



U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

News Release

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BLM proposes modernizing forest management rules

First revision in 35+ years aims to increase efficiency, effectiveness of active forest management
WASHINGTON – The Bureau of Land Management is proposing updates to antiquated regulations governing administration of timber sales and protest of forest management decisions, which haven't been revised in more than 35 years. This proposal more effectively executes the bureau's modern watershed and landscape-level land management planning and evaluation process, which will enable BLM to make better decisions more quickly for the benefit of taxpayers and local communities.

“Over 30 years ago, the BLM proposed a protest process to ‘expedite’ timber management decisions. Unfortunately, this process has had the opposite effect,” said **Deputy Secretary Kate MacGregor**. “This proposal seeks to ensure timely action, including for thinning activities related to fire preparedness.”

“The BLM's forest management program contributes to sustained yield of timber to support local communities, while reducing fuel loads and the potential for catastrophic wildfires that can devastate forests and surrounding communities threatening lives,” said **William Perry Pendley, BLM Deputy Director for Policy and Programs**. “Under the direction of President Trump's Executive Order 13855 and Secretary Bernhardt's Secretary's Order 3372, the BLM is updating these rules to increase efficiency and to improve our ability to conduct active forest management on public lands.”

The way BLM plans forest management projects and completes the environmental review of these projects has changed significantly since the 1980's, and these proposed changes will improve the public's ability to comment earlier in the process, when views and information have the greatest impact, rather than relying on protests after decisions have been made. Abuse of and litigation over protests has delayed the BLM's efforts to implement active forest management, with both economic and and public safety consequences.

For example, the Pickett Hog timber sale in Oregon received 29 protests before auction in September 2017 – delaying the sale by more than a year. Before the BLM could complete protest reviews and responses, a wildfire destroyed a number of sale units in July 2018. Under the proposed regulations, the public comments could have been addressed before the auction was held, allowing the BLM to award the sale and the purchaser to begin thinning operations before the fire took place.

When the current forest management rules were last updated in 1984, the BLM designed individual timber sales that were based on the location and extent of the forest management activity. Today, the BLM often conducts its environmental review on multiple projects in a single watershed or on a biologically-relevant scale, such as wildlife habitat for a particular species. At

the same time, the BLM promotes greater collaboration and information-sharing during the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, which includes multiple opportunities for public involvement at times when the views and information provided are most effective. For these reasons, the 15-day protest period, which opens after a forest management decision is issued, often occurs long after environmental review has taken place.

When the protest period was first adopted, it was intended to “expedite implementation of decisions relating to timber management.” Instead, in too many cases today, individuals and organizations that are unsatisfied with the final forest management decision are using the protest process to delay implementation by filing lengthy protests with the same comments that were previously raised and addressed during the NEPA process. Responding to these protests can be costly to the public in terms of time and other resources, and in many cases offer no value to improve the agency decision or reduce appeals and litigation. It also leads to uncertainty during the auction and award of timber sales, since protest and appeal processes are not available until a decision has been issued.

The proposed amendments streamline the procedures governing forest management decisions by eliminating as unnecessary the post-decision protest period and allowing a single forest management decision to cover all forest management activities covered in an environmental review document. This would help identify any issues earlier in the NEPA review process, enhancing the BLM’s ability to resolve them before advertising a timber sale or implementing other forest management activities.

“Rather than streamlining the review process, as was originally envisioned, protest periods have proven to expend agency time and resources with little benefit. Focusing opportunities for public review and comment during the NEPA process, as the law’s authors intended, will enable us to make better decisions and implement them more effectively and efficiently,” **Pendley said.**

The proposed amendments also would better use communications technology by making decisions available online, in addition to other communication platforms such as newspapers and social media.

The BLM is opening a public comment period on the proposed revisions, which closes 60 days after the proposal publishes in the *Federal Register*. The BLM will provide additional information about when and how to comment when the proposed rule is published.

For more information on the BLM’s forest management activities, visit <https://www.blm.gov/programs/natural-resources/forests-and-woodlands>

Background

In 2018, the BLM offered 246.2 million board feet of timber for sale, generating approximately \$600 million in economic output and supporting 2,000 jobs. In addition to selling timber harvested from BLM-managed lands under the principle of sustained yield, the BLM’s forest management efforts often include fire safety and fire resilience objectives. One quarter of the 245 million acres of lands managed by the BLM are forest ecosystems, spread across 13 western states including Alaska. Through responsible forest management, the BLM ensures the health of these forest lands as well as the availability of traditional forest products.

The proposed revisions are part of a larger national wildfire reduction strategy guided by President Trump’s [Executive Order 13855](#) – *Promoting Active Management of America’s Forests, Rangelands, and Other Federal Lands to Improve Conditions and Reduce Wildfire Risk*, as well as

[Secretary's Order 3372](#) – *Reducing Wildfire Risks on Department of the Interior Land through Active Management*. The two orders direct Department of the Interior (DOI) to implement policies to improve forest and rangeland management practices by reducing hazardous fuel loads, mitigating fire risk and ensuring the safety and stability of local communities through active management on forests and rangelands.

What They are Saying

“Anyone familiar with the Rogue Valley knows BLM public lands are important to our local economy and attract tourists from around the world. Yet, antiquated regulations and anti-forestry obstruction have made it difficult for federal land managers to complete the forest management work necessary to reduce fire risks and assure a healthy environment for residents and visitors alike,” **stated Brad Hicks, CCE, President & CEO, the Chamber of Medford & Jackson County**. “As a result, our Southern Oregon communities have unnecessarily endured the harmful effects of severe fire and toxic smoke in recent years. I applaud the proposed rules which will improve forest management on BLM lands, save lives as well as benefit local jobs and businesses in our community. This is quite an achievement and the effort will go a long way toward protecting our quality of life, providing relief from wildfires and smoke, and ensuring that our region remains a destination for tourism far into the future.”

“The members of the American Loggers Council, spanning 34 States across the United States, fully support the proposed changes to the BLM's forest management rules that will promote forest health, improve rural economies in forest dependent communities, and help to prevent the catastrophic wildfires that are a real threat to communities in fire prone forested areas,” **stated Daniel J. Dructor, Executive Vice President, American Loggers Council**. “For too long, professional, credible forest management decisions have been held up in courtrooms by serial litigants whose goals seem to be based on an emotionally charged preservationist agenda instead of forest management that is based on sound science and those forest managers that have both the background and skill set to properly manage the nation's public forestland.”

“These necessary changes will allow for more nimble management which better fit today's forest landscape situation. The current unwieldy dinosaur regulations have created costly delays with tragic results for wildlife, watersheds, and people,” **stated Idaho state Representative Judy Boyle, Chairman of the Western Legislative Forestry Task Force, and Co-Chair of the federal lands committee on federalism**.

“BLM's current forest management protest process isn't working and modernization is way overdue,” **said Douglas County Commissioner and President of the Association of OC Counties Tim Freeman**. “Concerns over proposed BLM projects should be identified early in the process so the BLM has an opportunity to promptly address concerns. The proposed updating of the protest process will help eliminate needless delays.”

“The BLM's administrative protest process has been abused by anti-forestry, activist groups to delay and stop needed forest management projects developed by forestry experts. More science-based management would improve the health of our overstocked federal forests, reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire that threatens lives, property, and air quality, and is absolutely essential to the sustaining the long-term viability of rural communities across Oregon. Murphy Company strongly supports common sense changes to end the blatant abuse of this system to restore greater fairness and certainty for the rural communities where we operate, forestry experts, and companies like ours that rely on BLM timber to continue putting Oregonians to work producing the renewable, carbon-friendly wood products we use every day,” **stated John Murphy, President & CEO, Murphy Company**.

“We very much appreciate the Department’s work to modernize forest management rules. Years of mismanagement under antiquated practices have left millions of acres of forests across the West at risk for disease and catastrophic fire,” **said Shaun Crook, 2nd Vice President, California Farm Bureau Federation.** “Every day that reforms to management practices aren’t implemented represents another day of possible forest improvement lost. Our rural communities and environments depend on healthy forests, and we have to significantly increase the pace and scale of management practices so we can once again have a resilient landscape.”

“Southern Oregon has been deeply impacted by catastrophic wildfire and smoke for far too long, resulting in negative health impacts, cancellations of signature cultural and sporting events, and reduced economic activity for local businesses across many sectors. The Chamber’s Natural Resource Action Team and Chamber Board of Directors has long advocated for this, so we are excited about the BLM’s proposed rule to modernize forest management decisions. This will help increase the pace and scale of thinning and other activities on local BLM lands, which is essential to protecting our communities, supporting our economy, and reducing the risks of fire and smoke in the future,” **said Sue Kupillas, Chair, Natural Resources Action Team, the Chamber of Medford & Jackson County.**

“It is not only a good time to be looking at changing the protest mechanism within forest management regulations,” **said Eric Carleson, Executive Director, Associated California Loggers.** “It is an urgently needed change. These provisions, and others, have not been changed in 35+ years, and over the decades, the nature of forest management has changed against a background of enhanced environmental review on the one hand, and the impact of massive wildfires in the West on the other. The ‘protest’ mechanism was intended to streamline management planning and decision-making; it has devolved down to a mechanism that slows down projects which are urgently needed for fuels reduction and forest health, without a commensurate improvement in the review process.”

“These updates improve the opportunity of timely implementation of management plans. Federal land managers have a wide diversity of resource experts designing and implementing management activity. The unnecessary delaying of needed action is a serious problem for resource managers. If the medical community was subject to justifying their every action, most patients would die before they reached the operating table. The forests are Interior’s patient, and the experts are in emergency mode. These updates will help them get the job done more expeditiously,” **stated Bill Mulligan, Idaho Forester, Trinity Consulting.**

"Extremists have hijacked the protest process in order to destroy jobs, drain forest revenues and jeopardize the safety of our mountain communities. Today's action increases transparency by posting protest decisions online as well as in newspapers and on social media. Modernizing this broken system after nearly four decades is badly needed and will provide significant benefits for public safety, the economy and the environment. I thank Secretary Bernhardt, Deputy Secretary MacGregor and BLM Acting Director Pendley for this leadership," **said U.S. Congressman Tom McClintock (CA-04).**

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The BLM manages more than 245 million acres of public land located primarily in 12 Western states, including Alaska. The BLM also administers 700 million acres of sub-surface mineral estate throughout the nation. In fiscal year 2018, the diverse activities authorized on BLM-managed lands generated \$105 billion in economic output across the country. This economic activity supported 471,000 jobs and contributed substantial revenue to the U.S. Treasury and state governments, mostly through royalties on minerals.



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BLM proposes expedited review of timber salvage projects

Proposal would allow agency to address threat posed by catastrophic wildfires to forest health and public safety across millions of acres in the West

The Bureau of Land Management today announced a proposal to establish a new categorical exclusion (CX) under the National Environmental Policy Act, which would streamline the agency's review of routine timber salvage projects and operations. This proposal would contribute to rural economies, accelerate reestablishment of native resilient forest tree species and reduce future wildfire fuel loads, while diminishing hazards to wildland firefighters, the public and infrastructure from dead and dying trees.

“The Trump Administration takes the threat of wildfire seriously. At Interior, we are doing everything we can within the law to aggressively prepare for wildfire season,” **said Deputy Secretary of the Interior Katharine MacGregor**. “This proposed measure would significantly cut back on the time it takes to allow commercial timber operators into a landscape devastated by wildfire to remove marketable trees while also reducing or eliminating hazard trees that pose a danger to firefighters and infrastructure. Fostering timber jobs while reducing wildfire risks is a win-win.”

“We have to give our land managers the tools they need to reduce fuel loads and the threat of catastrophic wildfires in an environmentally sustainable manner. This proposal will allow us to increase the health and resilience of the landscape for both wildlife and people,” **said William Perry Pendley, BLM Deputy Director for Policy and Programs**.

The proposed CXs is part of a larger national wildfire reduction strategy guided by President Trump's [Executive Order 13855](#) – *Promoting Active Management of America's Forests, Rangelands, and Other Federal Lands to Improve Conditions and Reduce Wildfire Risk*, as well as [Secretary's Order 3372](#) – *Reducing Wildfire Risks on Department of the Interior Land through Active Management*. The two orders direct Department of the Interior (DOI) to implement policies to improve forest and rangeland management practices by reducing hazardous fuel loads, mitigating fire risk and ensuring the safety and stability of local communities through active management on forests and rangelands.

From 2000 to 2017, wildfires burned an average of 6.8 million acres annually in the U.S. For BLM-managed forests, fire has affected an average of 279,630 acres annually from 2009 to 2018. The threat of wildfires is accelerated by the presence of dead and dying timber. Insect and disease survey data collected in 2015 by the Forest Health Protection Program of the U.S. Forest Service identified 70 different mortality-causing insects and diseases across 5.2 million acres in the conterminous United States. The BLM assembled data from the U.S. Forest Service Aerial Detection Survey from 2008 to 2017 and found nearly two million acres of forest mortality were observed over that period on BLM lands.

Given the threat of wildfires across millions of acres of forests – and the threat this poses to native wildlife and the lives and livelihoods of people and communities across the West – the BLM has identified that establishing a new CX for the actions is necessary to expedite the removal of dead and dying timber to reduce fuel loads and the threat of catastrophic wildfires.

NEPA requires Federal agencies to consider the potential environmental consequences of their decisions before deciding whether and how to proceed. The appropriate use of CXs allows NEPA compliance, in the absence of extraordinary circumstances that merit further consideration, to be concluded without preparing either an environmental assessment or an environmental impact statement.

The proposal would affect only routine timber salvage projects smaller than 5,000 acres that normally do not require more extensive environmental analysis. While wildfire affects hundreds of thousands of acres of BLM-managed lands each year, current BLM regulations only allow for use of a salvage harvest CX that may not exceed 250 acres. This additional CX will increase the agency's flexibility to respond to disturbances across larger areas.

The BLM has completed a review of scientific literature and previously analyzed and implemented actions and found no evidence that salvage harvest at the levels proposed would have a negative effect on forest health. To the contrary, removing dead and dying trees can accelerate forest succession and benefit native wildlife species that rely on successional habitat, while reducing the potential for catastrophic wildfires.

The BLM is opening a public comment period on the proposed CX that closes 30 days after the proposal publishes in the *Federal Register*. The BLM will provide additional information about when and how to comment when the proposed rule is published.

For more information on the BLM's forest management activities, visit <https://www.blm.gov/programs/natural-resources/forests-and-woodlands>

Background

The Department of the Interior has implemented an aggressive strategy to more effectively manage, treat, and prevent wildfires, reducing wildfire risks on more than 1.4 million acres of Federal lands in 2019. This was the largest fuel load reduction in a decade. More information is available [online](#).

What They are Saying

“In recent years, catastrophic wildfires have devastated the communities of the Sierra Nevada. Frivolous lawsuits and failed public land management policies have intensified these deadly blazes. The result is mortal danger to our citizens and devastation of our local economies as dead timber is left to burn.” said **U.S. Congressman Tom McClintock (CA-04)**. “Scientific land management can restore resilience to our forests, health for our economy and most important, safety for our communities. I applaud Secretary Bernhardt, Deputy Secretary MacGregor and BLM Acting Director Pendley for recognizing that the current process is badly broken and taking actions that will save lives, restore our forests and watersheds and boost our local economies.”

“I appreciate the Trump administration increasing the tools in our toolbox to improve our forest management. In 2017, wildfires consumed over one million acres in Montana, threatened livelihoods, and destroyed wildlife habitats. Fire season is getting longer and more severe,” said **Congressman Greg Gianforte (MT-At Large)**. “Today’s announcement from the Bureau of Land Management boosts common-sense, smart fire prevention measures, rehabilitation efforts, and timber jobs in Montana. By removing dead and dying timber on the front end, we can reduce the likelihood and severity of wildfires on our public lands.”

“Members of the American Loggers Council support the BLM’s proposed expedited review of timber salvage projects. While the use of the proposed categorical exclusion will allow land managers to reduce fuel loads caused by insect, disease and wildland fires in order to accomplish forest restoration work in a timely manner, it also allows commercial timber harvests to take place before the dead, diseased and dying timber has lost its commercial value generating not only revenue for the BLM, but also supporting rural infrastructure and jobs in timber dependent communities,” said **Daniel J. Dructor, Executive Vice President, American Loggers Council**.

“The frustration of not being able to salvage timber from dead and dying trees before wildfires can occur and before the timber becomes unmerchantable, is always painful,” noted **Eric Carleson, Executive Director, Associated California Loggers**. “But at a time when wildfires in California have destroyed an unprecedented number of acres, loss of salvage timber is a two-fold tragedy. Rural communities and firefighters alike are threatened by dead trees, and by wildfires that could have been prevented with streamlined salvage rules in place. Unmerchantable timber is a liability. This proposed Categorical Exclusion is the right solution at exactly the right time.”

"Current NEPA requirements delay any meaningful actions to remove hazardous snags and fuels left after wildfires. The resulting hazards pose long term risks to the public, elevate the dangers faced by firefighters and cause future fires to burn even more severely. This new CX authority will help land managers reduce those risks. We have seen countless wildfires sweep over the same burned landscapes that were not treated. These recurring incidents are far more damaging to the ecosystem than the first. This new CX authority will permit land managers prompt action to remove hazardous snags and fuels along roadways and create fuel to protect the land when the next fire comes," said **Javier Goirigolzarri, Executive Director, Communities for Healthy Forests, Inc.**

“A welcomed, commonsense change to more effectively allow BLM to respond to the forest health crisis in the West. This new proposal will provide BLM the opportunity to be a better neighbor to private and state forest lands and offer more protection for the environment,” said **Idaho state Representative Judy Boyle, Chairman of the Western Legislative Forest Task Force & Co-chair of the federal lands committee on federalism.**

“Timber salvage after a wildfire is a race against the clock. This CE will greatly improve the department’s ability to salvage timber after a wildfire. Removing the timber while it still has value allows for post-fire restoration to occur expediently and at a significantly reduced cost. This helps rural communities and environments rebuild after a catastrophic wildfire,” said **Shaun Crook, 2nd Vice President, California Farm Bureau Federation.**

“We need regulations that will allow more large scale, aggressive fuels management to improve forest health. In addition to improving safety and wildlife management, active managing fuels is the key to managing water yield and quality. Current scientific studies illustrate that those benefits may be the most important contribution of active fuels management,” stated **Bill Mulligan, Idaho Forester, Trinity Consulting.**

“We have been hit hard with wildfires in southwestern Oregon for the last ten years; those fires have caused economic and health hardships for the counties and citizens. Leaving dead and dying timber to fuel future fires is both dangerous for the forest and a waste of economic resources. Speeding up salvage operations by cutting bureaucratic red tape is a good first step in bringing sound forest management back to the BLM-managed timberlands,” said **Douglas County Oregon County Commissioner and President of the Association of O&C Counties Tim Freeman.**

“It is vital that the Bureau of Land Management turn their minds to the enormous timber salvage harvesting task that lies ahead to reduce fuel loads and the threat of catastrophic wildfires across millions of acres of forests,” said **Dan Johnson, Idaho State Senator.** “Communities and forests will benefit greatly by an expedited review of timber salvage operations that are part of a sustainable forest management program.”

“I applaud the Bureau of Land Management for their proposal to establish new categorical exclusions under the National Environmental Policy Act that will give resource managers the ability to streamline review of routine timber salvage projects”, said **Julia Altemus, executive director of the Montana Wood Products Association.** “This proposal is consistent with other federal efforts to address the need to streamline salvage opportunities and will help align cross-boundary federal and state responses to rehabilitate landscapes after wildfire and mitigates insect and disease outbreaks and spread.”

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