

# USE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING AT THE BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

A Case Study  
Submitted to the

The American Society for Public Administration:  
Government Accomplishment and Accountability Task  
Force

Nicholas J. Avdellas  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
Center for Public Administration and Policy

### **Abstract/Introduction:**

This case study outlines the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) strategic planning experience in the 1992-1995 timeframe. Readers should note BLM's clear focus on the effort, their reluctance to "program" the effort in its initial stages, and the commitment of high level BLM management to the strategic planning process.

Readers will also note that the strategic planning process has fostered an integration of legal, organizational, and budget drivers at BLM. Strategic planning is becoming an integrative tool for the agency. It is becoming an organizational "barometer" for tracking progress and program direction.

This case study suggests that the true test of strategic planning is whether or not it can become this sort of tool - which embraces, integrates, and guides many levels of organizational and stakeholder behavior towards legislative goals. The key now for BLM, which is addressed in the "Next Steps" section of this case study, is to integrate this process into the organization as a long-term iterative tool for effective performance measurement and strategic goal reporting.

The following seven key issue areas are addressed in this case study:

- **History and Context of the BLM Strategic Planning Effort**
- **The Strategic Planning Process at BLM**
- **Summary of the BLM Strategic Plan**

- **Use and Impact of Strategic Planning**
- **Agency Costs of the Strategic Planning Effort**
- **Lessons Learned**
- **Next Steps**

Attachments are included at the end of the document to highlight significant elements of the strategic planning process. The final attachment (Attachment 7) describes the evidence base and methodological approach of the study.

### ***1. History/Context***

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is responsible for managing close to 270 million acres (110 million hectares) of land -about one-eighth of the land in the United States - and 570 million acres (232 million hectares) of subsurface mineral resources. Most of these lands are located in the western United States, including Alaska, and are dominated by extensive grasslands, forests, high mountains, arctic tundra, and deserts.

BLM is headquartered in Washington, D.C., with 12 regional and various field offices operating throughout the United States. It also operates several specialized offices including a national training center and a wild land fire fighting center.

BLM manages lands for a wide variety of resources and uses. These include energy and minerals, timber, livestock, forage, wild horse and burro populations, fish and wildlife habitat, rights of way, wilderness areas, recreation, and archaeological and

historical sites. This multiplicity of resources places BLM in the center of many land and resource use conflicts involving diverse sets of interested publics.

Much of the institutional energy and unique culture of BLM is driven by its diverse field level activities and wide geographic dispersion. It is at the field level in which collaborative efforts with other agencies, adjacent landowners, and local publics have traditionally occurred. Decentralized field level activity will be an important attribute to track throughout this study. This field level implementation activity explains both the decentralized management approach historically present at BLM and much of the dynamics of the current strategic planning effort.

With the possible exception of a Four Year Authorization Proposal BLM prepared in 1980, no bureau wide strategic plan had ever been developed at BLM. However, BLM is not unfamiliar with the notion of strategic planning. Policy and program officials have grappled with strategic planning components from time to time, most notably during the Bush administration.

In the late 1980's BLM developed certain programmatic documents, referred to as "2000" plans. These documents were prepared at the national level and used by BLM to represent "strategic plan-like" products. They were prepared, mostly on an ad hoc basis, primarily to emphasize and showcase selected programs. Included among these documents are Recreation 2000; Fish & Wildlife 2000; Report of the Blue-Ribbon Panel on Rangeland Program Initiatives and Strategies; Our Growing Legacy; and the Strategic

Plan for Wild Horses and Burros on Public Lands. During this timeframe, BLM also developed several long term goal statements and, in an effort commonly referred to as *BLM 2015*, identified a preliminary list of national performance measures and recommended actions to simplify the budget process.

In the summer of 1993, which marks the beginning of the current strategic planning effort, a general consensus developed at the bureau level that a better integration of program areas was in order. The director of BLM assigned a team of 8-10 people to arrive at brief strategic documents in key areas. A survey of related federal agency experience with strategic planning was also completed.

Several factors, both internal and external to BLM, shaped the view that more salient strategic planning was in order for the agency. Key drivers included:

¥ **Changing demand patterns in the West.** The U.S. West had undergone tremendous population and economic growth. This resulted in changes in land use demands. These changes in demand (taken together with growing public concern over the health of waterways, grasslands, and forests) created significant challenges and opportunities for BLM.

¥ **Changes in the way resource professionals thought about the most effective way to manage resources.** Best captured under the term *Ecosystem Management*, these changes involved modifications in the **scale, focus, and goal integration** of all the BLM program activities along with other federal resource management programs. BLM realized the need to move from a project-oriented approach to a more comprehensive (watershed or landscape) view in its land use decisions. This shift in orientation also suggested a change in focus from program or commodity specific goals to more resource or landscape based objectives. This approach suggested the need for a more thorough integration of economic, social, and environmental considerations in land use decision-making.

¥ **A general sense that many traditional procedures were no longer meeting public needs.** Over time, many BLM programmatic procedures had become increasingly cumbersome and were no longer operating at optimum levels of efficiency or effectiveness.

The context for the current strategic planning effort, then, was a combination of demographic changes, management redirection, and a growing set of program related problems. The Bureau realized that something had to be done to help people make better sense out of the converging activities noted above.

## ***2. Strategic Planning Process:***

The strategic planning process took shape through an extensive effort that began in the summer of 1993 and culminated with a "BLM Summit" in April 1994. The Summit produced five clear, overarching goals that presently serve as a bureau wide strategic template for establishing performance objectives and associated measures. Three specific aspects are important in understanding how BLM has been able to use the strategic planning process to achieve a reasonable degree of consensus concerning the agency's mission, vision, and long-term goals and objectives:

¥ **The initial request for organizational information and the action taken on responses received;**

¥ **An effective follow-on meeting of key agency officials and stakeholders;**

**¥ The production of a strategic document that reflects agreements reached through the strategic planning process.**

### **The Request for Information**

In June of 1993, the Director of BLM sent each BLM employee a letter asking for ideas about issues worthy of consideration in the development of a blueprint for moving the BLM into the next century. Similar requests were sent to major public land usage groups, local officials, trade associations, and other constituencies. Approximately 400 suggestions were received.

A task force was identified to prepare a report evaluating the suggestions. The report was circulated to the Assistant Directors, State Directors, and Center Directors of BLM for review in late October of 1993. Over two hundred pages of additional comments were received by the Director's Office in response to this follow-on effort. A 64 page report, excluding appendices, entitled *Report on Dear Colleague Suggestions*, was then produced. (The Introduction portion of this document is included as Attachment (1)).

The *Dear Colleague* report was significant for two reasons. First, it consolidated and highlighted many common themes that ran throughout the survey responses, which fostered specification of important "critical mass" areas of concern. Second, the report served as a catalyst to suggest significant issue areas for a larger forum. Armed with this

information, BLM top management could better engage BLM employees, and important policy stakeholders, in a follow-on strategic debate.

### **The Meeting**

In April 1994, the new BLM Director convened the BLM Summit, a meeting of all BLM managers and over 100 people from outside of the organization. The goal of the meeting was to build upon the suggestions received from *Dear Colleague* respondents and to foster an open and collaborative decision-making procedure in the development of a new strategic vision. The week-long meeting involved BLM line managers, key officials from the Department of the Interior and other federal agencies, and a wide variety of non-federal outside stakeholders. Outside participants included cattlemen, environmentalists, oil and gas operators, loggers, recreational users, the press, and representatives from state, local, and tribal units of government. The meeting highlighted BLM's field level capacity to work with a variety of interest groups through practical, "on-the-ground" management experience.

Mat Millenbach (BLM Deputy Director), who was interviewed as part of this case study, noted that the Summit was a good first step towards building supportive constituencies through a cross section of field activities. The State Director in Utah at the time of the Summit, Mr. Millenbach noted that it stimulated the internal imagination of his agency and told external customers that BLM was serious about making informed land usage changes.



Nina Rose Hatfield (BLM Assistant Director for Business and Fiscal Services) was also interviewed. She noted that the Summit served as an invaluable platform for creating a common vision for the organization, setting the climate for needed changes, and opening up avenues for additional goal-related input.

### **The Blueprint for The Future**

The results of the BLM Summit were first assessed by headquarters staff. A summary document was sent to BLM State Directors and then to all Summit participants. Revisions and comments resulted in the *Blueprint for the Future* in September 1994. This document is BLM's first ever formal, bureau-wide strategic planning document. The document reflects Summit participant views and states five overarching goals to direct agency action. These goals are the following:

- 1. To maintain healthy ecosystems;**
- 2. To serve current and future publics;**
- 3. To promote collaborative leadership;**
- 4. To improve business practices, and**
- 5. To improve human resource management practices.**

The first goal states BLM's commitment to maintain the health and productivity of the land. The second pertains to the goods and services the American people derive from these lands. The third goal relates to how decisions are made about the use of this land. The last two goals outline how the Bureau is going to become a more efficient and

effective organization.

### ***3. Strategic Plan Summary:***

*The Blueprint For the Future* contains ten sections. The document is important because it reflects collaboratively defined Mission and Vision statements for BLM based upon several challenges defined by the agency and its stakeholder communities. The Mission and Vision statements lead to five *Blueprint Goals*. Each goal is discussed and several actions needed to achieve each goal are specified.

The linear relation between challenges, mission, vision, and goals is intended to shift BLM's thinking toward improving the health of the land using a holistic approach, where program (e.g. wildlife, forestry, oil and gas, recreation, minerals) boundaries would be de-emphasized and programs would work together with a common vision.

The Mission Statement reads:

It is the mission of the Bureau of Land Management to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

The Vision Statement in the Blueprint reads:

The Bureau of Land Management will:

Provide for a wide variety of public land uses without compromising the long-term health and diversity of the land and without sacrificing

significant natural, cultural, and historical resource values;

Understand the arid, semi-arid, arctic and other ecosystems it manages and commit to using the best scientific and technical information to make resource management decisions;

Resolve problems and implement decisions in collaboration with other agencies, states, tribal governments, and the public;

Understand the needs of rural and urban publics and provide them with quality service;

Maintain a skilled and highly professional work force;

Clearly define and achieve objectives through the efficient management of financial, human, and information resources;

Efficiently and effectively manage land records and other spatial data; and

Commit to recovering a fair return for the use of publicly-owned resources and to avoid creating long-term liabilities for the American taxpayers.

An extract from the *Blueprint* document is included as Attachment (2) of this case study.

#### ***4. Use and Impact of Strategic Planning:***

The following uses and impacts of strategic planning have been identified through document research and personnel interviews conducted from March through May 96:

a. The BLM Director has actively used the *Blueprint* to guide agency activity and has reinforced it by providing weekly messages to all employees. This process is tying the daily business of the organization to the strategic document and is "getting the word out " to all employees. The new Mission and Vision for BLM are being transformed from rhetorical statements into workable and practical concepts through this process. (An example of this type of message is provided as Attachment (3)).

b. BLM has used the *Blueprint* document in the budget process. Although the formal BLM budget structure has not yet changed, priorities expressed in budget documents reflect strategic plan objectives. For instance, choices made in the Bureau's 1997 budget submission were derived directly from goals related to the overall health of the land and serving current and future publics.

c. BLM field activities were encouraged to hold "Mini Summits " involving their employees and local constituency groups. The field was also asked to identify local priorities based on the *Blueprint* and follow-on summits. This activity is underway. For example, Pete Culp, State Director of the Eastern State BLM Office, indicated that he is using the *Blueprint Goals* to guide the day-to-day priorities of his organization. A draft summary of *Blueprint* based field level strategic planning is included as Attachment (4).

d. The *Blueprint* has been integrated into aspects of BLM's personnel management systems. For example, the document was used to develop performance agreements for all SES employees in the bureau for FY 96.

##### **5. Costs:**

BLM has not established a separate staff or formal office for strategic planning.

Therefore, there is no "cost center" associated with the strategic planning effort. Most of the activity surrounding the effort has been assigned to staff as part of other work duties.

Interviews indicate that the most substantial costs associated with the effort have been

costs for meetings designed to build consensus throughout the organization. These meetings, however, have generally been arranged as part of larger meetings normally held to address BLM business areas. The general sense at BLM is that the costs of getting to a GPRA usable strategic plan have not been, and should not be, overwhelming.

## **6. *Lessons Learned***

The BLM Summit and *Blueprint* brought diverse interests together to begin a new direction for the Bureau. The following "lessons learned" have been assembled to facilitate other agency use and discussion:

- a. In strategic planning, reaching agreement about direction and measurement is what is important. The process used to achieve and document such agreement is less important.
- b. The development of objectives and measures should not be viewed as a technical project that can be assigned to staff. Performance objectives and measures are a management tool, and management must be involved in their development.
- c. Thinking about performance measurement means alignment. An agency's objectives, organization, budget, and reporting structure must be calibrated for effective measurement to be useful.
- d. An agency should assume that objectives and measures will change over time. New opportunities and challenges will arise.
- e. The strategic planning process consumes a significant amount of time. It takes time for concepts to "jell" and truly take hold in the thinking and processes of an organization. Whatever process is used should be iterative, interactive, and adaptive and should provide for both top down and bottom up flows of information.

f. Strategic planning requires some flexibility and willingness to test some new approaches. It also requires that the strengths of the organization be located and built upon.

### **7. Next Steps:**

BLM has started an iterative process to incorporate more performance drivers into the *Blueprint* document. This process involves "stepping down" the new Mission and Goal statements into National Strategic Objectives and Performance Measures. The following "next steps" are currently in process:

- a. Establishment of working groups to establish performance drivers. Eight working groups are being established: One to work on the first *Blueprint* goal area, six to work on the strategic objectives under the second area, and one to address the third area. Each team will identify critical factors for the next 5 years with associated potential measurement drivers in each area. (See Attachment 5). An example of the kind of specific performance measures being developed in this "step down" process is included as Attachment (6). This example is a potential objective and measure for the first goal area.
- b. Results of the working groups will be shared with constituency groups and interested parties and modified accordingly. Groups will also be created and/or expanded to address all aspects of the strategic plan.
- c. BLM expects to submit a draft GPRA Strategic Plan at the end of FY 96. A final plan will be completed by FY 97. Throughout this iterative process, BLM intends to continue to work to develop both employee and stakeholder consensus on strategic objectives and parameters. The major challenge for BLM is to get legislation, policy, and budgets to better reflect this consensus on objectives so that critical goods and services can be tied to them and provided in accordance with measurable outputs and outcomes.

### Case Study Evidence Base and Methodological Approach

The case study was developed between February and May 1996. Document location/review and personal interviews were the primary methods of data collection. A scripted interview schedule was developed and used for all interviews. A list of all interviewees and primary documents on which the case study is based are listed below:

#### **A. Persons interviewed during the case study:**

1. Mat Millenbach, *BLM Deputy Director*
2. Nina Rose Hatfield, *BLM Assistant Director for Business and Fiscal Services*
3. Pete Culp, *State Director of Eastern State BLM Office*
4. Christopher (Kit) Muller, *BLM Office of the Director*
5. Carl Zulick, *Program/Management Analyst*

**B. Documents on which the case study is based:**

1. *BLM Report on Dear Colleague Suggestions*, April 1994.
2. *Utah BLM State Plan: Putting the Corporate Agenda into Action*.
3. *U.S. Department of the Interior. BLM Message from the Director*. May 1996.
4. *Bureau of Land Management Blueprint Implementation Survey, Draft Results Summary*. May 1996.
5. *National Resources Performance Measures Forum: Minutes*. March 11 and April 8, 1996.
6. *Memo to the Director, BLM Review of Strategic Planning of Select Federal Agencies*. August 10, 1993.
7. *BLM Environmental Indicators: Measuring Our Progress*. March 1996.
8. *Environment Strategic Framework 1995-1996*. September 18, 1995.
9. *Bureau of Land Management: Blueprint for the Future*. September 1994.
10. *BLM Goals for Maintaining the Health of the Land*. Draft Version. May 2, 1996.
11. *BLM Mission, Goals, Objectives Statement*. Draft Version. May 2, 1996.

Attachment (7)