

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

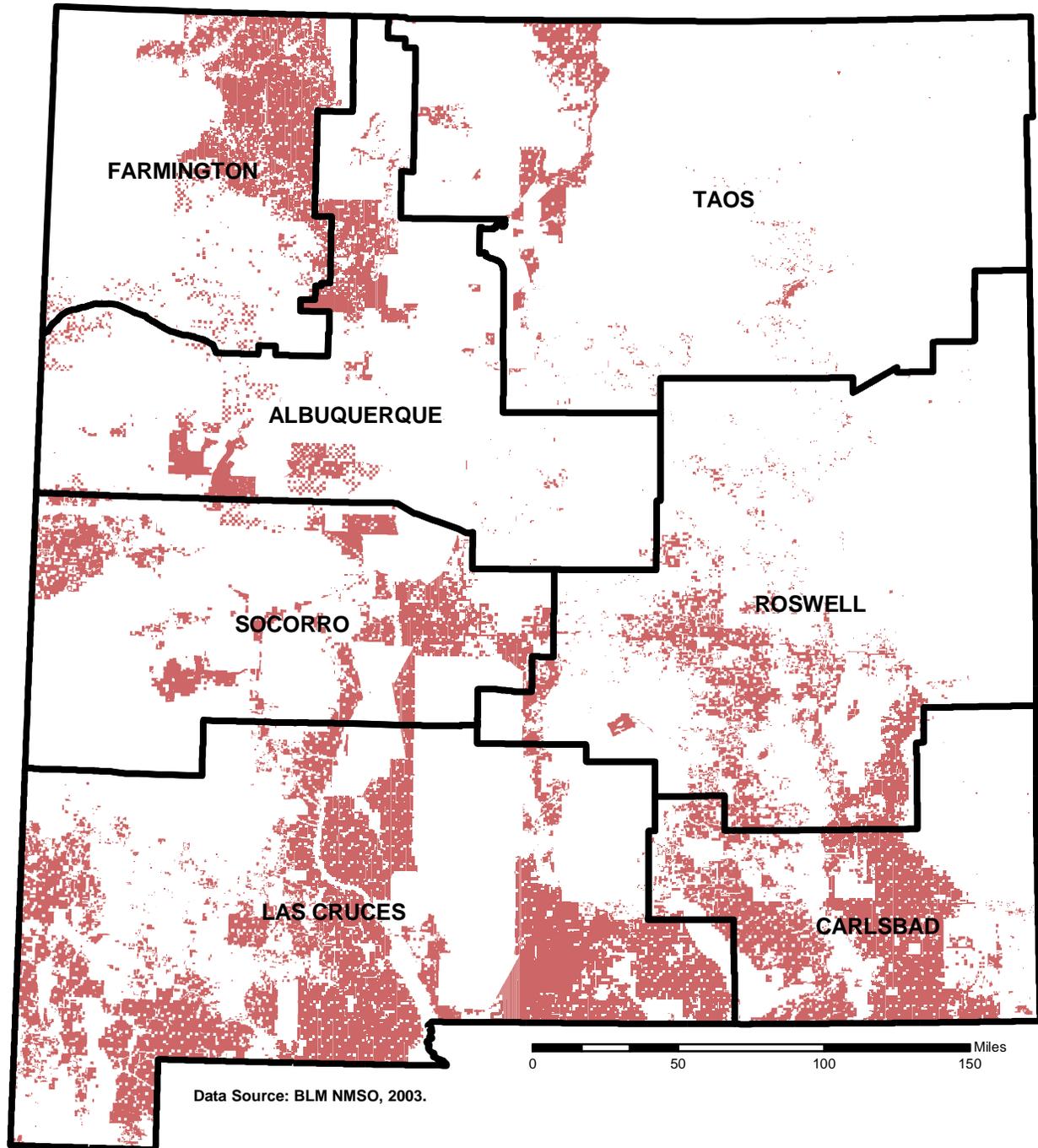
PURPOSE OF THE PLAN AMENDMENT

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposes to improve its implementation of the National Fire Plan and 2001 Federal Fire Policy by amending nine Resource Management Plans (RMPs) in New Mexico and Texas, to update direction for fire and fuels management. Nine RMPs (Carlsbad 1988, Farmington 2003, Mimbres 1993, Rio Puerco 1986, Roswell 1997, Socorro 1989, Taos 1988, Texas 1996, White Sands 1986) would be amended in eight Field Offices: Albuquerque, Carlsbad, Farmington, Las Cruces, Roswell, Socorro, and Taos, New Mexico and Amarillo, Texas. The purpose of the Plan Amendment is to incorporate current fire management policy into RMPs, to restore fire as an integral part of fire-adapted ecosystems in order to meet resource management objectives, to improve the protection of human life and property through the reduction of hazardous fuels, and to establish consistent methods of managing fire and fuels on public land in New Mexico and Texas.

The Plan Amendment will form the foundation for revision of the eight Field Office Fire Management Plans (FMPs). The FMPs are activity plans that detail Field Office fire and fuels objectives and implementation strategies for each Fire Management Unit (FMU). FMUs are geographic areas with particular topographic, biological, and socio-political characteristics and specific fire and fuels management objectives. The planning area includes all surface land managed by the BLM in New Mexico and Texas, including El Malpais National Conservation Area and Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument, but not lands for which the BLM only administers the subsurface or mineral estate. The BLM administers some 13.4 million acres of surface public lands in New Mexico (Figure 1.1) and 11,802 acres of surface public land north of Amarillo in Potter County, Texas (Figure 1.2, also known as the Cross Bar Ranch). Table 1.1 describes general land ownership in New Mexico.

TABLE 1.1	
NEW MEXICO SURFACE OWNERSHIP	
NEW MEXICO SURFACE OWNERSHIP	ACRES
FEDERAL	
Bureau of Land Management	13,458,833
Bureau of Reclamation	84,429
Fish & Wildlife Service	381,853
National Park Service	371,959
Department of Agriculture	109,461
Forest Service	9,227,914
Valles Caldera National Preserve	88,787
Department of Defense	2,505,370
Department of Energy	43,555
TOTAL FEDERAL LAND	26,272,161
TRIBAL LAND	
	8,067,059
State	8,980,955
State Game & Fish	104,279
State Park	25,080
TOTAL STATE LAND	9,110,314
PRIVATE LAND	
	34,374,246
Source: BLM NMSO GeoSciences 2003 Data are subject to ongoing revision.	

Figure 1.1 The BLM Field Offices and Surface Public Lands in New Mexico

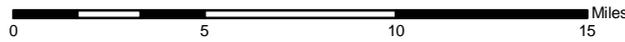
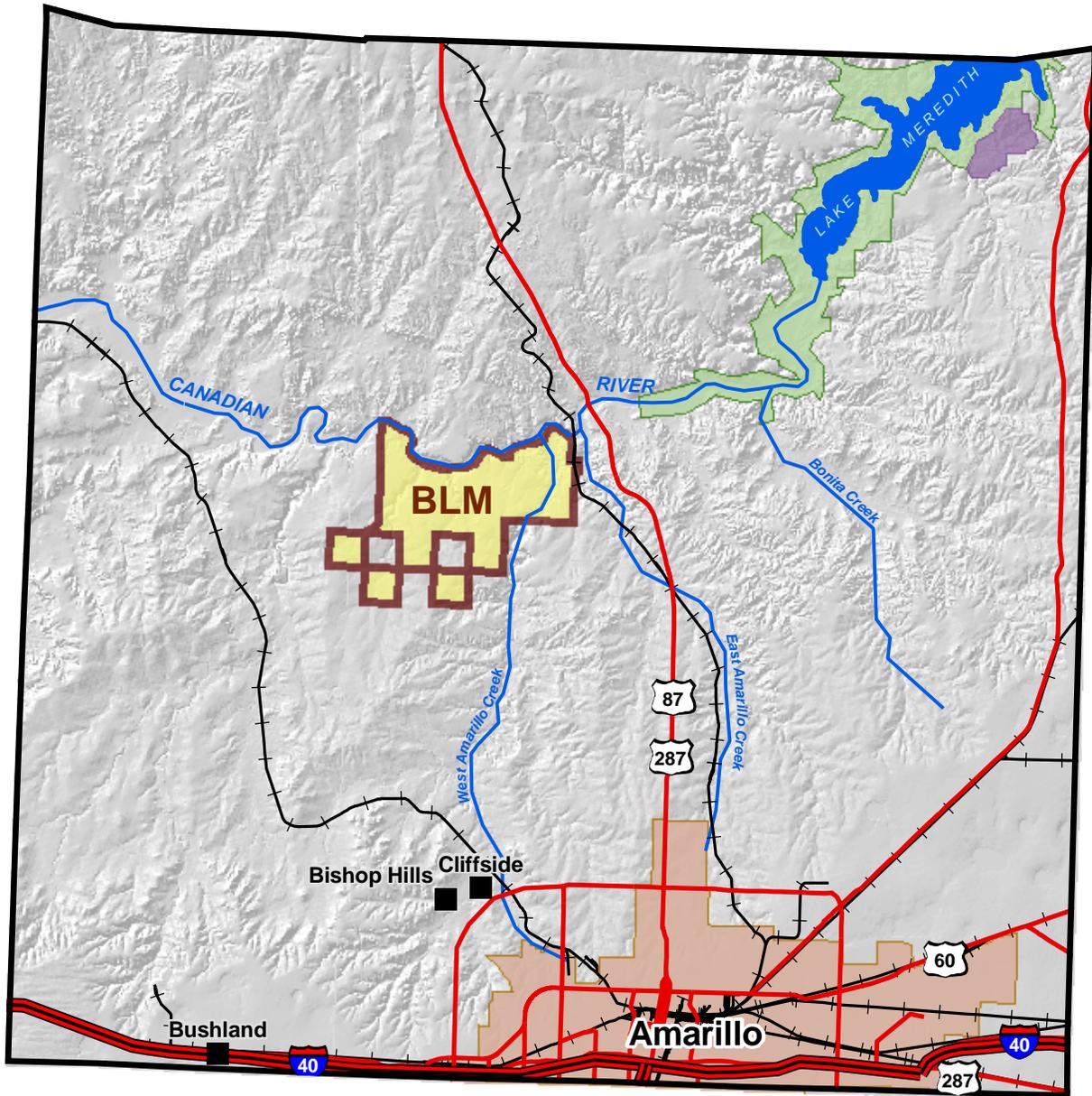


Produced by the BLM New Mexico Geographic Sciences Team.

No warranty is made by the Bureau of Land Management as to the accuracy, reliability, or completeness of these data for individual use or aggregate use with other data, or for purposes not intended by BLM. Spatial information may not meet National Map Accuracy Standards.



Figure 1.2 The Surface Public Land in Texas



Data source: BLM NMSO, 2003.
Produced by the BLM New Mexico Geographic Sciences Team.

-  Public Land
-  Alibates National Monument
-  Lake Meredith National Recreation Area
-  Amarillo City Limits
-  Potter County Line
-  Lake
-  River/Creek
-  Interstate Highway
-  Other Roads
-  Railroad



No warranty is made by the Bureau of Land Management as to the accuracy, reliability, or completeness of these data for individual use or aggregate use with other data, or for purposes not intended by BLM. Spatial information may not meet National Map Accuracy Standards.



Relevant Planning Documents

- Carlsbad RMP (1988)
- Farmington RMP (2003)
- Mimbres RMP (1993)
- Rio Puerco RMP (1986)
- Roswell RMP (1997)
- Socorro RMP (1989)
- Taos RMP (1988)
- Texas RMP (1996)
- White Sands RMP (1986)
- RMP Plan Amendments, as relevant

NEED FOR THE PLAN AMENDMENT

National fire management policy has evolved in response to the increased fatalities, property loss, local economic disruptions, and risk to ecosystems associated with increasingly catastrophic wildland fire seasons. The Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program (1995) was developed (and then updated) after severe fire seasons in 1994 and 2000. The 2000 fire season also prompted a report from the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior, which eventually became the basis of the *National Fire Plan*.

The *National Fire Plan* and the *2001 Federal Fire Policy* both indicated that Federal agencies must change their fire management practices to increase the protection of human life and decrease natural resource and private property damage. Specifically, the *2001 Federal Fire Policy* established that the deteriorating condition of fire-adapted ecosystems is the result of fire exclusion, that the fire hazard in fire-adapted ecosystems is worse than previously thought, and that the extent of the fire hazard in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) was not fully recognized in 1995.

The 2001 Federal Fire Policy referenced preliminary Fire Regime Condition Class data (finalized as Schmidt et al 2002) as a way of inferring risk to ecosystem sustainability and risk of uncharacteristic wildland fire behavior and effects (Hann 2002). According to coarse-scale spatial estimates for New Mexico and Texas, the fire regimes and frequencies on about 7.8 million of the 13.4 million acres of BLM-administered public land in the study area have been either moderately or significantly altered (Rocky Mountain Research Station 2000). The result is moderate to dramatic changes in fire size, intensity, severity, and/or landscape patterns. Based on estimates of the condition, these 7.8 million BLM-administered acres need treatments to restore the historical fire regime.

The risk to communities has been projected in response to nationwide inquiries related to the National Fire Plan. Sixty at-risk communities or areas were identified for New Mexico (Federal Register Vol 66 No 160: 43383-43435, August 17, 2001). In cooperation with the BLM and other Federal and State agencies, the New Mexico State Forestry Division (2003) has since further characterized fire hazard risk assessment by delineating 18 WUI areas in New Mexico, containing 120 communities rated at high risk, 63 rated at moderate risk, and 22 rated at low risk from wildland fire.

BLM planning documents generally have not kept pace with National fire and fuels management policies, nor do they reflect the condition of public land in terms of fuels (and associated risks to ecosystems and communities) in New Mexico and Texas.

DECISIONS TO BE MADE

Based on this analysis, the BLM New Mexico State Director will decide whether to amend land use plans to adopt the following decisions:

1. Establish Field Office-wide objectives for fire and fuels management
2. Delineate fire management areas
3. Identify broad vegetation treatments
4. Identify general restrictions on fire management practices
5. Determine the criteria by which the fire management areas can be changed.

The State Director may decide to implement the proposed action, to take no action, to select a different action alternative, or to examine and select another alternative. Decisions to delineate fire management areas and identify broad vegetation treatments are RMP-level decisions and may be protested. Decisions to identify boundaries of FMUs are implementation-level decisions and may be appealed.

The State Director will not authorize specific hazardous fuels reduction projects based on this analysis. Each Field Office will prepare appropriate site-specific National Environmental Policy Act analyses for individual projects. These analyses may include specific fire management objectives and guidance to protect unique resource values within project areas.

APPLICABLE LEGAL AND REGULATORY RESTRAINTS AND COORDINATION

Under any alternative, the BLM would comply with the constraints and processes imposed by the following laws, policies, and legal/regulatory agreements, both on this plan amendment and on any future site-specific plans that tier to it:

- Endangered Species Act of 1973: Fire suppression, rehabilitation, fuel reduction treatments, and related activities would comply with the Endangered Species Act (ESA) including, but not limited to, Sections 7(a)(1) for conservation of species and Section 7(a)(2) for consultation on actions that “May Affect” species. This shall include consultation on effects from BLM actions or authorizations that may extend onto private, state, tribal, or other land ownership. Section 7 consultations will be completed on this Plan Amendment and on any future site-specific wildfire restoration, prescribed burn or fuels reduction projects that “May Affect” listed species or critical habitat.
- Emergency Section 7 Consultation: Federal regulations (50 CFR 402.05) recognize the need for expedited consultation in response to natural disaster (including wildland fire) or other calamity. Where emergency actions (including fire suppression) are required that may affect listed species or critical habitats, the action agency shall initiate consultation,

usually by phone or facsimile, at the first opportunity. Emergency consultation procedures allow action agencies to incorporate endangered species concerns into their actions during the response to an emergency. Under no circumstance where human life is at stake should an emergency response decision be delayed due to administrative work required by the consultation regulations.

- BLM will comply with the provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966, as amended, including Native American consultation, through existing programmatic agreements. In the absence of such agreements, the BLM will adhere to regulations found in 36 CFR 800. Projects subject to the NHPA include fire suppression/restoration activities and fuels reduction projects.
- In New Mexico, smoke is regulated through a “permit by rule.” To comply with the New Mexico Smoke Management Regulation, Field Offices will complete a smoke registration and receive a burn identification from the New Mexico Environment Department for each project.
- Additional legal and regulatory authorities relevant to this proposal, as well as the BLM policies that typically guide development and implementation of individual projects, are available on request (see BLM NMSO 2004a in References Cited).