



## **CARES Act Review**

# **The Bureau of Land Management's COVID-19 Response at Recreation Management Areas**

### **The BLM's Public Lands**

The BLM manages 245 million acres of public lands — equivalent to one in every 10 acres of land in the United States. These lands are found in every State and encompass forests, mountains, rangelands, arctic tundra, and deserts.

### **Five Most Visited Recreation Management Areas in FY 2020**

1. Arkansas River, Colorado  
3.7 million visits
2. Red Rock Canyon, Nevada  
3.0 million visits
3. Bishop, California  
1.4 million visits
4. Alpine Loop, Colorado  
1.1 million visits
5. Colorado Riverway, Utah  
1.1 million visits

The Bureau of Land Management's (BLM's) mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. Along with major programs such as energy development, livestock grazing, and timber harvesting, the BLM also has an extensive recreation program that oversees 1,235 recreation management areas across the country. Visitors to the BLM's recreation management areas participate in activities such as hiking, horseback riding, off-highway vehicle driving, mountain biking, wildlife viewing, boating, fishing, hunting, camping, and winter sports.

We reviewed the actions the Bureau has taken to protect its employees, volunteers, and the visiting public during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Results of Our Review**

The pandemic presented BLM with unique challenges for its recreation program, and we acknowledge that the BLM took various actions at its recreation management areas to address the rapid spread of COVID-19 such as developing guidance, adjusting practices, and coordinating with local governments and other land management agencies. However, as described below, we also identified various ways in which the BLM's actions could have been improved.

In particular, BLM State and field offices reported problems with receiving timely and complete guidance and communication from BLM headquarters. Further, BLM officials stated that public messaging regarding COVID-19, such as news releases and safety information, was not always timely because of delayed approvals from BLM headquarters.

In addition, many BLM offices reported increased numbers of visitors to recreation management areas, along with harmful consequences including damage to restrooms, garbage dumping (see Figure 1), driving and camping in unauthorized areas, and general vandalism.

**Figure 1: Trash illegally left in a firepit (left) and at a campsite (right) on BLM land.**



Source: BLM

### **The BLM Took Various Actions to Address COVID-19**

Overall, we concluded that the BLM took various actions to address the safety of staff and visitors during the pandemic to prevent the spread of COVID-19 at its recreation management areas. For instance, the BLM:

- Instructed its 485 recreation management program employees to work remotely where feasible and told its approximately 26,750 volunteers not to work on site at recreation management areas
- Adjusted its practices for safety reasons and continued to manage its recreation management areas
- Closed some facilities and parts of recreation management areas temporarily but currently has opened almost all sites to the public
- Coordinated with local governments and other land management agencies

The BLM headquarters developed limited COVID-19 guidance for its recreation management areas in accordance with direction from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Institutes of Health, and State and local public health authorities. The BLM's first recreation program-specific communication regarding COVID-19 was its general program guidance dated March 25, 2020. This guidance encouraged local decision-making. For example, it stated that BLM State Offices should "follow the guidance or orders of their State and local authorities regarding the temporary closure or restrictions on public areas."

In subsequent months, the BLM provided additional guidance to the field, including a *COVID-19 Adaptive Operations Recovery Plan*, dated May 19, 2020. This document laid out a multi-phase recovery approach and provided details on mission essential functions, phased reopening, and roles and responsibilities.

### **Challenges With Guidance and Communication**

Even though BLM headquarters provided guidance, BLM personnel stated that both additional and more timely guidance was needed.

More specifically, BLM field office employees said that the lack of timely directives from BLM headquarters sometimes made it difficult for local-level staff to mitigate impacts of the pandemic on the ground. For instance, one State office employee noted that guidance from BLM headquarters or the U.S. Department of the Interior

(Department) was usually received after State-developed guidance was available. This employee also commented that the State office created its own guidance instead of waiting for direction from BLM headquarters or the Department.

In addition, BLM field office employees reported that guidance was urgently needed on how to safely operate and perform basic tasks such as collecting fees at entrance stations, closing visitor centers, and cleaning restrooms during an infectious disease outbreak. For example, a State office employee told us that without BLM guidance, the State office had to consider county, city, and State restrictions when deciding what actions to take. This employee also noted that the Department's message encouraging people to go outside and enjoy public lands presented challenges for State and local field offices because they did not receive clear guidance on how to operate during the pandemic. In addition, as noted previously, some State and field offices told us that they ultimately developed their own guidance.

BLM State and field offices also reported difficulties conveying important COVID-19 news to the public, such as closure information and visitor safety precautions. Field office employees told us that public messages and signage had to be approved by BLM headquarters and the Department prior to use. However, delays in the approval process prevented State and field offices from sharing information with the public in a timely manner.

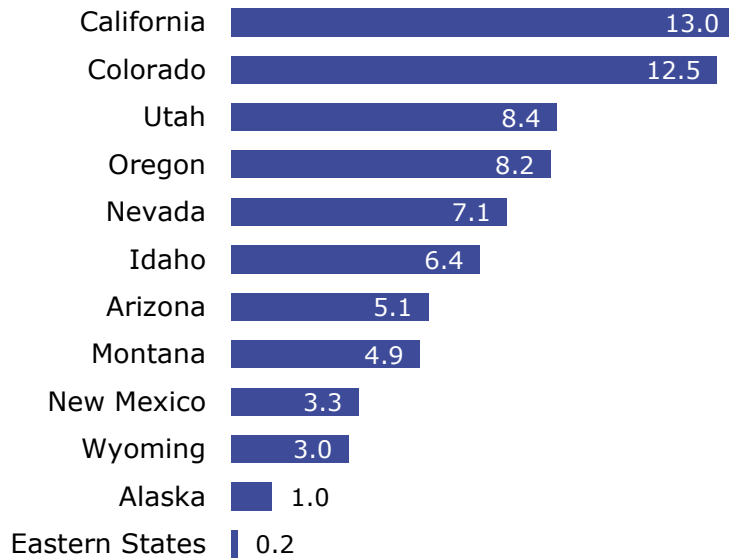
### **Recreation Management Areas Negatively Impacted by the Increased Number of Visitors**

Because of the vast, undeveloped, and remote nature of its public lands, the BLM was unable to close many recreation management areas. While other Federal, State, and local government land management agencies closed their public parks, the BLM experienced an unanticipated surge in visitors at 8 of the 10 BLM recreation management areas that we contacted.

BLM officials reported harm to recreation management areas due to the visitation surge during the spring and summer. The BLM reported 73.1 million visits in fiscal year (FY) 2020 (see Figure 3), an increase of more than 2.3 million visits over the prior year. Because the pandemic prompted the closing of certain facilities and sites for part of the year, the increased number of visits occurred during an abbreviated period of time and with fewer alternative recreation options.

In addition, as noted previously, many BLM employees were instructed to work from home to minimize the risk of spreading COVID-19, and volunteers likewise were told not to work on site at recreation management areas. This left only a limited number of essential personnel to monitor the land at the same time that visitation was increasing. As also noted previously, other land management authorities suddenly closed their nearby public lands, such as State and national parks, which caused overcrowding on BLM lands and exacerbated other problems such as garbage dumping, driving and camping in unauthorized areas, and general vandalism.

**Figure 3: Number of FY 2020 Visits to BLM Recreation Management Areas (in Millions)**



Of the 10 bureau offices we contacted, 9 reported harm to their recreation management areas, such as damage to restrooms, garbage dumping, driving and camping in unauthorized areas, and general vandalism. For example:

- The Moab (Utah) Field Office reported overloaded trash receptacles, improperly discarded garbage (see Figure 4), dirty restrooms, graffiti on rocks, broken windows, and damaged door locks.
- The Colorado Southwest District Office and Uncompahgre Field Office (Montrose, CO) reported off-highway vehicles driving in unauthorized areas, camping in unauthorized areas, human waste issues, and an increase in homeless camps (see Figure 4).
- The Elko (Nevada) District Office reported improperly discarded trash, failure to use established campfire rings, and graffiti.

**Figure 4: Trash illegally left at a BLM trailhead in Utah (left) and a homeless camp on BLM land in Colorado (right)**



Source: BLM



Given the BLM's experience during the pandemic, it should consider some of the lessons it has learned so that it can take steps to prepare more effectively for the future.

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**Key Action:** The BLM should use the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic to develop an infectious disease response plan with the goal to protect human health and safety and minimize the adverse impacts on recreation sites. This effort should include:

- Developing risk assessments to help maintain essential operations and provide guidance to support field operations
  - Preparing for overcrowding when other government land management agencies close
  - Providing effective public communication
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## Attachment: Standards and Methodology

We conducted this assignment as a special CARES Act review. The purpose of these reviews is to provide the Department and bureaus with actionable information. We did not conduct this review in accordance with the *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation* as put forth by the Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency. We did, however, plan and perform work to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our conclusion.

To accomplish our objective, we:

- Analyzed the BLM’s visitation data and selected five State offices with the most recreation sites and visitors—California, Colorado, Nevada, Oregon/Washington, and Utah—that accounted for 60 percent of the recreation sites and 67 percent of the visitors in FY 2020
- Judgmentally selected two district/field offices under each of the five State offices and interviewed officials representing the recreation management program at those offices
- Interviewed the national recreation program director as well as the Bureau’s safety officers at the national and State levels

Since we were unable to perform site visits due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we relied on statements, photographs, and other documentation provided by the BLM and our analysis of recreation program data.