Guides / Dispersed camping in a van: how to find and set up a legal site

DISPERSED CAMPING IN A VAN: HOW TO FIND AND SET UP A LEGAL SITE

THE SHORT ANSWER

Dispersed camping is camping on public land away from developed campgrounds, with no services. In a van it is legal on most BLM land and on national forest roads where the Motor Vehicle Use Map allows it: pick an existing site, keep your distance from water, follow the fire stage, and take all your waste with you.

Last updated 25 November 2026

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Dispersed camping is legal on most BLM land and much national forest land, within each manager's stay limit and distance rules.
- On national forests the Motor Vehicle Use Map is the legal document: drive off a road to camp only where it shows the dispersed camping symbol, and only as far as the forest allows.
- Distances from water differ by manager: 200 feet on BLM land, 150 or 200 feet in the Forest Service regions we read, and 200 yards in Mojave National Preserve.
- Under Stage II fire restrictions there are no campfires anywhere, and on the San Juan National Forest a van may leave the road only onto ground bare for 10 feet around it.
- On national forests waste water must leave with you; hold grey water and empty it at a dump station everywhere.

This guide is the practical half of free camping: how to read the official maps, which distances apply, what each fire stage means for a van, and a step by step for finding and setting up a legal site.

WHAT IS DISPERSED CAMPING, AND HOW IS IT DIFFERENT FROM BOONDOCKING?

Dispersed camping is the agencies' term for camping on public land outside a developed campground, with no water, toilets or trash service. Boondocking is the van and RV word for doing that in your vehicle. [1] [5]

The BLM calls camping on public lands away from developed recreation facilities dispersed camping, [1] and the Forest Service uses the term for camping anywhere on National Forest System land outside a designated campground. [5] Our boondocking guide covers the words, the stay limits and the Long Term Visitor Areas. This one is about the ground under your wheels: whose rules apply, how to read the maps, and how to set up a site that stays legal.

WHOSE RULES APPLY WHERE YOU PARK?

The land manager's. The BLM, the Forest Service and the Park Service each have their own regulation and each lets local offices set more: stay limits, closures and fire orders. Posted signs and the local office decide. [2] [12] [15]

MANAGER	WHERE YOU MAY CAMP	THE RULE BEHIND IT	UNATTENDED PROPERTY
BLM	Most BLM land, unless posted “Closed to Camping” or restricted [1]	43 CFR 8365.1-2: no camping longer than the authorized officer allows [2]	10 days (12 months in Alaska) [2]
National forests	Outside developed sites; with a vehicle only where the MVUM allows [6] [8]	36 CFR 261.13 (drive only as designated on the MVUM) and 261.58 (stay limits set by order) [12]	72 hours unless an area allows longer [12]
National parks	Designated sites or areas only, such as Mojave's previously used roadside sites [15] [16]	36 CFR 2.10: camping outside designated sites or areas is prohibited [15]	Leaving equipment or refuse after you depart is prohibited [15]

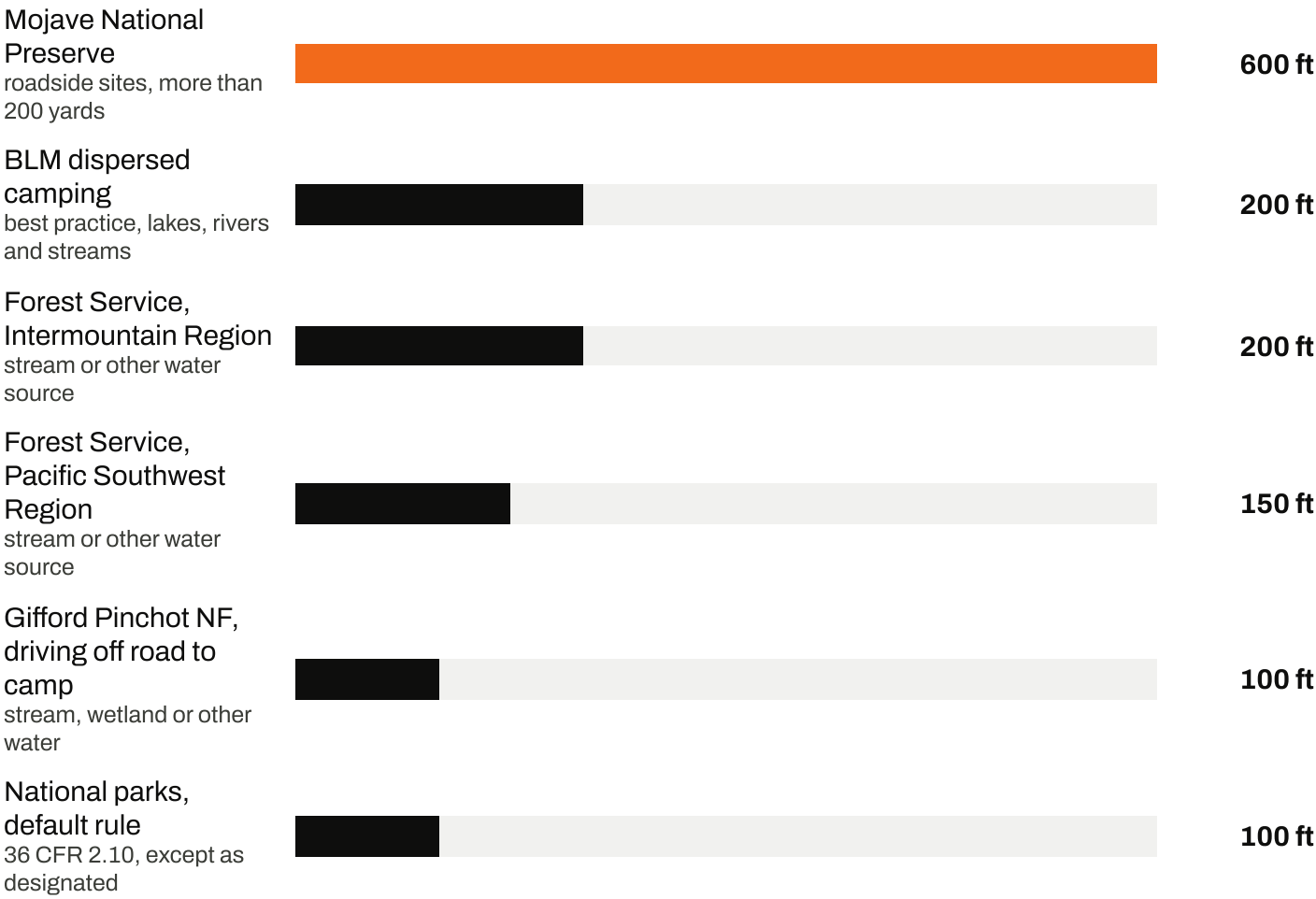
Mojave National Preserve is the useful exception to the national park rule: it allows roadside camping in previously used sites outside posted no camping areas, with a 14-day limit and no fee, and says most of those sites need a high clearance, four-wheel drive vehicle. [16] For city streets, store lots and the stay limits forest by forest, see is van life legal?

HOW FAR FROM WATER AND ROADS DO YOU HAVE TO CAMP?

It depends on the manager. The BLM says 200 feet from water and within 150 feet of a designated route; Forest Service regions say 150 or 200 feet from water; Mojave says 200 yards from water and a quarter mile from paved roads. [1] [6] [5] [16]

SETBACK FROM WATER

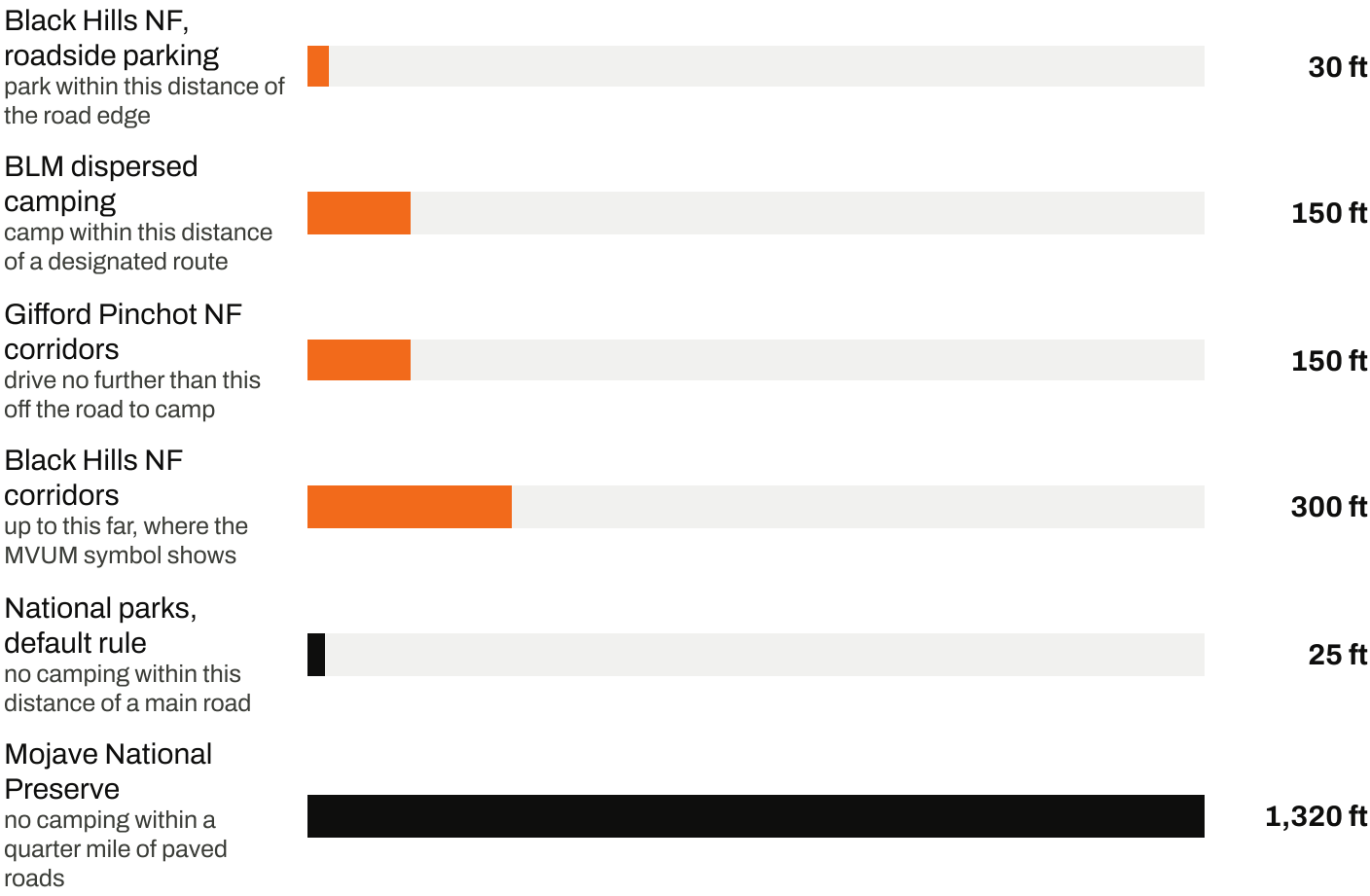
How far from water each manager asks you to camp



Sources: BLM, Forest Service regions and the Gifford Pinchot handout, 36 CFR 2.10 and Mojave National Preserve, read 25 November 2026. 16 1 6 5 9 15 Yards converted to feet by us.

DISTANCE FROM THE ROAD

How close to the road you may, or must not, camp

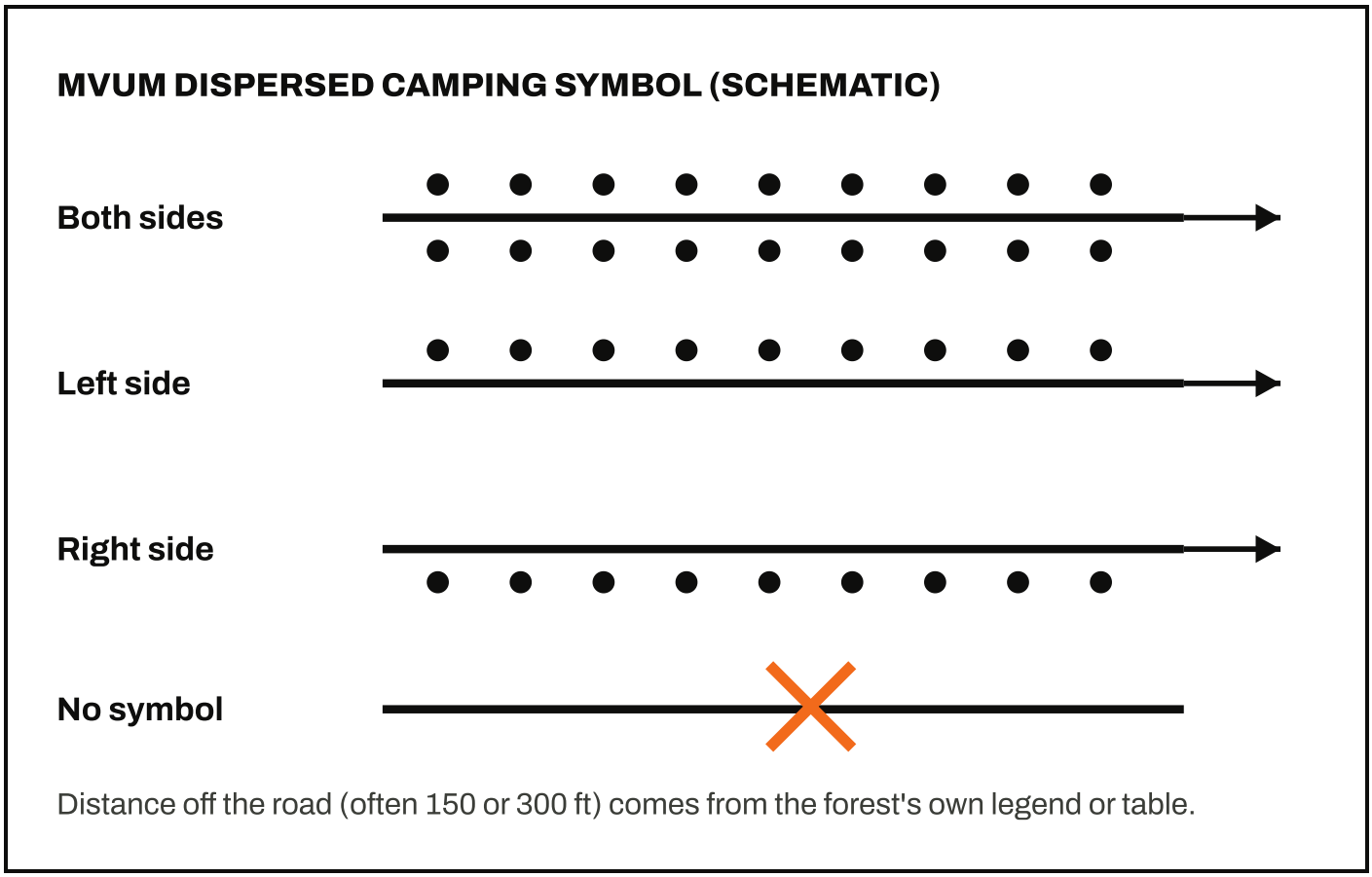


Orange: stay within this distance. Black: stay at least this far back. Sources: BLM, Black Hills and Gifford Pinchot national forests, 36 CFR 2.10 and Mojave National Preserve, read 25 November 2026. [8] [1] [9] [15] [16] A quarter mile converted to feet by us.

The two directions pull against each other on purpose. Forest Service travel rules let a forest allow motor vehicles a specified distance off certain roads solely for dispersed camping, [11] which keeps vans near the road and off the meadow; the water rules keep them off the bank. The BLM also asks you to keep at least a mile from campgrounds, trailheads and picnic areas, [1] and both Forest Service regions we read say dispersed camping is typically not allowed near developed sites. [6] [5]

HOW DO YOU READ A MOTOR VEHICLE USE MAP FOR CAMPING?

Look for the dispersed camping symbol, dots along a road on one or both sides, and the distance in the legend or table. No symbol means no driving off that road to camp. Routes not on the map are closed to public motor vehicles. [10][9][7]



Distance off the road (often 150 or 300 ft) comes from the forest's own legend or table.

The MVUM is the Forest Service's legal map of where motor vehicles may go: it shows roads, trails and areas open by vehicle class, season and distance, and routes not shown are not open to public motor vehicle travel.[7] Driving a motor vehicle on a district other than as the MVUM designates is prohibited,[12] and the regulation requires the map to show vehicle classes and times of year.[11] Three things catch van campers out:

The symbol has sides. The North Carolina legend lists dispersed camping and game retrieval on both sides, the left side or the right side of a route, and sends you to a table for specifics.[10] The Gifford Pinchot handout says no symbol means motorized access to dispersed camps is not allowed.[9]

The distance is local. It is 150 feet off designated roads on existing routes on the Gifford Pinchot, for highway-legal vehicles only,[9] and up to 300 feet on the Black Hills, where dispersed camping with a vehicle is allowed only where the symbol is displayed.[8]

Signs are optional. Routes are not always signed on the ground, and the public is responsible for knowing where they are.[8][7] The MVUM is black and white with no topography, so the Forest Service suggests using it with a forest visitor map.[7]

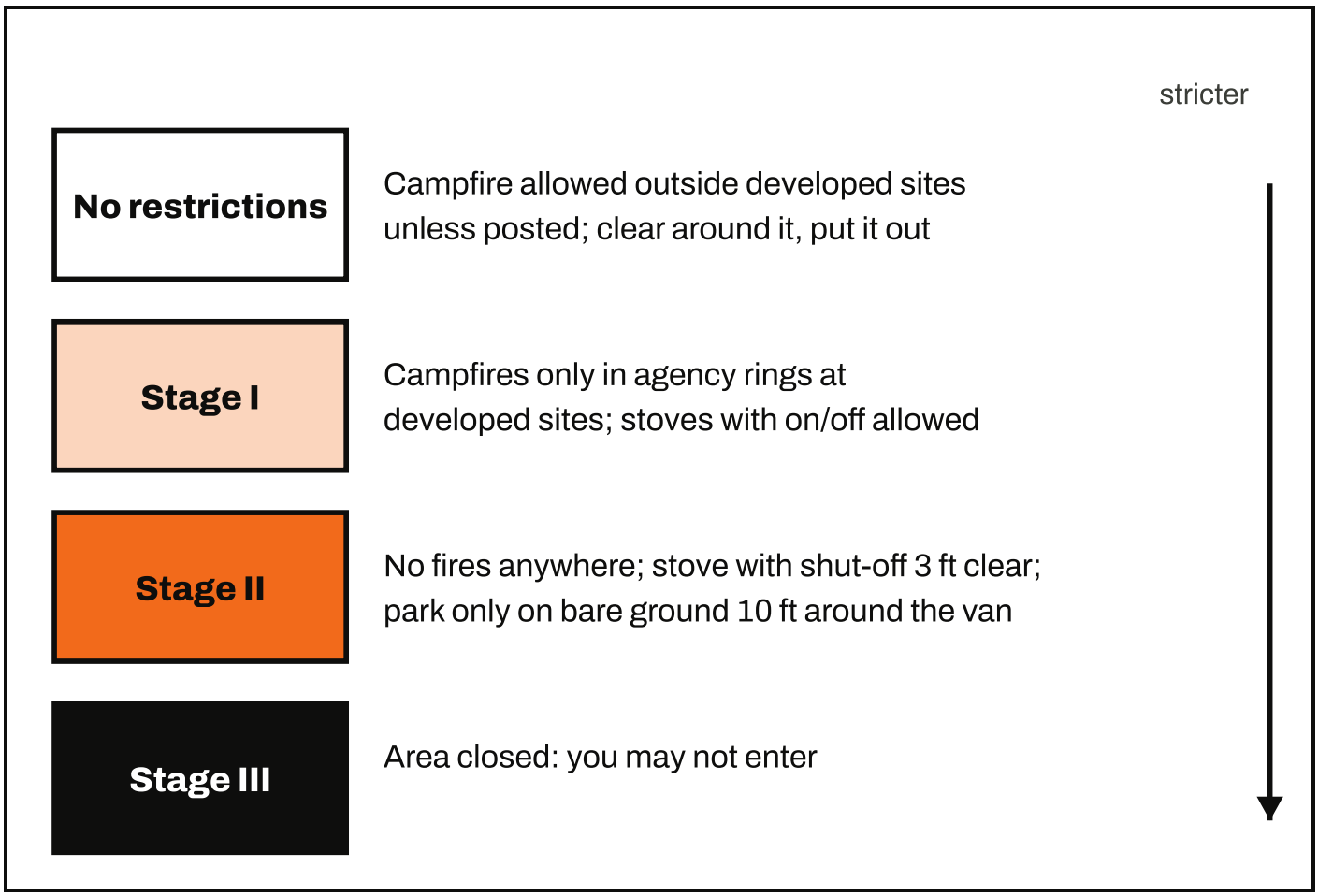
HOW DO YOU FIND LEGAL DISPERSED SITES ON BLM LAND?

Start with the BLM's interactive recreation map and its georeferenced PDF maps, then confirm with the local field office and obey posted signs. Most BLM land is open to dispersed camping unless posted closed.[1][3]

The BLM's camping page links to its interactive map of recreation opportunities and asks you to verify specifics with the local office, because rules vary by state and area.[1] Its georeferenced PDFs, listed by state, work in any georeferenced map app and show your position as a dot without cell coverage; some are also in the Avenza store.[3] Vehicles stay on designated roads and trails unless an area is designated for off-road use,[1] so the site you want must be reachable without making a new track.

WHAT DO FIRE RESTRICTIONS MEAN FOR A VAN?

Stage I limits campfires to agency fire rings at developed sites; Stage II bans all fires and keeps vehicles on roads or bare ground; Stage III closes the area. Stoves with a shut-off valve stay allowed through Stage II on the San Juan.[13]



Fire orders are set locally under 36 CFR 261.52, which lets an order ban fires, campfires and stove fires outright,[12] and the BLM says its restrictions change through the year and asks you to check before you go.[1][4] The San Juan's Stage II list is the one most van campers miss: no motor vehicles off established roads, trails or parking areas except to park in an area with no vegetation within 10 feet, and generators only with a spark arrester and 3 feet of cleared ground.[13] Even with no restrictions, a hot underside can light dry grass,[14] and any engine used on national forest land needs a working spark arrester.[12]

If you cook inside, the stove choice matters for more than fire orders; our guide to propane vs induction in a van covers carbon monoxide and ventilation, and van fire safety covers extinguishers.

WHAT DO YOU DO WITH TOILET WASTE, GREY WATER AND TRASH?

Take it with you. Forest Service rules require garbage, sewage and waste water to be removed or put in a receptacle; BLM rules ban draining sewage from a vehicle. Bury human waste only where the manager allows it. [12] [2]

The two federal rules differ in a way that matters for a van. On national forests, 36 CFR 261.11 prohibits failing to dispose of any garbage, “sewage, waste water or material” by removing it or putting it in a provided receptacle. [12] On BLM land, 43 CFR 8365.1-1 prohibits draining sewage or dumping waste “other than wash water” from a vehicle except in a provided place, and asks visitors to pack their trash home whenever practicable. [2] Our advice is the same everywhere: carry grey water out. A grey water tank and a van toilet make that easy.

WHERE BURYING IS ALLOWED	DEPTH	DISTANCE	TOILET PAPER
BLM [1]	6 to 8 in, in some locations; a portable toilet or packing out comes first	200 ft from water and trails	Not stated
Forest Service, Intermountain Region [6]	6 to 8 in	200 ft from water, camp and trails	Pack it out
Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region [5]	6 in	100 ft from any water source	Bag it and take it
Mojave National Preserve [16]	At least 6 in, or pack it out	Not stated on the camping page	Pack it out as trash

WHAT SHOULD YOU CHECK BEFORE YOU LEAVE TOWN?

The map, the office, the fire stage, your water and your waste capacity. Copy this list into your phone; every line comes from the rules above.

- Land manager confirmed for the area, and no posted closure. [1]

MVUM or BLM georeferenced PDF saved offline, legend included. [7] [3]

Road conditions asked of the district or field office. [5]

Fire restriction stage checked; California campfire permit if you will use a stove there. [4] [5]

Local stay limit noted, and the date you arrive written down. [1] [5]

Drinking water carried: dispersed sites have none, and the Forest Service says untreated water is not safe. [5]

Portable toilet or waste bags, trash bags, and room in the grey tank. [1] [6]

Water container and shovel if you plan any campfire. [5] [6]

Leveling blocks, so you never dig to level the van. [15]

Fuel and daylight to spare when you arrive. [5]

HOW TO FIND AND SET UP A LEGAL DISPERSED CAMPSITE IN A VAN, STEP BY STEP

Ten steps, from working out who owns the land to leaving the site clean. Each rule is cited to the manager's own page or the regulation; where the rules differ, the step says which manager it is.

SKILL
Beginner

STEPS
10

TOOLS

- Phone or GPS with a georeferenced PDF map app
- MVUM or BLM georeferenced PDF for the area, saved offline
- Leveling blocks
- Shovel and a water container you can lift (only if you will have a campfire)

MATERIALS

- Drinking water

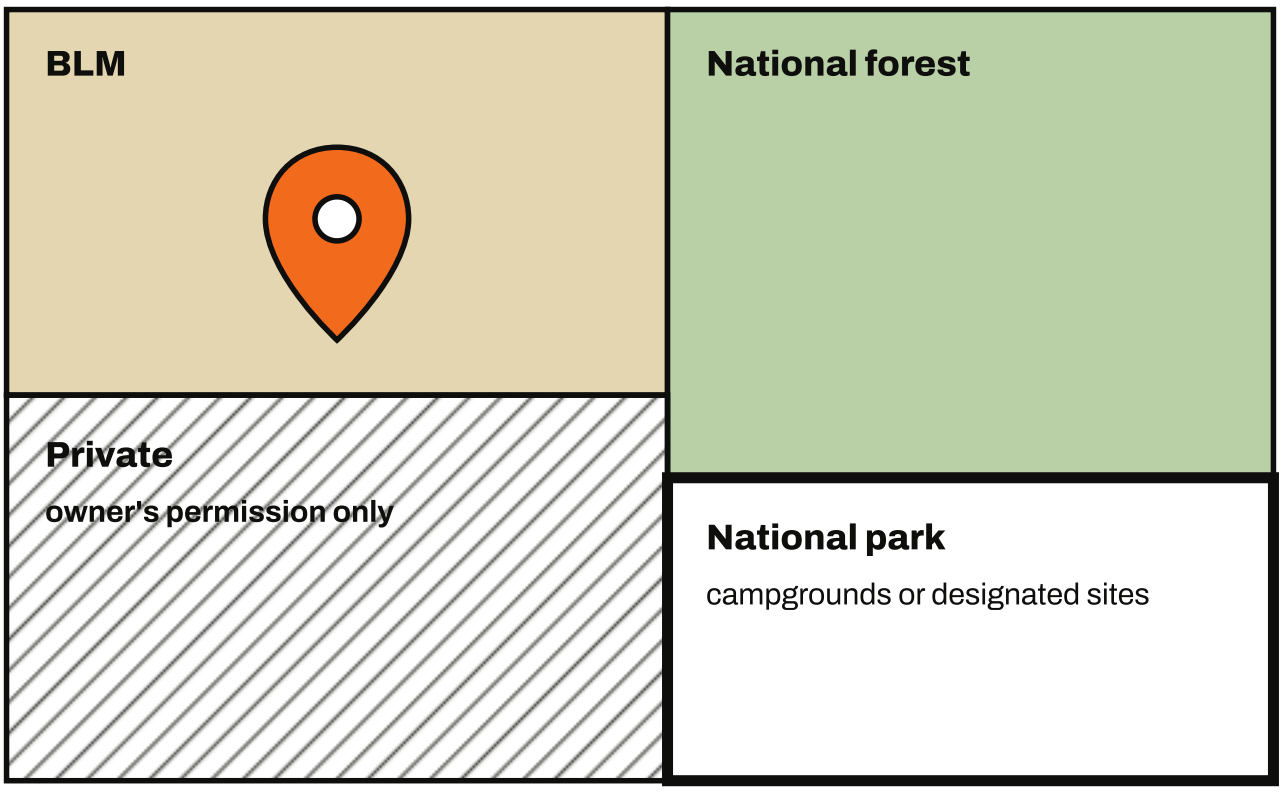
Trash bags

Portable toilet or waste bags

California campfire permit, where it applies

01 Find out who manages the land

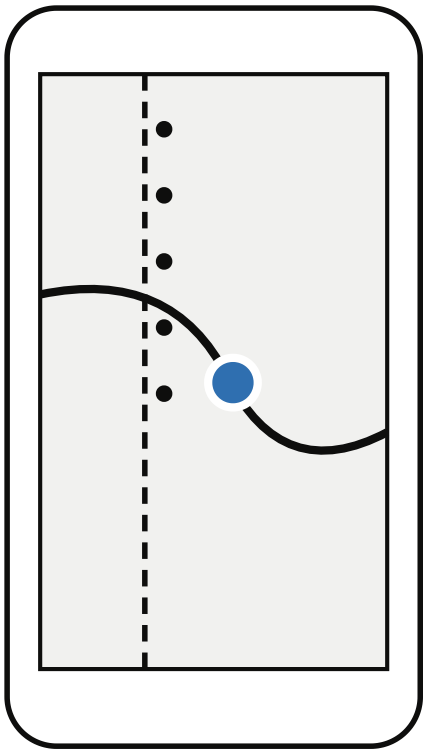
Rules follow the land manager, not the map app. Most BLM land allows dispersed camping unless it is posted “Closed to Camping”,[1] national forests allow it outside developed sites on the terms each forest sets,[6][5] and national parks allow camping only in designated sites or areas.[15] Private land inside or beside public land needs the owner's permission. The BLM's camping page links to its interactive map of recreation sites.[1]

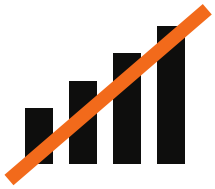


02 Download the official map before you lose signal

On a national forest, download the Motor Vehicle Use Map for the ranger district as a geospatial PDF from the forest's website; the Forest Service says some updated MVUMs are no longer in the Avenza store.[7] On BLM land, the BLM publishes georeferenced PDF maps by state that show your position as a dot without cell coverage, and asks you to download them before you lose data.[3] If you print an MVUM, include the legend: a full sheet is 34 by 44 inches.[8]

MVUM or BLM GeoPDF saved offline

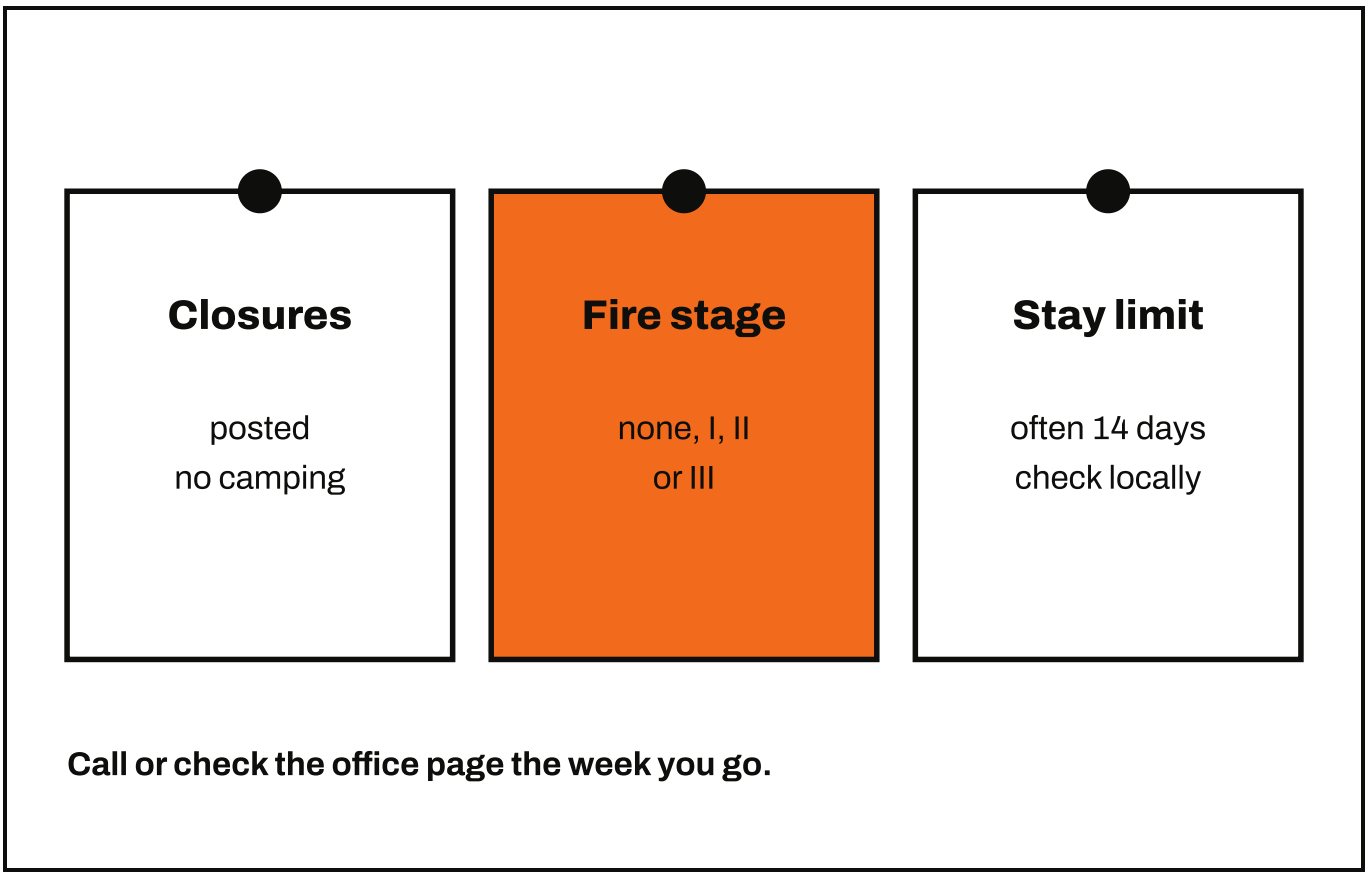




No signal? The dot still works on a saved GeoPDF.

03 Check closures, fire restrictions and the stay limit

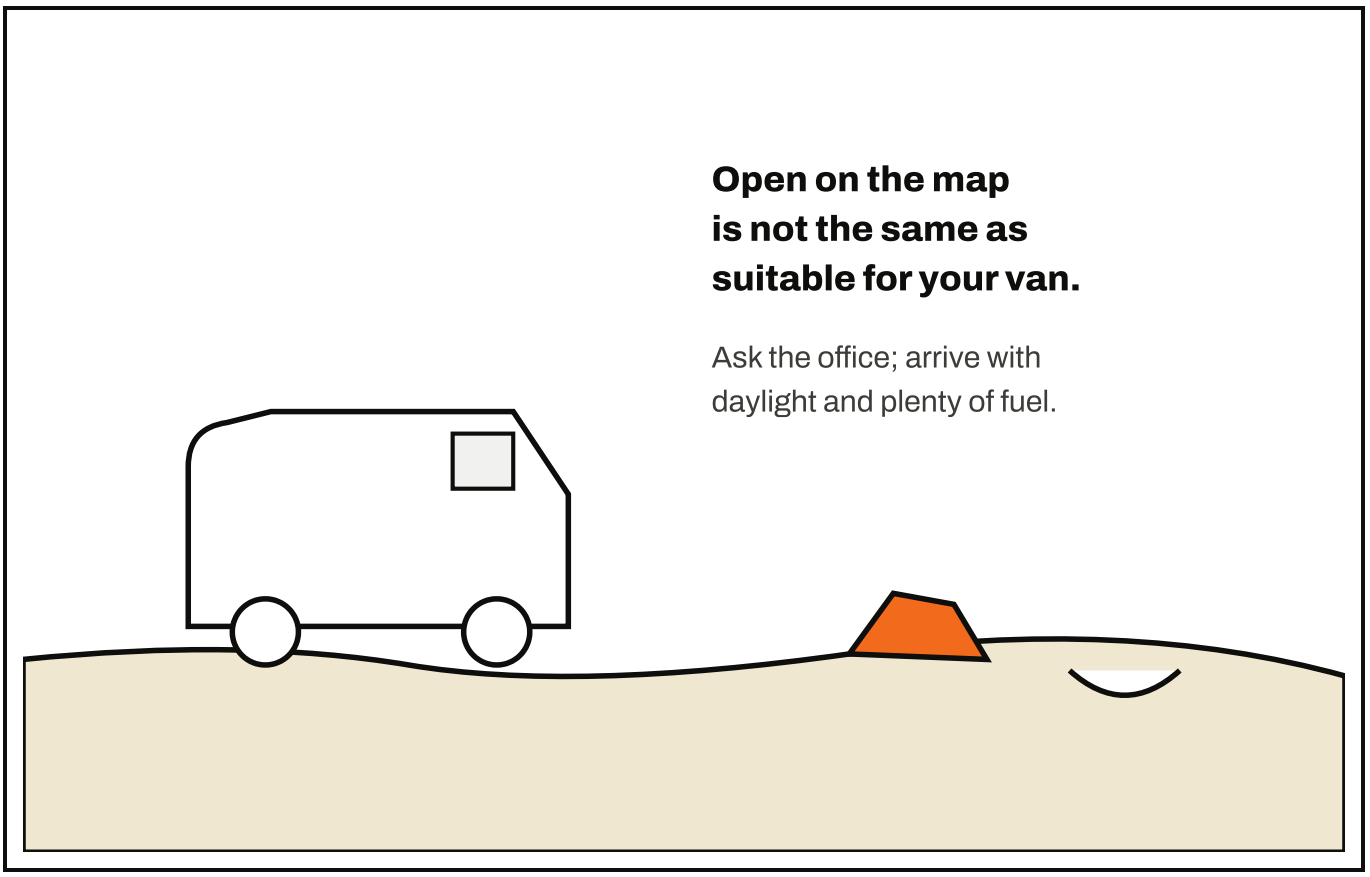
Ask the field or district office, or read its alerts page, the week you go. The BLM says rules vary by state and field office and fire restrictions change through the year;[1][4] the Forest Service says stay limits are usually 14 days but can be shorter, and the nearest district office knows which areas are open.[5] In California, get the free campfire permit before you light a stove outside a developed site.[5]



Call or check the office page the week you go.

04 Check the road suits your van

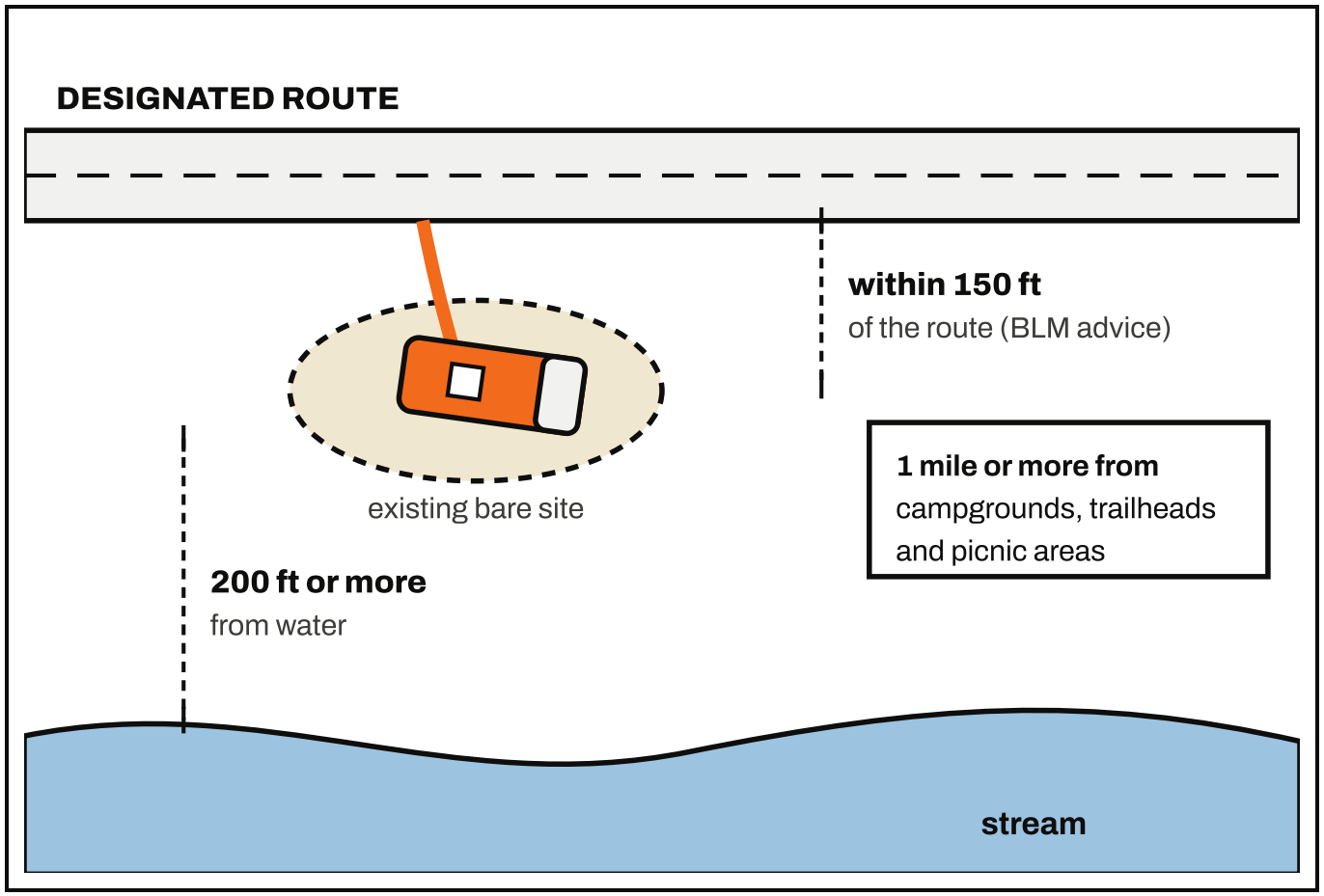
A road shown open to all vehicles on the MVUM is legal to drive, not necessarily maintained or suitable for your vehicle.[8] The Pacific Southwest Region warns that some rough, steep or narrow roads are dangerous for larger vehicles, and asks you to check with the local office and arrive with plenty of fuel and daylight.[5] If you are weighing a four-wheel drive van for roads like these, read our 4x4 camper van guide.



05 Pick an existing site inside the rules

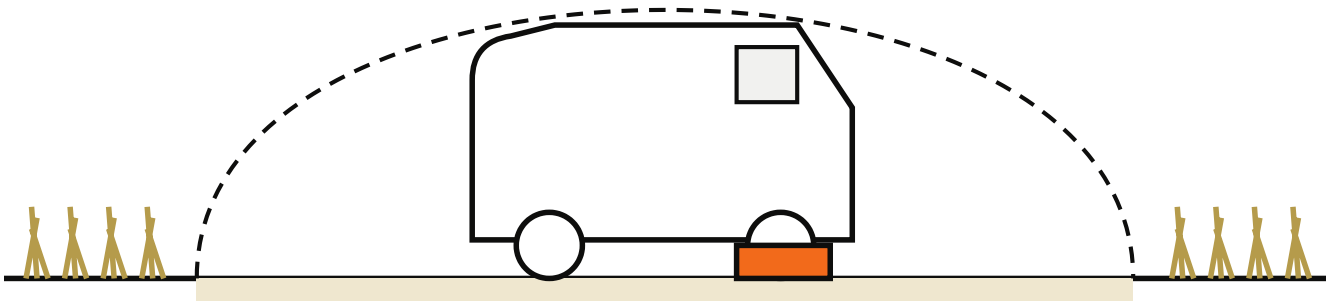
Choose a site that has been used before, so you do not damage new ground.[1][5] On BLM land the BLM recommends camping within 150 feet of a designated route, at least 200 feet from water and at least a mile from campgrounds, trailheads and picnic areas.[1] On a national forest, drive off the road only where the MVUM shows the dispersed camping symbol, and only as far as the forest allows.[8][9]

Caution. Do not drive through streams or wetlands; the Gifford Pinchot asks for at least 100 feet from water when you drive off a road to camp, and allows only existing routes.[9]



06 Park on bare ground and level without digging

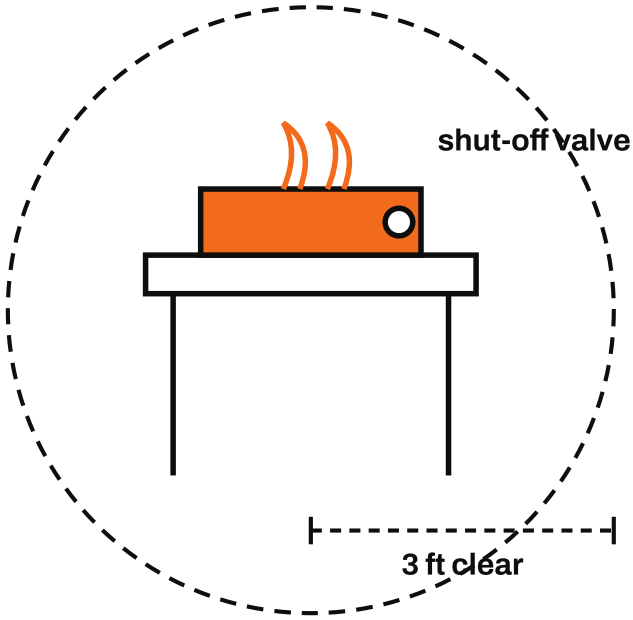
Park on pavement or bare ground, never over dry grass or tall weeds: the underside of a hot vehicle can light them.[14] Under Stage II restrictions on the San Juan National Forest a vehicle may leave the road only to park in an area with no vegetation within 10 feet of it.[13] Level the van with blocks rather than digging: the Park Service prohibits digging or leveling the ground at a campsite, and the Forest Service prohibits significant surface disturbance without a permit.[15][12]



Dry grass stays outside: a hot underside can light it.
Level with blocks; do not dig or level the ground.

07 Set up the stove and any fire within the rules

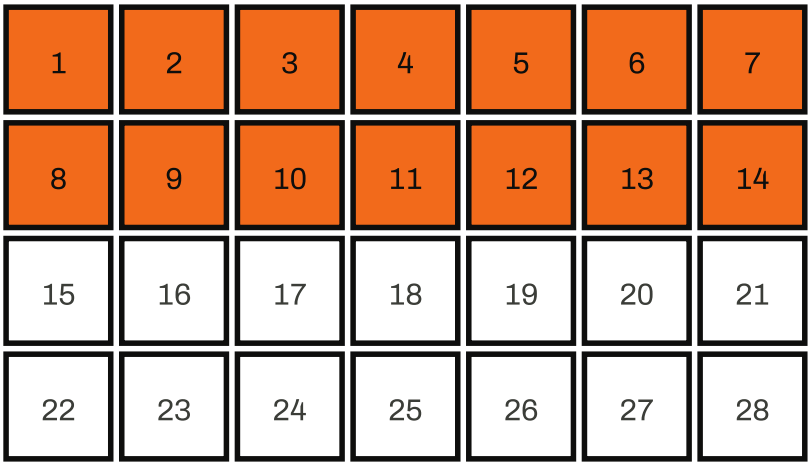
Under Stage II on the San Juan, pressurized stoves with a shut-off valve are allowed at least 3 feet from anything flammable, and generators need a spark arrester and 3 feet of cleared ground. [13] If a campfire is allowed, use an existing ring or a fire pan, [1] clear flammable material from around it, [12] and keep water and a shovel beside it. [5] [6] Do not build one when it is windy or may become windy. [5]



California:
free campfire permit for stoves too, outside developed sites.

08 Count your days and keep your gear with you

Write down the day you arrived. On BLM land the general limit is 14 days in any 28, then a move, often 25 to 30 miles.[1] Unattended property may stay no more than 10 days on BLM land (12 months in Alaska under the regulation)[2] and 72 hours on national forest land unless an area allows longer.[12] The full table of stay limits is in our guide to whether van life is legal.

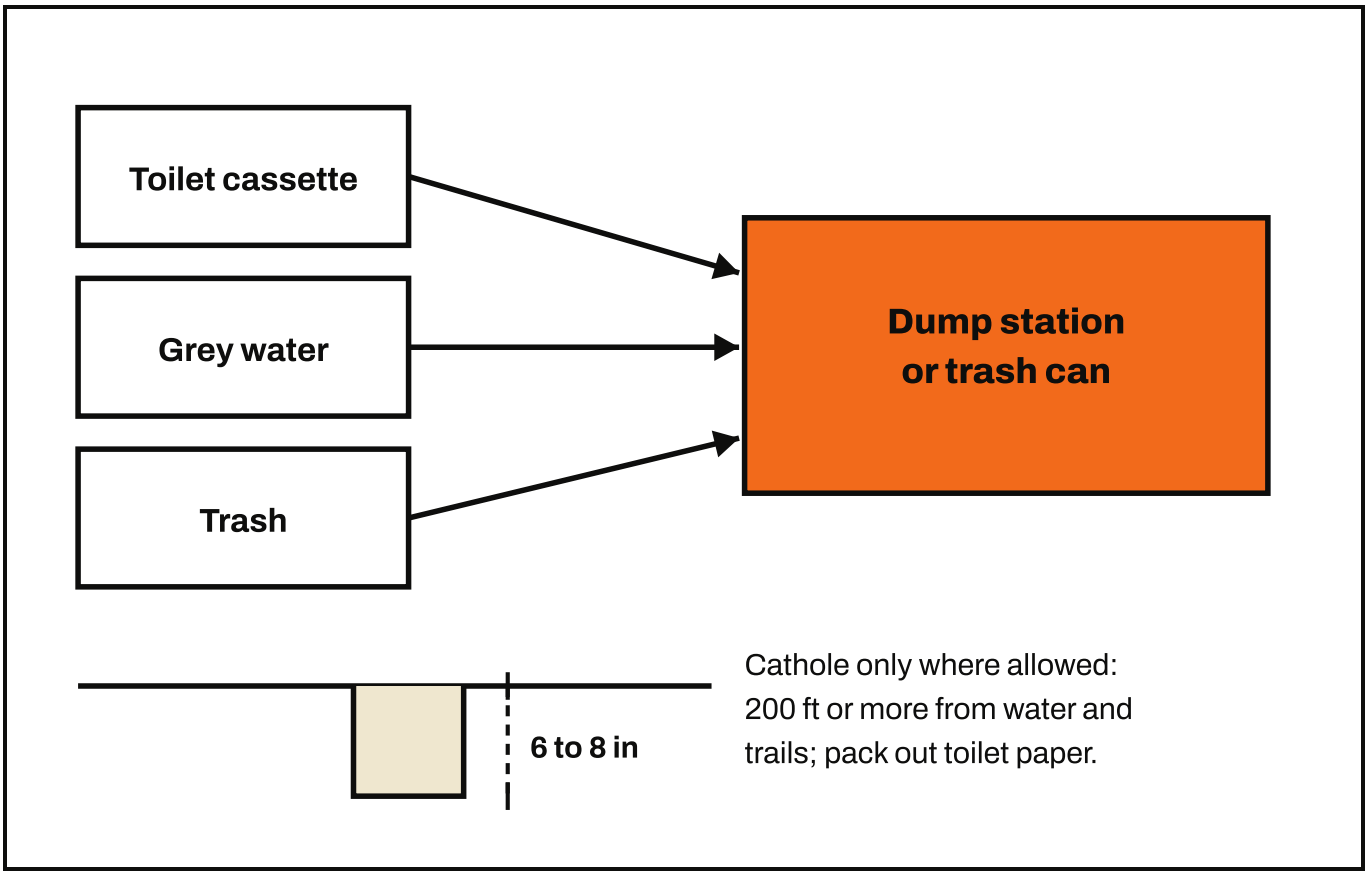


14 in any 28
then move, often
25 to 30 miles

Unattended property: 10 days on BLM land,
72 hours on national forest land, unless posted longer.

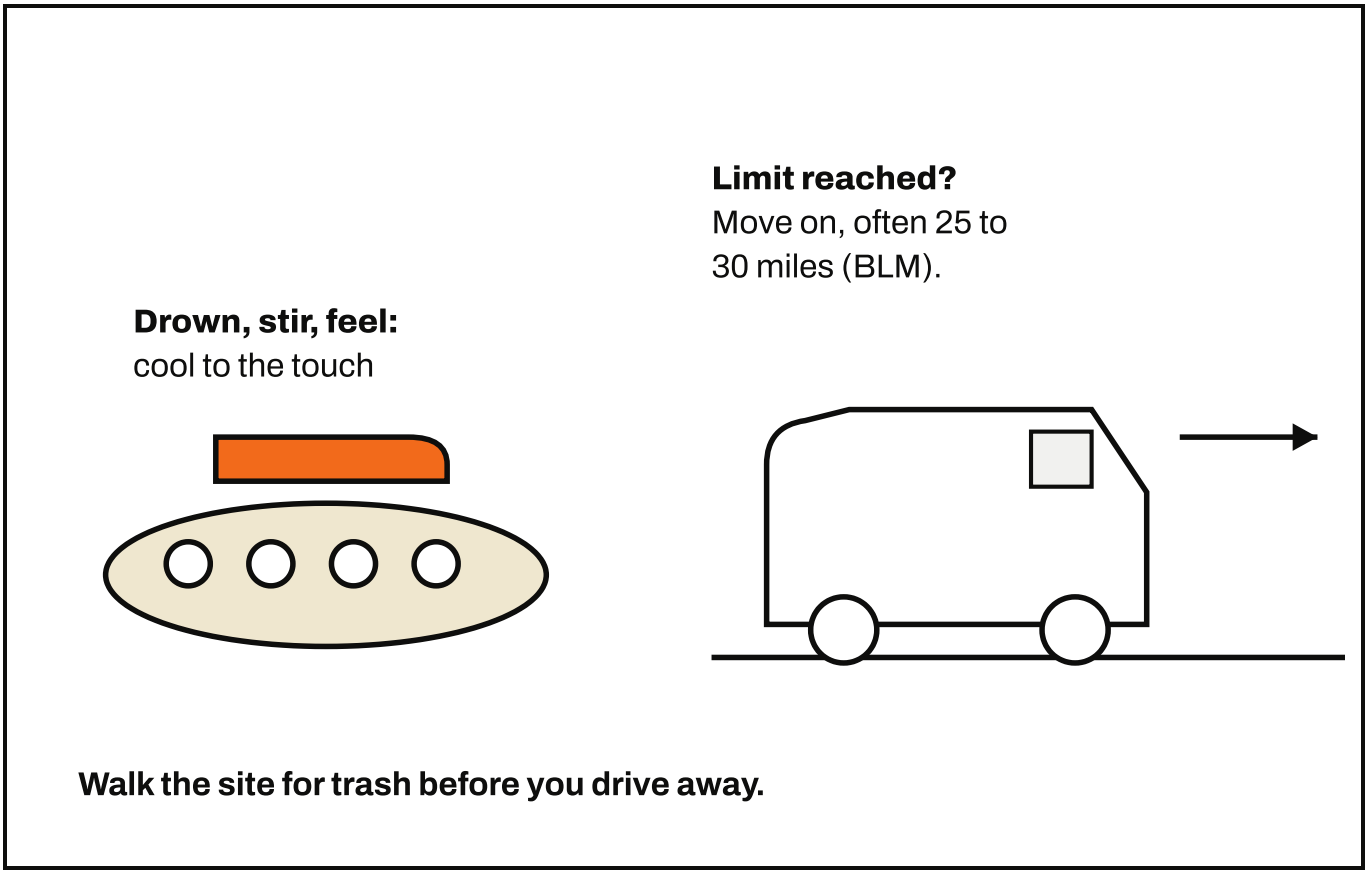
09 Hold your waste and take it with you

Hold grey and black water and empty them at a dump station; many Forest Service campgrounds have one.[6] On national forests, 36 CFR 261.11 requires sewage and waste water to be removed or put in a receptacle.[12] On BLM land the rule bans draining sewage or waste other than wash water from a vehicle except at a provided place, and asks you to pack trash home.[2] Use a portable toilet where you can; bury waste only where the manager allows it, as in the table above.[1]



10 Put the fire dead out and leave nothing behind

Drown the fire, stir it and repeat until the ashes are cool to the touch; the Intermountain Region says you should be able to put your whole hand in them.[5][6] Leaving a fire without completely extinguishing it is prohibited on national forest land.[12] Walk the site for trash and spilled food,[6] and when your stay limit is up, move on to a new area.[1]



WHAT SHOULD YOU READ NEXT?

The guides that cover the rest of a night off grid, and the vans that get there.

What is boondocking? The words, the stay limits and the BLM Long Term Visitor Areas.

Is van life legal? Stay limits by forest and park, store lots and city streets.

4x4 and AWD camper vans, for roads the map says are open and the office says are rough.

Van power budget and van solar, because no dispersed site has hookups.

Building your own? Start at the DIY library, or browse conversion kits and parts makers.

The live version of this guide, with every source linked: vanlife.co/guides/dispersed-camping. Builders, kits and parts makers we checked: vanlife.co/builders.

QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

Is dispersed camping free?

On most BLM land and national forest land it is: the BLM says most areas need no permit or reservation, and Mojave National Preserve charges no fee for its undeveloped roadside sites. Some places need a permit for large groups or for campfires, such as California's free campfire permit.

How long can you dispersed camp in one spot?

On BLM land, generally 14 days in any 28-day period, then you move, often 25 to 30 miles. National forests usually allow 14 days and set their own limits, and Mojave National Preserve has a 14-day limit. Our guide to whether van life is legal compares the limits forest by forest.

How far from a road can you dispersed camp?

On national forests, only as far as the Motor Vehicle Use Map allows for your road: the Gifford Pinchot allows 150 feet and the Black Hills up to 300 feet where the symbol is shown. The BLM recommends camping within 150 feet of a designated route. Mojave asks for a quarter mile from paved roads.

Can you dump grey water on the ground when dispersed camping?

Not on national forests: 36 CFR 261.11 requires waste water to be removed or put in a receptacle. The BLM's rule bans draining sewage and waste from a vehicle except wash water, but the BLM still asks you to pack out what you bring. Hold grey water and empty it at a dump station.

Can you have a campfire when dispersed camping?

Only when no restriction is in force and the site allows it. Under Stage I on the San Juan National Forest, fires are allowed only in Forest Service rings at developed sites; under Stage II, not at all. Stoves with a shut-off valve stay allowed in Stage II if kept 3 feet from anything flammable.

Where can you dispersed camp in a national park?

Usually nowhere: the general rule, 36 CFR 2.10, prohibits camping outside designated sites or areas. Some units designate areas: Mojave National Preserve allows roadside camping in previously used sites, at least 200 yards from water and a quarter mile from paved roads, and most of those sites need a high clearance 4WD vehicle.

What is a Motor Vehicle Use Map?

The Forest Service's legal map of the roads, trails and areas open to motor vehicles on a ranger district, including where you may drive off a road to camp. Routes not shown are closed to public motor vehicles, roads are not always signed, and knowing where you are is your responsibility.

SOURCES

Every rule on this page comes from the land manager's own website or the Code of Federal Regulations, read on 25 November 2026. Rules change by state, field

office, forest and park, and orders change during the fire season, so check the office for the exact place you are going. This page reports what the agencies publish; it is not legal advice.

Bureau of Land Management, Camping on Public Lands (dispersed camping core rules and best practices) (https://www.blm.gov/programs/recreation/camping). Read 25 November 2026

eCFR, 43 CFR part 8360, Visitor Services (BLM): 8365.1-1 sanitation, 8365.1-2 occupancy and use, 8365.2-1 (https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-43/subtitle-B/chapter-II/subchapter-H/part-8360). Read 25 November 2026

Bureau of Land Management, Georeferenced PDF Maps (https://www.blm.gov/maps/georeferenced-PDFs). Read 25 November 2026

Bureau of Land Management, Fire Restrictions (https://www.blm.gov/programs/fire/fire-restrictions). Read 25 November 2026

US Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region, Dispersed Camping (page updated 12 October 2026) (https://www.fs.usda.gov/r05/recreation/dispersed-camping). Read 25 November 2026

US Forest Service, Intermountain Region, Dispersed Camping (page updated 15 July 2026) (https://www.fs.usda.gov/r04/recreation/dispersed-camping). Read 25 November 2026

US Forest Service, Intermountain Region, Motorized Vehicle Use Maps (MVUM) (https://www.fs.usda.gov/r04/data-tools/interactive-maps/motorized-vehicle-use-maps-mvum). Read 25 November 2026

US Forest Service, Black Hills National Forest, FAQs: Motor Vehicle Use Map (https://www.fs.usda.gov/r02/blackhills/maps-guides/faqs-mvum). Read 25 November 2026

US Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot National Forest, What You Need to Know About the MVUM (PDF handout) (https://www.fs.usda.gov/media/151122). Read 25 November 2026

US Forest Service, National Forests in North Carolina, Tusquitee Ranger District Motor Vehicle Use Map 2022 (PDF legend) (https://www.fs.usda.gov/media/240994). Read 25 November 2026

eCFR, 36 CFR part 212, Travel Management: 212.51(b) and 212.56 (https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-II/part-212). Read 25 November 2026

eCFR, 36 CFR part 261, Prohibitions (Forest Service): 261.5, 261.10, 261.11, 261.13, 261.52, 261.58 (https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-II/part-261). Read 25 November 2026

US Forest Service, San Juan National Forest, Fire Danger Levels and Restrictions Explained (Stages I to III) (https://www.fs.usda.gov/r02/sanjuan/fire/fire-danger-levels-and-restrictions-explained). Read 25 November 2026

Smokey Bear (US Forest Service, Ad Council, National Association of State Foresters), Vehicle Safety (https://smokeybear.com/vehicle-safety). Read 25 November 2026

eCFR, 36 CFR 2.10, Camping and food storage (National Park Service) (https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-I/part-2/section-2.10). Read 25 November 2026

National Park Service, Mojave National Preserve, Camping (roadside and undeveloped camping regulations) (https://www.nps.gov/moja/planyourvisit/camping.htm). Read 25 November 2026