



Managing our Public Lands

A field perspective shows how customer service and collaboration benefit the greater good.

BY STEVEN W. ANDERSON

As part of the Department of the Interior, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages more land than any other Federal agency – some 248 million acres located primarily in the western United States and Alaska.

Field offices are where the professional and technical staff oversees the operations and decision-making processes for land that falls within their jurisdiction. At the field office in Redding, California, we manage over 265,000 acres that spans over five counties. A great deal of this land is close to rivers and streams and is much like the area that was once referred to as the “Mother Lode” during the Gold Rush era.

RIGHT OF WAY ACTIVITIES

The management focus in Redding has evolved from what was previously a high interest in mining, mineral development and grazing. As the population adjacent to these lands has surpassed 500,000, there is much more emphasis on serving the needs of the community. This includes providing rights of way, disposing and acquiring parcels to maximize opportunities, enhancing recreational opportunities and working to improve fisheries habitat.

Of the 15 BLM field offices in California, this office has the largest number of right of way cases, which currently totals 1,484. The rights of way are varied and consist of roads, power and phone lines, communication sites, railroad tracks, water lines and projects like ditches and dams. In addition to new applications from agencies, corporations and the public, the office has a steady workload that stems from the renewal of expiring rights of way and re-assignments that are needed following mergers and acquisitions of existing rights of way.

The Redding field office is also involved in other realty actions, such as land acquisitions from exchanges, purchases and even donations. Since 1993, we have repositioned almost 100,000 acres, with roughly 50,000 acres of those obtained and another 50,000 acres that were disposed of. The focus is on managing the larger blocks of land or watersheds, while disposing of those lands that are smaller acreage and of lesser public value. The fire and forestry programs have also taken on increased importance associated with the Wildland/Urban Interface protection and forest treatments that keep them healthy and less prone to fire.



The BLM Redding Field Office received the “Partners in Conservation” award from U.S. Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar (center) for their collaborative partnerships among individuals, agencies, organizations and non-profits. Steve (second from left), attended the awards ceremony in Washington DC.

At one time, this office was responsible for over 1,000 separate parcels. Thanks to the hard work of our land staff, the office has been able to cut that number in half. Our regulations include a customer service standard – we strive to provide right of way applicants with a decision within 60 days. If we anticipate that the application process will take longer, we notify applicants after 30 days to communicate what can be reasonably expected.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The projects that come through the Redding field office can be initiated by corporations, agencies, the public, as well as internally. There are also land projects that originate in Washington, DC and delegated from the State Office.

Needless to say, establishing priorities can be a challenge. All right of way and land actions are important to the applicant or the goals of future land management, and we work hard to ensure that all projects maximize benefits to the applicant, the public land user and the resource acquired. For example, building a road across a corner of BLM land may save the applicant thousands or even tens of thousands of dollars versus following the standard boundary lines. There are other times when we have a unique opportunity to acquire a parcel that completes a river segment or a watershed. Or perhaps a project will involve a parcel with multiple benefits to the public, such as a wildlife habitat or one that has deep-rooted cultural significance. In some cases, we recognize that these projects are likely to happen once in a lifetime, and we feel a sense of responsibility in making sure the community benefits.

Advanced planning with the BLM can often be the key to a project's success. Contacting the field office that manages the area where the right of way is needed is an important first step. If the right of way is within the jurisdiction of more than one field office, the discussion may be best served at the BLM State Office.

A TEAM COMMITMENT

As we often say, it takes every single person on the team to keep a land project moving forward, but it takes only one to cause a delay or stop it entirely.

All of us at the Redding office take pride in our follow through. Once we take on a project, we are steadfast on completing it. That means everyone involved throughout the entire process is committed to completing their part. The realty staff is relied on for legal descriptions, appraisals and closing. Other staff will handle reviews and clearance work, which can include anything from archeology or mineral reports to biological or botanical consultation associated with endangered species.



To see how projects can improve recreation access, BLM's Northwest California Resource Advisory Council visited a bottomless culvert constructed by BLM crews at Shasta Dam.

Management is also committed to lead if and when there are difficulties. For example, if a specialist finds a significant hurdle, we are willing to mitigate rather than stop a project altogether. Sometimes this might be a fairly easy process and involve a minor reroute of a road, trail, power line or other linear project. In other cases, we may be faced with a more complex National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) document or a post-action treatment plan.

In general, the work has an ebb and flow. When one area slows down a bit, we tend to see other areas ramp up. In recent months, for example, requests to access a home or subdivision have slowed, but there's been new interest in highway and infrastructure construction, as well as electrical transmission lines. If our funding for land acquisition is limited, it seems that there are always opportunities for land exchanges. Looking forward, we see the workload continuing at a steady or even increased pace.

The field office in Redding looks forward to getting involved in more projects that will bring about the best benefits for the long term, and the decisions almost always dictate the proper course of action.



Steven W. Anderson

Steven is a Field Manager for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in Redding, California. He oversees a staff of 35 and an area of 265,000 acres. His career has included not only managing land for BLM but also other positions with the National Park Service, Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.