

A Toolbox for Collaborative, Landscape-Scale Restoration on Federal Public Lands

by Alexander Hancock and Vicky Harder

Context:

In May 2024, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) passed the Conservation and Landscape Health Rule, commonly known as the Public Lands Rule, to help address and mitigate the ongoing degradation of federal lands. The rule is a compilation of new and existing tools, procedures, and directives that prescribe how entities can engage in certain conservation activities on federal public lands. This brief explores which of those tools might enable collaborative, landscape-scale planning and restoration work that is balanced with other public land uses.

Conclusions:

The Public Lands Rule offers a framework for advancing collaborative, landscape-scale restoration by integrating conservation with multiple-use management. While its future is uncertain, its core principles—aligning restoration with land-use planning, fostering stakeholder collaboration, and encouraging private investment—remain valuable. Policymakers, BLM planners, conservation groups, and resource users can apply these strategies to accelerate restoration efforts while balancing conservation with economic activity. Ultimately, sustaining public lands requires proactive engagement from all stakeholders to ensure their long-term health and usability.

Implications:

The Public Lands Rule introduces tools that could shape how restoration and mitigation efforts fit within federal land management. By clarifying mitigation and restoration leasing and promoting collaboration, the rule may expand landscape-scale restoration while aligning efforts with existing land-use plans to minimize conflicts. Clearer guidelines for private investment could also generate new funding for restoration. However, the rule's long-term impact will depend on its implementation and adaptation to shifting land management priorities. As these tools are tested, they may offer insights into balancing conservation with economic and recreational uses on public lands.

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Background

The BLM's multiple-use mandate, established under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), ensures that a diverse range of industries and communities have a vested interest in federal public lands. These interests include extractive industries such as oil, gas, and timber, as well as livestock grazing, recreation, and the preservation of historic and cultural resources. While some of these activities cannot coexist on the same parcel—a mountain bike path, for example, cannot run through an active coal mine—stakeholders share a common interest in maintaining the landscape and the services it provides. This shared reliance underscores the need for mechanisms that support land stewardship and restoration in a way that balances multiple uses while addressing local needs.

In May 2024, the BLM issued the Public Lands Rule to address landscape health and management on federal public lands. The BLM stated that the rule reflects its responsibility to manage lands for “a combination of balanced and diverse resource uses that takes into account the long-term needs of future generations for renewable and nonrenewable resources.”

The Public Lands Rule introduced new approaches while also incorporating existing practices to integrate landscape health considerations with the BLM's multiple-use mandate. While the rule has generated significant debate, particularly over the definition of “use” on federal public lands, several of its concepts should have lasting relevance. These include aligning restoration efforts with land-use plans, clarifying how private and non-profit organizations can support restoration on BLM lands, and encouraging collaboration to enhance compatibility between conservation and other land uses.

Planning for restoration

Effective restoration planning requires a strategic approach that integrates conservation efforts with existing land management priorities. Many BLM-managed landscapes face ongoing degradation due to factors such as invasive species, increased wildfire risk, habitat fragmentation, and intensive land use. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts to restore ecosystem health while maintaining the agency's multiple-use mandate. The Public Lands Rule introduced a process for the BLM to designate priority landscapes for restoration and develop restoration plans consistent with local land management plans. This builds on the agency's previous identification of twenty-one “Restoration Landscapes” for projects funded through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act.

Two principles guide the creation and use of tools like priority landscapes, restoration plans, and Restoration Landscapes. First, restoration is most effective at a landscape scale and second, restoration efforts should align with existing land use plans. Because local plans are developed with public input, they can serve as a tool for anticipating and balancing different land uses. Ensuring that restoration efforts align with these plans helps integrate conservation into broader land management strategies while meeting legal requirements under FLPMA, which mandates that all activities on BLM land conform to land use plans.

This approach of integrating restoration into land management decisions can also help identify where conservation activities are most viable. For example, if an area is designated for mineral extraction in a local land use plan, a conservation organization may determine that applying for restoration work there is

not the best use of resources, even if the site is ecologically significant. Mining operations would likely lead to further disturbance, and the company would already be responsible for mitigation measures, such as site reclamation or compensatory mitigation, as part of its regulatory obligations. A careful review of the land use plan and discussions with BLM field office staff could help identify more suitable opportunities for restoration efforts and ensure compatibility with other authorized activities.

Compatibility through collaboration

Collaboration is another essential component of ensuring that conservation efforts are effectively integrated with other land uses and that restoration projects align with the needs and priorities of diverse stakeholders. Two components of the Public Lands Rule specifically address collaboration between conservation organizations and other land users. First, applicants are required to provide a development plan detailing their outreach to existing permittees and leaseholders, as well as neighboring landowners and managers. Second, BLM authorizing officers are directed to prioritize applications for restoration or mitigation that demonstrate meaningful collaboration with stakeholders, including existing lessees and permittees, neighboring landowners, and local communities.

These guidelines encourage organizations seeking to lease land for conservation purposes to engage with other land users who may be affected by their activities. With or without the Public Lands Rule, early communication with neighboring stakeholders can help organizations pursuing restoration build positive relationships, foster mutual understanding, and create opportunities for mutually beneficial, landscape-scale conservation across different ownership and management boundaries.

For example, an organization seeking to lease 500 acres of BLM land to manage cheatgrass after a brush fire should consider adjacent land uses. The parcel may border federally permitted grazing on one side and a private ranch on the other. Before applying for a lease, the organization should engage with these neighbors to communicate the restoration plan and address any concerns. The grazing permittee may be concerned about potential restrictions on future land use, while the landowner may value the area for hunting access.

To address these concerns, the organization could outline in its application that the parcel will be reopened to grazing or other permitted activities once restoration is complete and ensure that access for neighboring landowners is maintained. Including these details in the application allows the BLM to verify that outreach was conducted before approving the lease, ensuring that restoration efforts align with local land use considerations rather than being determined solely by agency staff or external entities.

Promoting private investment on public lands

Prior to the issuance of the Public Lands Rule, the BLM did not have a specific mechanism for leasing public lands exclusively for conservation purposes. While organizations could engage in restoration activities through general land use applications, these processes were not explicitly designed for conservation-focused leasing. Similarly, although mitigation efforts to offset environmental impacts from extractive activities could occur, the procedures lacked clear guidelines and a formalized framework. The Public

Lands Rule introduced specific restoration and mitigation leases, providing a more structured, secure approach for conservation and mitigation activities on BLM-managed lands.

The Public Lands Rule established defined time frames for both leases; restoration leases are limited to 10 years, while mitigation leases remain in effect for the duration of the activity they are designed to offset. These timelines provide greater certainty of durability for conservation efforts, helping to attract private investment in public land restoration. The effectiveness and longevity of these projects are further strengthened when they are strategically located in alignment with land use plans. Restoration efforts are more likely to yield lasting benefits when sited in areas where future land uses support ongoing landscape health and ecological resilience.

Overall, minimizing the administrative uncertainty associated with shifting land management priorities, legal challenges, and funding constraints through a formalized mechanism like restoration and mitigation leasing is the key to leveraging private investment for public lands conservation.

Putting it all together

The BLM is charged with managing an expansive set of lands, primarily in the western United States, in accordance with the principles of multiple use and sustained yield. Maintaining and restoring healthy landscapes is essential to this mission, and a shared priority beyond just agency staff. There is an opportunity for traditional land users and conservation organizations to work together to address this common goal.

The Public Lands Rule offers a framework for advancing collaborative, landscape-scale restoration by integrating conservation with multiple-use management. While the rule's future is uncertain, three core principles—aligning restoration with land-use planning, fostering stakeholder collaboration, and encouraging private investment—remain valuable. These strategies can help accelerate restoration efforts while balancing conservation with economic activity, reinforcing the role of multiple stakeholders in maintaining public land health.

The principles discussed in this brief can be leveraged by various stakeholders invested in the health of BLM lands. Policymakers can consider incorporating these approaches into new or revised policies that support conservation on federal public lands. BLM planners can assess landscapes to identify where conservation activities can enhance overall land health while remaining compatible with multiple-use mandates. Conservation organizations can do the same, working to align their efforts with local land use planning and existing land uses while collaborating with neighboring stakeholders to address concerns and ensure restoration efforts are compatible with surrounding activities. When extractive industries are required to provide compensatory mitigation, these strategies can facilitate mitigation efforts on public, rather than private, lands.

Together, these approaches can help all land users and stakeholders work towards a shared goal of ensuring that public lands remain healthy, productive, and accessible for future generations.