

Field Manager's Report
Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office
California Desert District Advisory Council Meeting
Continental Labor Hall, Desert Empire Fairgrounds
Ridgecrest, June 24, 2006

1. Energy Project Proposals

BLM Action: The BLM is processing several energy related proposals. Some are complex and controversial. All involve Section 7 consultations. Due to the current energy situation, considerable policy emphasis has been placed on expediting processes and timelines. The following is a summary of the major energy related proposals.

Contact: John Kalish, Associate Field Manager (760) 251- 4849

Desert Southwest 500 kV Transmission Line Project:

Project proponent: Imperial Irrigation District.

Status: Issued final EIS/EIR for the project (involving major electrical transmission line issues within the I-10 BLM utility corridor.) The Final EIS/EIR comment period closed on January 25, 2006 and the Record of Decision is pending completion of the Biological Opinion by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Devers-Palo Verde #2 500 kV Transmission Line Project:

Project proponent: Southern California Edison;

Cooperator: California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC)

Status: Draft EIR/EIS released May 4, 2006; public meetings recently held in CA and AZ on this draft document. This project involves a proposed 500 kV electrical transmission line from San Bernardino, CA to area west of Phoenix, AZ using I-10 utility corridor in California and alignment through Kofa Refuge in Arizona.

Blythe Energy 230 kV Transmission Line Project:

Project proponent: Blythe Energy LLC;

Cooperators: California Energy Commission (CEC) and Western Area Power Administration (WAPA)

Status: Applications filed with CEC, WAPA and BLM for project involving construction of 230 kV line from Blythe to area between Desert Center and Chiriaco Summit along I-10 utility corridor. Draft environmental assessment released May 25, 2006.

Wind Energy:

Project proponent: various.

Status: Overseeing 20 wind energy rights-of-way grants including processing r/w applications and assignments, assessing and monitoring cost recovery accounts, completing environmental reviews, and issuing notices and decisions. Processing an application for the 285 Section re-power project located just north of Palm Springs proper involving preparation of a joint EIS/EIR with the City of Palm Springs.

2. Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation Plan at Big Morongo Canyon ACEC

BLM Action: Implement rehabilitation and restoration actions to promote recovery from the fire that burned through Big Morongo Canyon ACEC in June 2005.

Contact: Greg Hill, Planning and Environmental Coordinator (760) 251-4840

Agency Roles: Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve are partners in the rehabilitation effort. Student Conservation Association rehabilitation and restoration work crew doing portions of restoration work.

Status: As a result of the June 2005 fire, 958 feet of boardwalk trail, an historic barn and 2,038 acres of public land were burned. BLM is working in partnership with the Friends to rehabilitate the area. ACEC post-fire public opening was March 25, 2006. Rehabilitation of fire impacts continue.

3. Off-Highway Vehicle Green Sticker Grant Program

BLM Action: Install signage and provide information to the public regarding riding opportunities in the Palm Springs Field Office. Conduct restoration work to repair OHV intrusions into closed areas.

Contact: John Kalish, Associate Field Manager, (760)251-4849

Agency Roles: Off Highway Vehicle Commission – Issuers of green sticker grants
Student Conservation Association – Restoration work crew
Environmental Careers Organization – Restoration coordinators for BLM

Status: Grants were generously provided to BLM Palm Springs in 2004 to 2006 for ongoing restoration work being conducted at Meccacopia, Dos Palmas and Big Morongo, and to continue signage and outreach efforts.

4. Santa Rosa Mountains Recreation Trails Planning

BLM Action: Preparation of a coordinated recreation trail plan that provides recreational opportunities and minimizes impacts to the federally-listed Peninsular Ranges bighorn sheep and their habitat

Contact: Jim Foote, Acting Monument Manager, Santa Rosa/San Jacinto Mountains National Monument (760) 251-4836

Agency Roles: Bureau of Land Management - cooperator
Cities of the Coachella Valley - cooperators
Coachella Valley Association of Governments (CEQA lead)
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (NEPA lead)

Status: Due to the mix of land ownership, this trails plan was conceived as a collaborative effort, and is part of the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (CVMSHCP) process. In coordination with the local jurisdictions and CVAG, BLM jointly conducted public scoping sessions and coordination meetings to get public input based on two goals: 1) allow for trail use and 2) minimize impacts to the federally-listed Peninsular Ranges bighorn sheep and their habitat. Interim measures are in place, promulgated from the Biological Opinion for the Coachella Valley California Desert Conservation Area Plan Amendment (2002). BLM currently relies primarily on a *voluntary* closure and has had good response from user groups. Recruitment of lambs into the bighorn sheep population was very good during 2000 and average in 2001 through 2004. The Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the CVMSHCP and trails plan was released for a 90-day public comment period early November, 2004. Public meetings were held in November, December, 2004 and January, 2005. The comment period was extended from February 3 to March 7, 2005. Significant comments were received opposing a trail permit system. The comments were addressed in the Final EIS/EIR with the proposed trail plan being modified to the satisfaction of most of the respondents. The CVAG Executive Committee released the Final EIS/EIR to the various signatory agencies in early February. Final adoption of the MSHCP/trails plan has been extended past the June 1, 2006 deadline based on issues raised by several participating communities.

5. Water Projects: Implement Canal Lining Projects as part of PL100-675

BLM Action:	PL 100-675 established the All American and Coachella Canal Lining Projects and commits the federal government to providing potential habitat creation/restoration sites and groundwater from public lands to help meet project environmental requirements. The Dos Palmas ACEC is a focus area for these efforts.
Contact:	John Kalish, Associate Field Manager, (760)251-4849
Agency Roles:	BLM, BOR, Coachella Valley Water District, San Luis Rey Indian Water Rights Settlement Parties & San Diego Water Authority
Status:	In cooperation with the above parties, BLM is developing an assistance agreement that could include BLM managing the restoration of 352 acres of desert riparian habitat, making lands available for the creation of 17 acre marsh/aquatic habitat, preserving 105 acres of marsh/aquatic habitat, acquisition of up to 875 acres of additional lands within the ACEC, and long-term management of these projects.

6. Fuels Reduction Permits/Private Property Defensible Space

BLM Action:	BLM has prepared a Programmatic Environmental Assessment that would allow permits to be issued to property owners to reduce or remove vegetation from public lands adjacent to their private property to create defensible space in the event of a wildfire. This project was initiated in response to landowners requests to clear vegetation from public lands to comply with county regulations requiring a minimum 100 foot defensible space.
Contact:	James Gannon, Fire Mangement Specialist (951) 903-4141
Agency Roles:	Bureau of Land Management , lead Fish and Wildlife Service, cooperator
Status:	Permits are issued upon request; BLM personnel will work with the landowners to provide technical information and guidance in carrying out the intent of the permits.

7. Federal Scenic Highway Designation Nominations

Box Canyon Road, (old highway route 195) was once the only vehicle route between the town of Mecca and desert communities to the east and is now a 12 mile long, paved corridor through the Mecca Hills Wilderness. This canyon defines the rare physical evidence of the San Andreas Fault, with massive plates of seafloor deposits broken and exposed shooting vertically into the sky. A wide array of mineral color and erosional effects provides a breathtaking scenic drive through what would otherwise be a harsh desert environment.

8. Status of Route Signing Palm Springs South Coast Field Office

All primary routes within the NECO planning area are signed with 4 x 4 steel posts consistent with the CDD sign policy. All major intersections have kiosks with maps. Secondary roads in the NECO area are not funded or signed at this time. Routes within the Coachella Valley planning area are not signed due to intermix of public and private lands, (i.e. locked gates, low mileage public route segments, not useful to the public.) The South Coast planning area is not signed but route inventory and designation is being done

in conjunction with the SC Plan Amendment which is anticipated to be completed this year.

9. **Riparian Restoration Activities Update – Palm Springs South Coast Field Office**

Inventory: Approximately 2000 acres area annually inventoried for ecological condition. Habitats include stream corridors, mountain and desert oasis, and other desert riparian communities. Riparian Assessments review avian riparian species present, noxious weed infestations, disturbances, etc.

Acres treated restored: Approximately 250 acres are annually treated, techniques include:

Manual:	Hand pulling isolated noxious weed infestations such as Sahara mustard, Mexican tree tobacco, saltcedar,
Mechanical:	Chainsaw, dozer use for removal of saltcedar
Chemical:	Herbicide cut stumps of saltcedar
Biological:	Excessive aquatic vegetation removal within sensitive desert oasis using sterile Grass Carp in Dos Palms ponds

The vast majority of the restoration is with the removal of Tamarisk (saltcedar). Once the saltcedar is removed the existing native seed bank responds quickly, re-establishing itself as does the water table.

Location of Treatments: Numerous locations, including ACECs, Dos Palmas, Big Morongo, Edom Hill/Willow Hole; isolated oases within the Santa Rosa Mountains, including Bear Creek, Magnesia Springs, Cathedral Canyon, Dead Indian Canyon drainages, etc.

Partners: Numerous partners continually work together to inventory, treat, educate and restore riparian communities. Recently a Lower Desert Weed Management Area was established further augmenting coordination and collaboration and pooling of resources for riparian projects. The list of partners:

Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy
Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians
Californian Department of Fish and Game
College of the Desert Biology Class
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
University of California, Riverside
U.S. Forest Service
U.S. Geological Survey
Friends of Big Morongo
California Native Plant Society RSB Chapter
Center for Natural Lands Management
The Wildlands Conservancy

10. **Border Activities/Issues – Palm Springs South Coast Field Office**

San Diego Sector of the Border Patrol has four Field Stations, plus the Headquarters Office and is responsible for San Diego County and a slice of western Imperial County. Border Patrol reports that apprehensions are up 49% to date in 2006 from 42,373 to 62,947. This trend indicates that the east and westbound checkpoints have been effective, but have created a 105% increase in activity on Otay Mountain. It is critical that we continue our coordination with the Borderlands Management Task Force (BMTF) on access, communications, and other infrastructure issues near the border to help protect and make safe, public lands north of the border. The Department of Homeland Security has legislative authority to waive all laws, rules and regulations if land management agencies are unable to authorize their projects due to legal constraints which is another reason to work cooperatively to find common ground and potential solutions where possible.