**GUIDELINES FOR**

**REPORTING RECREATION VISITS**

**Bureau of Land Management**

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**I. REPORTING VISITOR USE**

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) collects data on recreation use of public lands in a variety of settings. These settings range from urban areas to very primitive wilderness areas – from concentrated use areas to dispersed settings. Total use of an area or site is not reported – only the recreational use of the area is reported. Recreation specialists should make every attempt to provide complete and consistent visitor use estimates in the BLM’s Recreation Management Information System (RMIS). While it is not reasonable, nor feasible to count the millions of public land visitors, these guidelines provide field offices a common set of principles to follow when making visitation estimates. Definitions clarify which visitors to count as recreational visits and strategies help specialist avoid duplicate reporting of visits to public lands. In this document, the terms recreation use and visitor use are synonymous.

**A. Recreation Visits**

A *recreation visit* is the entry of a person onto lands or waters, administered by the BLM for the pursuit of recreational experiences regardless of duration. The applicable rule is that one entrance per individual to public lands is reportable as a visit, whether they stay one hour or one week. However, a visitor going from BLM area to BLM area ***may*** be reported as separate visits as long as the areas visited are independently managed units of the BLM, and not separate parts of the same management area. Examples of counting recreation visits to BLM lands include:

1. A person going to a river to fish for a few hours – 1 visit.
2. A family of five staying at a BLM campground for six days – 5 visits.
3. Three friends riding motorcycles on a sand dune area for the day – 3 visits.
4. A group of seven college friends camping and hunting for 10 days – 7 visits.
5. A family of three stop along a highway at a BLM developed overlook for 15 minutes to view a scenic vista – 3 visits.

The complexity of BLM managed areas and the diversity of surrounding environments can easily result in conditions that could lead to duplicate or inappropriate reporting of visits. Below are examples where visitors should not be counted multiple times.

**1.** Recreation visitors going **to and from outside locations during one visit** (e.g. campers in need of additional supplies or in search of goods and services outside the management area).

**2.** Recreation visitors going to **different recreation sites within the same management area** that may involve crossing non-BLM lands.

**3.** Recreation visitors staying outside the management unit and making **multiple daily visits** to the same site.

**B. Non-Recreation Visits**

The dictionary definition of a visit is going to a place temporarily. There are many situations where individuals are temporarily on BLM administered lands but not for recreational purposes. This use should not be counted as recreational visitor use and should not be recorded in RMIS. There are also occasions where BLM staff contact visitors off-public lands for official business. These people should also not be counted as recreational visitors. These contacts can be reported for different purposes (i.e. education programs at schools, contacts at a state fair booth), but not in RMIS.

**1. Public Land Visits not recreational in nature** should not be reported in RMIS. Examples include:

a. **Commuter or regular highway traffic** traveling through the public lands on Interstate, State, or County highways and roads.

*Example*: Traffic on Interstate 15 through the Virgin River Gorge between St. George, Utah and Las Vegas.

b. **Brief incidental entries** into a public lands by passing traffic (vehicular or pedestrian) using BLM administered land, roads, or walkways, if not otherwise visiting public lands.

*Example*: A quick stop to stretch legs at a highway turnout without facilities on public lands.

c. Persons going **to and from in-holdings** across significant parts of public lands.

*Example*: A rancher who must travel across public lands between his base property and town.

d. Any civilian activity as part of or incidental **to the pursuit of gainful employment or an occupation.**

*Example*: Permitted vendors engaged in the sale of goods and services on BLM lands.

e. **Employees or volunteers** of the BLM who are performing their official duties.

*Example*: Wilderness Rangers patrolling areas.

f. **Government personnel** (other than BLM employees) with business on public lands.

*Example*: State Game and Fish Department conducting game surveys or checking hunting and fishing licenses.

g. **BLM contractors, concessionaires, cooperating associations** and their employees, and volunteers.

*Example:* Concessionaires living along the Colorado River. Contractors working on a BLM projects and residing on public lands as part of their employment.

h. **BLM leasees or mining claimants** on extended stays on public lands.

*Example:* Cabin leases which are more residential than recreational and mining claimants who occupy BLM lands under other than recreational regulations should be excluded from recreational visits.

i. **Research activities** conducted on public lands.

*Example:* Scientists or universities under contract to BLM to conduct baseline studies.

j. Temporary or permanent **members in households of personnel** otherwise included in this definition whose residence is on public lands.

*Example*: Family members of an employee living at a remote station on public lands.

k. **Citizens using BLM buildings, property, or sites located on public lands,** for civic, government, or BLM business.

*Example*: Public hearing at a BLM conference room. Local Audubon Society chapter using a BLM facility for a monthly meeting.

**2. Visits occurring off public land areas** should not be reported in RMIS unless the BLM has a lease or administrative responsibilities for management of the land**.** Examples include:

a. The **general public visiting BLM buildings**, which are not located on public land.

*Example*: Visitors stopping at the State Office and requesting information for future public land use.

b. The public contacting BLM at **events not located on public land**.

*Example*: Visitors stopping at the BLM booth at the State Fair.

**II. DEFINITIONS**

Use the following definitions to determine the appropriate categories of data to collect, estimate, and report:

**A.** **Visitor** - any individual who generates one or more visits over time to public lands or BLM offices or contact stations.

**Discussion:** Although visit and visitor are often used interchangeably, they are slightly different in use in the recreation profession. A specific person may go to a specific site several times during the year and is considered one specific visitor. For example, economic studies, especially related to fish and wildlife related recreation activities, provide a total per visitor expenditure for all visits during a calendar year.

In terms of collecting data for RMIS, the BLM does not attempt to account for use of public lands by specific visitors.

**B.** **Visit** - the entry of a person onto lands or waters, administered by the BLM for the pursuit of recreational experiences regardless of duration. A visit begins when an individual enters public lands and ends when they leave for the last time. A single visit may last one hour or one week. A same day reentry, negligible transit, or entry to another recreation site, or detached portion of the same management area on the same day are considered the same visit and are counted as a single visit.

**Discussion:** Visits are one of the required reporting metrics of the BLM and other federal land management agencies. It is important to have a consistent understanding of what a visit means and how it is reported. Every attempt should be made to ensure that a visit is entered only once into the RMIS database. RMIS users enter visits at one of the following:

1. A specific site;
2. An area designation or corridor, or;
3. In association with a special recreation permit.

If the same visit is entered in multiple locations, you are double counting the amount of use in your area. Determining where and how to enter visits is based on knowledge of visitor trends and use patterns in an area and the practicality of getting an accurate count.

Every effort should be made to analyze visitation, based on local knowledge of your major agency land units and make adjustments in the counting of visits as appropriate and practical. In conformance with other federal agencies, visits to separate, but contiguous NLCS or Recreation Management Areas (RMA) may be counted as separate visits.

**C.** **Visitor hour** – a unit of measure of the presence of one or more persons in an area for continuous, intermittent, or simultaneous periods totaling one hour (i.e. one person for one hour; two persons for 30 minutes each; or 10 persons for 6 minutes each).

**Discussion:** RMIS users enter visitor hours associated with activities occurring on public lands in RMIS formulas. Formulas identify what visitors are doing (activities), for how long (hours), and the percent of total use each activity represents. The program uses the formula to determine the visitor’s average length of stay for a visit and, with the number of visits, calculates the number of visitor hours for that site.

**D.** **Visitor day** – a unit of measure equal to twelve visitor hours.

**Discussion:** A visitor day is another basic unit of measure among federal agencies. RMIS calculates this number by dividing total recorded visitor hours by 12. Field Specialist do not enter visitor days. Visitor days are a calculated value and reported in several Standard Reports.

**E.** **Participant** – a visitor on a single visit who engages in one or more recreational activities on public land. A single visitor can participate in several activities during a single visit.

**Discussion:** The number of participants are specific to a particular activity. The RMIIS user adds specific activities to a formula. RMIS calculates the number of participants based on the formula and the number of visits. Formulas require only one activity be entered to be valid. However, your formula should represent the general use that occurs at the site. ***A rule of thumb is to keep the number of activities in a formula down to the major or unique activities occurring at the site or area.***

There is no reporting requirement to identify all of the recreational activities that occur on public lands. However, recording participants is valuable when tracking specific user groups, activities, or when communicating with constituency groups about where or how much of their favorite activity occurs on public lands.

# III. VISITOR USE ESTIMATES

It is important to establish a consistent methodology for estimating visitor use. This will allow you to establish trend data for planning and reporting purposes. Once you have established a visitor estimate methodology, it is important to document your rationale and process with enough detail to enable others, who follow, to reproduce the methodology. The documentation (called a visitor use reporting plan - VURP) should include 1) how you record use (sampling locations, frequency, and method), 2) how you calculate total visits, and 3) how these numbers are recorded in RMIS. When building your visitor use formulas in RMIS, document any relevant information about the logic behind the formulas in the site note pad. There are two basic areas where outdoor visitor use can be collected – controlled access sites/areas and dispersed sites/areas.

1. **Controlled access sites/areas**

Controlled access sites/areas are most often developed sites/areas such as campgrounds, boat launch sites, and day use sites. However, you may have large areas that, due to topographic or other features, have a limited number of key, access points. In these situations, staff can use methods to gather accurate numbers of visits to a site/area.

When possible, use direct visitor counts obtained from fee permits, vehicle counts from staff observation, trail counters, traffic counters, remote cameras, or other data such as Department of Transportation statistics. Once these raw numbers have been obtained, one must combine these with on-site observations to determine variables such as:

* Percent of Recreation vs Non-recreation use,
* Average number of occupants per vehicle,
* Average length of stay,
* Type and duration of recreation activities in which individuals participated.

This information will allow one to do two things – 1) determine the number of recreation visits and 2) build a RMIS formula to record use. Remember to document your process and rationale in your visitor use reporting plan.

1. **Dispersed sites/areas**

Estimating use at dispersed sites is more difficult because these sites are un-staffed and have multiple access points. With limited opportunities for observing visitor use, you may feel visitor use estimates inherently imply low levels of precision and accuracy. However, you must make these estimates to get a complete picture of the recreation use occurring in your office. The following methods can help you gather the information needed to build visitor use formulas for dispersed sites and areas:

* Schedule time to go to various locations, count visitors during both “off” hours (weekdays), and peak times (holidays, weekends) during different times of the year. Note the type of activities, average party size, and length of stay. Use these counts to extrapolate use throughout the year.
* Provide field staff (both permanent and seasonal) and volunteers with quick, easy to use visitor count forms or notebooks. Encourage them to record the numbers of visitors and activities as their time allows. Use these observations and your own routine visitor contacts as a means to gather additional information as to length of stay, party size, season of use, and recreational activities.
* Contract with a university or a college student in need of an internship to do a visitor use study to gather visitor use information.
* Install vehicle counters and trail counters at major access points. Use this number to calculate actual recreation visits to the area. Also, get traffic counts for major roads from county or district highway, or state transportation departments.
* Monitor your recreation facilities such as outhouses and trash cans to determine levels of use. For sites without facilities, monitor clues such as vehicle impacts, user created sites or trails, and amount of debris left behind as use level indicators.
* Install visitor self-registration boxes at recreation use focus points like trailheads, parking areas, kiosks, and cave entrances.
* Look at Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans for visitor use estimates and projections for your area.
* Use State Fish and Game Department data for hunting statistics to estimate use numbers for hunt units on BLM lands.
* Obtain visitor information from permitted outfitters and guides in post use reports.
* Obtain visitor use numbers from adjacent private, local, county, state, or federal parks or recreation areas where use also occurs on BLM lands.
* Examine and monitor online sites that track and collect activity data from smart devices (e.g. STRAVA, Sports-Tracker, etc.) to get a sense of the amount of use in your area.
* Conduct aerial visitor use counts by sharing helicopter or fixed wing flights with other resource staff, fire staff, law enforcement, local Fish and Game office, etc. Ask other specialists on flights to do visitor counts during their own survey flights.
* Review relevant data which may be useful to indicate recreation use trends such as Chamber of Commerce reports, local visitor center counts, other government agencies or other sources of visitor/recreation use data:
  + National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE)
  + American Recreation Coalition (ARC)
  + National Recreation and Parks Association
  + Recreation industry publications/marketing studies

1. **Annual Visitor Use Estimate**

Likely very few dispersed areas have a consistent amount and type of use throughout the year. Use patterns will typically vary from weekday to weekend and from season to season. Therefore, you should not have one catchall estimate for visitor use for the year. Create separate use estimates for different times of the year to reflect these seasonal differences. Using the techniques outlined in A and B above that fit your situation, make visitor use estimates to the best of your ability for seasonal times of the year. Compile these numbers to make an estimate of total annual use. This will be a baseline for making annual adjustments to the visitor use data. For areas that have major seasonal use differences, RMIS allows one to create multiple formulas to better track different activities through the year.

*Example:* You have a large area of the field office that receives year round use but there are no developed sites in the area and you rarely get a chance to patrol the area. An accepted method is to calculate a reasonable estimate for the area and report that amount of use for the next 3-5 years or until you have some indication that there has been a change in visitation. Make sure you document this in the reporting plan for your office.

Let us say you have a park ranger collect use numbers for the area on several weekdays and weekend days for each season. Take these numbers and extrapolate use estimates for each season: winter – 10K visits; spring – 30K visits; summer – 20K visits; fall – 40K visits. Use RMIS’s multiple formula feature to create different formulas to represent the activity changes from season to season; skiing in the winter, hiking and biking in the spring, sightseeing in the summer, and hunting in the fall. Add 10K visits using the winter formula; 30K using the spring formula; 20K using the summer formula; and 40K using the fall formula.

Summing these estimates gives you a baseline visitor use for your area of 100,000 visits in that year. You can reasonably report these numbers for the next several years or until there is an indication of change. For example, two years later, a nearby state park records a 15% increase in visitation due to a major wildflower bloom. You could add a similar amount to your spring visits if there is a similar wild flower bloom on the adjacent BLM lands. Maybe a late summer wildfire closes a large portion of the area to use through the fall and winter. Similarly, you should adjust the numbers down to reflect this change.

If you decide to use a steady-state number for a rarely monitored area, make sure you re-evaluate your estimate at least every five years and make changes accordingly.

1. **Dangers to Avoid**

The workload of a recreation planner is ever increasing. It is easy to get overwhelmed with other duties that prevent getting to the field and seeing for yourself the recreation trends and patterns that are occurring. As the year ends, a data call for use numbers leaves you wondering where the time went and what happened. The first tendency may be to “make up some numbers.” This is not acceptable. Other versions of this mistake of making up numbers are:

* Adding a fixed percentage to last year’s numbers, regardless of what is actually occurring at your site or elsewhere in the region; or
* Attempting to spread an arbitrary visitor use total over the entire field office.

The use of these "unapproved techniques" creates an atmosphere of distrust concerning the reliability of any visitor use data. Using a consistent, logical visitor use estimate methodology, and by writing down your methods and techniques in a reporting plan, one creates trust and acceptance of BLM’s visitor use information.