Sustainability at the BLM

Thanks to a Presidential Management Fellowship, Ashley Conrad-Saydah finds herself working on the front lines of renewable energy in California

During the two years that ended this past July, Ashley Conrad-Saydah (MESM 2008) served two federal agencies as part of the Presidential Management Fellowship she won during her second year at Bren. Her fellowship is based in Sacramento, where she serves as the Renewable Energy Project Manager for the Renewable Energy Coordination Office at the U.S. Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) California State Office. She also worked for the U.S. Department of Energy’s (DOE) Wind and Hydropower Technologies Program in Washington, D.C.

As the point person for ten of California’s fifteen BLM field offices, Ashley’s responsibilities range from interacting extensively with stakeholders on renewable-energy siting, permitting, and transmission issues, to analyzing geospatial data for wind and solar applications, to addressing long-term renewable energy and climate policies in California.

Recently, she’s been busy with the permitting process for renewable-energy projects that may qualify for a 30-percent cash grant under a provision of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. To qualify, projects have to be permitted by the end of 2010, creating a fast permitting timeline for the BLM. Adding to the time crunch, the California Energy Commission, one of BLM’s key partners, has a twelve-month approval process.

“We had to look at all of the 160 proposed renewable projects and see which of them had already completed enough environmental and cultural review to qualify for the fast-track program,” she says. “The feds had to sync their processes with the realities of the state’s review process.”

On any given day, Ashley may work on eight to ten projects, including two she manages that are not seeking fast-track approval.

Another major aspect of her job is outreach to environmental nonprofit stakeholders. She works closely with such groups as the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Sierra Club, and the Wilderness Society, attending and presenting at conferences and meetings and ensuring that the BLM listens and responds to stakeholders, and follows the right processes.

“In California, we have a good relationship with the environmental nonprofits,” she says. “There are a few who may dislike some of our actions, but even they work collaboratively with us. I think it helps for me to meet with stakeholders from environmental NGOs. They appreciate my science and conservation background and my history working for environmental NGOs. They also know the Bren school, which is nice.”

Ashley also meets with project developers to resolve project issues ranging from potential impacts on the desert tortoise and bird species, to water use and effects on cultural resources. “We’re attempting to develop renewable-energy projects with the

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Presidential Management Fellowships Accelerate Careers

Bren students have been regular recipients of Presidential Management Fellowships, which are awarded by the U.S. government’s Office of Personnel Management. Graduate students who have earned their degree in any discipline are nominated by their school and then take a test. The highest-scoring students becoming finalists and have a year to obtain a position with a federal agency of their choice.

“Basically, the program accelerates you to higher management status in just a few years,” said Hannah Muller (MESM 2007). “It’s a rare opportunity.”

The eight Bren PMF finalists who have been appointed to a federal agency (out of eleven finalists total) are: Kristine Herrington Wall (MESM 2004), Jeff Phillips (MESM 2005), Amanda Cundiff (MESM 2006), Ashley Conrad-Saydah (MESM 2008), Lara Polansky (MESM 2009), David Alderman (MESM 2009), Kyung Koh (MESM 2010), and Leanne Veldhuis (MESM 2010). Bren had four finalists in 2010 alone, including Hylton Edingfield and Sara Solis. Bren Presidential Fellows worked in the Forest Service, the Department of Agriculture, the Bureau of Land Management, the Fish & Wildlife Service in the Department of the Interior, and the Department of Energy.
fewest impacts to California’s amazing resources,” she says.

In complement to the permitting process, BLM also works on the transmission side of the energy equation. “If we build all these renewable-energy projects, we have to figure out how to get the electricity to market,” Ashley says. “So there are a lot of meetings with utility companies, the California Independent System Operator [the nonprofit public-benefit corporation charged with operating most of California’s energy grid], the California Public Utilities Commission, and others to make sure that we’re moving ahead and we have a process to follow to ensure that we get the projects to market. Negotiation is a critical part of that work.”

Both at DOE, where she was the environmental and siting lead for the wind program, which she describes as “a lot of science and management with a sprinkle of policy,” and at BLM, which is “more of a mix of management and policy with a sprinkling of science,” she has applied much of what she learned at Bren.

“My undergraduate work was very theoretical and specifically science focused,” she adds. “Bren gives you more of the bigger picture. It wasn’t just one class that was the key, but the fact that in every class, you thought about not just one issue but how all the issues fit together, and that’s a big part of my day-to-day.”

Equally important as her educational background and professional experience, Ashley says, has been her ability to adapt. She came into a federal agency having no government experience and was introduced as a “recent college graduate,” when, in fact she had spent seven years in the professional world working as a manager before coming to Bren.

“It was definitely a rocky start,” she says. “One guy said to me, ‘We don’t want a 25-year-old coming in and telling us what to do.’” She told him she was flattered by his shaving a few years from her age and that she wasn’t planning to tell anyone how to do anything.

“Every Bren student envisions him- or herself in the ideal job that perfectly combines policy, science, and management, where we all have a say and we all have authority and we’re changing the world,” she says. “Ultimately, what’s really important—and what Bren teaches—is to keep your eye on the big picture regardless of where you end up. Because even if you think you’re just turning out GIS maps, maybe those maps are allowing a senator or a congressperson to make a new wilderness designation, or maybe your part of maintaining data is allowing external-affairs staff to produce a report that changes the way the public thinks about something.”

Her advice to new grads? “Recognize that while it may seem that you’re playing a minor role now, it’s all part of the process to make a big impact in the long run. Have patience, be optimistic, always represent yourself well, and say yes to everything you can because you never know where you’ll find the next opportunity to learn more.”