

Overview of Bears Ears National Monument Resource Management Plan

(BENM Article Series: 1)

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service (FS) recently released a proposed Resource Management Plan (RMP) for the 1.36 million acre [Bears Ears National Monument](#) in Southern Utah. The RMP includes five Alternatives for public comment. As outdoor recreation enthusiasts, it is our goal at Utah Public Lands Alliance (UPLA) to encourage and equip members of the outdoor recreation community to submit substantive comments on the draft RMP. We'd like to ensure the final plan does not unnecessarily restrict public access, limit outdoor recreation opportunities, or close roads and trails to off-highway vehicle (OHV) motorized recreation. The deadline to submit public comments is June 11, 2024.

Designation of national monuments typically bears immediate, detrimental impact on outdoor recreation access to public lands given that monument status removes the multiple-use mandate as the core land management directive. Whereas the BLM and FS are explicitly required by Congress to manage public lands for "multiple-use sustained yield," in contrast, lands within national monument status are managed primarily for protection of natural and cultural resources. Multiple-uses (such as outdoor recreation, logging and grazing, and economic interests like guided expeditions) are not required to be prioritized in land management decisions within national monuments. Thus, it is critical for members of the outdoor recreation community to share their input on management plans for national monuments in order to insert a voice of advocacy to maintain and prioritize public access and outdoor recreation opportunities.

In October 2021, President Biden issued a proclamation expanding the size of the Bears Ears National Monument. For historical context, President Obama first designated the monument in 2016, then President Trump later scaled back the size of the monument from over 1 million acres to only 202,000 acres. Since 2021, the BLM and FS have been working with the Bears Ears Commission, which is comprised of representatives from six native American tribes, to develop a management plan with the goal of balancing livestock grazing and recreational activities with conservation and preservation of the newly designated 1.36-million-acre national monument site.

There are several areas of significant negative impact on outdoor recreation access within the range of Alternatives in the draft RMP, including:

- Designation of two new "areas of critical environmental concern" (ACEC) that cover a footprint of more than 97,000 acres. The ACECs would be managed primarily to protect natural and cultural resources; essentially, the land within ACECs would be managed similarly to wilderness. Currently, there are five ACECs covering 28,975 acres within the monument. Thus, ACECs would be expanded by more than 300% of current ACEC acreage.
- Limitation of off-highway vehicle use.
- Prohibition of competitive mechanized and motorized events.
- Restriction to permitted-only use of new bolts, anchors, and fixed gear for rock climbing.
- Implementation of a ban on recreational target shooting.
- Creation of strict visual resource designations to limit light pollution and "preserve or retain the natural landscape character."

The plan would allow selective areas and access for hunting, camping, and hiking inside the national monument.


The BLM and FS preferred Alternative is Alternative E. The table below shows the impact of closures and restrictions to OHV access in each of the five Alternatives. **The preferred Alternative, E, proposes closure of 569,971 acres to OHV use** (392,989 acres of BLM-managed land, and 176,982 acres of FS-managed land), **and designation of 794,181 acres as OHV limited to existing roads and trails.** Alternative D would be the most detrimental to OHV recreation, closing over 980,000 acres to OHV access. Alternative A would have the least negative impact, though the likelihood of Alternative A being selected is minimal given that it would merely continue existing public land management practices, which is precisely what the Biden administration and Bears Ears Commission has sought to change through national monument designation.

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Travel and Transportation Management	A	B	C	D	E
BLM Closed to OHV travel	389,645	389,645	487,048	805,932	392,989
BLM OHV travel limited	685,403	685,403	588,000	269,117	682,059
BLM Open to OHV travel	0	0	0	0	0
USDA Forest Service Closed to OHV travel	46,430	176,982	176,982	176,982	176,982
USDA Forest Service Limited to OHV travel	242,677	112,122	112,122	112,122	112,122

In regard to non-OHV recreation, as shown in the table below, the preferred Alternative E would shift outdoor recreation management from designated Recreation Management Areas to use of a zoned approach. The zones proposed in Alternative E would implement widespread restrictions and closures to a variety of outdoor recreation opportunities by categorizing select types of public access into each specified zone. We'll dive into the details of the zones proposed in Alternative E in another upcoming article on the Bears Ears National Monument RMP.



RECREATION USE AND VISITOR SERVICES

Summary of Alternatives

Alternative A	Alternative B and C	Alternative D	Alternative E
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Recreation Management Areas (SRMAs) – 534,617 acres • Recreation Management Zones (RMZs) – 112,508 acres • Extensive Recreation Management Areas (ERMAs) – 500,188 acres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SRMAs – 432,180 acres • RMZs – 112,615 acres • ERMAs – 236,502 acres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management Areas (MAs) – 561,219 acres • Management Zones (MZs) – 94,999 acres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Front Country Zone – 18,995 acres • Passage Zone – 7,498 acres • Outback – 265,299 acres • Remote – 1,072,587 acres

For more details about the Bears Ears National Monument RMP, check out the RMP planning website, the draft RMP, and the BLM's press release and invitation for public comment:

- [Bears Ears National Monument ePlanning website](#)
- [Bears Ears National Monument Resource Management Plan](#)
- [BLM, USDA Forest Service invite input on Bears Ears National Monument draft plan](#)

UPLA is continuing to review the draft RMP and seek guidance from the outdoor recreation community to identify areas of concern regarding the impacts of each proposed Alternative. We will be sharing additional information along with resources to support you in writing substantive comments to submit during the public comment period, keep an eye out for new articles and resources on the Bears Ears National Monument RMP on the [UPLA website](#).

If you have questions or would like to share your input on the draft RMP, please contact UPLA's Natural Resources Consultant, Rose Winn, at rose@utahpla.com.