



# The Bureau of Land Management Budget — Let's Fix It For Conservation

## Key Points

- Conservation goals guide management of nearly 27 percent of public land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).
- BLM has a significant backlog of incomplete ecological restoration and conservation projects.
- Funding for BLM's ecological restoration and conservation activities rose 5 percent from 2002 (the year of President Bush's first budget) to the administration's proposed 2005 budget. On the other hand, funding for BLM's commodity extraction and commercial land use programs jumped by 17 percent.
- The administration proposes to spend \$39 million in 2005 on the 26 million-acre National Landscape

Conservation System managed by BLM — an investment of just \$1.50 per acre.

- Proposed funding for land acquisition in 2005 totals \$24 million, less than half the amount received by BLM for 2002.
- Both the budget structure and budget process limit BLM's ability to manage land and resources in a cohesive manner

## Conservation Goals

The Bureau of Land Management, an agency within the Department of the Interior, manages 262 million acres of public land, found mostly in 11 western states and Alaska, as well as subsurface minerals on 700 million acres of federal land. The law requires BLM to administer



PHOTO BY SCOTT MOORE (BLM)

Crossing Little Blitzen River in Little Blitzen Gorge Wilderness Study Area, Oregon. Outstanding recreation opportunities abound on conservation lands managed by BLM.



PHOTO BY JERRY SINTZ (BLM)

Corona Arch in "Behind the Rocks," a spectacular area near Moab, Utah, proposed by conservationists for congressional protection. BLM has specific direction to manage many of the public lands it oversees for conservation purposes.

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BLM has not determined the ecological status of 41 percent of public rangeland that it manages nor the condition of one-third of the wetland areas in the lower 48 states that it oversees.

the land for a range of uses, including recreation, habitat conservation, live-stock grazing, hunting, fishing, timber, energy and minerals production, and protection of cultural resources.

About 71 million acres (or 27 percent) of the land BLM manages are subject to specific conservation goals outlined in administrative and congressional designations. Some 26 million acres are in the National Landscape Conservation System, established in 2000 to coordinate management of protected and conservation areas. Included are national monuments, national conservation areas, designated wilderness, wilderness study areas, national wild and scenic rivers, and national scenic and historic trails. Another 45 million acres serve as herd management areas for wild horses and burros, areas of critical environmental concern, national natural landmarks, and research natural areas.

### Conservation Backlog

Despite its conservation obligations, BLM is behind in completing important ecological restoration and conservation projects, in part because of insufficient funding. The agency's 2002 budget for control of noxious weeds, for example, was enough to treat only about one-third of the acres that are newly infested each year and none of the millions of acres already suffering from wide-scale weed populations. The agency also carried a \$61.3 million deferred maintenance backlog for 2,097 recreation sites and 16,155 miles of trail.

That same year, BLM implemented water quality prescriptions in only 5 percent of priority sub-basins where water quality is a problem and identified 3,300 abandoned hardrock mine sites that are hazardous to the public and need to be cleaned up.



## Funding for Conservation vs. Commodities

Adequate funding for stewardship of public lands continues to be a challenge for BLM and other federal land management agencies. While it is difficult to estimate with certainty the amount of money BLM needs to fulfill its myriad responsibilities, the information presented above points out that recent budgets have clearly fallen short with regard to conservation.

Yet, the proposed 2005 budget calls for just a 5-percent increase in funding above the administration's first budget in 2002 for the categories and sub-categories that directly support BLM's ecological restoration and conservation activities.<sup>1</sup> The proposed amount of \$186 million for 2005 is a mere 6 percent of the total BLM budget of \$3 billion. Nearly all of the funding increase goes to remove, hold, and feed about 11,000 wild horses and burros that have yet to be adopted.

In contrast, the budget categories and sub-categories<sup>2</sup> that directly support commodity extraction and commercial land

uses received a 17-percent boost in the proposed 2005 budget over 2002 levels.<sup>3</sup> Most of that increase supports the energy and minerals program and timber sales.

## Stingy Investments in Conservation Lands

In 2002, the \$37.5 million allocated for BLM management of the National Landscape Conservation System represented less than 2 percent of BLM's total budget. Funding rose to \$41.5 million in 2003 and decreased to \$40.4 million in 2004. The proposed \$39 million for

### Who pays for commodity use and extraction?

Some of the costs of mineral exploration and development, grazing, and logging on public lands are paid by commercial users, who may also pay some portion of what is spent to clean up the environmental damage they cause. However, BLM budget documents do not directly match receipts from commodity users with expenditures. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to determine how much of the costs are covered by users and how much by taxpayers. Still, numerous studies reveal that BLM's costs for two commodity programs, hardrock minerals and grazing, far exceed the receipts generated.

- The government receives no financial compensation for hardrock minerals such as copper, silver, gold, and lead that are mined on federal land. In 1990, at least \$1.2 billion worth of hardrock minerals were extracted from federal lands.
- The Mining Law of 1872 allows holders of economical mining claims to obtain all rights and interests in the land, as well as the minerals, through a patent that costs \$2.50 or \$5.00 an acre. That was the fair market value for western grazing and farmland in 1872. Some of the patent holders have reaped huge profits at taxpayers' expense. For example, between 1970 and 1983, the government received less than \$4,500 for 20 patents that in 1988 were estimated to be worth between \$14 million and \$48 million. In 1991, Congress imposed a moratorium on new mining patents.
- The fees that ranchers pay to graze livestock on public lands do not cover the government's costs to manage the grazing program or the costs to improve the lands. In 1990, total federal grazing program costs of \$73.8 million (for BLM and the U.S. Forest Service) exceeded grazing fee receipts by \$52.3 million. A report by a congressional committee estimated that between 1985 and 1992, the federal government would have received \$1.8 billion more than it did from the grazing program *if* federal grazing fees had been priced at prevailing market value.

<sup>1</sup> Land Resources (soil, water and air; riparian; cultural; and wild horse and burro management), Wildlife and Fisheries Management, and Threatened and Endangered Species Management — all in the Management of Land Resources category — and Wilderness Management in the Recreation category.

<sup>2</sup> Energy and Minerals and Alaska Minerals Assessment (in the Management of Lands and Resources category); Rights-of-Way Processing; Timber Sale Pipeline Restoration; Road Maintenance Expenses; and Commercial Film and Photography.

<sup>3</sup> Monies from Rangeland and Forest Management (in the Land Resources sub-category), Range Improvements, Forest Ecosystem Health and Recovery, Western Oregon Resources Management, and Land and Resource Management Trust are also directed to conservation and commodities. However, it is not possible to determine how much goes to conservation activities versus commodity activities because the BLM budget does not so specify.

### Budget Structure and Process vs. On-the-ground Realities

The mismatch between budget structures and the nature of work performed by land management agencies has been noted for the U.S. Forest Service and likely holds true for BLM as well. Programs and budget categories for both agencies are resource specific (forests, wildlife, etc.), while the work is governed by multiple-use mandates and is ecosystem based.

The budget process also creates problems for ecosystem management, which is a multi-year commitment that requires secure, consistent funding. Flexibility in how and when money is spent allows managers to adapt to changing ecological conditions and new scientific knowledge, but that flexibility is seldom allowed in the budget process.

acquire lands that protect critical wildlife habitat and ecosystems, historic and cultural sites, and wilderness and to provide outdoor recreation and open space for the public. When the funding is lost, so may be the opportunity to protect some of these resources from pending development or other non-conservation uses.

### Budget Structure and Process Impede Conservation Management

The structure of the BLM budget, with its many categories and sub-categories, impedes program integration and limits budgetary accountability, with potentially negative consequences for the effectiveness of conservation programs. The National Landscape Conservation System, as one example, receives funding from at least seven different budget categories, making it difficult for agency personnel and members of the public to

2005 represents an investment of just \$1.50 for each acre of the 26 million-acre system, which includes some of the nation's most spectacular conservation and recreation areas as well as important cultural and historic resources.

Money for land acquisitions will drop by half, from \$50 million in 2002 to \$24 million in the administration's proposed 2005 budget. These funds are used to

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The administration's proposed 2005 budget invests \$39 million to manage the 26-million-acre National Landscape Conservation System — just \$1.50 per acre.  
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PHOTO BY SCOTT MOORE (BLM)

A high school field trip at Diamond Craters in BLM's Burns District, Oregon, illustrates the educational value of conservation lands.

comprehend, let alone influence, the amount of money devoted to stewardship of the important lands within the system.

The budget process also bodes ill for sound conservation management. Budget authorizations that cover only one year at a time can be a significant hindrance to carrying out the longer-term projects needed to restore or protect ecosystems. And agencies must prepare their budget requests well over a year before the money is received. The amount of money that is eventually appropriated varies from year to year and is uncertain until Congress agrees on the final federal budget. In addition, funding levels generally remain fixed for each year, curbing efforts to adapt to changed circumstances.

## Recommendations

To address the concerns presented in this Brief, The Wilderness Society recommends the following:

**1. Consolidate and stabilize funding for conservation.** Congress should create a BLM budget category for management activities devoted to conservation and ecological restoration. Monies for the new category should come from the several categories and sub-categories in the BLM budget that currently fund these activities and that would be consolidated under the new conservation budget category.

Ideally, Congress should pass legislation to establish a mandatory minimum level of funding from the U.S. Treasury for the new conservation category.

A sub-category should be devoted to the National Landscape Conservation

### Key recommendations to fix the BLM budget for conservation:

- Consolidate and stabilize funding for conservation.
- Improve tracking of commodity revenues and commodity-related BLM costs.
- Appropriate more money for clean up and safety.

System. All of the funds intended for the system that are now scattered throughout the BLM budget should be redirected to the new sub-category. Until this can be accomplished, BLM budget documents should *clearly* identify where funding for the system comes from and how much.

**2. Improve tracking of commodity revenues and commodity-related BLM costs.** Collection and reporting of information about BLM's commodity-related costs and receipts must be improved. At least two benefits of such improvements are readily apparent. First, better information will help determine the actual short- and long-term costs of commodity programs, as well as the amount of actual revenue generated by commodity extraction. Second, better information can serve as the basis for adjustments, where necessary, in commodity user fees to cover BLM's costs associated the commodity programs.

**3. Appropriate more money for clean up and safety.** We recommend that Congress immediately increase the amount of funding allocated to cleaning up the environmental damage and eliminating the safety hazards left behind at mining sites on land managed by BLM. Also, existing bonding requirements should be changed to ensure that mining bonds are adequate to cover reclamation costs.

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## Suggested Readings

The following sources were used in writing this Science & Policy Brief. They contain useful information for readers who are interested in learning more about the BLM budget and related issues.

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