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ALERT

TOP STORY

ARIZONA VOICES

Arizona Voices: Arizonans know best: protecting ecosystems is a win-win

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Amy Martin, left, with the National Park Service, and Jim Walters with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service use a seine net to collect juvenile humpback chubs in turbid water conditions for the November 2011 chub translocation in the Little Colorado River.

Mike Pillow, USFWS

Earlier this year, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposed the Public Lands Rule to bring much needed balance to the agency's management of roughly 245 million acres across the West. Specifically, the proposal would modernize BLM's strategies for managing public lands and increase their focus on conservation, recreation, wildlife, water, and local economies. Currently, 90% of this land is open to oil and gas drilling, cattle grazing, and mining.

To be clear, the proposed rule does not remove these multiple uses. Rather, it brings balance to the equation by putting conservation outcomes on equal footing, as directed by the Federal Land Policy & Management Act. In a recent Gallup poll in partnership with the Center for the Future of Arizona, 92% of Arizonans said it was a priority to protect and preserve Arizona's rivers, natural areas, and wildlife. In other words, most Arizonans support the types of outcomes that would be achieved through the proposed Public Lands Rule.

So what's the issue?

A public comment period followed the announcement of the proposed rule to ascertain the level of support and to address any related questions or concerns. However, in the middle of the public comment period, legislation was introduced to block consideration of the rule altogether. While the BLM is currently assessing comments before making a final decision, and Congress considers the bill, it is important that the public and politicians alike understand how vitally important it is for the BLM – and all land management agencies for that matter – to protect and restore western ecosystems so that they will be resilient in this era of interconnected crises – aridification, catastrophic wildfire, and rampant species loss.

As an associate professor at the Northern Arizona University School of Earth & Sustainability, I focus primarily on the protection and restoration of riverine ecosystems. In particular, my research investigates how essential landscape

connectivity is for healthy river systems, the ecosystem services they provide, and for climate change adaptation and mitigation.

Rivers are enormously important for biodiversity everywhere, but especially in the arid states of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah. Yet, the health of the Colorado and Rio Grande Basins is diminished due to nearly two centuries of mining, dam building, and poorly managed livestock grazing. These pressures are compounded by rising demands on water resources from growing populations and human responses to climate change such as a return to damming and diverting rivers for increased energy and irrigation needs.

For example, in the Lower Colorado River Basin, 75% of fish species are listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act and in Arizona, 90% of native species are either extinct or endangered. Such losses are worrisome as biodiversity is integral to providing the ecosystem services humans depend on, not to mention the intrinsic value that plants and animals possess.

Beyond the species and genetic diversity of biodiversity, ecosystem and landscape diversity are also important for ecosystem resilience. Connected, free-flowing rivers, their riparian zones, and associated wetlands serve as buffers against floods, droughts, and wildfires. Rivers and their riparian areas also offer cultural ecosystem services including sacred sites and recreation activities such as fishing, hunting, bird and wildlife viewing, camping, and boating, among others.

Starting in 2021, the U.S. launched a 10-year campaign to protect and restore the lands and waters of the country. In the same year, the International 30X30 agenda to protect and restore at least 30% of the Earth's terrestrial, freshwater, and ocean ecosystems by 2030 was launched at the Convention on Biological Diversity. As the integrators of the land and sea, free-flowing rivers are fundamental for the maintenance of interconnected ecosystem services and functions. Therefore, expanding protections on free-flowing rivers is necessary for reaching national and international conservation obligations.

As the nation's largest land manager, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has a significant role to play in conserving and restoring these crucial freshwater ecosystems. The Public Lands Rule can help in doing just that. Enacting this rule will modernize the agency's approach to managing public lands by appropriately rebalancing its focus on conservation, recreation, wildlife, water, renewable energy production and local economies. It is a vital and significant action that will have lasting benefits for generations through more sustainable resource management.

Clearly the majority of Arizonans know communities are only as healthy as the surrounding public lands and waters. Supporting the Public Lands Rule is in the best interest of the people and planet.

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Tags

