



NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

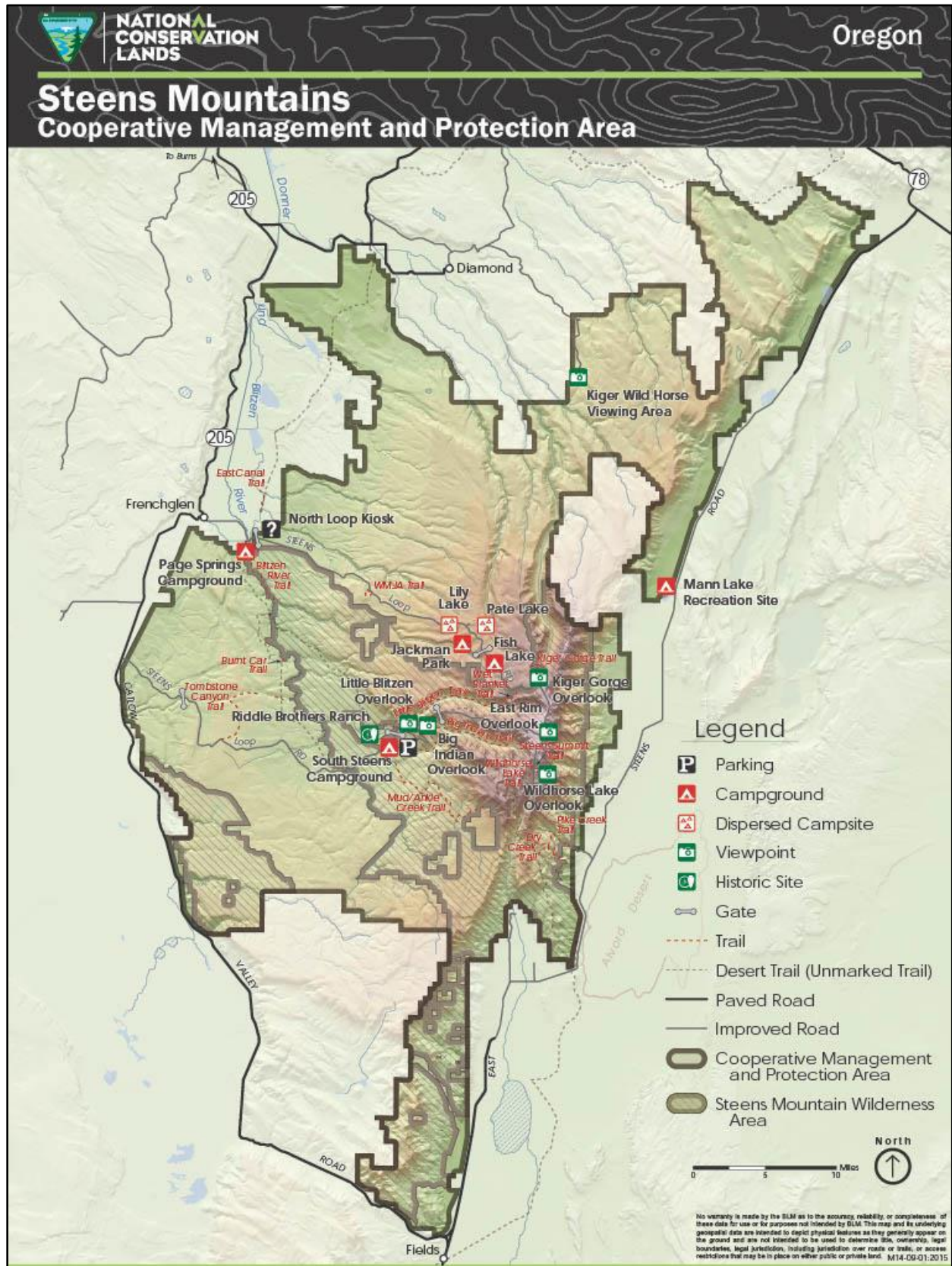
Oregon/Washington
2021: Annual Manager's Report

Steens Mountain

Cooperative Management and Protection Area



Map



Accomplishments

In 2021, the BLM and its partners completed several successful projects in the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Area (CMPA), despite COVID-19 challenges and staffing limitations. This included projects to improve camping, provide stewardship to the Steens Wilderness, and treat invasive plants.

The BLM installed new aluminum picnic tables and updated fee boxes in popular campgrounds within the CMPA. The updated boxes save labor by allowing staff to collect fees less frequently. Staff also chipped and removed woody debris from campgrounds, cutting larger pieces into rounds for free public firewood. In response to increased visitation on the east side of Steens Mountain, staff installed five picnic tables and fire rings at free dispersed campsites around Mann Lake.

In the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act of 2000, the U.S. Congress designated over 97,000 acres within the Steens Wilderness as a No Livestock Grazing Area. In 2021, BLM staff, volunteers, and private landowners continued to collaborate to protect this area, which is heavily bordered by private land. The fences used to exclude livestock are in a rugged environment and frequently need maintenance or rebuilding, which must be done without motorized vehicles or equipment. BLM staff and partners walked and maintained many miles of fence and worked with a local rancher to rebuild an existing fence line.

In 2021, the BLM treated 18,268 acres in the CMPA using integrated weed management techniques. Invasive species treated include: medusahead, whitetop, Mediterranean sage, spotted knapweed, Canada thistle, Scotch thistle, and bull thistle.



Challenges

In 2021, the CMPA experienced challenges related to visitation levels, limited staffing, and continued COVID-19 restrictions. Due to heavy visitation at campgrounds and other recreation sites, recreation maintenance staff spent the majority of their time on sanitation. The BLM prioritized cleaning frequency due to COVID-19. This limited the time staff were able to spend on site improvements and new developments.

For many years, youth engagement has been an important part of the CMPA's recreation program. Prior to COVID-19, the BLM partnered with the Northwest Youth Corps, Idaho Conservation Corps, and other organizations on trail construction and maintenance projects in the CMPA. Unfortunately, staffing and pandemic issues did not allow for these projects to occur in fiscal year (FY) 2021. BLM staff hope to again host youth crews at the CMPA in FY 2022.

In 2021, off-highway vehicle encroachment caused resource damage in wilderness and wilderness study areas. Staffing shortages magnify this problem and affect other important work, including removing fence caches in the Steens Wilderness and maintaining wilderness boundary fences (see the Accomplishments section above). The Burns District is considering methods to increase capacity for backcountry fence maintenance through contracts, agreements, and hiring additional personnel.

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



Visitors

Visitation to the CMPA remained high in FY 2021. Traditional recreational activities such as camping, hiking, fishing, hunting, horseback riding, off-highway vehicle use, and photography remain popular.

Use of the CMPA's four fee campgrounds remained high in FY 2021, as did use of free dispersed campsites. The BLM estimates that CMPA campgrounds had a total of 9,526 visitors in FY 2021, slightly down from 9,698 in FY 2020. Visitation trends vary between campgrounds when compared with FY 2020, with visitation to Page Springs Campground up 23 percent and visitation to South Steens and Fish Lake campgrounds down 19 and 30 percent, respectively. Smoke drift and high temperatures likely contributed to variability in visitation in FY 2021. Page Springs continues to be the busiest campground.

In FY 2021, magnetic road counters in heavily trafficked areas in the CMPA recorded 80,582 vehicles. The northern section of the Steens Mountain Loop Road continues to be most used. Infrared trail counters recorded 33,545 persons in the CMPA in 2021. The Blitzen River Trail (out of Page Springs Campground) continues to be the most used trail.



Partnerships

Partnerships are a vital part of the CMPA. In 2021, the BLM Burns District partnered with the Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA) for a pilot trail monitoring and maintenance stewardship program within the CMPA. The ONDA stewards contributed over 300 hours of volunteer labor.

The Backcountry Horsemen of America – Steens Chapter, continues its longstanding involvement in CMPA equestrian recreation. Members participate in trail maintenance and monitoring and promote equestrian projects within the CMPA. The Eastern Oregon Visitors Association has also been helpful in promoting responsible recreation in the area.

In addition to formal partnerships, visitors to the Steens CMPA volunteered their time and labor. The BLM hosted a small National Public Lands Day event at Fish Lake Campground in 2021. Ten volunteers contributed 20 volunteer hours towards campsite cleanup and signing.

The BLM also partners with organizations that conduct research within the CMPA; the Science section, below, describes these partnerships.



Science

Science plays a vital role in understanding how the unique ecosystem of Steens Mountain responds to a changing environment. In 2021, BLM staff and partners performed important projects to better understand the Steens ecosystem, interpret how it is changing, and improve response to that change.

In FY 2021, BLM staff recruited a graduate student to comprehensively document the CMPA's wildlife assemblage. Staff also continued annual spring sage-grouse lek counts in the CMPA and conducted bald eagle counts at Page Springs Campground.

Riparian staff continued their work to better understand and protect aquatic systems within the CMPA. In 2021, they installed temperature probes and water quality measurements in CMPA streams; completed aquatic assessment, inventory, and monitoring surveys on 16 reaches; and conducted 9 proper function and condition assessments.

BLM specialists continued assessing the Neals Hill Fire rehabilitation project and monitoring reestablishment of native grasses in the burned areas. They also monitored the effectiveness of a medusahead aerial treatment conducted in 2020.

The United States Geological Survey continued its annual breeding bird surveys in the CMPA, which date back to the 1960s. Oregon State University continued partnering with the BLM on a long-term songbird study. The university is also conducting a study to determine the response of big game to juniper removal within aspen stands. The Xerces Society continued annual bumble bee monitoring in the CMPA.



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 shows a recent increase in annual invasive bromus grasses at higher elevations in the Steens. Juniper also continues to expand its distribution. The Steens Act mandated a special Juniper Management Area, which allows managers a range of options for implementing and assessing juniper encroachment treatments.

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



This photo depicts vandalism to one of the signs

Climate Resiliency

The BLM is working to reduce fuel loads within the CMPA to mitigate risks related to increasingly hot and dry summers. An interdisciplinary BLM team collaborated with Oregon State University to conduct juniper thinning projects to enhance wildlife habitat and reduce fuel loads. The threat of stand replacing fire in juniper woodland is very real, so reducing fuels is crucial to maintaining a stable ecosystem.

BLM staff are planning riparian enclosure projects within the CMPA to enhance fish habitat and restore the natural condition of the landscape. They are also repairing and redesigning existing enclosures to better protect riparian habitats.

In addition to trail monitoring and maintenance, the partnership between the Burns District and ONDA (see the Partnerships section above) is also addressing wilderness study area monitoring. Volunteer stewards are collecting data on adverse impacts to wilderness study areas using a phone app; this information allows the BLM to respond more quickly to problems and to better understand the condition of wilderness study areas.



Social and Environmental Justice

BLM leadership and staff meet quarterly with an official from the Burns Paiute Tribe to discuss upcoming projects, exchange ideas, and listen to tribal concerns. The BLM values and respects Tribal views and the connection of Tribal members to this land. 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. The Steens Act created the advisory council, which meets quarterly, to advise and consult with BLM on management of the CMPA. This group, members of which are pictured below, includes local community leaders and representatives from business groups, environmental groups, hunting/fishing advocates, and grazing advocates.



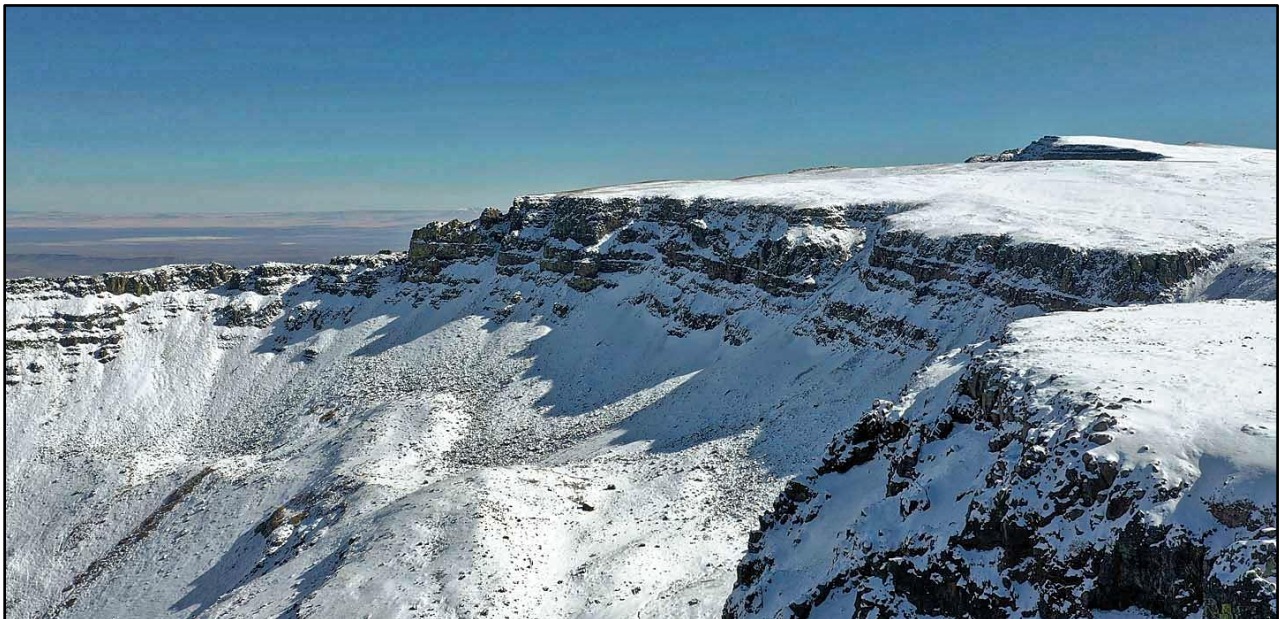
Events

Managing and permitting recreation events has been especially challenging during COVID-19. Many event managers and permittees have altered their operating plans or cancelled entirely due to pandemic health and safety precautions. Public health and safety remain a priority for the CMPA recreation program.

Compared to 2020, 2021 was an encouraging year for special recreation permits. The BLM issued 15 special recreation permits for the CMPA, up from 9 in 2020. After cancelling in 2020, the popular Steens Mountain Running Camp was able to return for 2021. This camp is the longest permitted group within the CMPA, having hosted high altitude running camps for decades. Other permittees include horseback tours, birding tours, youth environmental education, hunting guides, and driving tours.

Winter recreation also rebounded in 2021. The BLM issued 38 winter recreation permits, up from 21 in 2020. Winter recreation permits allow skiing, snowshoeing, and limited snowmobiling on the Steens Mountain North Loop Road.

In December, the Audubon Society held its annual Christmas Bird Count on the lower portion of Steens Mountain.





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