

BLM's New Acting Director James Hughes Delivers First Address at the Recreation Exchange

James M. Hughes, newly-named Acting Director of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), gave the first speech since his appointment to the February 2007 Recreation Exchange. Mr. Hughes, who had been Deputy Director of Programs and Policy at BLM since 2002, spoke to the group about the challenges of managing outdoor recreation on BLM's 262 million acres, much of which is within a short drive of Western cities.

Today, he explained, Americans are demanding more of BLM's land than the traditional "mining and grazing" which predominated before World War II. As other public lands became more crowded, he explained, the public turned to BLM-managed lands, traditionally with fewer use limitations, for solitude and the wide-open spaces they seek for recreation. However, "new technology and new toys," he observed, "mean that the days of unmanaged use are over."

The 3,500 recreation sites on BLM land are faced with meeting the demands of competing user groups for access, Mr. Hughes said. Travel and trail management for off-highway vehicle (OHV) use is now the greatest recreation challenge BLM faces. The Bureau is currently updating its resource management plans to determine where use is appropriate, both where it currently takes place and other lands that might be designated for OHV use. He urged the recreation community to be actively involved locally in the planning process "so we get it right."

Mr. Hughes described several new partnership programs at BLM. The "Healthy Lands Initiative" is a flexible landscape-level approach to land management that supports healthy wildlife populations and human use. There are currently six pilot projects underway, in partnership with other federal agencies and the private sector. Restoration of habitat through mitigation credits (similar to wetlands restoration programs), corridors for wildlife movement across gas fields and smaller footprints for oil and gas wells are other approaches being implemented.

The "Healthy Kids" program encourages families to connect with the land and get healthier through outdoor recreation. "Take It Outside" engages children in schools through BLM's existing education programs. He sees getting the whole family involved as critical to the success of these efforts.

Mr. Hughes praised the Recreation Resource Advisory Committees (RRAC) and the new America the Beautiful Pass created by Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (REA). He said BLM is working to improve its collection of fees and investing fees where they are collected to improve visitor services. He noted that public satisfaction with BLM's recreation programs is high - 93% in a recent survey. However, in closing, he acknowledged that there is room for improvement and invited BLM's recreation partners to tell him "where our failings have been."

In a question and answer session following his remarks, Mr. Hughes was asked about the need to collaborate with local governments where local land use decisions can complicate BLM's efforts, especially where rapid changes are occurring near Western cities. Mr. Hughes mentioned BLM land sales related to local government annexations and law enforcement as two areas where collaboration with local government is taking place. And he noted that BLM staff currently provide much-needed training to county governments on the NEPA process.

Mr. Hughes was asked if the BLM is moving towards an entirely-designated route system for OHV use, as the Forest Service is now doing. He said that BLM addresses OHV use in individual resource management plans, either by route designations or with guidelines. He also supports partnerships with both local governments and user groups to designate and manage appropriate "play areas" where use can be less regulated.

Asked about BLM welcoming private sector involvement in recreation on BLM lands similar to ski-area management on Forest Service land, Mr. Hughes said that he favors private-sector involvement in providing recreation management. He sees great opportunities, particularly on the urban interface where, he said, there are too many conflicts and too much demand not to use marketplace solutions.

ARC's Derrick Crandall closed the session by urging the Acting Director to better publicize the new America the Beautiful Pass, and especially the volunteer pass. Most people don't understand, he said, that you can volunteer on BLM lands where no fees are charged and still earn a pass for use where fees are collected, including national parks.

Recreation Exchanges have been held since 1980 as a forum for discussion and sharing between the recreation community and the nation's public policy leaders. Exchanges are hosted in Washington, D.C. by the American Recreation Coalition ten times annually, featuring guests who are influencing recreation policy in America. Information on past and future programs is available at www.funoutdoors.com.

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