

Encyclopedia of Politics of the American West

Land Management, U.S. Bureau of

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The federal government owns a significant percentage of the land, including subsurface territory, in the western United States, with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) being the government's largest landowner. This agency of the Department of the Interior was established on July 16, 1946 by Reorganization Plan No. 3, which consolidated the General Land Office created in 1812 (Pub. L. 12–59) and the Grazing Service established in 1934 (Pub. L. 73–482).

BLM manages over 256,000,000 surface acres and over 700,000,000 subsurface acres of minerals that constitute nearly 13 percent of total U.S. land surface and over 40 percent of all federally owned lands. BLM manages public lands for multiple uses and conserves resources for current and future generations. These resources include timber, solid minerals, oil, gas, geothermal energy, wildlife habitat, endangered plant and animal species, rangeland vegetation, recreational and cultural sites, designated conservation and wilderness areas, and open space.

The 1976 Federal Public Lands Management Act (FPLMA) (Pub. L. 94–579) is this agency's contemporary organic statute. The act seeks to facilitate bureau efforts to protect its land stewardship while also promoting orderly development and land and resource use, with the goals of multiple use and sustained yield. BLM develops land-use plans with extensive public involvement, to provide orderly use and development while enhancing environmental quality. BLM manages watersheds to protect soil and enhance water quality; develops public-lands recreational opportunities; administers programs for protecting and managing wild horses and burros; and sells lands to individuals, organizations, local governments, and other federal agencies when such transactions are determined to be in the public interest. BLM also oversees and manages development of energy and mineral leases and ensures compliance with federal regulations governing extraction of these resources. BLM also surveys federal lands; maintains public-lands records and mining-claim records; and administers a payment program in lieu of taxes, based on the amount of federally owned lands in counties and other local government units.

Controversy over federal land ownership periodically erupts in western politics. In 1996, President Bill Clinton issued Proclamation 6920, creating Utah's Grand Staircase-

Escalante National Monument under authority provided by the 1906 Antiquities Act (Pub. L. 59–209). This proclamation placed this area under the administration of BLM instead of the National Park Service (NPS), which administers most national monuments. Placing Grand Staircase–Escalante under BLM jurisdiction permitted the area to be used for some natural resources development, unlike NPS properties. Clinton's action, however, received significant opposition from Utah's congressional delegation, who were concerned that his action exceeded presidential discretion under the Antiquities Act. Several congressional attempts over the next few years to eliminate or drastically reduce presidential power to unilaterally designate public monuments proved unsuccessful.

In response, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt and Utah governor Mike Leavitt established a planning team of federal, state, and local government professionals—representing diverse scientific and economic areas of expertise—to work with BLM to develop a planning process for cooperatively managing, developing, and preserving Grand Staircase–Escalante and enhancing communication with interested stakeholders.

BLM will continue its delicate balancing act of managing the development of natural resources on lands it administers while also seeking to promote the preservation of these lands and public access to and use of them in environmentally desirable ways. BLM will have to interact with other governmental and nongovernmental agencies—such as the U.S. Forest [p. 440 ↓] Service and NPS; multiple congressional oversight committees, state and local government agencies; and a variety of nongovernmental organizations, including mineral-extraction industries and environmental organizations—balancing its own viewpoints and objectives with theirs when determining proper use of public lands. The desire of many to enhance domestic oil and natural gas exploration and development without causing environmental damage will prove to be a particularly acute challenge for BLM in years to come, given the presence of these resources on publicly owned lands. There could also be calls for the federal government to sell some BLM properties in order to raise funds for reducing the federal budget deficit. For better or worse, BLM is a major player in western economic and natural-resources development and political policymaking.

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See also

Further Readings

Belco, Michelle, and Brandon Rottinghaus. "The Law: Presidential Proclamation 6920; Using Executive Power to Set a New Direction for the Management of National Monuments ." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* , vol. 39 , no. 3 (September 2009): pp. 605–18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2009.03692.x>

Skillen, James R. *The Nation's Biggest Landlord: The Bureau of Land Management in the American West* . Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009.

U.S. Congress, House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources . *Up in the Air: The BLM's Disappearing Helium Program* . Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2010.