



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



Travel across the desert in California



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

1862
Homestead Act lets Western settlers claim 160 acres of public land after they live on and cultivate it for 5 years.

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

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

1869
The Transcontinental Railroad is completed, reducing coast-to-coast travel time from 4–6 months to a week.

Workers joining the tracks for the first transcontinental railroad



Placer mining in Colorado, 1893



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

Yellowstone National Park Protection Act passes, shifting federal land use from mainly homesteading and commercial purposes to also include preservation and public use.

1877
Desert Land Act allows homesteaders to claim 640-acre tracts of public lands upon proof of land improvement and irrigation.

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

1889
Oklahoma Land Rush begins, and people race to settle 160-acre parcels of public domain lands that were formerly Indian Territory.

Oklahoma Land Rush



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

1897
Forest Service Organic Administration Act transfers fire protection responsibilities for forest reserves to the General Land Office.

1898
Congress extends homestead laws to Alaska.



Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir, 1903

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

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 allows people to claim up to 640 surface acres for ranching, while the subsurface (mineral) estate is retained by the government.

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

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



Evening campfire, 1926



John Trumbull's painting, Declaration of Independence



Lewis and Clark Expedition path across the western portion of North America, published in 1814

1770s–1780s

1790s–1800s

1810s–1820s

1830s–1840s

1850s–1860s

1870s–1880s

1890s–1900s

1910s–1920s



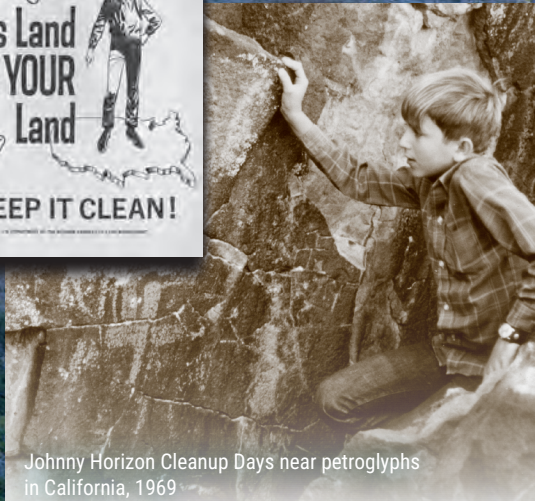
Cadastral surveyors



Oil well operation



Johnny Horizon Cleanup Days near petroglyphs in California, 1969



1934

Taylor Grazing Act authorizes grazing districts, regulation of grazing, and public rangeland improvements in Western states (excluding Alaska) and establishes Division of Grazing (U.S. Grazing Service).

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.

1942

More than 13 million acres of public lands withdrawn in 2 years during World War II for military purposes.

1946

Bureau of Land Management is established within the Department of the Interior, made up of former General Land Office and U.S. Grazing Service.



BLM range grass study, 1959

1930s–1940s

1950s

1953

Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act authorizes the lease of mineral lands more than 3 miles offshore; the BLM assumes responsibility for leasing.

1954

Recreation and Public Purposes Act is amended, allowing the sale and lease of public lands for purposes besides recreation.

1955

Multiple Surface Use Act withdraws common minerals from entry as mining claims; claim owners may use the surface estate for mining operation purposes only.

1959

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

1960

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

1964

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

The Wilderness Act protects 9.1 million acres of undeveloped federal land and creates a process to designate additional wilderness lands.

Land and Water Conservation Fund is established to safeguard natural areas, waterways, and cultural heritage and provide recreational opportunities through land acquisition.



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.

1960s

1970

National Environmental Policy Act requires all federal agencies to assess the impacts of their activities on the environment before projects begin.

1971

Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act provides for settlement of aboriginal land claims by Alaskan Native corporations; the BLM is tasked with the largest U.S. land transfer ever.

Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act protects and manages equines on BLM lands.

1973

Endangered Species Act requires conserving threatened and endangered species and the ecosystems they depend on.

1975

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

1976

Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), considered landmark BLM legislation, repeals homestead laws and retains public lands managed for multiple uses through land-use planning.

U.S. Navy transfers management of National Petroleum Reserve–Alaska to the BLM.

1977

Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act regulates the environmental effects of coal mining and addresses reclamation of abandoned mines.

1978

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

1979

Archaeological Resources Protection Act creates stringent permitting for archaeological investigations and collections and sets penalties for violations.

1970s

Geothermal energy project in New Mexico



1980

Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act designates millions of acres of 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 energy sources such as oil shale, synthetic fuel, wind power, and geothermal.

Using FLPMA regulation, the BLM completes its first land use plan and designates its first area of critical environmental concern.

1983

BLM's first wilderness area, Bear Trap Canyon in southwestern Montana, is designated by Congress.

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

1987

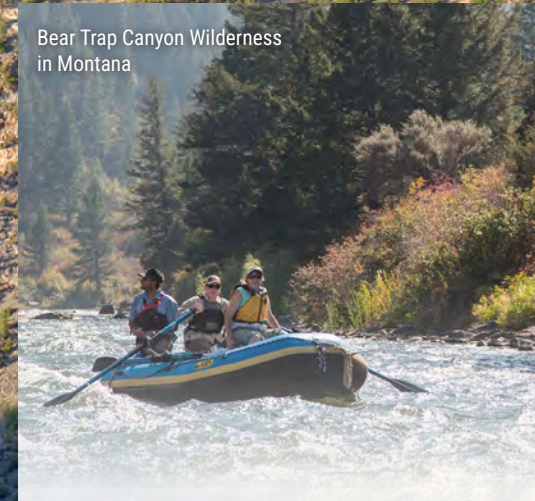
Federal Onshore Oil and Gas Leasing Reform Act establishes a new leasing system and changes certain operational procedures for onshore resources on federal lands.



Alaska Natives filleting salmon in Alaska, 1985

1980s

Bear Trap Canyon Wilderness in Montana



1992

Energy Policy Act passes, focusing on alternative energy sources, energy efficiency, and reducing the country's reliance on foreign fuel sources.

1995

Public Rangelands Management Act modernizes range management, creating local resource advisory councils and updating environmental review processes.

1996

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

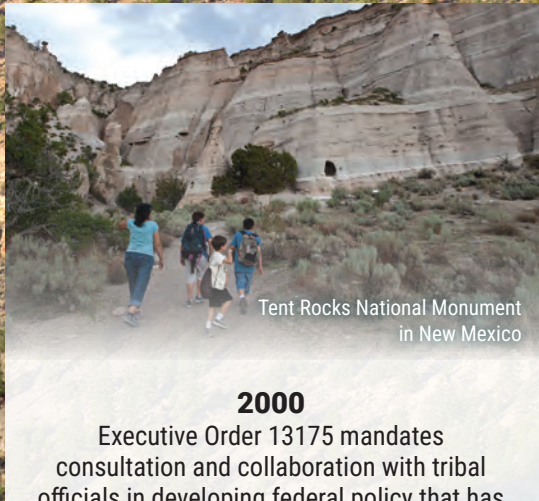


Femur bone fossil found on BLM land in Wyoming

1990s

2000

Tent Rocks National Monument in New Mexico



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.

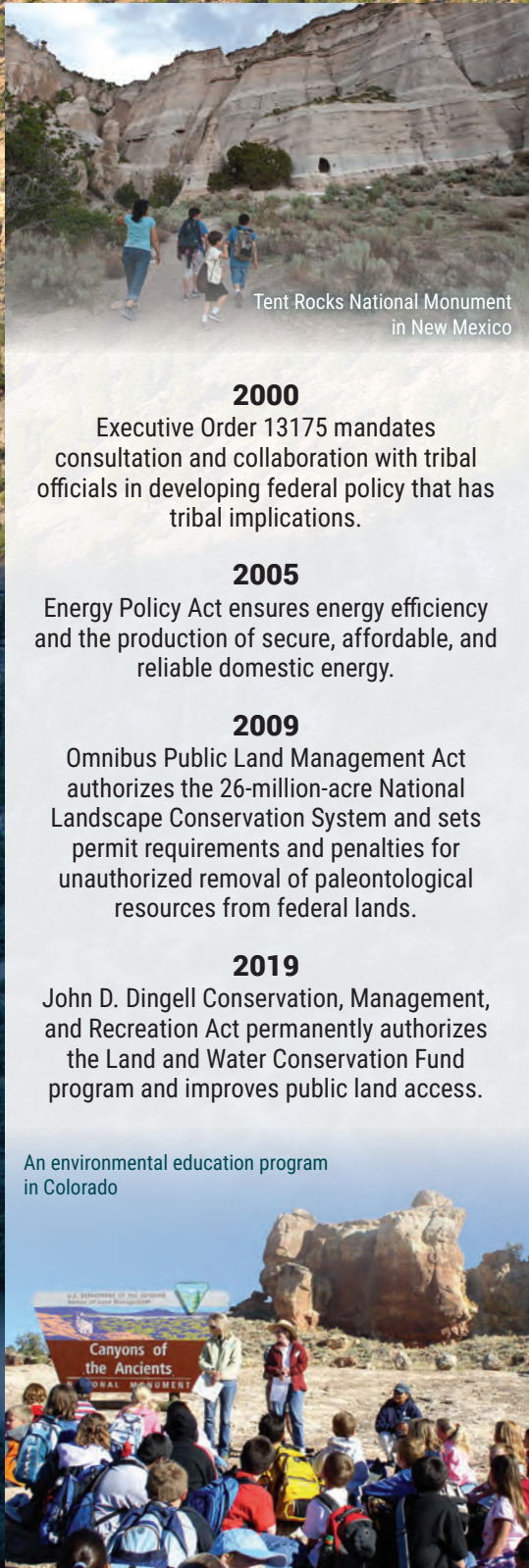
2009

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

2019

John D. Dingell Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act permanently authorizes the Land and Water Conservation Fund program and improves public land access.

An environmental education program in Colorado



2000–2019

Monitoring trees in Oregon



2020

The BLM establishes its Western headquarters in Grand Junction, Colorado.

Great American Outdoors Act authorizes permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund and addresses overdue maintenance and infrastructure needs.

The Energy Act reshapes the way the BLM may manage public lands for energy purposes.

2025

The EXPLORE Act advances national outdoor recreation policy through expanding access, modernizing infrastructure, and better supporting recreation-based economies through improved planning, partnerships, and permitting.

2026

U.S. Wildland Fire Service is created within the Department of the Interior; the BLM transfers much of its firefighting capacity and cross-agency coordination to this new agency.

This year marks the 250th anniversary of the United States, 80th anniversary of the BLM, and 50th anniversary of FLPMA.

Today, the BLM manages roughly 245 million acres of America's public lands, providing benefits to local communities and the nation. Activities on BLM-managed lands, such as energy production, mineral extraction, timber harvesting, grazing, and recreation result in jobs and income from goods and services. In 2024, the BLM generated over \$245 billion in total economic output, which supported 884,000 American jobs.

2020–Present