

# *Back Country Horsemen of America*



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Subject: National Landscape Conservation Summit

I represented BCHA at the Bureau of Land Management, National Landscape Conservation System Summit in Las Vegas on November 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>. The Summit was well attended -- about 340 participants of which roughly 2/3 were Bureau employees and 1/3 invited stakeholders.

Highlights of the Summit included a brief address by Secretary of Interior Salazar who signed an order recognizing the NLCS, endorsing a Policy for the management of the NLCS, and establishing a new directorate, called the National Landscape Conservation System and Community Partnerships. Introductory comments were given by Bureau of Land Management Director Bob Abbey. The involvement of BLM's top leadership was impressive. Director Abbey stayed for the entire meeting. Also quite a number of State Directors, Associate State Directors and Field Managers were in attendance as were Washington Office Division Chief's for Recreation and NLCS and key members of their staffs.

The National Landscape Conservation System contains some of the West's most spectacular landscapes. It includes over 886 federally recognized areas and approximately 27 million acres of National Monuments, National Conservation Areas, Wilderness Areas, Wilderness Study Areas, Wild and Scenic Rivers, National Scenic and Historic Trails, and Conservation lands of the California Desert. The NLCS was created in 2000 by former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, and brought these special places into a single system where conservation would be the overriding goal. NLCS lands are managed to conserve, protect, and restore the exceptional scientific, recreational, cultural, and ecological values for which they were designated. The system was made permanent by the 2009 Omnibus Public Land Management Act.

The purpose of the Summit was to provide a forum to solicit, discuss and build upon ideas and suggestions from NLCS partners to assist in the challenging mission of balancing competing land and resource uses while protecting the values for which the areas were designated. The second day of the

Summit was spent in focus group sessions brainstorming ideas. Focus group leaders were scheduled to meet on Wednesday (after the Summit concluded) and develop proposed action plans based on the information gathered. Highlights of the action plan were to be presented to the Director on Thursday. Proceedings of the summit will be published on the internet at [www.blm.gov/NLCS](http://www.blm.gov/NLCS).

It was encouraging to hear Director Abbey's comments that, consistent with the values for which the areas were designated, these areas would remain "accessible for use," management plans would be "build on local effort," and that these areas would be managed to "preserve local traditions and history as working landscapes" -- a "bridge between landscapes and cultures."

When asked (by one of the more extremist participants) whether the law meant "protection or use," Abbey responded, clearly but politely, that it does not have to be "either- or!" The areas would be managed "to protect the values for which they were established *and* provide for compatible uses."

Both Secretary Salazar and Director Abbey stressed the importance of "partnering" and "neighboring." TWS President, Bill Meadows, moderator of a panel discussion, also emphasized the "gospel of partnering and neighboring" and the importance of "connecting people to the places they care about."

Much of the value of these meetings is the opportunity to renew old acquaintances and make new ones. I had the opportunity to visit briefly with Director Abbey about BCHA's mission and our partnership contributions. My perception is that he was not very familiar with our organization.

I also visited with BLM's Partnership Program Lead. Much of the emphasis for their volunteerism is with 'Site Based' organizations – friends groups. I gave him a handout on our volunteer contributions. He was surprised to see that BCH contributed nearly as many hours as they reported for the entire NLCS last year. I had several people (BLM field managers, SCA Western Regional Director, friends) approach me throughout the meeting and comment on volunteer BCH efforts on their respective areas.

I had the opportunity to visit briefly with TWS President Bill Meadows (who once again spoke about the importance of our partnership); Doug Scott, Campaign for America's Wilderness; Adam Cramer, Outdoor Alliance; Greg Mumm, Blue Ribbon Coalition; Jay Watson, Student Conservation Association; and to renew acquaintances with several BLM WO staff members (including one who had worked for me in the 1980s – small world).

Although there was a lot of talk about traditional users (ranchers, oil and gas, etc.), I didn't meet many at the Summit. I don't know if this was by design or simply indicative of a lack of trust between ranching organizations and industry leaders and the BLM. I think the exchange would have been more meaningful if traditional users had been better represented. BCHA was also the only equestrian group represented (although a couple of BLM employees came up to ask about our organization and indicated that they would like to join or form a local chapter). My 'feel' about the stakeholder participation was that it was more representative of urban values than rural-western. I heard references to NLCS units as being "as

special as our National Parks” by both BLM employees and stakeholders and sensed a ‘philosophy’ more aligned with Park management than with other BLM or Forest Service lands.

From the top down, it was clear that BLM sees the NLCS as “a different way of doing business,” a more collaborative management environment in which the responsibility for both planning and the actions prescribed by the plans would be shared with stakeholders. If they’re successful in doing this they will have a model for management that other agencies have given lip service to for years.

Where units of the NLCS are important providers of recreation experiences for horsemen, it will be important that we get involved in their planning processes to be successful in preserving a reasonable balance between protectionism and responsible use. I come away from the Summit with the feeling that the leadership is sincere about their commitment to making public involvement truly *meaningful*. It’s up to us now, to participate in a *meaningful* way...

*dennis*

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