

**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

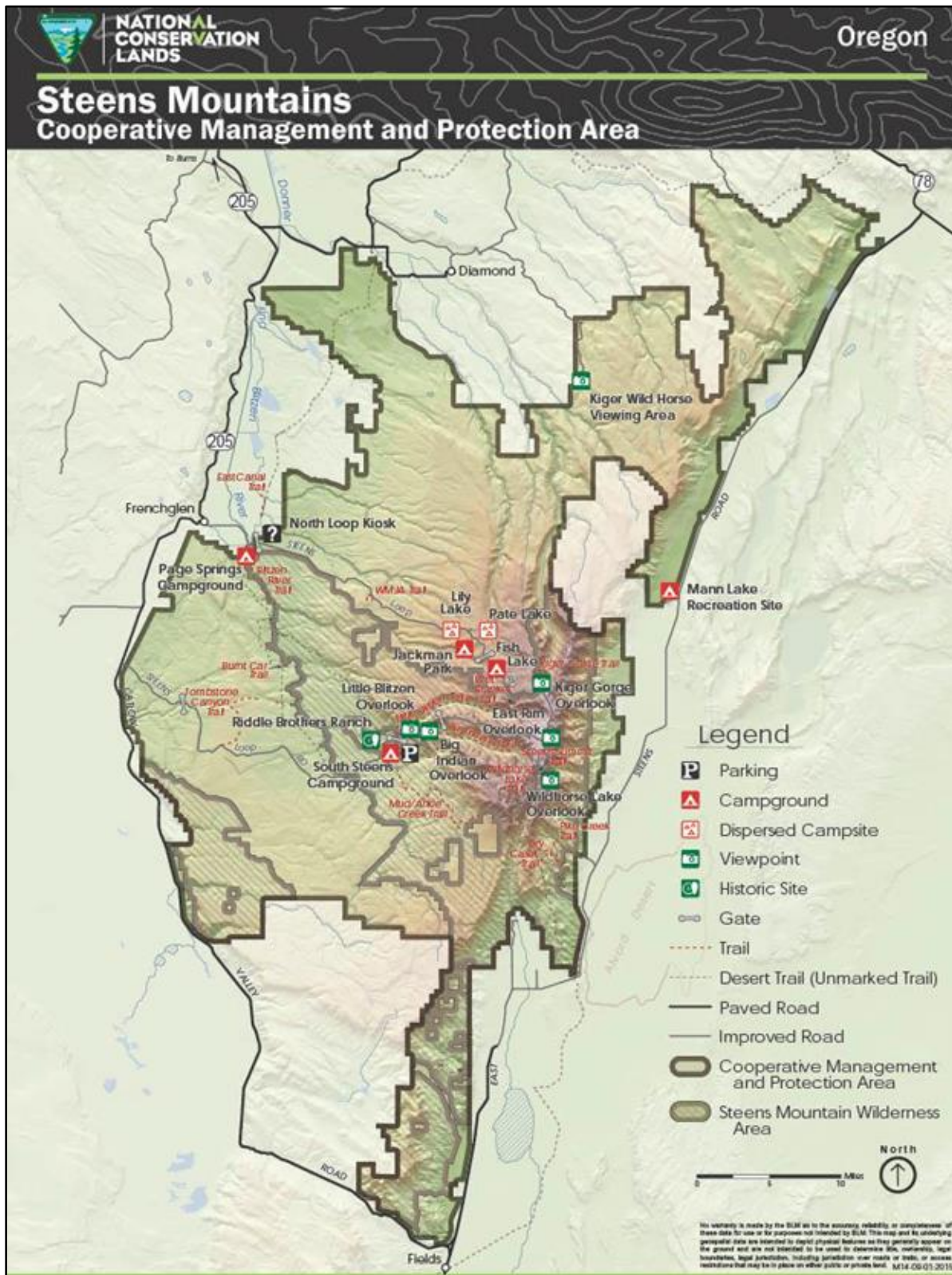
Oregon-Washington
2023: Annual Manager's Report

Steens Mountain

Cooperative Management Protection Area



Map



Accomplishments

In 2023, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Burns District wilderness program worked with Oregon Natural Desert Association to host a National Public Lands Day event to restore the Fred Riddle Trail in the Steens Cooperative Management and Protection Area (CMPA). Lack of use and maintenance during the pandemic had rendered the trail indistinguishable from its surroundings. Volunteers and BLM staff re-established approximately 1.5 miles of trail, with more work scheduled for 2024.

Also in 2023, BLM Burns District recreation staff updated portal signs at the CMPA's Fish Lake and Jackman Park campgrounds. Portal sign replacement is scheduled for spring 2024 at Page Springs and South Steens campgrounds as well as at Mann Lake. In 2023, recreation staff also installed a new double-pane informational kiosk at the CMPA's Riddle Brothers Ranch National Historic District. This kiosk allows posting of valuable visitor information such as trail descriptions, maps, fire restrictions, and area history. The BLM intends to install a new kiosk at Page Springs Campground in spring 2024.

The BLM Burns District hosted crews from the Northwest Youth Corps and Idaho Conservation Corps. Crews completed a variety of work in the CMPA, including brushing work at Riddle Ranch, trail maintenance of the Levi Brinkley and Little Blitzen Gorge trails, and restoration work on the Fred Riddle Trail. More crew work in the CMPA is scheduled for the 2024 season.



Trail maintenance in the Steens Mountain CMPA

Challenges

In the spring of 2023, rockfall occurred in the CMPA on the Rooster Comb section of the South Steens Loop Road. While clearing the debris, maintenance staff noticed some highly unstable boulders above the road that appeared to pose imminent danger to motorists. The road was assessed by BLM engineers, who recommended immediate closure; the road remains closed. The unstable boulders are within wilderness and stabilizing them may require use of motorized equipment and installations, which necessitates a minimum requirements analysis and an environmental assessment.

The Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act of 2000 (the Steens Act), designated approximately 97,000 acres of the Steens Mountain Wilderness, which is within the CMPA, as a No Livestock Grazing Area (NLGA), the only designation with this name in the National Wilderness Preservation System. The BLM is responsible for fencing livestock out of the NLGA from surrounding range and private inholdings. Maintaining this fence is challenging, as the BLM has not been able to fill the “range rider” position, which has performed such maintenance in the past.

The Steens Act requires the removal of the Page Springs Weir from the Steens Mountain Wilderness if removal “is scientifically justified and funds are available for such purpose.” River Designs Group, a private contractor, has created a detailed report with identifying options for removal. There are concerns about the effect removal would have on cultural resources. The weir was constructed in 1937, by the Civilian Conservation Corp, and has potential cultural value due to its connection to history.

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



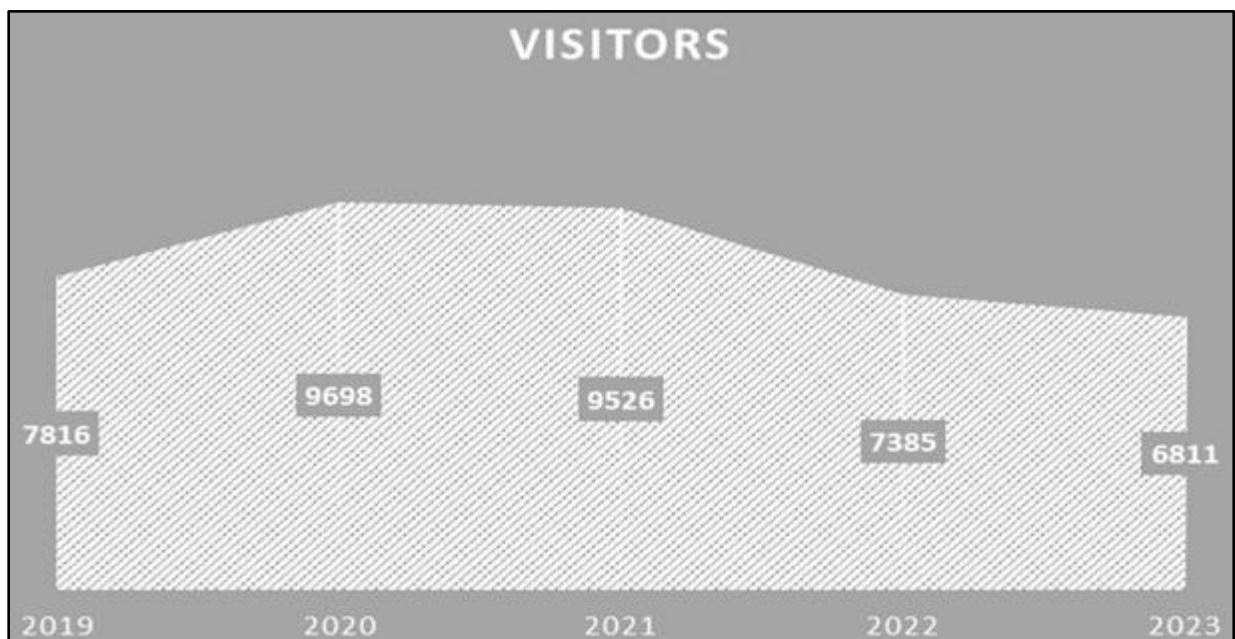
Rockfall on the Rooster Comb section of the South Steens Loop Road

Visitors

In 2023, visitation to the Steens Mountain CMPA was down slightly from 2022 and well below the uptick in visitation that occurred in 2020 (see graph). This may have been due to the heavy snowpack early in the season.

The BLM Burns District issued 19 special recreation permits and 8 winter recreation permits for activities in the CMPA in 2023. These included permits for hunting outfitter/guides, birding groups, running camps, a 10k run/walk, outdoor education, horseback rides, youth programs, driving tours, and cross-country skiing, among other activities.

Campground visitation in the CMPA declined slightly from 7,386 in 2022 to 6,811 in 2023. There was also a slight reduction in use of the Steens Mountain Backcountry Byway and a 20 percent reduction in use of CMPA trails. This is likely a result of the rockfall closure on the South Steens Loop Road.



Steens Mountain CMPA campground visitation from 2019 through 2023

Partnerships

Partnerships are a vital part of the Steens CMPA recreation program. In 2023, the BLM Burns District continued a partnership with the Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA) for a trail monitoring and maintenance stewardship program within the CMPA. ONDA stewards contributed 2,016 hours of volunteer trail monitoring and maintenance. ONDA also cooperated with the BLM Burns District on two projects in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023. In early October 2022, volunteers worked with BLM staff to rehabilitate the closed 'Burnt Car' road in designated wilderness. In September of 2023, ONDA volunteers put in their hard work re-establishing the Fred Riddle Trail, a scenic, steep trail that facilitates long distance loop hikes in the Little Blitzen Gorge near the South Steens Campground.

Youth and young adult engagement has long been an important part of the BLM Burns District recreation program. In FY 2023, BLM Burns hosted a Northwest Youth Corps crew performing trail work around South Steens Campground. The crew completed trail maintenance on the Little Blitzen Trail and re-established the lower portion of the Fred Riddle Trail.

The Eastern Oregon Visitors Association remains a partner with the BLM Burns District. The Association promotes responsible recreation in the Steens Mountain CMPA.



Volunteers in the Steens Mountain CMPA

Science

While conducting aerial surveys on Steens Mountain, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) personnel spotted the mountain goat pictured below. He appeared to be alone and must have travelled a great distance across the sagebrush sea to get here, as there are no established populations of this species in the Steens Mountain area.

In 2023, 21 temperature monitors were deployed along wild and scenic rivers and other streams in the CMPA mostly for monitoring temperature in Lahontan cutthroat trout streams on the east side of the Steens.

A graduate student from Oregon State University is in her second year of collecting Data within the CMPA for her thesis on the effects of treatments on aspen stands that have been encroached upon by juniper. Her data, which she is collecting from a wide range of plant communities, includes point counts and audio recording of bird songs. She is also using remote cameras to document big game wildlife use in different habitats and to document use before and after treatments in aspen stands. At least 75 species of wildlife have been documented through the acoustic and camera monitoring in different habitats. She will also analyze bird species use and diversity in untreated and treated aspen stands. The thesis and final report should be done around the end of calendar year 2024.



Mountain goat on Steens Mountain

Climate Impacts

Over the last few years, there has been a dramatic change in surface streams and lakes in the Steens CMPA. Mann Lake, a former popular fishing destination, is now mostly dry and no longer supports a fishery. Much of that is due to changing 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 grasses at higher elevations in the CMPA. Juniper also continues to expand its distribution. The Steens Act designated a special Juniper Management Area, which allows managers a range of options for implementing and assessing juniper encroachment treatments.

Changing climate can bring on conditions conducive to wide-scale catastrophic wildfire. Should it occur, extreme fire would have a direct impact on visitation, visual resources, air quality, and public safety within the CMPA.

Climate Resiliency

Understanding the science about fuels and fire is vital to managing Steens Mountain's dynamic ecosystem in the face of a changing climate. Fuel management is an important component of managing the ecosystem, mitigating the effects of juniper encroachment, and enhancing habitat for sage grouse and other important species.

In 2023, the BLM accomplished the following fuels treatments within the CMPA:

- Juniper cut and pile: 2,632 acres
- Prescribed fire: 700 acres
- Seeded: 700 acres

In 2023, the BLM also treated 44,825 aerial acres for invasive plants within the CMPA boundaries. Weed species treated include: medusahead, ventenata, cheatgrass, whitetop, puncturevine, Mediterranean sage, perennial pepperweed, spotted knapweed, diffuse knapweed, Canada thistle, Scotch thistle, and bull thistle.

The BLM continues to encourage citizen science within the CMPA through a cooperative agreement with ONDA. Volunteers with ONDA provided valuable assessments of wilderness study areas while doing important tasks such as wilderness boundary sign installation and increasing public awareness of wilderness values.

Range staff assisted with installation of a log structure to repair a large headcut in Riddle Creek in the Stonehouse Wilderness Study Area in the CMPA.



Stonehouse Wilderness Study Area

Social and Environmental Justice

BLM Burns District management 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 of the Burns Paiute Tribe to Steens Mountain. Connecting youth and communities to the landscape is a goal of the BLM, and consulting with local tribes is an important part of that work. 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 and consult with BLM staff on any management activity. This group meets quarterly and includes local community leaders, business groups, environmental groups, hunting/fishing advocates, and grazing advocates.

Events

The BLM Burns District hosted several events in the CMPA in FY 2023. These included the Steens Mountain Rim Run, Steens Mountain Running Camp, and two separate National Public Lands Day events.

In FY 2023, the BLM held two volunteer events with ONDA in the CMPA. In October of 2022, Burns District staff partnered with ONDA to rehabilitate the Burnt Car Road, within the Steens Mountain Wilderness. In September of 2023, BLM staff again partnered with ONDA to re-establish the Fred Riddle Trail near the South Steens Campground, also in the Steens Mountain Wilderness.



Participants in the Steens Mountain Running Camp



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