

Evaluation of Relevance and Importance Criteria for Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

BLM Guidance: Manual 1613: Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

1613.02: Objectives: ACEC designations highlight areas where special management attention is needed to protect and prevent irreparable damage to important historic, cultural, and scenic values, fish, or wildlife resources, or other natural systems or processes; or to protect human life and safety from natural hazards. The ACEC designation indicates to the public that the BLM recognizes that an area has significant values and has established special management measures to protect those values. In addition designation also serves as a reminder that significant value(s) or resource(s) exist which must be accommodated when future management actions and land use proposals are considered near or within an ACEC. Designation may also support a funding priority.

Evaluating ACECs is a two-part process that involves determining whether or not proposed areas meet relevance and importance criteria to be considered as an ACEC in at least one of the RMP alternatives. To be considered as a potential ACEC and analyzed in RMP alternatives, an area must meet at least one criterion for both relevance and importance.

- 1) **Relevance.** An area must meet one or more of the following criterion:
 - a. A significant historic, cultural, or scenic value (including but not limited to rare or sensitive archeological resources and religious or cultural resources important to Native Americans).
 - b. A fish and wildlife resource (including but not limited to habitat for endangered, sensitive, or threatened species, or habitat essential for maintain species diversity).
 - c. A natural process or system (including but not limited to endangered, sensitive, or threatened plan species; rare, endemic, or relic plants or plant communities which are terrestrial, aquatic, or riparian; or rare geological features).
 - d. Natural hazards (including but not limited to acres of avalanche, dangerous flooding, landslides, unstable soils, seismic activity, or dangerous cliffs). A hazard caused by human action may meet the relevance criteria if it is determined through the RMP process that it has become part of a natural process.

- 2) **Importance.** The value, resource, system, process, or hazard described above must have substantial significance and values in order to satisfy the “importance” criteria. This generally means that the value, resource, system, process, or hazard is characterized by one or more of the following:
 - a. Has more than locally significant qualities which give it special worth, consequence, meaning, distinctiveness, or cause for concern, especially compared to any similar resource.
 - b. Has qualities or circumstances that make it fragile, sensitive, rare, irreplaceable, exemplary, unique, endangered, threatened, or vulnerable to adverse change.
 - c. Has been recognized as warranting protection in order to satisfy national priority concerns to carry out the mandates of FLPMA.

- d. Has qualities which warrant highlighting in order to satisfy public or management concerns about safety and public welfare.
- e. Poses a significant threat to human life and safety or to property.

All ACECs meeting at least one relevance criteria **and** at least one importance criteria **must be considered** as potential ACECs under at least one alternative in the RMP. Some things to keep in mind:

- If it is determined that only a portion of a proposed ACEC meets at least one relevance criteria *and* at least one importance criteria, then only that portion needs to be considered.
- The BLM can modify the boundary of the ACEC throughout the Alternatives.
- Don't give modified boundaries different names (e.g., don't call an ACEC Kate Wynant ACEC under Alternative X and Kate Wynant ACEC Expansion under Alternative Y). There's no need and only causes confusion.
- ACECs under a particular alternative should not overlap.
- ACECs can overlap other special management areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, wild and scenic rivers, special recreation management areas, etc. However management should be thought of *independently* of these areas. Think of it this way... If the wilderness study area (or other area) were not there, how would we manage the ACEC?

Special Management Attention

To be designated as an ACEC, an area must require special management attention to protect the important and relevant values (43 CFR 1601.0-5(a)). "Special management attention" refers to management prescriptions developed during preparation of an RMP expressly to protect the important and relevant values of an area from the potential effects of actions permitted by the RMP. These are management actions that would not be necessary if the relevant and important values were not present.

Document, Document, Document

- If a proposed area does NOT meet either the relevance or the importance, the BLM must document why.
- During alternatives development, if an area meeting relevance and importance is not included in at least one alternative in the Draft RMP, the BLM must provide rationale.

Research Natural Areas

The BLM Land Use Planning Handbook H-1601-1 states that Research Natural Areas (RNAs) are considered a type of ACEC. The BLM will use the same criteria described above to evaluate existing or proposed new RNAs.