



BLM Ignores Own Findings in Proposed Management Plans

Millions of acres of Western public lands could lose protections

Overview

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) oversees a quarter-billion acres of public lands across the nation. Every two decades, the agency revises its management plans for each of the more than 100 planning areas—designated regions that it oversees. In mid-2019, BLM released six draft plans that will guide management of more than 20 million acres for the next 20 to 30 years. The Pew Charitable Trusts reviewed the plans and found troubling trends within agency-preferred alternatives—the course BLM says it is most likely to take—that could result in the loss of protection for millions of acres of public land: The proposals would fail to conserve lands that the agency’s own research has deemed worthy of protection,¹ cut decades-old safeguards, minimally protect a fraction of 1 percent of the areas found to contain wilderness characteristics, and open vast swaths of public lands to energy and mineral development.

Federal law requires BLM to consider special management, including prioritizing the designation and protection of areas of critical environmental concern (ACECs), for lands that have special fish and wildlife, archaeological, and unique values. However, the 2019 drafts feature far fewer ACECs designations than the agency’s findings of lands that meet the criteria warrant and propose to eliminate ACECs that have been in place for decades.² (See Table 1.)

As with ACECs, a large gap exists between BLM’s findings for lands with wilderness characteristics (LWCs)—natural places that provide excellent opportunities for solitude or primitive, unconfined recreation—and how many of these lands are included for adequate management in the draft plans: Less than 1 percent of agency-identified LWCs would be managed to protect these values under the BLM drafts.

Table 1

BLM’s Draft and Final Resource Management Plans Mean Loss of Protection for Millions of Acres

Acres and river miles threatened under preferred plans, by area

	Bering Sea Western Interior (Draft)	Lewistown (Draft)	Missoula (Draft)	Four Rivers (Draft)	Southeastern Oregon (Draft)	Eastern Colorado (Draft)	Uncompahgre (Proposed)	Total
Planning area acreage	13,400,000	750,300	150,000	783,160	4,600,000	668,000	675,000	21,026,460
ACECs in prior plan (acreage)	1,884,376	22,900	1,225	64,300	n/a	69,500	30,000	2,072,301
ACECs proposed to be removed by BLM from prior plan (acreage)	1,884,376	22,900	585	18,720	n/a	23,200	n/a	1,926,581
ACECs determined by BLM to meet relevance and importance criteria (acreage)	4,248,610	32,008	1,225	112,060	n/a	101,400	215,840	4,711,143
ACECs preferred alternative (acreage)	0	0	640	45,470	n/a	46,300	51,320	143,730
ACECs proposed final plan (acreage)	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD	n/a	TBD	30,190	TBD
LWCs found by BLM to meet agency-established criteria (acreage)	13,382,250	202,681	2,523	8,000	1,206,780	190,753	42,150	15,035,137

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	Bering Sea Western Interior (Draft)	Lewistown (Draft)	Missoula (Draft)	Four Rivers (Draft)	Southeastern Oregon (Draft)	Eastern Colorado (Draft)	Uncompahgre (Proposed)	Total
LWCs preferred alternative (acreage)	0	0	2,525*	0	0	1,300*	18,320	22,145
LWCs proposed final plan (acreage)	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD	18,320†	TBD
Ecological emphasis areas in preferred alternative (acreage)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	177,700	177,700
Ecological emphasis areas in proposed final plan (acreage)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	0
Backcountry conservation areas preferred alternative	0	0	0	0	n/a	0	n/a	0
Wild and scenic river eligibility (miles)	650	89	27.6	91	n/a	112	154	1123.6
Wild and scenic rivers suitable preferred alternative (miles)	0	0	2.1	n/a	n/a	60	104.6	166.7
Wild and scenic rivers suitable proposed final plan (miles)	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD	104.6	104.6

* Plans for these areas prioritize multiple uses over protecting wilderness character.

† Lands managed to minimize impacts on wilderness character, while managing for other uses.

Sources: Bureau of Land Management, "Bering Sea-Western Interior Resource Management Plan: Areas of Critical Environmental Concern—Report on the Application of the Relevance and Importance Criteria and Special Management" (2018); Bureau of Land Management, "Lewistown Field Office, Resource Management Plan Revision and Environmental Impact Statement: Areas of Critical Environmental Concern—Report on the Application of the Relevance and Importance Criteria" (2015); Bureau of Land Management, "Preliminary Areas of Critical Environmental Concern Report, Missoula Resource Management Plan" (2018); Bureau of Land Management, "Four Rivers Field Office Areas of Critical Environmental

Concern (ACEC) Report," Appendix U (2019); Bureau of Land Management, "Evaluation of Potential ACECs: Relevance and Importance Criteria April 2019 Draft, Royal Gorge Field Office" (2019); Bureau of Land Management, "Evaluation of Existing and Proposed Areas of Critical Environmental Concern for the Uncompahgre Planning Area" (2013); Bureau of Land Management, "Bering Sea-Western Interior: Draft Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement" (2019); Bureau of Land Management, "Draft Lewistown Resource Management Plan" (2019); Bureau of Land Management, "Draft Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement, Missoula Field Office" (2019); Bureau of Land Management, "Draft Southeastern Oregon Resource Management Plan Amendment and Draft Environmental Impact Statement" (2019); Bureau of Land Management, "Draft Eastern Colorado Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement" (2019); Bureau of Land Management, "Uncompahgre Field Office Proposed Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement" (2019); Bureau of Land Management, "Bering Sea-Western Interior Resource Management Plan: Wilderness Characteristics Inventory Report" (2015); Bureau of Land Management, "Lands With Wilderness Characteristics Report: Lewistown Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement" (2016); Bureau of Land Management, "Missoula Field Office Resource Management Plan Revision: Lands With Wilderness Characteristics" (2017); Bureau of Land Management, "Four Rivers Field Office Wilderness Characteristics Technical Report," Appendix W (2019); Bureau of Land Management, "Lands With Wilderness Characteristics Inventory Report, Royal Gorge Field Office" (2018); Bureau of Land Management, "Uncompahgre Planning Area Wilderness Characteristics Inventory: 2015 Update" (2015); Bureau of Land Management, "Bering Sea-Western Interior Resource Management Plan: Wild & Scenic River Eligibility Determination Report" (2015); Bureau of Land Management, "Bering Sea-Western Interior Resource Management Plan: Wild & Scenic River Study Report" (2018); Bureau of Land Management, "Final Wild and Scenic River Eligibility Report, Lewistown Field Office, Montana" (2010); Bureau of Land Management, "Wild and Scenic Rivers Eligibility Report, Lewistown Field Office, Montana: Chouteau, Judith Basin, Fergus, and Petroleum Counties" (2015); Bureau of Land Management, "Final Wild and Scenic River Eligibility Report, Missoula Field Office, Montana" (2010); Bureau of Land Management, "Preliminary Wild and Scenic River Suitability Report, Missoula Resource Management Plan" (2018); Bureau of Land Management, "Four Rivers Field Office Wild and Scenic River Eligibility and Tentative Classification Report," Appendix V (2019); Bureau of Land Management, "Final Wild & Scenic River Eligibility Report for the Royal Gorge Field Office" (2015); Bureau of Land Management, "Wild & Scenic River Suitability Report—Royal Gorge Field Office" (2019); Bureau of Land Management, "Wild and Scenic River Suitability Report for the BLM Uncompahgre Planning Area" (2013)

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94%

Overall percentage of ACEC acreage from prior plan removed in agency-preferred alternative in pending plan

2.1%

Overall percentage of ACEC acreage meeting relevance and importance criteria that is included in preferred alternatives

.03%

Overall percentage of BLM-identified LWC acreage included in preferred alternatives

6.4%

Overall percentage of BLM-identified eligible wild and scenic rivers recommended for designation in preferred alternatives

Endnotes

- 1 Bureau of Land Management, "Bering Sea-Western Interior Resource Management Plan Areas of Critical Environmental Concern Report on the Application of the Relevance and Importance Criteria and Special Management" (2018), <https://eplanning.blm.gov/epl-front-office/eplanning/planAndProjectSite.do?methodName=dispatchToPatternPage¤tPageId=48431>; Bureau of Land Management, "Lewistown Field Office, Resource Management Plan Revision and Environmental Impact Statement: Areas of Critical Environmental Concern—Report on the Application of the Relevance and Importance Criteria" (2015), <https://eplanning.blm.gov/epl-front-office/eplanning/planAndProjectSite.do?methodName=dispatchToPatternPage¤tPageId=50899>; Bureau of Land Management, "Preliminary Areas of Critical Environmental Concern Report, Missoula Resource Management Plan" (2018), <https://eplanning.blm.gov/epl-front-office/eplanning/planAndProjectSite.do?methodName=dispatchToPatternPage¤tPageId=77158>; Bureau of Land Management, "Four Rivers Field Office Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) Report," Appendix U (2019), <https://eplanning.blm.gov/epl-front-office/eplanning/planAndProjectSite.do?methodName=dispatchToPatternPage¤tPageId=10301>; Bureau of Land Management, "Evaluation of Potential ACECs: Relevance and Importance Criteria: April 2019 Draft, Royal Gorge Field Office" (2019), <https://eplanning.blm.gov/epl-front-office/eplanning/planAndProjectSite.do?methodName=dispatchToPatternPage¤tPageId=53991>; Bureau of Land Management, "Evaluation of Existing and Proposed Areas of Critical Environmental Concern for the Uncompahgre Planning Area" (2013), <https://eplanning.blm.gov/epl-front-office/eplanning/planAndProjectSite.do?methodName=dispatchToPatternPage¤tPageId=86004>.
- 2 Ibid.

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