



The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Las Cruces Field Office (LCFO) is preparing a revision of its 1986 White Sands Resource Management Plan (RMP), an amendment to its 1993 Mimbres RMP, and an environmental impact statement (EIS). This planning effort—referred to as the TriCounty RMPs/EIS—is an opportunity for BLM to systematically and procedurally analyze and update its management of public land in Sierra, Otero, and Doña Ana Counties in south-central New Mexico (collectively these three counties are called the Planning Area). The planning process and public scoping began in January of this year. Comments received from the public during the scoping period, which ended on March 28, 2005, have been valuable to help BLM understand the public's views on management of public lands within the TriCounty Planning Area.

This is the second in a series of newsletters to keep you informed about the TriCounty RMPs/EIS and to announce the completion and availability of the TriCounty RMPs/EIS Scoping Report.

Thanks for Your Participation!

BLM thanks everyone who participated in the public scoping meetings and/or submitted comments during the public scoping process – there was a great turnout! A total of 187 people attended the scoping meetings that the BLM conducted in March 2005 in the communities of Las Cruces, Alamogordo, Truth or Consequences, and Anthony. BLM received approximately 320 letters or comment forms during the scoping period, as well as oral comments captured at the meetings. Each comment received was reviewed and analyzed to identify the preliminary issues that will be addressed in the RMPs and EIS. The results of the scoping process are documented in the TriCounty RMPs/EIS Scoping Report, which can be downloaded from the BLM Web site, at www.blm.gov or a hard copy is available for review at the Las Cruces Field Office, located at 1800 Marquess, Las Cruces, New Mexico.

Although the scoping process is complete, BLM will continue to



collaborate with interested public, relevant agencies, and tribes for comment consideration throughout the RMPs and EIS process.

Preliminary Issues Identified

The comments received during scoping were analyzed to identify the preliminary issues related to management of resources or resource uses on public land within the TriCounty Planning Area. The issues identified through scoping will assist in determining the scope of the studies to be completed and addressed in the RMPs/EIS. The predominant issues identified are summarized below, in no particular order.

Lands and Realty, including Open Space

Many commenters requested that the BLM dispose of land in a way that would control where development could take place and coordinate with those communities that are experiencing growth. Many commenters recommended specific lands that should be retained by BLM in order to protect wildlife movement corridors; establish new and expanded special designation areas; and provide



open space, park, and trail systems. In addition, commenters advised against urban expansion that would encroach on lands that support recreation, scenic areas, livestock grazing, watersheds or arroyos, wilderness areas, and wildlife habitats. Many commenters identified a concern for providing a balance between development and maintenance of open space and trails.

General Recreation

Comments received indicated interest in diverse recreational uses in the Planning Area. A majority of the commenters expressed appreciation for the existing recreational opportunities, and advocated the establishment of additional recreational opportunities that would further contribute to the quality of life in southern New Mexico. Non-motorized recreational uses were mentioned as a form of recreation that minimizes disturbance to the natural resources in the Planning Area. Some commenters identified the preservation of particular public lands—such as the Organ Mountain recreational areas—as critical to retaining the present quality of recreational life in the Planning Area. Others recommended the establishment of additional special recreation areas.

Off-Highway Vehicle Use

Though comments pertaining to OHV use were received from opponents and proponents of such use, nearly all of the commenters mentioning OHV as an issue advocated placing restrictions and controlled access on public lands to prevent damage, noise, and resource disturbance. Some commenters mentioned that OHV users often are destructive to lands and resources by leaving trash, damaging fencing, and destroying vegetation and wildlife

habitat. Comments from OHV users requested that BLM designate specific areas and/or trails for OHV use.

Trails and Access

A majority of commenters mentioning trails and access as an issue suggested utilizing the Citizens' Plan for Open Space and Trails Vision as BLM undertakes development of the RMPs. Many commenters recommended that the BLM preserve open space for recreational opportunities. Commenters suggested that BLM provide for more access for non-motorized uses, as OHV use often conflicts with horseback riding and hiking. Other commenters requested that the BLM address the issue of grazing permittees restricting access to or across public lands.

Biological Resources

Commenters identified areas to protect for biodiversity—riparian areas and other important wildlife habitats such as migration routes, wintering areas, birthing areas, caves, spawning areas, and nesting and roosting areas were singled out as areas warranting special protection. The Organ, San Andres, and Franklin Mountains also were identified within several comments as high priority areas for preservation of biodiversity.

Vegetation and Noxious Weeds

Commenters indicated a concern for maintaining the integrity of existing vegetation communities. The presence of noxious weeds was identified as an issue and commenters requested that BLM increase weed-control measures

and educate the public about noxious weeds. For example, it was recommended that BLM establish guidance about appropriate times to refrain from ground-disturbing activities in order to prevent the spread of invasive species. Concerns were expressed for the potential introduction of invasive species into native plant communities where access is provided for even typical uses allowed by BLM such as: (1) opening new roads, (2) grazing, (3) vehicle travel through known locations of sensitive plant species, (4) wood cutting, (5) access to communication sites, and (6) vehicle travel along right-of-way corridors.

Special Status Species

Some comments expressed concern about the possibility of bighorn sheep contracting diseases from domestic sheep and goats, which could cause a catastrophic decline in the species population. As a measure of protection against this, establishing adequate buffer zones around bighorn sheep habitat areas was suggested.

Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat

A majority of the comments received regarding wildlife and wildlife habitats indicated support for establishing wildlife movement-corridors to protect wildlife from the urban expansion in areas around Las Cruces. Some commenters recommended the establishment of ACECs to protect wildlife movement corridors and preserve existing wildlife habitat. Some requested that the BLM acquire lands critical as wildlife habitat. Riparian corridors are valued as: (1) habitat, (2) rare water features providing critical habitat in the Chihuahuan Desert, and (3) movement corridors for various wildlife species.



Transportation

Transportation often correlates to other resource issues including recreation (e.g., OHV use), urban expansion, wildlife habitat preservation, and land ownership. Most comments received were related to OHV and vehicular access to public lands for recreation. Several commenters supported the continued use of trails, roads, and OHV access because they are unable to hike to remote areas. However, nearly all comments submitted stressed the importance of “treading lightly” and responsible off-road transportation.

Visual Resources

Many comments received pertaining to management of visual resources in the Planning Area supported the adoption of the Citizens’ Plan for Open Space and Trails Vision to protect scenic areas from development. Several commenters advocated protecting beautiful views while allowing OHV access to remain open. A few commenters suggested that the BLM ensure scenic value by establishing a clear management direction, describing areas of scenic importance, and defining objectives for preservation.

Water Resources

Many comments were received concerning water resource issues including the protection of wetlands, riparian areas, watersheds, arroyos, fisheries, wildlife habitats, and aquifers. A few commenters mentioned water rights and the availability of water in this arid region, stressing that future water development should recognize the rights of existing permittees and affected landowners. Several comments also suggested that the BLM consider watersheds and aquifer recharge when identifying public lands for disposal. Additionally, commenters suggested that the BLM ensure compliance with

State water quality standards and the Clean Water Act. Specifically, some comments suggested that, to protect water quality, livestock grazing should be prohibited near arroyos that drain into the Rio Grande.



Livestock Grazing

Three issues regarding livestock grazing appeared to be of most importance: (1) standardizing criteria for managing the amount of grass that livestock can consume, (2) standardizing criteria for managing the amount of forage available for all herbivores to consume, and (3) designating grazing areas. Some commenters supported the continued use of land by ranchers as long as they respect the rights of other land users.

Cultural Resources and Tribal Concerns

Comments received pertaining to cultural resources were focused on the need to identify and protect these resources. Many comments suggested that BLM consider preservation for public enjoyment and learning, significant historical and cultural sites. A large number of



comments stated that cultural resources should be protected from vandalism, theft, and damage in general by (1) limiting access, (2) designating specific tracts of land for protection, and (3) undertaking resource inventories.

Energy and Minerals

Most of the comments submitted regarding energy and mineral resources urged the BLM to restrict oil and gas development in the Planning Area. Several commenters were concerned about potential contamination of water supplies, spread of noxious weeds, noise pollution, and air pollution resulting from oil and gas development in the area. Several of the commenters suggested that the economic and environmental impacts resulting from continued and increased oil and gas drilling would be detrimental to fisheries and water resources, open space preservation, protection of archaeological sites, bird habitats, and plant communities. One commenter advised against wind energy development within the Planning Area because of its incompatibility with specially designated areas, sacred American Indian sites, and habitats important for supporting imperiled species.

BLM’s Planning Process and What’s Next

The planning process for developing the RMPs and EIS for the TriCounty Planning Area is well underway. To date BLM has developed the planning criteria (guidelines to follow during the planning process), identified issues through public scoping, and completed the Scoping Report.

As part of the next steps in the process, the planning team will carefully consider the issues identified through

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scoping, compile and map an inventory of resource data to understand the existing condition of the environment, and analyze the way in which BLM currently manages the public land in the Planning Area. Based on this information, BLM will look for opportunities to modify some of it's current management to develop strategies that respond to current and future needs based on the principles of multiple use and sustained yield. These opportunities will result in a range of reasonable alternative management strategies, including an alternative to continue BLM's existing management. The environmental effects of these alternatives will be analyzed for and documented in the EIS—in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act.

How to Participate in the Planning Process

Once preliminary alternatives have been developed, BLM will host public workshops to introduce and discuss the alternatives. The workshops will be announced in news releases, on BLM's Web site, and in a newsletter mailed to everyone on BLM's mailing list. At this time, we anticipate that the workshops will take place in Spring 2006 so that your comments are considered prior to the analysis of effects and completion of the Draft EIS.

Also, when the Draft RMPs/EIS is ready for publication, BLM will announce the availability of the Draft EIS for public review and comment.

During the 90-day review period, BLM will accept written comments and will conduct public meetings to accept your comments on the adequacy of the Draft RMPs/EIS.

BLM will maintain a mailing list throughout the process. If you wish your name and address to be removed from the mailing list, please let us know. Otherwise your name will be retained on the list and you will receive information on the TriCounty RMPs/EIS in the future.

If you have any questions, would like to be on the mailing list, or would like to speak to someone, you can call our toll-free information line at 1-877-877-0918, leave a message, and someone will return your call as soon as possible.