

Are Our Public Lands Healthy and Sustainable? A Review of Recent Analyses and Data



MAIN TAKEAWAY

SPRING 2026

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) administers the 245-million-acre National System of Public Lands, nearly one in every 10 acres in the United States. The National System of Public Lands spans stunning red rock canyons in Colorado and Utah, wild rivers in Alaska, ancient forests in Oregon and expansive shrublands and deserts of the Interior West. These public lands play a substantial role in supporting native wildlife, with BLM managing more wildlife habitat than any other federal agency. Recent analyses and data suggest that the ecological health across large portions of the National System of Public Lands is compromised or declining with implications for the sustainability of at-risk wildlife species over the long term. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act requires BLM to manage for “sustained yield” which includes sustainable ecosystems and wildlife.

BLM’S MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES

BLM manages public lands according to direction provided by Congress in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). FLPMA directs the agency to manage public lands for multiple use and sustained yield. Sustained yield is defined by maintaining, and where necessary recovering, renewable resources in perpetuity—a long-term mandate to manage for land health, ecosystem function and wildlife habitat, not just short-term outputs. Within this framework, BLM authorizes a range of uses across public lands.

Historically, BLM management has been tilted toward extractive uses: with 81% of BLM lands open to oil and gas development and over 60% open to livestock grazing. BLM has acknowledged that currently, the “[d]egradation of the health of public lands threatens BLM’s ability to manage public lands as directed by FLPMA.”

WHY BLM LANDS MATTER FOR WILDLIFE

The National System of Public Lands provides habitat for more than 300 threatened and endangered species and approximately 2,460 species of conservation concern. It supports iconic and imperiled species such as the Mojave Desert tortoise, greater sage-grouse and pygmy rabbit, among others.

National-scale analysis indicates that the top two leading drivers of species imperilment are climate change (affecting 91% of imperiled species) and habitat loss (affecting 90%). Because most species face multiple and interacting stressors, maintaining intact and resilient ecosystems is an essential component of long-term biodiversity conservation. A majority of public lands overlap ecosystems that are currently classified as at-risk.





ECOLOGICAL CONDITION OF PUBLIC LANDS

A growing body of recent reports and analyses indicates that ecological conditions across much of the National System of Public Lands are consistently declining.

FRESHWATER HABITATS

Within the National System of Public Lands are more than 20,000 acres of wetlands and more than 250,000 miles of perennial and intermittent streams and rivers which serve as the source of drinking water for one in ten people in the West.⁹ Freshwater habitats are especially important to wildlife in western arid and semi-arid landscapes found in the West and are regional hotspots for biodiversity. For example, in Arizona and New Mexico, at least 80% of all vertebrates use riparian areas and more than 50% primarily depend on riparian zones for their survival.¹⁰ A 2016 assessment of stream and river conditions on BLM lands found that at least 70% of streams showed moderate to significant departure from biological reference conditions, with nearly half (47%) classified as significantly departed.¹¹



TERRESTRIAL HABITATS

A 2024 assessment of BLM's land health data indicates that, of the grazing allotments that have been assessed, 50% (57 million acres) are failing to meet minimum land health standards (Figure I) and an additional 24% (36.5 million acres) have never been assessed.¹² This has serious implications for at-risk species: 35% of designated critical habitat on public lands and 46% of greater sage-grouse habitats are in grazing allotments with failing land health grades (Figure II).¹³

SCIENCE & POLICY BRIEF

Figure I. A map depicting BLM-managed grazing allotments. Red, yellow, and orange polygons are those failing to meet land health standards. Data and map provided by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (2024).¹⁴

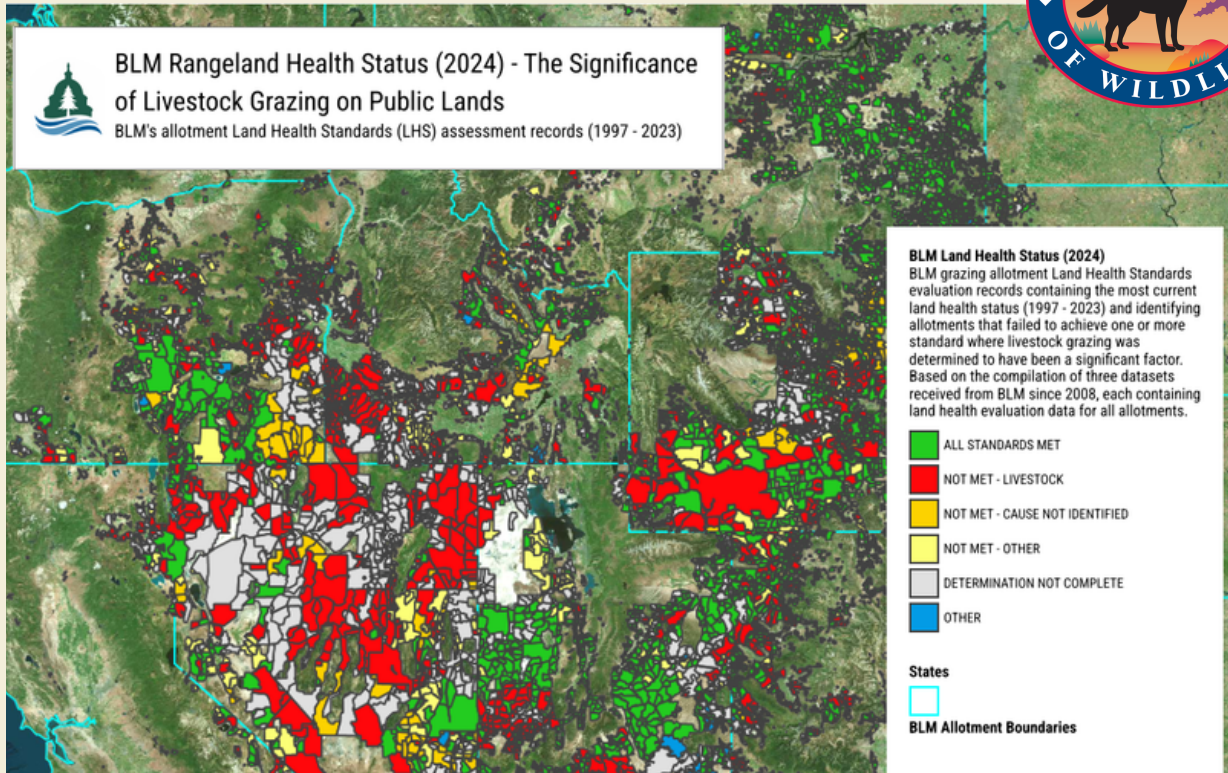
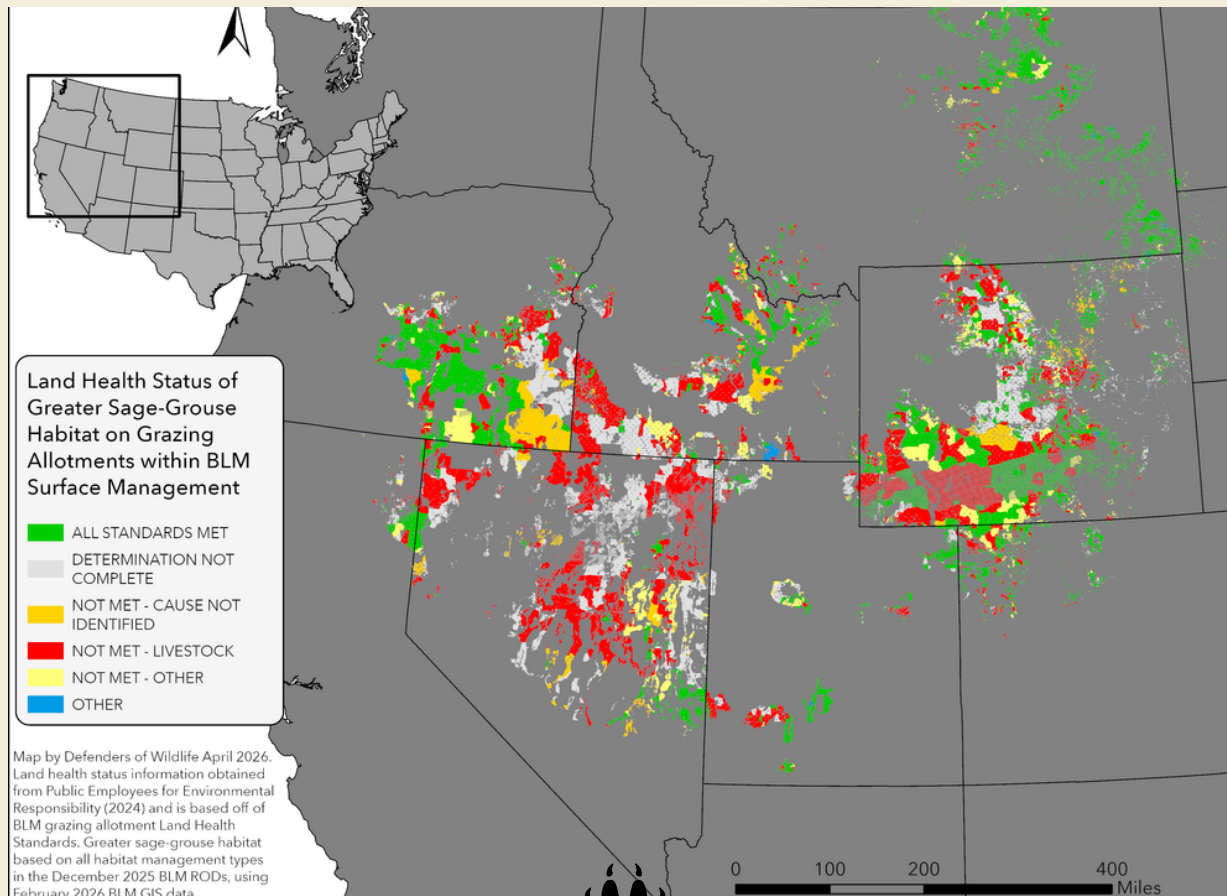


Figure II. A map depicting land health grades for BLM-managed Greater sage-grouse habitat. Red, yellow, and orange indicate failing land health grades.





INVASIVE PLANTS

Invasive plant species, such as cheat grass, contribute to degraded land health by taking over areas previously occupied by native vegetation relied upon by wildlife. In the cold desert ecoregion, which covers much of the Interior West, nearly one-third of public lands are now dominated by invasive plant species, in contrast to approximately 4% in 1992 (Figure III).¹⁵

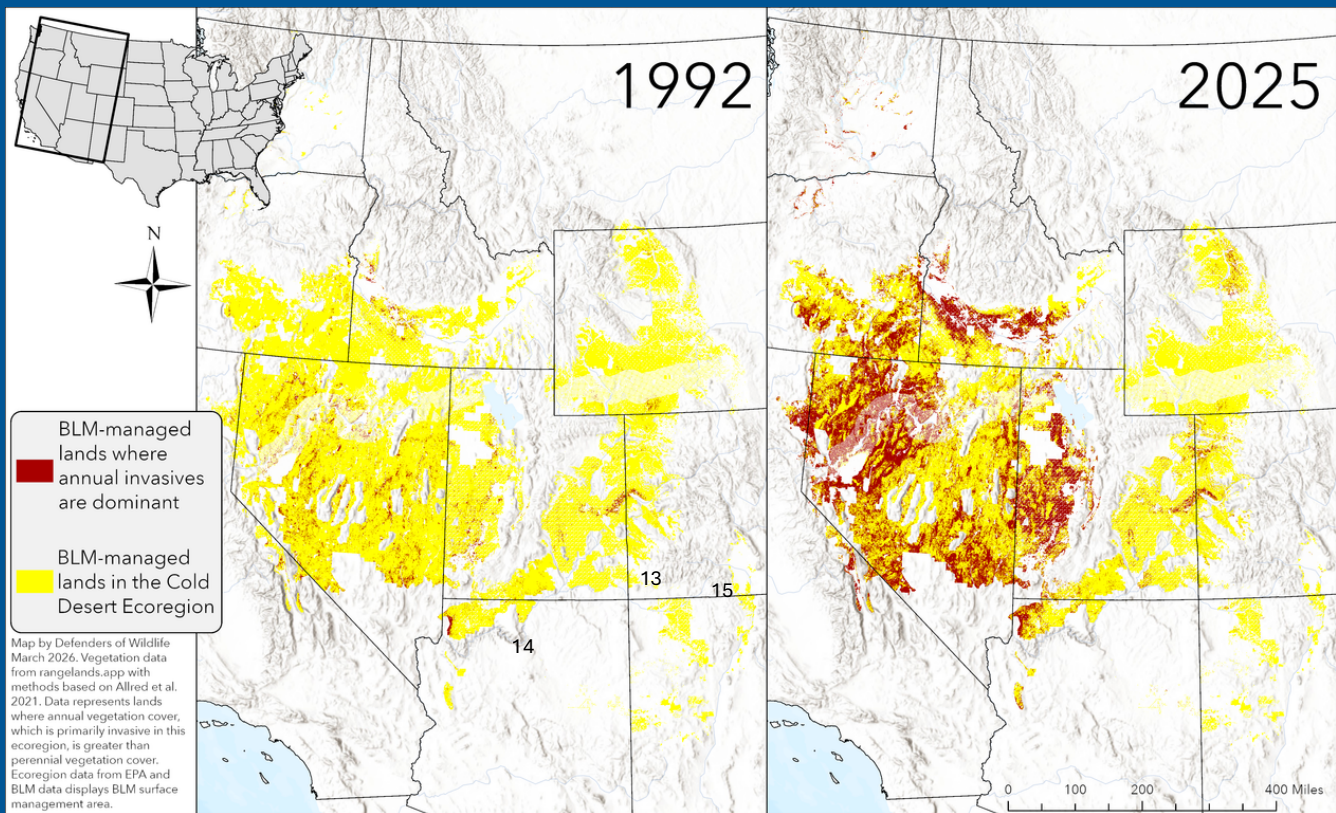


Figure III. Maps showing vegetation data in 1992 and 2025. Data represents lands where annual vegetation cover, which is primarily invasive in this ecoregion, is greater than perennial vegetation cover.



CLIMATE CHANGE

Much of the west is becoming warmer and dryer. This climate change is changing habitat conditions and ecological processes (e.g., fire, flood) affecting resilience. The majority of the National System of Public Lands is currently experiencing chronic drought (see Figure IV) which affects wildlife, the activities that occur on public lands and the benefits public lands provide.

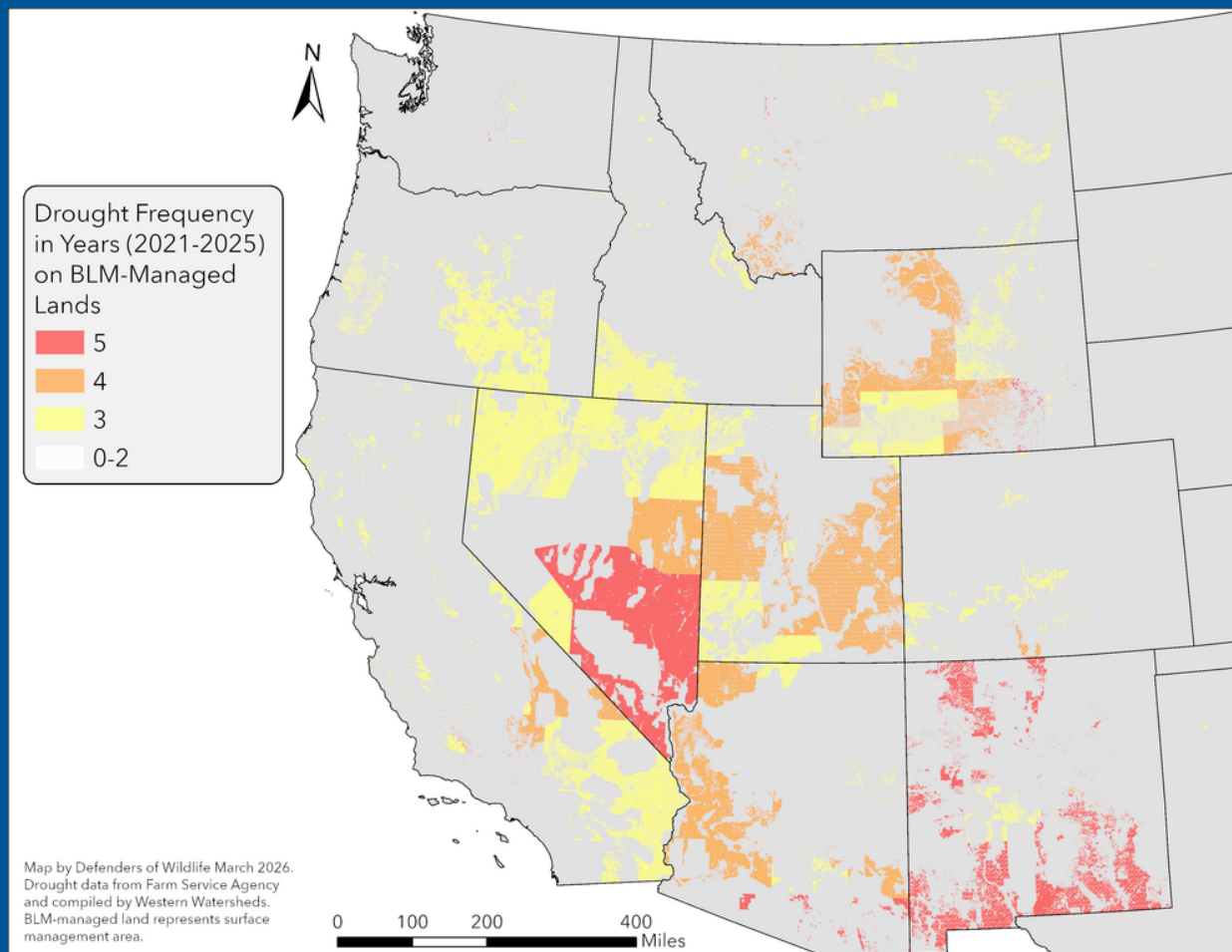


Figure IV. Map illustrating drought frequency on BLM-managed lands, ranging from 0 to 5 years, 2021-2025. Drought ratings are applied to counties.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE MANAGEMENT

Restoring the health of our public lands is important and necessary for assuring long-term benefits such as thriving native wildlife, rewarding outdoor recreation, productive range and resource extraction. This is because healthy and resilient lands can support an array of activities while maintaining ecological sustainability, in contrast to those lacking an ecological buffer. There is an urgency to reverse declining land health and restore degraded lands because once ecosystems cross ecological thresholds, they are nearly impossible to restore.

ADOPT SCIENCE-BASED LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION MODELS THAT PROVIDE COARSE-SCALE PROTECTION FOR MULTIPLE AT-RISK SPECIES ACROSS TAXA

A landscape conservation design for the Sagebrush Sea developed by the U.S. Geological Survey and the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies can serve as a model for other landscape scale conservation strategies. The potential of this type of approach hinges on commitments to protect the core intact sagebrush areas, restore adjacent and connecting areas and establish accountability to these outcomes.

INCORPORATE THE SCIENCE OF ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION INTO LAND MANAGEMENT

To achieve sustainability, we must implement ecological restoration using standards-based practices. Poorly implemented restoration can result in additional degradation and is costly. Designing projects that align with science-based standards of practice, such as those published by the Society for Ecological Restoration, helps promote positive outcomes and avoid additional degradation.¹⁶ Current BLM regulations, management plans and practice do not incorporate these standards.

ADOPT EFFECTIVE LANDSCAPE HEALTH MONITORING AND ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK AND OTHER TOOLS

The Conservation and Landscape Health Rule, finalized in 2024 and repealed in 2026, introduced regulatory tools for enhancing landscape resiliency and sustainability, including an adaptive management framework, science-based monitoring and improved mechanisms for the conservation of rare and imperiled species and habitats.¹⁷ It also for the very first time introduced the concept of restoration of degraded landscapes into BLM's regulatory direction. While the rule is no longer in effect, these concepts are firmly grounded in science and ensure alignment with statutory direction under FLPMA.¹⁸

PROTECT PLACES WITH RARE AND AT-RISK SPECIES AND HABITATS

Because habitat loss is a leading cause of species endangerment, BLM should follow FLPMA's clear direction to prioritize the protection of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, BLM's primary conservation designation for protecting rare or threatened ecosystems and species.¹⁹

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