and suitable for further protection through the Resource Management Planning (RMP) process.



*Upper Missouri Breaks, Montana.
Photo: Bob Wick*

Western States Need Bold Action from BLM to Achieve Their Conservation Goals

There is Strong Support for More BLM Conservation

[The Navajo Utah Commission](#), U.S. Senators, and congressional representatives have called on the BLM to use these administrative protections. Many [Western Senators have called](#) on the Secretary of Interior to push for more BLM conservation. They joined other [Senate conservation champions](#) from around the country in [calling for administrative action](#).

Additionally, [Oregon senators have called for more BLM conservation](#) and noted that “protecting lands managed by the BLM is the single biggest opportunity the administration has to make conservation progress.” They were joined by [Sen. Padilla and Rep. Huffman who also wrote a letter to the California BLM State Director](#) calling for more BLM administrative protections as part of planning processes.



Upper Missouri Breaks, Montana.
Photo: Bob Wick

In addition to Tribal and congressional leaders, local elected officials who live in communities that depend upon BLM lands have also called for greater protections. In May of 2022, over 120 western local elected officials sent [a letter](#) to Interior Secretary Haaland calling for greater BLM conservation as well.

Additionally, [businesses](#), [Latino](#) communities, and [conservation](#) organizations have repeatedly and overwhelmingly urged the BLM to take bold conservation action. These calls have been highlighted frequently in [media coverage](#). These actions will be critical to ensure the economic and environmental future of communities across the region. As a [New York Times](#) piece recently noted, lands managed by the BLM may be the administration’s biggest opportunity to bring the agency’s mission into balance by focusing on doing more to conserve wildlife habitat, access to nature, recreational opportunities and economic stability for rural communities as well as the protection of watersheds and fresh water.