



NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

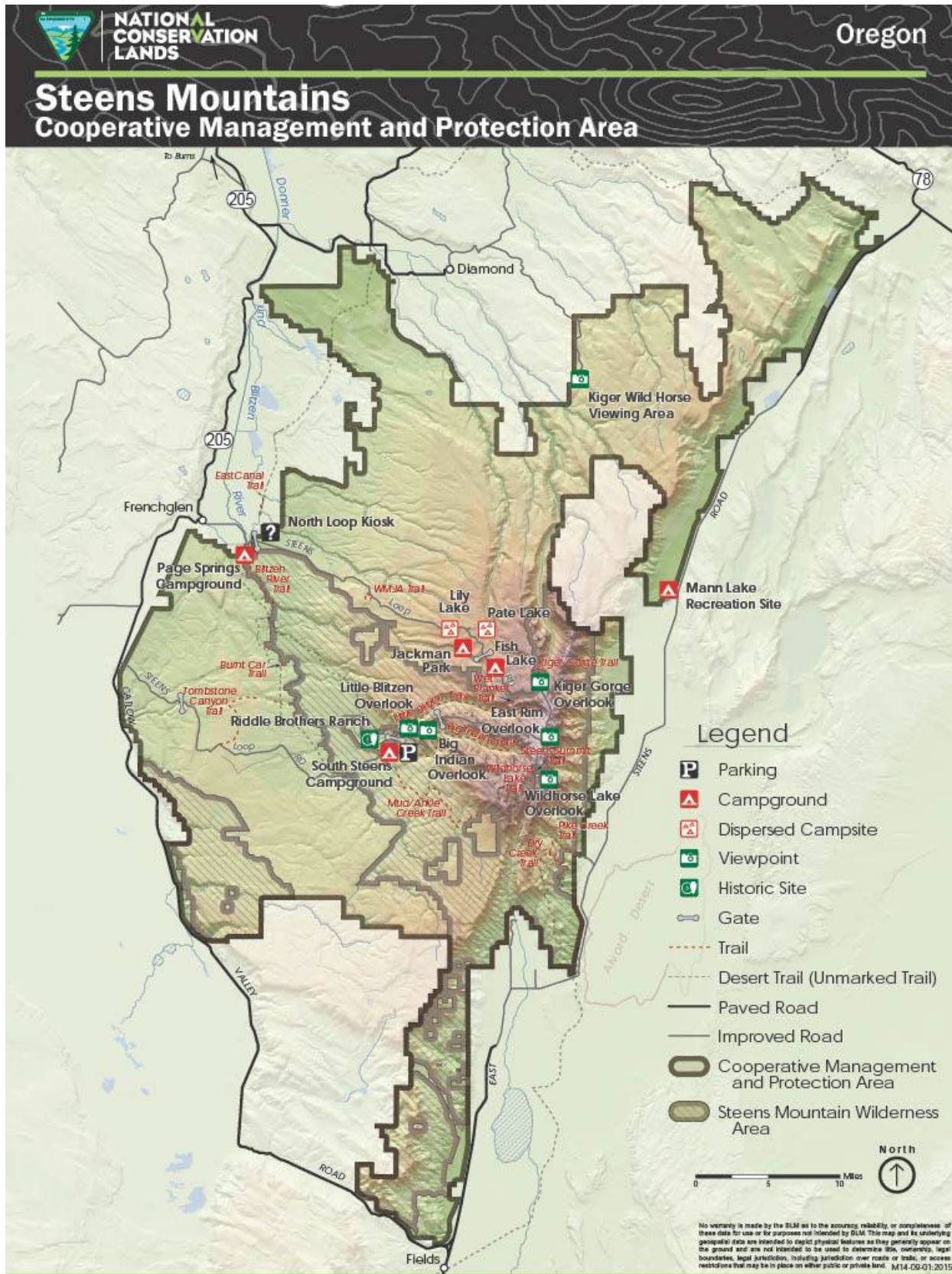
Oregon/Washington
2022: Annual Manager's Report

Steens Mountain

Cooperative Management and Protection Area



Map



Accomplishments

In 2022, the BLM completed several successful projects in the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Area (CMPA). These included campground improvements, initiation of a new fee program, and a successful wild horse gather.

The BLM installed new informational kiosks at both Fish Lake and Jackman Park campgrounds. These kiosks are low maintenance and allow maps and other information to be updated without the expense of new signs. The BLM also piloted a remote, off-grid kiosk at the South Steens Campground. This solar-powered kiosk processes credit card transactions for campground fees. This year also saw the implementation of a scan and pay option at Page Springs Campground, which allows visitors to pay through the recreation.gov app via a QR code. The Burns District Recreation Program is committed to providing cashless fee processing options for the public. The water system seal at South Steens Equestrian Campground was also updated to ensure water quality.

In 2022, the BLM initiated a Burns District-wide fee update. This plan updates fees at all developed campgrounds to a standard \$16 per night, including at five campgrounds within the CMPA. This update will allow the District to continue to provide quality developed recreation opportunities. Fees collected at campgrounds stay local and are spent on the operations and maintenance of those facilities.

In September of 2022, the BLM successfully gathered 753 wild horses off the range within the CMPA.



New sign being installed at Jackman Park Campground along the Steens Loop Road

Challenges

Through the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act of 2000 (the Steens Act), Congress designated over 97,000 acres within the Steens Wilderness as a No Livestock Grazing Area (NLGA). It is the BLM's responsibility to fence livestock out of the NLGA from surrounding range and private inholdings. Ongoing maintenance of this fence is challenging, as the 'range rider' position, which is critical for maintenance of the NLGA fencing, has been vacant for several years. The BLM often has difficulty finding qualified applicants for positions in this remote, though beautiful, area.

The Steens Act required the removal of the Page Springs Weir from the Steens Mountain Wilderness if removal "is scientifically justified and funds are available for such purpose." The weir, which is in the Donner und Blitzen Wild and Scenic River, is detrimental to the undeveloped and untrammled qualities of the area's wilderness character and negatively impacts habitat in the Redband Trout Reserve. The 2005 Steens Mountain Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers Plan directed that the BLM develop alternatives for the removal or modification of the weir. The BLM has conducted some preliminary planning work for the removal of the weir. This long-term project involves numerous regulatory and biological variables, creating a complex and expensive project that requires an interdisciplinary and coordinated approach.

There are several distinct wild horse populations within the CMPA. Viewing and photographing these horses is a popular recreational activity. Balancing competing interests and managing wild horse herds at sustainable levels is a challenge facing the BLM throughout the 10 western states with herd management areas.

In 2007, the BLM completed a travel management plan for the CMPA. The plan was litigated and eventually vacated by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, which ordered the BLM to redo the plan. The new planning process is ongoing, but there have been challenges with contractors and doing efficient work in such a remote location.

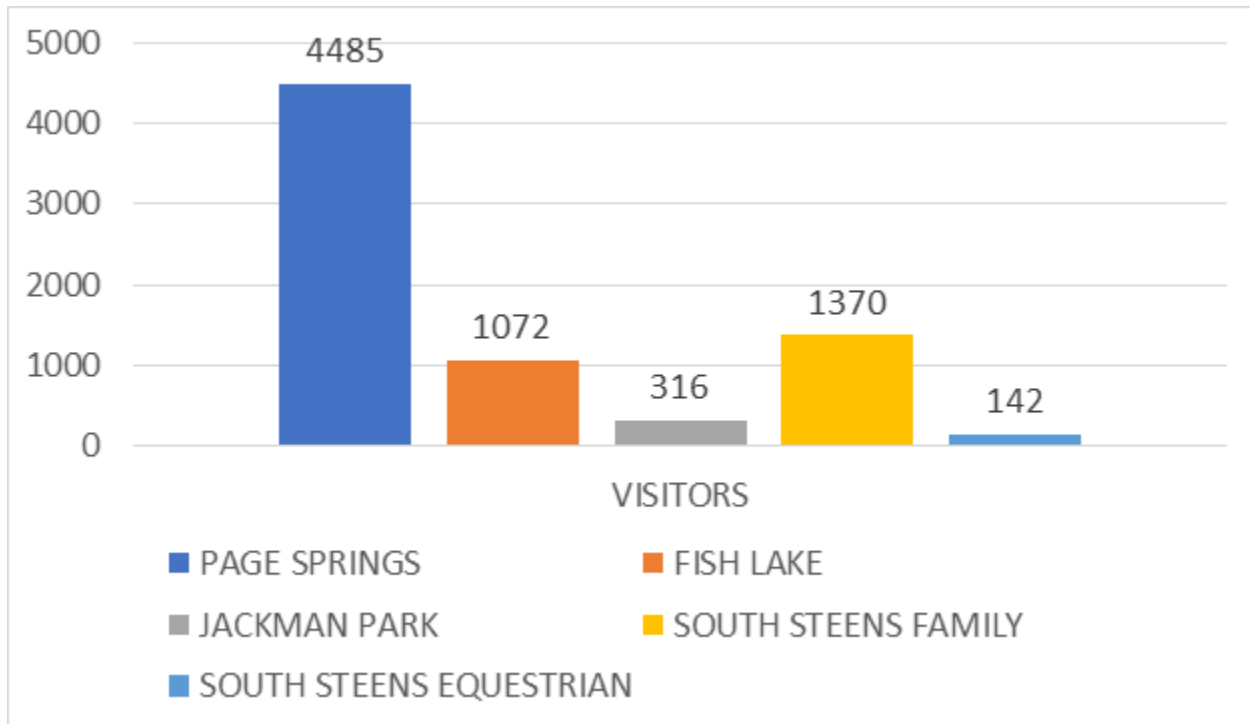
Limited staffing presents challenges to the recreation program. The BLM is prioritizing sanitation tasks to provide for public health and safety and limited resources are available for site improvements and new developments. Providing clean, safe recreation sites continues to be a priority for the BLM Burns District Recreation Program.

Visitors

Visitation to the CMPA was down in fiscal year (FY) 2022 compared to recent years. Cumulative visits to the CMPA totaled 244,963, including visitors counted on roads, trails, campgrounds, overlooks, and other public points of interest. This figure is a 20 percent decrease from FY 2021. High fuel prices may have contributed to this decrease.

Magnetic road counters are buried on heavily trafficked roads to estimate vehicle use. The North Loop Road continues to be most used. This is the northern access point to the Steens Mountain Back Country Byway.

In FY 2022, the BLM estimates that the CMPA’s total campground visitation was 7,385. This is a 22% decrease from FY 2021. The chart below shows visitation estimates broken out by campground. Page Springs, which is the only year-round accessible campground within the CMPA, continues to be the busiest campground.



Visitation estimates by campground

Partnerships

Partnerships are a vital part of the CMPA recreation program. In 2022, the BLM continued to partner with the Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA) on trail monitoring and maintenance within the CMPA. ONDA stewards contributed over 236 hours of volunteer labor. Volunteers with ONDA also provided valuable assessments of wilderness study areas while doing important tasks such as wilderness boundary sign installation and increasing public awareness of wilderness values.

The BLM Burns District also partnered with the Trailkeepers of Oregon to host a two-day trail training within the CMPA. This was an opportunity for BLM staff and partner groups to learn about trail planning and maintenance. Work was completed on the Blitzen River Trail and Wildhorse Lake Trail.

The Backcountry Horsemen of America – Steens Chapter remains involved in CMPA equestrian recreation. Members participate in trail maintenance and monitoring and promote equestrian projects within the CMPA.

Youth and young adult engagement continues to be an important part of the CMPA recreation program. In FY 2022, the BLM Burns District hosted a Northwest Youth Corps crew at Pike Creek Trail. The crew completed trail maintenance and constructed a new trail segment, connecting Pike Creek Trail to Dry Creek Trail.

The Eastern Oregon Visitors Association remains a partner with the BLM Burns District and has been helpful in promoting responsible recreation in the CMPA.



Trail Keepers of Oregon doing trail work on the Blitzen River Trail

Science

Science plays a vital role in understanding how the unique ecosystem of Steens Mountain responds to a changing environment. In 2022, BLM staff and partners performed important projects to better understand the Steens ecosystem, interpret how it is changing, and improve response to that change. This work included BLM staff conducting pasture forage utilization measurements and long-term Pace 180 trend monitoring; sampling for lotic aquatic assessment, inventory, and monitoring at fifteen points within the CMPA; monitoring riparian trends at three permanent photo points along wild and scenic rivers; and surveying water temperature at seven monitoring sites along wild and scenic rivers.

In 2022, a Ph.D. candidate at Oregon State University concluded four years of field work in the CMPA and Alvord Desert area, resampling and documenting current wildlife species diversity and abundance to compare to surveys done as far back as 100 years ago. The survey area covered from the lowest to the highest elevation in the Steens, and data were collected as close as possible to the original survey sites.

A graduate student from Oregon State University is starting to compile data for her thesis, which will look at the effects on aspen stands of cutting encroaching juniper. Data collected across a wide range of plant communities will include point counts and audio recording of bird songs, photos taken through remote cameras to document big game wildlife use in different habitats, and before and after use in treated aspen stands. She will also analyze bird species use and diversity in untreated and treated aspen stands.

Ongoing wildlife population monitoring efforts within the CMPA include sage-grouse lek counts, sonic bat monitoring, and Columbia spotted frog counts. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife reported that the sage-grouse population within the Steens Priority Area of Conservation was up slightly (5 percent). To date, 12 bat species have been documented within or adjacent to the CMPA. Columbia spotted frog has been documented at Lily Lake and additional sites will be surveyed for the presence of egg masses, juvenile, and adult frogs. The U.S. Geological Survey amphibian monitoring crew will be in the area this summer and may assist with surveys to identify new sites.

Climate Impacts

Over the last few years there has been a dramatic change in surface streams and lakes in the CMPA. Mann Lake, formerly a popular fishing destination, is now completely dry. That change is primarily due to new management practices on surrounding private land, but there is no doubt that reservoirs and natural water sources across the region are depleted.

Data from weed experts show a recent increase in annual invasive bromus grasses at higher elevations. Juniper distribution also continues to expand. The Steens Act mandated a special Juniper Management Area, which allows researchers to study a range of options for controlling western juniper encroachment.

Changing climate can bring on conditions conducive to wide-scale catastrophic wildfire. Extreme fire conditions can have a direct impact on visitation, visual resources, air quality, and public safety.



BLM sign for the Mann Lake recreation site with the word "lake" spraypainted over

Climate Resiliency

Fuels management is a vital component of managing the CMPA, including mitigating the effects of juniper encroachment and enhancing habitat for sage-grouse and other important species. Understanding the science of fuels and fire is vital to managing this dynamic ecosystem.

The BLM is working to reduce fuel loads within the CMPA to mitigate risks related to increasingly hot and dry summers. In 2022, the BLM cut and piled juniper on 1,650 acres, conducted prescribed fire on 1,619 acres, and seeded 1,813 acres.

In 2022, 3,022 acres were treated for invasive plant species within the CMPA. Weed species treated include: medusahead, ventenata, cheatgrass, whitetop, puncturevine, Mediterranean sage, perennial pepperweed, spotted knapweed, diffuse knapweed, Canada thistle, Scotch thistle, and bull thistle.



Fire crews take a break during juniper thinning/fuels reduction project on Steens CMPA (Photo by S Bonson)

Social and Environmental Justice

BLM leadership and staff meet quarterly with an official Burns Paiute Tribe representative to discuss upcoming projects, exchange ideas, and listen to tribal concerns. The BLM values and respects tribal views and the connection to this land. Connecting youth and underserved communities to the landscape is a goal of the BLM and consulting with local tribes is an important part of that work. The BLM Burns District is currently developing a cooperating agency agreement with the Burns Paiute Tribe for the Bridge Creek Allotment Management Plan Environmental Impact Statement.

The Burns Paiute Tribe also has a designated membership position on the Steens Mountain Advisory Council (SMAC). The SMAC was created as part of the Steens Act to advise staff and the decisionmaker during planning and implementation of all management activities. This group meets quarterly and includes representatives from local communities, business groups, environmental groups, hunting/fishing advocates, and grazing advocates.

Events

In 2022, recreation events and permitting continue to rebound in the wake of Covid-19; the BLM issued 14 special recreation permits the CMPA. Below is a photo of the Steens Mountain Guest Ranch, a permittee providing guided horseback trail rides. Cascadia Quest, an environmental education group, also held events in the CMPA in 2022

Other permittees include a running camp, a 10K run/walk, birding tours, youth environmental education, hunting guides, and driving tours.

Winter recreation in the CMPA declined in 2022. The BLM issued 16 winter recreation permits, down from 38 in 2021. Winter recreation permits allow skiing, snowshoeing, and limited snowmobiling on the Steens Mountain North Loop Road.



Guided horseback group.



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