

May 5, 2000
Executive Summary

Petition to Secretary Bruce Babbitt to Protect the Wilderness Character of BLM Roadless Lands and for Rule Making Under the Administrative Procedure Act

One hundred conservation groups concerned about the preservation of America's wilderness heritage are submitting a petition to Secretary Babbitt of the U.S. Department of Interior seeking the immediate protection of all lands under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management which qualify as wilderness under the Wilderness Act of 1964.

The Secretary of Interior Has the Authority to Protect these Incomparable Western Landscapes Immediately.

The Secretary of Interior has a duty to protect these lands, but his ability to do so is undermined by the lack of accurate inventories of wilderness resources on BLM lands and outdated land management plans. As a result, the BLM regularly makes decisions and permits developments such as mining and oil and gas fields, that foreclose future protection of these unique and scenic lands.

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act, together with other federal environmental laws such as the National Environmental Policy Act ("NEPA"), give the Secretary ample authority to meet his responsibilities. The conservation organizations are requesting that the Secretary use this authority to immediately protect wilderness quality lands by:

- * initiating wilderness reinventories and amend existing management plans to protect the areas found to qualify as wilderness. Pending completion of this process, and in compliance with NEPA and Section 302 of FLPMA (prohibiting the undue and unnecessary degradation of public lands), the Secretary should freeze action on development proposals for BLM roadless areas;

- * withdrawing the lands from entry under the mining laws, with a corresponding moratorium on oil and gas leasing pending completion of the wilderness reinventories and plan amendments;

- * implementing Executive Orders 11898 and 11644 so that off-road vehicles do not further damage wilderness-quality lands pending plan amendments; and

- * initiate a rulemaking process that would require all BLM plans and inventories to be updated at least every ten years.

Each of these actions is necessary to ensure that America's wilderness heritage is not lost to mining, oil and gas development, road construction, off-road vehicles, and other damaging uses of the public lands. They are firmly grounded in sound policy goals -- the protection of scenic and biologically important public lands, and decision making based on a full understanding of the wilderness resources available to meet increasing demand for open space, recreation, and solitude.

There is Strong Public Support for Protecting These Lands.

Americans wholeheartedly support protecting the remaining BLM roadless lands, which are every bit as pristine and scenic as those lands already designated as wilderness. Two-thirds of all Americans support protecting the estimated 60 million acres of BLM in the contiguous states that still qualify as wilderness. This broad-based support crosses gender, age, partisan and geographic lines.

BLM Lands Deserve to be Protected as Wilderness.

BLM lands represent the last of the untouched, native west, some of our nation's roughest and wildest country. They include rugged mountains, canyons, mesas, redrock deserts, and river ecosystems rich with wildlife. Incredibly, only five million acres of the approximately 264 million acres of BLM lands in the United States have been protected from development by Congressional wilderness designation -- a paltry 1.8 percent. But there are an estimated additional 60 million acres of lands under BLM jurisdiction in the lower 48 states which qualify for wilderness protection, and an estimated 50 million acres that qualify in Alaska. Roughly two-thirds of BLM's wilderness legacy in the lower 48 states has already been lost to developments like roads, mines, and oil rigs.

The unique lands under BLM's jurisdiction hold the greatest diversity of ecosystems found within any state or federal land management agency. They include 14,000 foot peaks in Colorado, the serpentine redrock canyons of Utah, the desolate Basin and Range country of Nevada, the high desert Owyhee Canyons in Oregon and Idaho, the north rim of the Grand Canyon, and the striking mesas of northern New Mexico, immortalized in the vibrant paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe.

Once disregarded as deserts that were only valuable for hardscrabble ranching and mining, BLM lands are now recognized as repositories of our nation's most valued ecological and cultural treasures. According to agency estimates, the BLM oversees 4 to 4.5 million archeological sites, comprising the "largest, most varied, and scientifically most important body of cultural resources" in the United States. These lands also harbor 228 plant and animal species listed under the Endangered Species Act, and over 1,500 "sensitive species." Antelope, bison, bighorn sheep and elk utilize 90 million acres of key habitat in the lower 48 states and 400 species of song birds rely on all 170 million acres. An estimated 65 percent of the west's wildlife depends on riparian areas for their survival; the BLM administers 180,000 miles of riparian-lined streams and 16 million acres of wetlands.

Conservationists also submitted a report entitled "Importance of Bureau of Land Management Roadless Areas in the Western U.S.A." It demonstrates the tremendous biological and ecological value of BLM lands, discusses the current threats to these areas, and concludes that these lands lack the necessary protection to maintain this native biodiversity. For this reason, on March 24, 2000, sixty five scientists signed a letter

urging the Secretary of the Interior to conduct an accurate inventory of, and to provide protection to, BLM roadless areas.