

Agency seeks input on how to modernize land-use planning

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Published: Monday, May 5, 2014

The Bureau of Land Management today asked the public to suggest ways for it to modernize its land-use planning across hundreds of millions of public acres.

The agency is proposing its resource management plans (RMPs) be updated more quickly and be made more conducive to landscape-level planning and mitigation required under an October 2013 [order](#) signed by Interior Secretary Sally Jewell.

Greenwire reported on the proposed changes in late April ([Greenwire](#), April 24). The agency is now [asking](#) for formal public comment, but it has set no deadline.

"As I've met with elected leaders and citizens from across the West on BLM issues, I've consistently heard two things: first, the BLM needs to more effectively address landscape-level management challenges; and second, planning takes too long," said a statement today by BLM Director Neil Kornze. "We're listening to you and we are stepping forward to improve the way we work so we can make our process more flexible in planning across landscapes, more dynamic and responsive to change and less time consuming."

The effort -- dubbed "Planning 2.0" -- could mark a major shift in how BLM revises and maintains roughly 160 RMPs that dictate nearly every decision the agency makes in the West, including for energy development, wildlife protections and recreation.

It could be the first significant update in decades to BLM's planning regulations under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act. BLM last modified its planning regulations in 2005 in a rule designed to enhance the role of state, local and tribal governments in crafting land-use plans.

RMPs dictate which areas will be made available for oil and gas leasing, which will be managed in their primitive state and which will be left open to motorized recreation, among many other things. They're typically updated once every 15 years, but the process can take up to several years and cost BLM millions of dollars.

Sportsmen's groups today said the planning update is an opportunity for BLM to better recognize in its planning efforts the importance of unfragmented, backcountry lands to big game species and those who hunt them.

"Much of this habitat exists on BLM lands," said a statement this morning by Ken Mayer, former director of the Nevada Department of Wildlife. "The main challenges the BLM face are incompatible development and land use, as well as the need for well-funded restoration."

Hunting and angling advocates plan to lobby for BLM's planning regime to emphasize recreational access and the conservation and restoration of important habitats, migration corridors and intact backcountry lands, said Joel Webster, who leads the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership's Center for Public Lands out of Missoula, Mont.

While officials from Republican and Democratic administrations say the RMP revision process is costly and inefficient and sometimes lags behind ecological and economic changes, it's unclear how much consensus may be reached on how to modernize the process.

Some conservationists are wary of BLM seeking changes to its planning regulations, a process that can be time-consuming and controversial in its own right. They argue BLM could incorporate landscape-level planning through policy changes without overhauling its regulations, a process that typically requires a National Environmental Policy Act review.

One oil and gas industry official said the changes could further distract the agency from its mission of providing multiple use. While more frequent RMP updates could be a good thing, industry also likes to know what's on the regulatory horizon.

Industry advocates have also expressed reservations with the Interior Department's evolving mitigation policies, and there is some concern over those policies being baked into the RMP process.