

## BLM Guidelines for ACEC's and RNA's

### BLM Research Natural Areas

Research Natural Areas (RNAs) are areas that are part of a national network of reserved areas under various ownerships which contain important ecological and scientific values and are managed for minimum human disturbance.

BLM manages 148 Research Natural Areas across the country, covering 345,000 acres.<sup>1</sup> It also administratively designates [research natural areas on refuges](#); currently there are 210 such areas on refuges, totaling an additional 1,955,762 acres.

The RNA program was created to (1) To preserve examples of all significant natural ecosystems for comparison with those influenced by man; (2) to provide educational and research areas for ecological and environmental studies; and (3) to preserve gene pools of typical and endangered plants and animals.<sup>2,3</sup> Research natural areas are intended to represent the full array of North American ecosystems with their biological communities, habitats, natural phenomena, and geological and hydrological formations.

In RNA, as in designated wilderness, natural processes are allowed to predominate without human intervention. RNAs are primarily used for non-manipulative research and baseline data gathering on relatively unaltered community types. Under certain circumstances, deliberate manipulation may be used to maintain the unique features for which the RNA was established.<sup>4</sup> Since natural processes are allowed to dominate, RNAs also make excellent controls for similar communities that are being actively managed. In addition, RNAs provide an essential network of diverse habitat types that will be preserved in their natural state for future generations.<sup>5</sup>

Activities such as hiking, bird watching, hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, and photography are permissible, but not mandated, in RNAs. The BLM may close RNAs to public use if such use is determined to be incompatible with primary refuge purposes.

### BLM Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

An Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) is a designation that highlights areas where special management attention is needed to protect and prevent irreparable damage to important historic, cultural and scenic values; fish, wildlife resources or other natural systems or processes; or to protect human life and safety from natural hazards. BLM

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<sup>1</sup>[http://72.14.253.104/search?q=cache:VJoGHHYNzC0J:www.doi.gov/pfm/bur\\_annual\\_rpt/blm\\_1998\\_high\\_lights.pdf+research+natural+areas+Bureau+of+Land+Management&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=8](http://72.14.253.104/search?q=cache:VJoGHHYNzC0J:www.doi.gov/pfm/bur_annual_rpt/blm_1998_high_lights.pdf+research+natural+areas+Bureau+of+Land+Management&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=8)

<sup>2</sup><http://oregonstate.edu/ornhic/rna.html>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=landClassifications>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.fws.gov/refuges/habitats/specialAreas.html#rnas>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.plantsocieties.org/importan.htm#BLM%20Research%20Natural%20Areas>

establishes special management measures for these areas through land use planning. The designation is a record of significant values that must be accommodated when BLM considers future management actions and land use proposals.<sup>6</sup> Congress mandated the designation of ACECs through the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) to manage areas containing truly unique and significant resource values. In 2000, there were 838 ACECs managed by BLM covering 14,045,540 acres.<sup>7</sup>

ACEC designations are an important management tool because they highlight significant resources or hazards where special management measures are needed to prevent irreparable damage. The ACEC designation enables land managers to specifically address the relevant and important value or hazard and formulate a prescription to manage it. ACEC designations do not automatically prohibit or restrict other uses in the area.<sup>8</sup> Since the management of ACECs is focused on the resource or natural hazard of concern the BLM prescribes special management measures that are specific to the values for which the ACEC is designated. Therefore, what can and cannot occur in different ACECs may vary dramatically. Private lands and lands administered by other agencies may be located within the boundaries of ACECs, but are not subject to the prescribed management of the ACEC.

ACECs are an administrative designation made by the BLM through a land use plan. It is unique to BLM in that no other agency uses this form of designation. Nominations for ACECs must stand the test for relevance and importance before they are evaluated for ACEC designation. An area is relevant if it contains one or more of the following<sup>9</sup>:

- A significant historic, cultural, or scenic value (including but not limited to rare or sensitive archeological resources and religious or cultural resources important to Native Americans).
- A fish and wildlife resource (including but not limited to habitat for endangered, sensitive, or threatened species, or habitat essential for maintaining species diversity).
- A natural process or system (including but not limited to endangered, sensitive, or threatened plant species; rare, endemic, or relic plants or plant communities which are terrestrial, aquatic, or riparian; or rare geological features).
- Natural hazards (including but not limited to areas of avalanche, dangerous flooding, landslides, unstable soils, seismic activity, or dangerous cliffs). A hazard caused by human action may meet the relevance criteria if it is determined through the RMP process that it has become part of a natural process.

The value, resource, system, process, or hazard described in the relevance section must have substantial significance and values to meet the importance criteria. This generally means that the value, resource, system, process, or hazard is characterized by one or more of the following<sup>10</sup>:

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.ut.blm.gov/ACEC/acec\\_FAQ.htm](http://www.ut.blm.gov/ACEC/acec_FAQ.htm)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.blm.gov/flpma/snapshot.htm>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.ut.blm.gov/ACEC/acec\\_FAQ.htm](http://www.ut.blm.gov/ACEC/acec_FAQ.htm)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ut.blm.gov/ACEC/criteria.htm>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.ut.blm.gov/ACEC/criteria.htm>

- Has more than locally significant qualities which give it special worth, consequence, meaning, distinctiveness, or cause for concern, especially compared to any similar resource.
- Has qualities or circumstances that make it fragile, sensitive, rare, irreplaceable, exemplary, unique, endangered, threatened, or vulnerable to adverse change.
- Has been recognized as warranting protection in order to satisfy national priority concerns or to carry out the mandates of FLPMA.
- Has qualities that warrant highlighting in order to satisfy public or management concerns about safety and public welfare.
- Poses a significant threat to human life and safety or to property.

Any individual or organization inside or outside the BLM can nominate ACECs by:

- Submitting nominations for ACECs (preferably during the public scoping period for ongoing planning efforts).
- Submitting information on why nominated ACECs do or do not meet relevance and importance criteria.
- Submitting comments on the draft environmental impact statement.

To determine whether to create an ACEC, a BLM interdisciplinary team uses information from both internal and external sources including other federal agencies, state and local government, conservation groups, research institutions, expert opinions, etc. Nominated areas meeting relevance and importance criteria become proposed ACECs, and are considered in the array of Resource Management Plan (RMP) alternatives. Each proposed ACEC is considered for designation in at least one of the management alternatives. The need for special management attention and the effects of applying such management are assessed in the environmental analysis.