Our Public Land Heritage: From the GLO to the BLM

The challenge of managing public lands started as soon as America established its independence and began acquiring additional lands. Initially, these public lands were used to encourage homesteading and westward migration, and the General Land Office (GLO) was created to support this national goal. Over time, however, values and attitudes regarding public lands shifted. Many significant laws and events led to the establishment of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and laid the foundation for its mission to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of America's public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

www.blm.gov/history

Wagon train

1783
Revolutionary War ends

1776
Declaration of Independence is signed.

1778
Second Continental Congress begins persuading states to cede land to create the public domain.

John Trumbull's painting, *Declaration of Independence*

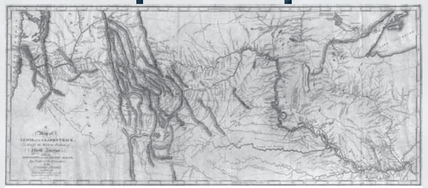
1785
Land Ordinance allows settlement of public domain lands and establishes the government's rectangular survey system.

1789
U.S. Constitution gives Congress the "Power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting The Territory and other Property belonging to the United States."

Meriwether Lewis

William Clark

1803
Ohio becomes the first state created from the public domain.


Lewis' and Clark's path across the western portion of North America, published 1814

1812
General Land Office is established within the Treasury Department to oversee disposition of ceded and acquired lands.

1824
Office of Indian Affairs is established in the Department of War and is later transferred to the Department of the Interior

1837
On its 25th anniversary, the General Land Office has 65 district land offices.

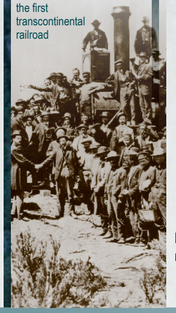
Homestead

1843
"Great Migration" on the Oregon Trail begins.

1844
First geological surveys of public lands are initiated by the General Land Office in Michigan.

1849
Department of the Interior is established and the General Land Office is transferred to the new department.

1850
First railroad land grants are made in Illinois, Alabama, and Mississippi.


Workers joining the tracks for the first transcontinental railroad

1861 • 1865
American Civil War

1860
First Pony Express rider leaves St. Joseph, Missouri.

1862
Homestead Act entitles settlers to 160 acres of public land after they reside on and cultivate the land for 5 years.

Transcontinental Railroad Act gives railroad companies rights-of-way and alternate sections of public domain lands along both sides of their railroads.

1869
First transcontinental railroad is completed at Promontory Summit, Utah.

Placer mining in Colorado, 1893

1872
General Mining Law identifies mineral lands as a distinct class of public lands subject to exploration, occupation, and purchase under stipulated conditions.

Establishment of Yellowstone National Park marks a shift from disposition to conservation and protection of federal lands.

1877
Desert Land Act authorizes the disposition of 640-acre tracts of public lands to homesteaders upon proof of reclamation of the lands by irrigation.

1878
Timber and Stone Act authorizes the negotiated sale of lands that are valuable for either logging or mining and otherwise unfit for cultivation.

1889
Oklahoma Land Rush begins the disposal of federal public domain lands in Oklahoma.

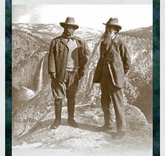
Travel across the desert in California

1894
Carey Act authorizes transfer of up to 1 million acres of public desert land to states for settling, irrigating, and cultivating purposes.

1897
Forest Management "Organic" Act transfers fire protection responsibilities for forest reserves from the Department of Army to the General Land Office.

1898
Congress extends homestead laws to Alaska.

1906
Antiquities Act preserves and protects prehistoric, historic, and scientifically significant sites on public lands and creates national monuments.


Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir, 1903

Oklahoma Land Rush

Gold dredge in Alaska, 1938

1917 • 1918
World War I

1911
Weeks Act permits the federal purchase of private land to protect the headwaters of rivers and watersheds and calls for cooperative fire protection efforts.

1916
Stock Raising Homestead Act authorizes homesteads of 640 acres and separates surface rights from subsurface (mineral) rights.

1929
Great Depression Begins

1920
Mineral Leasing Act authorizes federal leasing of public lands for private extraction of oil, gas, coal, phosphate, sodium, and other minerals.

1926
Recreation and Public Purposes Act allows conveyance or lease of public lands to state and local governments for outdoor recreation purposes.

Evening campfire, 1926

1934
Taylor Grazing Act authorizes grazing districts, grazing regulation, and public rangeland improvements in western states (excluding Alaska) and establishes the Division of Grazing (later renamed the U.S. Grazing Service) within the Department of the Interior.

1937
Oregon and California (O&C) Revested Lands Sustained Yield Management Act requires O&C Railroad lands to be managed for permanent forest production and provides for watershed protection, regulation of streamflow, and recreational facilities.

1939
Alaskan Fire Control Service is created within the General Land Office to prevent and suppress fires on Alaska public lands.

Land Acquisitions of the United States

1783
Lands south of the Great Lakes and east of the Mississippi River are ceded to the United States.

1803
Louisiana Purchase nearly doubles the size of the United States.

1819
Spanish cession of Florida and boundary adjustments west of the Mississippi River add more than 46 million acres to the public domain.

1845
Republic of Texas is annexed by the United States.

1846
Oregon compromise gives the United States claim to part of the Pacific Northwest.

1848
Mexico cedes California and vast areas of the inland West to the United States.

1853
Gadsden Purchase adds almost 19 million acres of public lands in southern Arizona and New Mexico.

1867
United States purchases Alaska, adding 375 million acres to the public domain.

1770 1780 1790 1800 1810 1820 1830 1840 1850 1860 1870 1880 1890 1900 1910 1920 1930

Cadastral surveyors

1942
Extensive withdrawals of public lands for military and defense use begin, with more than 13 million acres withdrawn in 2 years.

1946
Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is established within the Department of the Interior through the consolidation of the General Land Office and the U.S. Grazing Service.

1940

Oil well operation

1953
Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to lease mineral lands more than 3 miles offshore; the BLM assumes responsibility for leasing through competitive sales.

1954
Recreation and Public Purposes Act amends the 1926 act and allows the sale and lease of public lands for other purposes in addition to recreation.

The BLM reorganizes and creates a state office system.

1955
Multiple Surface Use Act withdraws common varieties of minerals from entry as mining claims and allows claim owners to use the surface for mining operation purposes only.

1959
Wild Horse Protection Act prohibits the roundup of wild horses by aircraft and motor vehicles.

BLM range grass study, 1959

1950

Johnny Horizon Cleanup Days near petroglyphs in California, 1969

1960
Public Land Administration Act allows the use of donations and cooperative agreements to improve and better manage public lands.

1964
Public Land Law Review Commission is established to study public land laws and make long-term recommendations for public land use.

Wilderness Act protects undeveloped federal land to preserve its natural condition.

The BLM adopts a new logo.

1965
Land and Water Conservation Fund is established for federal acquisition of outdoor recreation areas.

1966
National Historic Preservation Act expands protection of prehistoric and historic properties.

1968
Wild and Scenic Rivers and National Trails System Acts preserve sites with outstanding natural, cultural, scenic, historic, and recreational significance.

Johnny Horizon program promotes public awareness of BLM-administered lands.

1969
National Environmental Policy Act requires federal agencies to assess the impacts of their actions on the environment.

1960

Alaska pipeline

1971
Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act provides for settlement of aboriginal land claims of Alaskan Natives and Native groups; the BLM is tasked with the largest U.S. land transfer effort ever undertaken.

Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act provides for the protection and management of these animals on federal lands.

1973
Endangered Species Act requires the conservation of threatened and endangered plants and animals and the ecosystems upon which they depend.

1975
Energy Policy and Conservation Act addresses energy demands and establishes a strategic petroleum reserve.

1976
Federal Land Policy and Management Act requires that public lands be managed for multiple uses and sustained yield through land use planning.

Management of the National Petroleum Reserve–Alaska is transferred to the BLM.

1977
Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act ensures environmental safeguards for mining and reclamation of mined areas.

Trans Alaska Pipeline System begins transporting oil 800 miles from Alaska's North Slope to the Port of Valdez.

1978
Public Rangelands Improvement Act requires inventory, determination of trends, and improvement of public rangelands.

1979
Archaeological Resources Protection Act requires permits for excavation or removal of these resources from federal lands and provides stringent criminal and civil penalties for violations.

1970

Wind energy project in Wyoming

1980
Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act designates and conserves public lands in Alaska as national parks, wildlife refuges, wild and scenic rivers, wilderness, and forests and provides for subsistence use by rural Alaska residents.

Energy Security Act promotes the development of alternative energy sources such as oil shale, synthetic fuel, wind power, and geothermal sources.

The BLM completes its first resource management plan, covering the California Desert Conservation Area, and designates its first areas of critical environmental concern in Utah and California.

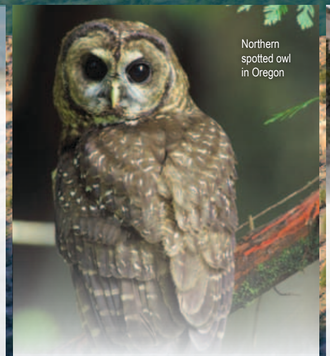
1983
Bear Trap Canyon in southwestern Montana is designated by Congress as BLM's first wilderness area (it later became part of Lee Metcalf Wilderness).

The BLM transfers responsibility for offshore leasing to the Minerals Management Service.

1987
Federal Onshore Oil and Gas Leasing Reform Act establishes a new leasing system and changes certain operational procedures for onshore resources on federal lands.

Alaska Natives filleting salmon in Alaska, 1985

1980


Northern spotted owl in Oregon

1990
Northern spotted owl is listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act, leading to an enjoinment of all timber sales on federal lands within its range.

1992
Energy Policy Act increases focus on alternative energy sources, energy efficiency, and reducing the country's reliance on foreign fuel sources.

1993
Presidential summit leads to the development of the Northwest Forest Plan to address human and environmental needs in areas within the northern spotted owl region.

1994
BLM Summit, the first ever gathering of all BLM managers, resulted in the development of a new strategic vision for the BLM.

Rangeland Reform '94 amends grazing regulations and establishes Resource Advisory Councils.

1996
Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument is designated by Presidential proclamation as BLM's first national monument.

1990

Tent Rocks National Monument in New Mexico

2000
National Landscape Conservation System is established.

Executive Order 13175 mandates consultation and collaboration with tribal officials in developing federal policy that has tribal implications.

2005
Energy Policy Act ensures energy efficiency and the production of secure, affordable, and reliable domestic energy.

2008
BLM-managed lands are officially designated as the National System of Public Lands.

2009
Omnibus Public Land Management Act authorizes the 26-million-acre National Landscape Conservation System and establishes permit requirements and penalties for unauthorized removal of paleontological resources from federal lands.

Femur bone fossil found on BLM land in Wyoming

2000

Monitoring trees in Oregon

2012
200th anniversary of the General Land Office and the 150th anniversary of the Homestead Act

An environmental education program in Colorado

Today, the BLM benefits the national economy as well as the economies of local communities. Activities on BLM lands, such as energy production, mineral extraction, timber harvesting, grazing, and recreation, result in jobs and income from goods and services associated with public land resources. In 2010, the BLM's management of public lands contributed more than $112 billion to the national economy and supported more than 500,000 American jobs.

2010

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