



## **New Mexicans Applaud New “Public Lands Rule” that Could Protect Local Lands**

*Policy will Rebalance BLM’s Focus on Recreation, Conservation, and Climate Impacts*

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**March 30, 2023 (Albuquerque, New Mexico)** – New Mexicans welcomed today’s [announcement](#) of a rule that modernizes the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to promote healthy landscapes, abundant wildlife, clean drinking water, and balanced decision-making. The rule clarifies that conservation, which includes restoration and protection, is a multiple use within the agency’s management framework, and will ensure America’s public lands can be managed to sustain their health, diversity, and productivity for current and future generations. As the nation’s largest land manager (245 million acres), the BLM plays a critical role in New Mexico, managing over [13.5 million acres of lands across the state](#), areas vitally important to the conservation of water, wildlife, cultural resources, and our growing demand for access to the outdoors.

Known as the “Public Lands Rule,” the proposal highlights the need for the agency to work with local communities to focus on the conservation of land, water, and wildlife to ensure people can protect future access to federal public lands while combating the growing impacts of climate change. The draft rule also encourages BLM managers to work more closely with tribal nations to ensure cultural resource protection in New Mexico and across the West. In addition, the rule provides consistent direction to land managers to prioritize the inventory, designation, and special management of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs). The public has 75 days to comment on the rule.

In New Mexico there are many treasured areas that could benefit from the BLM’s new rule. Examples include the following:

- **Otero Mesa:** This area encompasses the largest remaining Chihuahuan desert black grama grassland and is home to pronghorn antelope, black-tailed prairie dogs, and numerous bird species. It has long been a priority for sportsmen groups like [New Mexico Wildlife Federation](#). The area has been proposed as a Backcountry Conservation Area (BCA) since 2016 and an ACEC since 2008.

*"To hunters and anglers in New Mexico, BLM Lands are critical for providing healthy wildlife habitat on large, intact landscapes," said **Jesse Deubel, Executive Director of the New Mexico***

**Wildlife Federation.** *"In addition to harboring sustainable populations of wildlife that many New Mexicans depend on as part of our food supply, the physical, mental and emotional benefits gained by spending time in nature on our collectively owned public lands is priceless. A strong Public Lands Rule will help ensure these experiences remain available for future generations of New Mexicans."*

- **Caja del Rio ACECs:** Two ACECs just outside of Santa Fe are known for petroglyphs dating back 8,000 years, other cultural resources, wildlife and special status species, geologic features, and scenic values. The La Cieneguilla Petroglyph Site, located within the Caja del Rio, was recently [vandalized again](#), and Pueblo leaders are asking for more patrols and resources to protect this site.

*"The destruction of petroglyphs within the Caja del Rio ACEC should be a call-to-action for the BLM," said **Santa Fe County Commission Chair Anna Hansen.** "It is time to ensure that no further damage is done, and I am hopeful we can honor the stewardship of the Puebloan people and protect these areas for generations to come."*

*"The Caja del Rio is a profoundly important cultural landscape that sustains traditional Hispano and Tribal cultures still to this day. To not do anything to conserve and protect this place yet reap what we have inherited is a sin," said **Julian C. Gonzales Jr., lifelong sportsman, veteran, rancher, multi-generational New Mexican, and New Mexico Wild Grassroots Organizer.** "The Caja has to be passed on to my children's children in better shape than I received it, no questions asked, and this starts with enhanced protections by the BLM."*

- **Greater Chaco ACECs:** Chaco Canyon was designated in 1987 as one of 24 [UNESCO World Heritage Sites](#) in the United States based on its importance as the center of Puebloan cultural and economic life during the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. The area holds thousands of artifacts and archaeological sites—some of which have yet to be identified and studied. Many tribes throughout the Four Corners are the direct descendants of the Chacoan people and consider the region their traditional homelands. The BLM's current management plan, adopted in 2003, designated 79 ACECs within the Greater Chaco landscape to protect cultural resources. Unfortunately, these ACECs are small and fail to protect landscape-scale features of cultural importance. Since 2012, the BLM has been working to revise the management plan. However, the BLM rejected a 2014 nomination for a landscape-level ACEC, and the agency issued a draft plan in 2020 that declined to consider additional ACEC designations and included numerous exemptions for oil and gas drilling.

**Keegan King, the CEO of Native Land Institute** said, *"As a proud New Mexican and public lands advocate, I am thrilled to see the overwhelmingly positive response to the new Public Lands Rule, which prioritizes the protection of our public lands, cultural resources, and wildlife. This rule represents a significant step forward in our efforts to combat the growing impacts of climate change while preserving our cherished outdoor spaces for future generations. I am grateful for the tireless advocacy of our communities and tribal nations who have worked hard to ensure that these lands are protected and accessible to all. The BLM's renewed focus on conservation, recreation, and cultural resource protection is essential for the economic well-being of our rural communities and small businesses that rely on these lands. I am excited*

*to see how this new policy will help us address the challenges of managing public lands in New Mexico and across the West, and I look forward to hearing from the public as we continue to refine and implement this critical rule.”*

The draft rule provides critical guidance to BLM for protecting areas with outdated resource management plans. For example, the Carlsbad Field Office has been working for over a decade to revise its current plan, adopted in 1988, which governs the management of several areas that have been nominated for ACEC designation:

- **Carlsbad Chihuahuan Desert Rivers ACEC:** The Carlsbad Chihuahuan Desert Rivers proposed ACEC – totaling 108,474 acres – includes the riparian corridors of the Delaware, Pecos, and Black rivers. The ACEC would protect cultural, historic, scenic, plant and animal, geologic, paleontological, soil, karst, and riparian resources.
- **Salt Playas ACEC:** The Salt Playas proposed ACEC – totaling 49,772 acres – would protect Carlsbad’s salt lakes, which serve as essential stops for migratory shorebirds and have significant archeological and historical values.
- **Birds of Prey Grasslands ACEC:** The Birds of Prey Grasslands proposed ACEC – totaling 349,355 acres – contains significant grasslands and an extraordinarily high diversity of raptors and other birds. The area is located between two principal routes of the Central Flyway, which is one of four waterfowl flyways in North America.

Bringing conservation on equal footing with the many other uses of BLM lands would boost rural economies that depend on beautiful lands and clean water. The draft plan helps ensure a future in which people can continue to enjoy hiking and biking, hunting and fishing, and other forms of outdoor recreation, giving businesses the assurances they need to grow and thrive. According to the Bureau of Economic Affairs, the [outdoor recreation economy in New Mexico](#) generates \$1.1 billion in wages and salaries, almost 26,000 jobs, and almost 2% of New Mexico’s GDP. In 2022, [businesses](#) that serve communities that depend on BLM lands sent a [letter calling for greater protections](#).

*“BLM Lands in New Mexico make up an important part of our local economy,” said **Ivan Valdez, Reel Life Santa Fe**. “People come from near and far to hike, bike, and more on these lands, and they spend their dollars in our stores, our hotels, and with our outfitter guides. Simply put, small, locally owned businesses like mine depend on BLM lands and we need to protect them.”*

New Mexicans and leaders across the West have long been urging the BLM to update its policies to ensure the conservation of our cherished landscapes. Senator Martin Heinrich, along with other Western Senators, sent the Biden administration [a letter](#) encouraging the BLM to do more to protect more lands; and similarly, Representatives Melanie Stansbury and Teresa Leger Fernández recently sent [a letter signed by 40 members](#) of the House calling on Interior Secretary Deb Haaland to direct the BLM to help Western states meet the challenges of the climate crisis by administratively protecting more public land. Local elected leaders have likewise called for greater BLM conservation.

*Anna Peterson, Executive Director of [The Mountain Pact](#) said, “[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. 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.”*

The new Public Lands Rule will help the agency better implement and balance its multiple use and sustained yield mission. This long overdue guidance is needed to update BLM’s policy framework to address the land management challenges of today, including rising temperatures, drought, and loss of nature in New Mexico and across the West.

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### **Background on the BLM in New Mexico**

- There are 13.5 million acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM)-managed lands in New Mexico, making it the largest land manager in the state.
- 88% of the lands managed by BLM in the state of New Mexico are open to oil and gas development, while only 11% of the lands are protected.
- Currently, 4.3 million acres of BLM managed minerals in New Mexico are under lease for oil and gas development. That's nearly 32% of the total acres of BLM-managed lands in the state.
- There are 18 BLM designated wilderness areas in New Mexico, totaling 455,794 acres or less than 1% of the state’s total land mass and 3.3% of the total acres of BLM-managed lands in the state.
- There are 48 BLM wilderness study areas in New Mexico totaling 725,006 acres or just under 1% of the state’s total land mass and slightly over 5% of the total acres of BLM-managed lands in the state.
- There are 344,459 acres of BLM-identified lands with wilderness characteristics (sometimes referred to as “LWC areas”) or less than 1% of the state’s total land mass and 2.5% of the total acres of BLM managed lands in the state.
- New Mexico Wild has identified an additional 2.9 million acres of BLM-managed lands it determined also have wilderness characteristics. The BLM does not currently manage these wilderness quality lands to protect their cultural and ecological values.