

Climate Change Listening Sessions: A Structured Brainstorming Activity with BLM Employees

Executive Summary March 2022

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) conducted a series of 15 Climate Change Listening Sessions for BLM employees in October and November of 2021. The goal of the listening sessions was to give a platform for employees to share ideas with leadership through group brainstorming sessions focusing on how we, as a bureau, can best address climate change. In total, 1,578 participants attended the listening sessions providing over 3,200 comments. The ideas and feedback from employees, which are linked to this report in a dashboard, may be used to help inform and influence new policies and business practices to allow the BLM to tackle the climate crisis consistent with Executive Orders on the topic.

Background

The Administration has highlighted the worsening impacts of the climate crisis and how the impacts pose an imminent threat to our daily lives, critical wildlife habitats, and future generations. Tribal, rural, and urban communities are economically burdened by storms, wildfires, droughts, and floods. Indigenous communities, low-income families, and communities of color bear a disproportionate brunt of the harm from air and water pollution. The following Executive Orders underscore the severity of this problem and direct agencies to take action:

- Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad;
- Protecting Public Health and the Environment and Restoring Science to Tackle the Climate Crisis;
- Moving on the Executive Order on America's Supply Chains; and
- Restoring Trust in Government Through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking.

The Department of the Interior and the BLM play central roles in how our nation stewards its public lands, increases environmental protections, pursues environmental justice, and honors our nation-to-nation relationship with Tribes. At the President's direction, the Department is already:

- Identifying steps to accelerate responsible development of renewable energy on public lands and waters;
- Standing up a Civilian Climate Corps to put a new generation of Americans to work conserving and restoring public lands and waters and addressing climate change;
- Restoring the government-to-government relationship with sovereign Tribal Nations;
- Developing approaches to conserve at least 30% of our lands and waters by the year 2030; and

- Reviewing the Federal oil and gas program to ensure that it serves the public interest and restores balance on America's public lands and waters.

During the summer of 2021, in an effort to build transparency and trust within the Bureau, the BLM Deputy Director of Operations offered time for one-on-one discussions with employees and managers across the bureau. During these meetings, many employees raised concerns about the climate crisis and expressed a strong desire to offer input toward ways the agency could address the challenge. The Climate Change Listening Sessions were developed in response to those employee requests.

Listening Session Methodology

In order to engage employees across the Bureau on the topic of the climate crisis, senior leadership organized 15 interactive webinars—one session each for 12 BLM States, 2 Centers, and the BLM Headquarters (HQ). Staff from the BLM's National Training Center hosted one or two Zoom webinars per day from October 19 to November 4, 2021, accommodating the different sessions. Employees were invited to sign up in advance for their respective session and were provided a brief description of what the session content or structure would include. Participation was voluntary.

Each listening session followed the same format: a short introductory video from the Deputy Director of Policy and Programs, live remarks from the respective State or Center Director, four brief poll questions followed by five key questions used to prompt employee reflection and feedback. The sessions ended with a sixth open question for sharing any additional thoughts. The questions were designed to be consistent with the Executive Orders, relevant to the BLM mission, and open-ended to prompt substantive employee responses. Both the poll questions and content questions were developed by the BLM's State Climate Points of Contact and members of the BLM's National Science Committee.

Feedback was collected in five ways. First, the poll questions collected audience background information (i.e., number of years as a Federal employee and area of work) and presented opportunities for employees to weigh in on resource allocation and priorities related to addressing the climate crisis. Next, five questions and the open response period featured open-ended themes, setting the stage for individual employees to offer more detailed input through the Zoom platform, through a live response, or an anonymous Chat feature. The employee input was recorded through various methods, including notetakers, transcripts, and recorded chat content. The sessions were live recorded for archival purposes, but participants were advised that their comments would remain anonymous and the recordings were not intended to be made public. Additional input was accepted until November 16, 2021, through online submissions. The online submission allowed individuals to reflect on each question and submit the response anonymously. Additionally, a format was offered throughout the sessions for employees to share longer responses on the topics that may be useful for future efforts, such as relevant research accomplished regionally and specific contacts or historical data.

In total, 1,578 participants attended the listening sessions. Additionally, 53 emails and 50 online forms were submitted, some of which may have been submitted by listening session attendees. In total, over 3,200 comments were submitted in the Zoom chat, Zoom question and answer,

email, online form, and spoken comments. Headquarters staff assembled comments and generated a summary overview of responses. Comments were compiled by State/Center/HQ and organized by topic under each question. A comment classification codebook of keywords was then created based on topic, roughly approximating BLM program areas, as well as ideas represented in participant comments. Comments were unaltered to avoid any bias or incorrect interpretation of the idea.

Dashboard Report

In order to organize the more than 3,200 employee comments into a user-friendly and interactive format, we worked with the HQ Resources and Planning Directorate to develop a Dashboard in ArcGIS that allows for easy sorting of comments by topic area -- a very important feature for leaders and policy makers alike. States/Centers/HQ may use this tool to review the employee input and identify ideas for ways to refine or develop new national policies, business and resource management practices, and other climate-related action items.

To access the dashboard, viewers must be connected to the BLM network, either through PulseSecure or connected at an office. Click the link to open ArcGIS and view the Dashboard. It may take a minute to open the new page. Note – the link works best using Google Chrome. The Dashboard opens with a map showing the locations of the listening sessions. Detailed instructions describe how viewers may “data mine” based on topics of interest, such as Range, Wildlife, or Oil and Gas. Additionally, viewers can access States/Centers/HQ specific data to view comments from each area.

[Access the Dashboard here](#)

To request a copy of an excel spreadsheet with all the comments, please email the National Science Committee at BLM_NSC@blm.gov

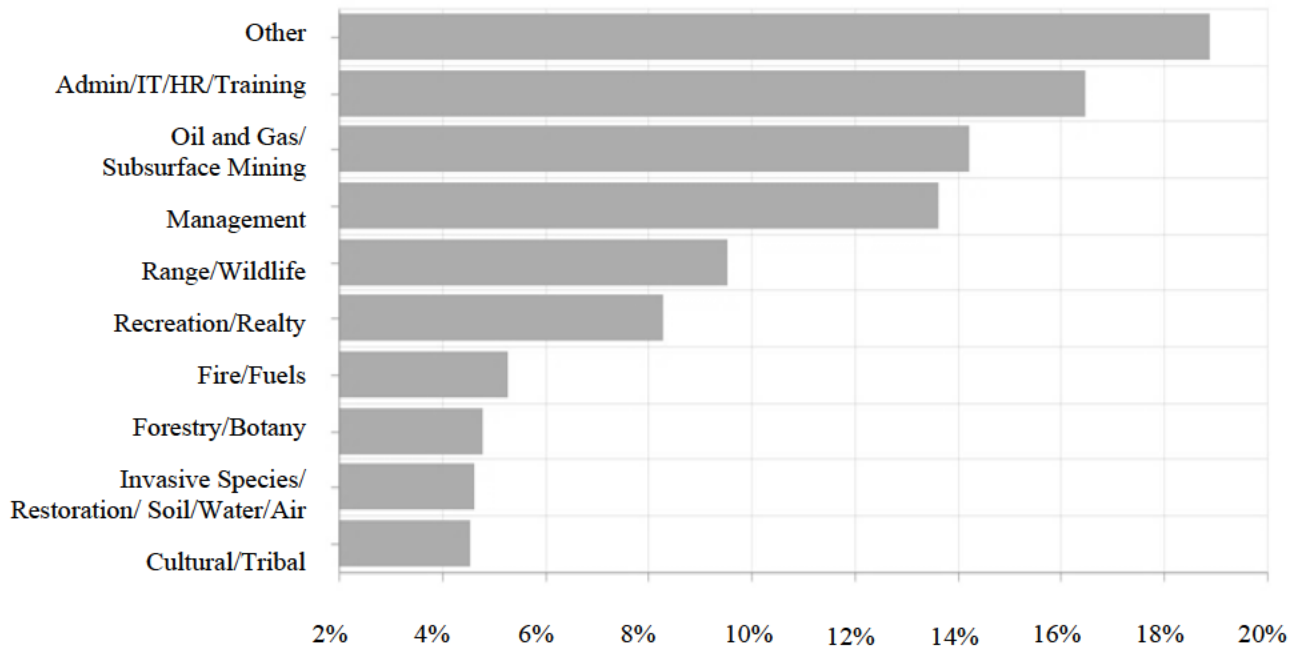
Summary of the Listening Sessions

We analyzed the combined data from all 15 listening sessions. Here are the highlights: poll results and trends of the most-often-repeated feedback from the six questions posed in the sessions.

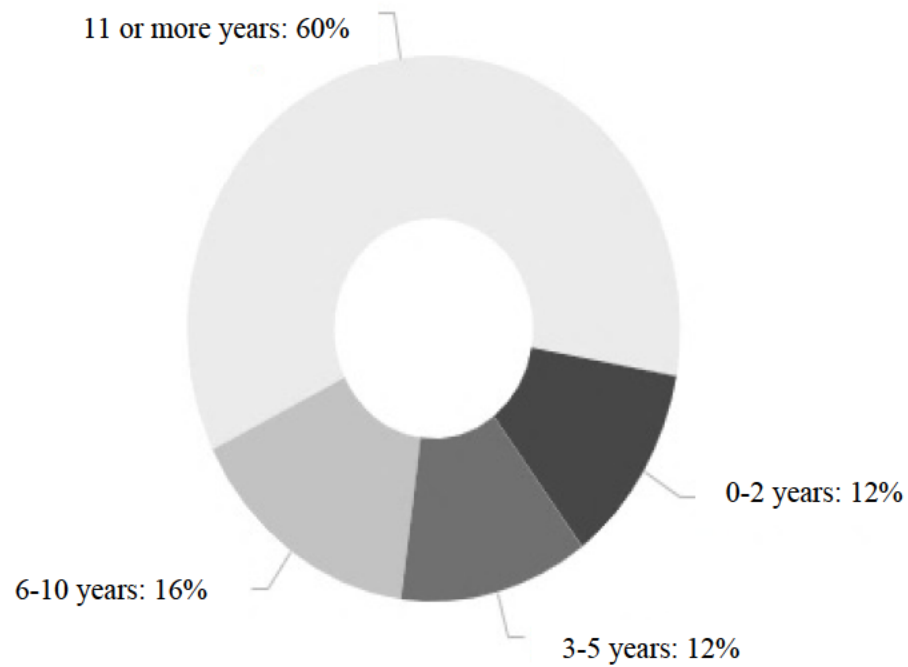
Poll Results

The poll responses have been combined here to show the national responses. Comparative data for individual listening sessions can be seen in the dashboard.

1. On what task or resource do you primarily spend your time?



2. How many years have you been a Federal employee?

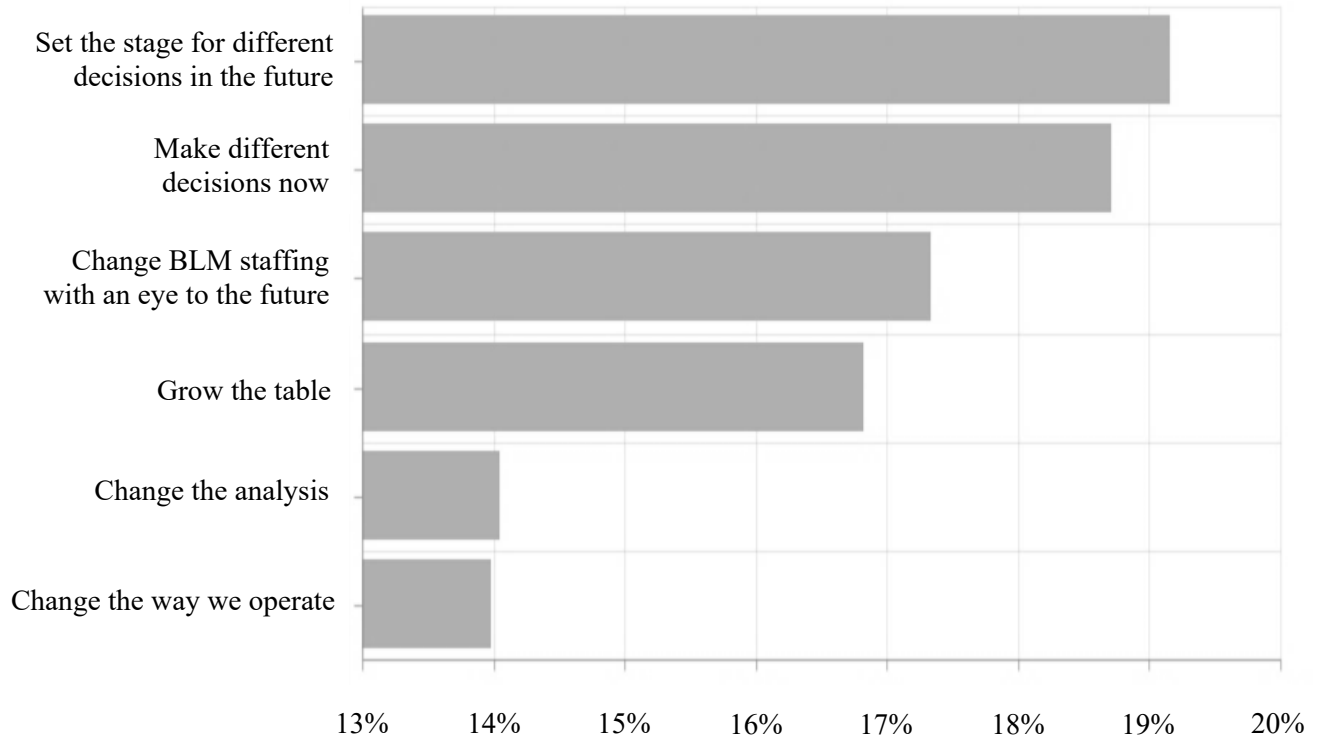


3. **How much should BLM be focusing its resources on the resolution of Climate Change issues?**



4. **Without regard to resource restrictions, such as limited staffing, what should BLM focus on in the next three years? Please identify your top 3 priorities.**

- a. **Grow the table:** Engage with Tribes, Tribal organizations, Federal agencies, and State and local governments to explore opportunities to address land conservation and habitat and natural resource stewardship through co-management agreements. Build on the existing efforts and knowledge of public and private partners, including recreational groups, industry, international counterparts, municipalities, States, Tribes, and Insular areas. Collaborate and coordinate across multiple scales and boundaries.
- b. **Change the analysis:** Make it easier to find and use Best Available Science, for all relevant disciplines, complemented with Indigenous and Traditional Ecological Knowledge to guide priorities and investments and to ensure effective and durable conservation.
- c. **Make different decisions now:** Change the weighting given to factors such equity, environmental justice, landscape resilience, connectivity, ecosystem services, and GHG emissions when making allocation and land management decisions.
- d. **Set the stage for different decisions in the future:** Reconcile policy conflicts and/or develop new policy.
- e. **Change BLM Staffing with an eye to future:** Ensure that BLM has access to the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to meet these challenges. Recruit and train to address these needs. Build tools to help leverage existing staff.
- f. **Change the way we operate:** Evaluate office recycling, fleet management, energy conservation, travel.



Employee Responses to Questions

In the section below, we have provided representative employee comments for five common topics from each question, based on an analysis of most-often repeated comments. This approach is not intended to represent all comments, and it does not reflect the many other great ideas captured in the comments. You are encouraged to mine the information through the dashboard. The Word Clouds are added as a visual aid and do not reflect the value of individual ideas. Inherent with brainstorming sessions, often an idea is remarked upon multiple times and it does not necessarily reflect the “best” idea.

Question 1

What have you seen where you live or on the lands that you manage that you would attribute to climate change?



Vegetation

“Conifer expansion (into riparian, sagebrush/grasslands and forests). Invasive annual grasses moving into areas naturally devoid of vegetation. Drying of mesic, riparian and wetland areas, (perennial to intermittent. intermittent to ephemeral) changing wildlife behavior.” -BLM-MT/DK

Wildfire

“I am 52 years old and grew up in Reno. When I was growing up, we never had a "smoke day" from fires burning in California. In the last 5 years, we have had days during the summer when Reno was fully smoked out, with schools closed and air quality in the "hazardous" range. These smoke days are from mega-fires that are burning in drought-stricken forests, often consuming trees that have been killed by pests such as pine beetles.” -BLM-NV

Temperatures/Seasons

“I work in northern AZ as an RMS. The past two years have given us record drought, with varying degrees of mega drought and record heat for the past 20 years. This past summer following the record drought we've seen record flooding.” -BLM-AZ

Drought/Water

“Changes in forage for cattle and wild horse, drying of water sources for wildlife and livestock out on the eastern part of the state are a game changer.” -BLM-CA

“Diminished stream and river flows, lowered lake, reservoir, and pond elevations, and reductions or the complete drying up of springs. Reduced populations of aquatic species due to reduced water volumes and discharges. Increased stream and river water temperatures. Increased impacts to aquatic and riparian habitats as domestic livestock concentrate in these wet/lush areas due to decreased upland forage production, and lack of reliable upland water sources.” -BLM-CO

Question 2

The Department is committed to integrating issues of inequity and Environmental Justice into decision-making. What tools, resources, or training can be leveraged to ensure that adaptation efforts are sustainable and account for the impacts on all populations, including low-income communities, communities of color, Insular areas, and Tribes?

Collaboration Public Agreements Hiring
Land-Use States/Countries Justice Tribal
Nepa/Planning Intern Fund Workforce Minority
Communication Geographic Local
Mitigation Impacts People Management
Training Scientific Office Environmental-Justice

Tribal

“Create better policy for working with tribes as sovereign nations. BLM policy doesn't allow us to easily meet Tribes in a fashion that is their custom. Gov 2 gov consultation is on our Federal terms, not theirs. Agreements are in BLM formats. Another example is that food is very

important in many of the Tribal communities we work with. The BLM should be able to provide a meal to Tribes when seeking their input. That acknowledges some tribal customs and shows respect to them.” -*BLM-OR/WA*

“Provide more clarity on the process of tribal notifications vs consultation. Many tribes have expressed that we over-communicate on low level projects while not consulting meaningfully on other projects.” -*BLM-CO*

Communication

“More efforts to translate messaging into the languages of our communities. Provide more training to best work with our indigenous communities. Identify and partner with NGOs that work in those affected communities and see how best we can work with them.” -*BLM-AZ*

“More public outreach to local communities. Many in our community see the Federal agencies as a monolithic entity -- without local interaction -- where grazing forms or permits are submitted and a form letter is returned. Lack of consistent personnel also prevents rapport with the local community.” -*BLM-WY*

Collaboration

“Prioritizing work that involves collaboration across jurisdictions to achieve landscape-level impacts. Need the staff, resources, time, and budget to successfully do this and support from higher management to make it a priority.” -*BLM-AZ*

“GNA has helped us reach tribal groups but having more options to contract with the smaller entities would help. Also, more contracts and agreement specialists to administer those agreements and contracts.” -*BLM-NIFC*

Management/Hiring

“Analysis on how decisions will impact diverse populations. Make decisions based on how this population will be directly impacted. Make sure staff is sensitive to the struggles that marginalized people experience.” -*BLM-NOC*

“This is really beyond the department, but we need either more training or flexibility in our hiring practices allowing us to "grow the Table" and increase our diversity. It would also be helpful to hire more anthropologists and tribal liaisons.” -*BLM-UT*

Question 3

The Department is committed to building strong partnerships, collaborating and coordinating across boundaries and spatial scales, and building on existing efforts and knowledge of public and private partners, including recreational groups, industry, international counterparts, municipalities, States, Tribes, and Insular areas. What tools, resources, or training can be leveraged to accomplish this and what else is needed?

Communication Tribal Land-Use Office Hiring Workforce Nepa/Planning PeopleTool O&G Public Agreements Management Contract Local Water Training Scientific Fund Travel Minority Collaboration Mitigation Relationship States/Counties

Collaboration

“I can highly recommend the Partnership and Community Collaboration Academy. Here's a link: <https://www.partnership-academy.net/managingbynetwork/> (please share). It's a great resource for people who want training in how to support partnerships.” -BLM-AK

“Perhaps create collaborative working groups that focus on climate change, similar to other working groups that the BLM has participated in (e.g. Sage-grouse working groups, trail working groups, etc.)” -BLM-ID

Agreements

“Having national MOUs with fishing advocates, advocates to get more young or other seriously underrepresented groups into fishing, MOUs or MOA with Trout Unlimited or TNC or similar groups to assist with restoration of wetlands, streams, and other aquatic habitats would be extremely helpful. Folks in the field can point to these national agreements to support the work they need to do across the landscape.” -BLM-CA

Hiring/Training

“Partnerships need dedicated positions for these efforts, human connection takes a lot of time and energy. With reduced funding levels and more job duties, staff lack the time to have meaningful relationships to build these partnerships. It's hard to accomplish this kind of work when it's "other duties as assigned." Then the choice becomes putting money into projects on the ground, or putting money into communication, and that is a tough choice to make as an agency.” -BLM-OR/WA

“I've been involved now with some partnership training and it's actually managing by networking. And I found it exceptionally helpful because it's not really what you take away and to work with what you're doing. It's what you're bringing to the group and how to ensure people understand one another in those groups, it was a very powerful training tool. I took this last year and I included talking about environmental law. It talked about working and listening in interdisciplinary and inter-agency groups. It was very powerful and it actually has helped working with our counterparts.” -BLM-NV

Management

“Better geospatial data for evaluating impacts on the landscape, communicating affectively with partners, and to make informed decisions.” -BLM-HQ

“Shift the narrative and perspective so that collaboration and engagement comes from a place of true co-management, not from a perspective of "checking the box".” -BLM-AK

Science

“Citizen Science can be an avenue to engage with local users better and get information on BLM lands and the uses.” -*BLM-MT/DK*

“Developed an interagency clearinghouse for data, information, and methodologies specific to resource concerns and analysis.” -*BLM-HQ*

Question 4

The Department is committed to using Best Available Science complemented with Indigenous and Traditional Ecological Knowledge to guide its priorities and investments and to ensure effective and durable conservation. What tools, resources, or training can be leveraged to accomplish this and what else is needed?



Scientific

“Concise briefs or talks/trainings to spread best available science and traditional ecological knowledge internally and perhaps to our partners and communities as well. A science officer or someone to distill the research would be great. I do not have time to look into new research.” -*BLM-NV*

“Establish a science program that has a clear line of authority to the Director as well as a budget. There should be data/science advisors in every program at headquarters. The agency needs to build on the successes of AIM and insist that each program develop standardized approaches to monitoring and reporting. I'd like to see the talent in science at the NOC be part of a well-organized cadre that designs practical monitoring that can be used to understand the impacts of all of our proposed actions. To fulfill the promise of FLPMA, we need to increase our understanding of cumulative impacts and have the courage to make decisions that impact resource uses.” -*BLM-NM*

“To leverage the best available science and traditional knowledge, we need to train and empower our staff to produce concise, issue-based NEPA documents. If we focus our NEPA documents on the scientific and traditional analyses of how a proposed action would likely affect various resources, then we can incorporate this knowledge into our decisions. The way we are currently doing our NEPA process results in us taking too long, writing too much, and losing the key points of our analysis in a sea of jargon. The BLM has hosted training on conducting issue-based NEPA processes. We need our supervisors and managers to support these practices so we can produce concise, useful, timely NEPA documents.” -*BLM-ES*

Management/Training

“BLM staff need to be educated and trained with regards to indigenous knowledge but also climate science. I work with a number of people who don't believe in climate change, don't believe that the changes we're seeing are the result of anthropogenic factors, etc. We can't expect these people to be effective ambassadors or to take the effects of climate change into consideration if they don't have accurate information. We also need to make policy changes, directives, etc. durable against changes in administration that seek to spread misinformation about climate change.” -*BLM-CA*

Tribal/Traditional Ecological Knowledge

“The TEK projects in MT/DKs are models for this type of work, including how to collaborate and share Tribal Traditional Ecological Knowledge while protecting sensitive information.” -*BLM-MT/DK*

“Change priorities to allow for more conservation projects, increase capacity of contracting and agreements shops, change decision space to allow projects to be developed on tribal timelines rather than our timelines and allow tribes to take lead on developing projects.” -*BLM-OR/WA*

Land-Use

“Add critical climate-sustaining lands, such as locally significant carbon sequestration areas to the list of approved ACECs and then identify key climate ACECs in each BLM state.” -*BLM-CA*

“a lot of local offices, they're relying on old land use plans and those are difficult to change and fast enough to be flexible, to respond to what we know is coming in terms of climate change. I'd like to suggest that, if possible, we could make programmatic type analysis of the effects of climate change based on the best available science that we have and traditional ecological knowledge. So, we would do a programmatic type Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement that covers the whole Western United States and would include something like worksheets or things that could be stepped down so that local offices could tear to a national NEPA document and make changes that would be appropriate to keep their landscapes, that they manage resilient. I'm coming from a wild portion view research coordinator. And so, this is kind of a wild horse and burro centric viewpoint but for example, I know that a lot of the appropriate management levels that are set for horses and burros were based on climate conditions from very wet time periods. And I think that it may be true for permitted livestock use in many districts as well. So, planning for landscapes to be more resilient in the future could mean to be aware of what would the future climate conditions be. And if we could have an Environmental Assessment that allows for local flexibility and temporarily reducing the number of horses and burros, or maybe permitted livestock levels, until a more formal land use plan is available, then that could give the flexibility to local offices without having to do one by one land use planning changes to get that resilience.” -*BLM-HQ*

Question 5

What low hanging fruit exists within your unit (State Office, District, Field) or program that could have the biggest positive impacts on climate change?



Telework

“Recognize that telework is the lowest hanging fruit available for most people to reduce their carbon footprint. Phase out single use plastics across departmental operations - such as hundreds of thousands of plastic water bottles in fire camps every summer.” -*BLM-NIFC*

“Maximum telework has shown us that many, many staff are very effective, some more so, in the telework environment. So, I agree with the comments of embracing telework and remote work in the future. This will also help with hiring and retention of talented employees.” -*BLM-OR*

Management

“I continue to be concerned that climate change is a political football and we as a staff have suffered years of whiplash with administration changes. How do craft/implement policies that can withstand political changes and still move forward on this issue.” -*BLM-HQ*

“Educate staff, managers and especially decision makers of the importance of how much carbon vegetation, including biocrust captures. Take carbon storage or the loss thereof into consideration before authorizing large scale projects.” -*BLM-NV*

Vegetation/Restoration

“Range and wildlife to increase plant diversity across the landscape and require rotational grazing (which does not always happen). require all proponents to mitigate environmental impacts - typically mitigation is not done as it should be done. For example, most operators think mitigation is paying their bonds and reclaiming their well sites. however, when vegetation is initially removed, operators should be restoring the same amount of acreage in another location (that is, degraded sagebrush habitats to restore sagebrush connectivity across the landscape).” -*BLM-WY*

“Put together "strike teams" that dedicate time to projects like orphaned well plugging and reclamation, grazing permit renewals, riparian restoration, etc So often staff has too little time to get meaningful work done and projects drag on too long. Focused roles like these might help expedite important projects” -*BLM-CO*

Oil and Gas

“Since methane gasses are 4 times more potent than CO₂, arm inspectors within the oil and gas world with the ability to find leaks via FLIR cameras.” -*BLM-WY*

“Landscape scale analysis of the impacts of oil and gas development - policy on how many wells should be allowed in large areas, vs individual fields, or units.” -*BLM-WY*

Question 6

Is there anything else you'd like to share regarding these questions or any other climate-related topics?

Mitigation Vegetation Mining-And-Minerals Land-Use
Ecological O&G Fund Sequestor
Scientific Public Workforce Training
Collaboration Hiring Sustainable Water Nepa/Planning
People Renewable-Energy DOI Office Communication
Vehicle Conservation

Management/Land Use

“Climate change is a large-scale challenge. Start with reviewing RMPs to see how climate change is currently addressed. Field offices lack climate science experts on staff. Addressed by BLM partnering with climate experts or hiring climate scientists at the SO and/or FO level. Stop the Climate Change Science pendulum swing from administration to administration.” -BLM-AK

“Solar and Wind projects are processed as Rights of Ways, and therefore cost recovery applies to each project. It does not seem logical to charge cost recovery to the proponent for projects that can help with climate change where in Western Oregon BLM O&C lands that are primarily utilized for timber sales do not have cost recovery. I would like to know if cost recovery has ever been considered for timber sales. This is important because if BLM is to truly work to mitigate climate change the true cost of removing the probable carbon sinks (forest) should be looked at which includes NEPA/contract administration/responding to protest/appeals. From the 2022 Budget Justification <https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/fy2022-blm-budget-justification.pdf> On page I-5 there are many excellent ideas and funding recommendations for them (for example \$4,200,000 in Western Oregon Resource Management, to identify and manage for carbon sinks, including developing and implementing reforestation projects and projects to protect old growth forests). I think the only way things like this can happen is if climate change is a very large part of managements performance evaluation.” -BLM-OR/WA

Vegetation

“BLM could have a program with the purpose of planting native trees and shrubs on a large scale for carbon dioxide sequestration. Native trees and shrubs would not require irrigation once established. BLM could have a program for planting large trees on a large scale even if the trees are not native for the purpose of storing carbon dioxide. This could be done using modern agricultural techniques and forestry. Growers using BLM land could be encouraged to grow crops like avocados since these trees can become large and store carbon dioxide year-round.” -BLM-AZ

Collaboration/Communication

“Solutions that focus simply on increasing money for programs will be inadequate. The bureau (and some regulatory and even statutory frameworks) need to be retooled or adjusted to stabilize a focus on climate resilience and adaptation. For example, natural hazardous fuels treatments are a key piece of addressing climate issues and increasing resiliency and climate adaptation, and additional funding for fuels treatments appears to be increasingly available. However, large

influxes of dollars that reflect a sudden shift in priorities can't be spent rapidly if the organizational capacity to spend the dollars is not available--challenges and delays in procurement, high vacancy rates and slow hiring (insufficient HR capacity), skill gaps (e.g., inadequate number of qualified burn bosses internally and externally), and project planning horizons all make rapid accomplishments difficult. The fact that question #5 above is asking for "low hanging fruit" suggests that the agency and perhaps the administration may be looking for quick fixes, when what we really need is a long-term, stable, sustainable shift in culture and priorities. The agency needs to be making systemic and structural changes that acknowledges that climate issues and adaptation and resilience concerns are here for the long haul. Admittedly, political whims will sway, so the agency needs to be structured so that it is more agile and can respond better to rapid priority shifts. Increasing procurement and HR capacity is critical to this shift - without people and without contracts, you can't spend dollars or achieve results on the ground." -*BLM-OR/WA*

Next Steps

The BLM plans to share the executive summary and dashboard with employees, leadership, and policy makers to encourage active conversations and involvement in the development of local, state, and national climate action plans.

The National Science Committee may use the information in the report and the related priorities developed in this process to incorporate into their Climate Change Action Plan.