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The Federal Land Management Agencies

The Property Clause in the U.S. Constitution (Article IV, Section 3, clause 2) provides Congress the authority to acquire, dispose of, and manage federal property. Currently, approximately 640 million acres of surface land are managed by the federal government, accounting for nearly 28% of the 2.3 billion acres of land (excluding inland waters) in the 50 states and District of Columbia. Four federal land management agencies (FLMAs) administer 606 million acres (95%) of these federal lands:

- U.S. Forest Service (FS), in the Department of Agriculture, manages the 193 million acre National Forest System.
- Bureau of Land Management (BLM), in the Department of the Interior (DOI), manages 244 million acres of public lands.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), in DOI, manages 89 million acres as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System.
- National Park Service (NPS), in DOI, manages 80 million acres in the National Park System.

Most of these lands are in the West, where the percentage of federal ownership is significantly higher than elsewhere in the nation (see **Figure 1**). The remaining federal acreage is managed by several other agencies, including the Department of Defense. The federal estate also includes areas on U.S. territorial lands and offshore and subsurface mineral resources (not discussed here). The four FLMAs

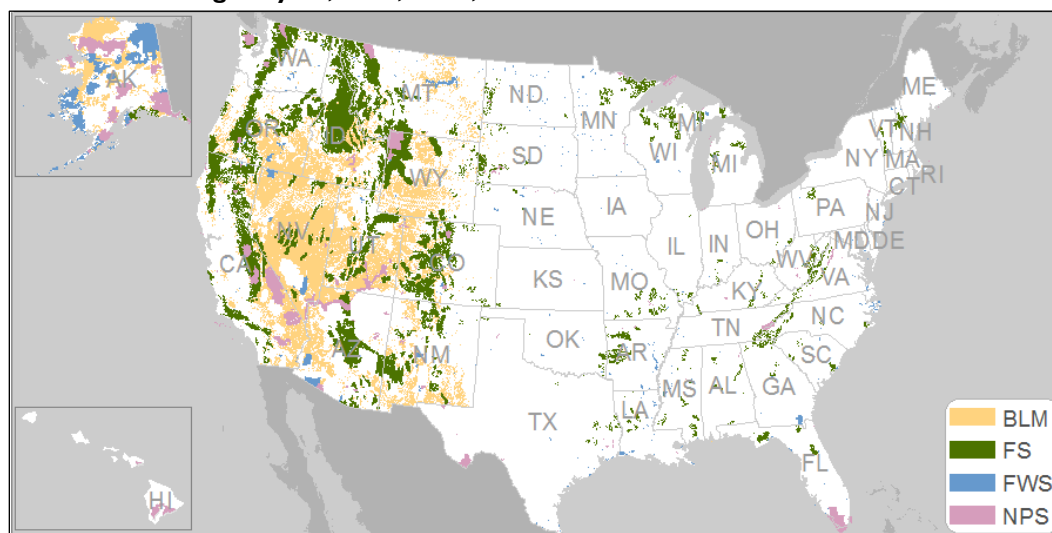
were established at different times with different management missions and purposes, which are briefly summarized in this In Focus.

U.S. Forest Service

FS was established in the Department of Agriculture in 1905 and is charged with conducting forestry research, providing assistance to nonfederal forest owners, and managing the 193 million acre National Forest System (NFS). The NFS includes 154 national forests; 20 national grasslands; and various other federal land designations in 43 states, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Most NFS land is in the West, although FS manages more than half of all federal lands in the East.

The first forest reserves—later renamed national forests—originally were authorized to protect the lands, preserve water flows, and provide timber. These purposes were expanded in the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 (16 U.S.C. §§528-531). This act added recreation, livestock grazing, and wildlife and fish habitat as purposes of the national forests. The act directed that these multiple uses be managed in a “harmonious and coordinated” manner and “in the combination that will best meet the needs of the American people.” The act also directed FS to manage renewable resources under the principle of sustained yield, meaning to achieve a high level of resource outputs in perpetuity, without impairing the productivity of the lands. In addition, Congress directed FS to conduct long-range planning efforts to manage the national forests. Balancing the multiple uses across the NFS has sometimes led to conflicts regarding management decisions and priorities.

Figure 1. Federal Land Managed by FS, BLM, FWS, and NPS



Source: Congressional Research Service (CRS).

Note: BLM = Bureau of Land Management; FS = U.S. Forest Service; FWS = U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; NPS = National Park Service. In this CRS product, the West refers to the following 12 states: AK, AZ, CA, CO, ID, MT, NM, NV, OR, UT, WA and WY.

Bureau of Land Management

BLM was formed in 1946 by combining two existing agencies. BLM administers more onshore federal lands than any other agency—244 million acres. BLM lands are heavily concentrated (99.8%) in the 12 western states. Nearly half of the total acreage is in two states—Alaska (29%) and Nevada (19%). BLM lands, officially designated as the National System of Public Lands, include grasslands, forests, high mountains, arctic tundra, and deserts. BLM lands often are intermingled with other federal or private lands, and the agency has authority to acquire, dispose of, and exchange lands under various statutes.

As defined in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (43 U.S.C. §§1701 et seq.), BLM management responsibilities are similar to those of FS—sustained yields of the multiple uses, including recreation, grazing, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish habitat, and conservation. For instance, about 155 million acres are available for livestock grazing, and about 37 million acres are managed by BLM as National Conservation Lands. Some lands are withdrawn (restricted) from one or more uses or managed for a predominant use. The agency inventories its lands and resources and develops land-use plans for its land units. In addition, BLM administers onshore federal energy and mineral resources, covering 713 million acres of federal subsurface mineral estate—including the subsurface of many national forests. BLM also provides technical supervision of mineral development on about 62 million acres of tribal lands. Conflicts sometimes arise among and between users and land managers as a result of the diversity of the lands and multiple-use opportunities on BLM lands.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The Fish and Wildlife Service was created in 1940 and reestablished as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) in 1956, although the first national wildlife refuge was established by executive order in 1903. In 1966, selected FWS-administered lands were aggregated into the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), administered by FWS. The NWRS includes 89 million acres of wildlife refuges, waterfowl production areas, and coordination areas in the 50 states (of which 77 million acres [87%] are in Alaska). In addition, the NWRS includes 652 million acres of mostly territorial lands and submerged lands and waters as part of several mainly marine wildlife refuges and marine national monuments. FWS also manages other lands within and outside of the NWRS through other authorities, agreements, easements, or leases or in a co-management or secondary jurisdiction capacity. In addition to administering the NWRS, FWS enforces various wildlife laws, protects endangered species, and manages migratory birds.

In contrast to the multiple-use missions of FS and BLM, FWS manages the NWRS through a dominant-use mission—to conserve plants and animals for the benefit of present and future generations. Other uses (timber cutting, grazing, etc.) may be permitted, to the extent that they are compatible with the NWRS mission and purposes of NWRS units, but wildlife-related activities (hunting, fishing, bird-watching, education, etc.) are considered “priority uses.” Determining compatibility can be

challenging, but the specificity of the mission generally has minimized conflicts over refuge management and use.

National Park Service

NPS was created in 1916 to manage the growing number of national parks and similar protected areas. The National Park System has grown to 431 units with diverse titles—national park, national preserve, national historic site, national recreation area, national battlefield, and many more. NPS administers 80 million acres of federal land in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and some U.S. territories. Roughly two-thirds of the system’s lands are in Alaska.

NPS has a dual mission—to preserve unique resources and to provide for their enjoyment by the public. Park units include natural areas (e.g., Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Arches National Parks); prehistoric sites (e.g., Mesa Verde National Park, Dinosaur National Monument); and special places in American history (e.g., Valley Forge National Historical Park, Gettysburg National Military Park, the Statue of Liberty National Monument), as well as areas that focus on recreation (e.g., Cape Cod National Seashore, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area). NPS laws, regulations, and policies emphasize the conservation of park resources in conservation/use conflicts, and the system’s lands and resources generally receive a higher level of protection than those of BLM and FS. The tension between providing recreation and preserving resources has produced many management challenges for NPS.

Selected CRS Products

CRS Video WVB00399, *Introduction to Federal Lands*

CRS Report R42656, *Federal Land Management Agencies and Programs: CRS Experts*

CRS Report R43429, *Federal Lands and Related Resources: Overview and Selected Issues for the 118th Congress*

CRS Report R42346, *Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data*

CRS Report RL34273, *Federal Land Ownership: Acquisition and Disposal Authorities*

CRS Report R45340, *Federal Land Designations: A Brief Guide*

CRS Report R45480, *U.S. Department of the Interior: An Overview*

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