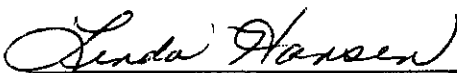


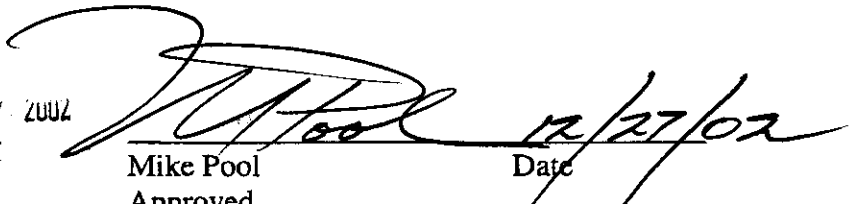
United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Record of Decision
for
California Desert Conservation Area
Plan Amendment for the Coachella Valley

Prepared by
Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
California Desert District Office


Linda Hansen Date DEC 27 2002
Recommended
Bureau of Land Management
District Manager, California Desert


Mike Pool Date 12/27/02
Approved
Bureau of Land Management
State Director, California

DECISION

This Record of Decision (ROD) approves, with minor modifications, the Proposed California Desert Conservation Area Plan Amendment for the Coachella Valley and Final Environmental Impact Statement (Coachella Valley Plan). The Coachella Valley Plan amends the 1980 Bureau Land Management (BLM) California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) Plan. No decisions were changed in the approved plan from the Proposed Plan and Final EIS; however, minor wording changes were made for better clarification. The Proposed Plan (which also represents the agency's preferred alternative) was drawn predominantly from Alternative B for the various plan elements. Alternative A was selected for the grazing and special area designations plan elements.

This plan amendment was prepared under the regulations implementing the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. An environmental impact statement (EIS) was prepared for the Coachella Valley Plan in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). The proposed Coachella Valley Plan was published in October 2002 and is available on BLM's web site at: <http://www.ca.blm.gov>. A summary of the major plan amendment decisions in the Coachella Valley Plan includes:

1. Establish eligibility of river segments on BLM-managed lands in Whitewater Canyon, Mission Creek, and Palm Canyon for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.
2. Designate Visual Resource Management classes on public lands.
3. Adopt regional land health standards and apply to all BLM lands and programs.
4. Implement air quality management prescriptions.
5. Establish habitat conservation objectives for assessing compatible uses in eight vegetation community types and developing appropriate mitigation measures. (Approximately 95% of the public land base is to be managed consistent with the multi-species habitat conservation objectives established through the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan.)
6. Establish three fire management categories and desired fire management responses based on vegetation communities.
7. Designate the Coachella Valley Wildlife Habitat Management Area.
8. Establish criteria for land exchanges, sales, and acquisition.
9. Provide for energy production, communication sites, and mineral materials extraction on public lands.
10. Provide for continued livestock grazing in Whitewater Canyon until voluntary relinquishment of the permitted use and preference, and retire the Palm Canyon and Morongo Wild Horse and Burro Herd Management Areas.
11. Designate motorized-vehicle routes of travel and set maximum distances for stopping vehicles.
12. Establish the Meccacopia Special Recreation Management Area to include the Mecca Hills and Orocapia Mountains Wilderness Areas and adjacent public lands.

13. Establish a recovery strategy for Peninsular Ranges bighorn sheep that emphasizes restoration of public lands and coordination of conservation efforts with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California Department of Fish and Game, local jurisdictions, and non-government organizations.

Included with the amendments are certain site-specific conservation measures. While these measures are addressed and approved in the Coachella Valley Plan, they are not authorized until specifically proposed and addressed through additional site-specific NEPA analyses.

All of the interim measures identified in the Consent Decree in Center for Biological Diversity, et al. v. BLM (C-00-0927 WHA (JCS)) and subject to expiration upon the signing of this record of decision for the Coachella Valley planning area, are terminated.

CONSISTENCY WITH OTHER CDCA PLAN AMENDMENTS

Several other CDCA Plan amendments are concurrently being developed for other regions in the CDCA. Those decisions that are common among these amendments have been developed to be consistent with each other. In addition, the applicable decisions of this ROD take precedence over decisions made in the Northern and Eastern Colorado Desert (NECO) Plan ROD within the overlap area of the two plans.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

General Description of the Alternatives. Four general alternatives, labeled A through D, were presented in the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statements for managing BLM-administered public lands in the Coachella Valley planning area. These alternatives provided decision-makers with a range of realistic and distinct options to fulfill the purpose and need for the plan, and to address the nine issues identified during public scoping. Alternatives A through C represented an array of options ranging from less restrictive land use (A), to more restrictive (C). Alternative D is the “no action” alternative.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative. Federal environmental quality regulations (40 Code of Federal Regulations 1505.2 (b)) require that an agency identify the environmentally preferable alternative or alternatives in the ROD. Alternatives B and C are the environmentally preferable alternatives. Alternative C is the most restrictive of land uses. Alternative B allows for land uses within conservation areas that meet the habitat conservation objectives established through Alternatives B and C. Alternative B allows for more opportunities to work collaboratively with the local jurisdictions to redirect consumptive uses away from sensitive areas. Alternative C would be more expensive to implement, requiring more law enforcement to implement the valley-wide closures to off-highway vehicle use. Based on the Bureau’s experience of imposing interim off-highway vehicle closures on public lands in the Coachella Valley, we have learned that the prior off-highway vehicle use does not leave the region; instead, the use is displaced to other areas within the region. We have learned that when no legal outlet for off-highway vehicle use is provided in a region, the incidence of off-highway vehicle trespass onto sensitive areas increases, which requires more law enforcement and more funding to enforce off-highway vehicle closures region-wide.

MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Once a vast blowsand ecosystem covering more than 100 square miles, the Coachella Valley today is a series of fast growing communities stretching from the City of Palm Springs at its western end, to the City

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of Indio and outlying communities of Mecca, Coachella, Thermal, and North Shore in the southeast. Between 1990 and 2000, the Coachella Valley population grew by 38 percent. Over the next 20 years, the Valley's population is projected to grow from its current population of 318,000 residents to 600,000 residents. The Coachella Valley is a destination resort area, fueled in large part by the mild winters, the spectacular views and recreational opportunities afforded by the surrounding mountains, and the solitude and beauty of the Colorado Desert. The juxtaposition of mountains and desert in the Coachella Valley has resulted in unusually high biodiversity, with many wildlife and plant species endemic to the area. The BLM is responsible for managing 28% of this natural landscape.

Maintaining the quality of life in the Coachella Valley is important to the local communities. So much so, that the local communities, along with other local, State and Federal agencies, have been collaborating since 1996 to develop the Coachella Valley multi-species habitat conservation plan (CVMSHCP). Consistent with its mission and mandate, the BLM is a partner in this collaborative effort.

To facilitate consistency with the goals and objectives of the CVMSHCP, the BLM established habitat conservation objectives for protecting sensitive species and their habitats. These objectives were developed using biological information gathered through the CVMSHCP effort. The habitat conservation objectives apply to all BLM-administered public lands that fall within the conservation area boundary established through the CVMSHCP. Future activities on public lands within the conservation area must achieve the habitat conservation objectives either through avoidance or application of appropriate mitigation measures to be in conformance with the Coachella Valley Plan and consistent with the CVMSHCP. The habitat conservation objectives were also applied to route designation within conservation areas in order to reduce resource use conflicts, especially for protection of threatened and endangered species.

As a land management agency, the BLM has the challenge to make the public lands and resources available for multiple uses, while sustaining the health and diversity of the landscape. The approved Coachella Valley Plan establishes a series of goals, conservation objectives, land health standards and criteria for various plan elements, designed to help managers achieve the appropriate balance of providing for multiple uses while sustaining the health and diversity of the landscape.

Within the CVMSHCP conservation area, wind parks, communication sites and mineral materials mining areas are established in designated areas, and are consistent with habitat conservation objectives to minimize resource use conflicts. These designations were established based on careful analyses to ensure future resource needs can be met, as all of these are important contributions towards an adequate infrastructure and healthy economy for the local communities. Mining will continue to be considered in State-designated mineral resource areas. The available mineral material reserves in these State-designated mineral resource areas will last for at least the next 50 years. BLM found that the best sites for wind parks and communication-related facilities are already under production. Satellite technology continues to supplant the need for more communication sites.

In 1993, the Environmental Protection Agency classified the Coachella Valley as a serious PM10 non-attainment area. The BLM wanted to do its part in reducing PM10 emissions on the public lands. The motorized vehicle route network designated through the Coachella Valley Plan reduces the route network (outside the NECO overlap area) by 36%, all upwind of sensitive receptors. This was achieved by closing redundant routes so that motorized vehicle access to the public lands would be maintained. Additional measures will be taken to further reduce PM10 emissions from the public lands.

Based on the Bureau's experience of imposing interim off-highway vehicle closures on public lands in the Coachella Valley, the BLM learned some valuable lessons on how to effectively manage off-highway

vehicle use. When no legal outlet for off-highway vehicle use is provided in a region, the incidence of off-highway vehicle trespass onto sensitive areas increases. For this reason, it was important to continue off-highway vehicle use at Drop 31 (which is downwind of sensitive receptors), and to seek new opportunities (in coordination with Riverside County) at the east end of the Coachella Valley and downwind of sensitive receptors. In recognition of the special management attention that is required to effectively manage off-highway vehicle use and to minimize trespass, the BLM established the Meccacopia Special Recreation Management Area that includes Drop 31.

The Peninsular Ranges bighorn sheep recovery strategy outlines BLM's general program for protecting bighorn sheep and their habitat on public lands. These same public lands are popular for recreational uses such as hiking, biking and equestrian riding, in an area where tourism is a major contributor to the local economy. The BLM is committed to continuing its efforts to work in collaboration with the local jurisdictions on developing a trails management plan in bighorn sheep habitat. This collaboration is essential for ensuring success of the program due to the checkerboard pattern of land ownership in bighorn sheep habitat. Hands-on management of bighorn sheep habitat will be required due to the intense urban interface pressures being put on bighorn sheep habitat.

Overall, the approved Coachella Valley Plan provided the best option to effectively and efficiently: 1) provide for multiple use and sustainable development of the public lands while making progress towards healthy, properly functioning ecosystems, 2) provide for the recovery of Federal and State listed species, 3) to avoid future listings of sensitive species, 4) provide recreational opportunities on the public lands, and 5) make available mineral and energy resources on the public lands. The approved Coachella Valley Plan provided the best opportunities to work collaboratively with the local jurisdictions to facilitate land management consistency, management effectiveness and cost-efficiency across jurisdictional boundaries.

MITIGATION MEASURES

In the course of developing and approving this landscape-level resource management plan for public lands in the Coachella Valley planning area over the next 20 years or more, the BLM adopted all practicable means to avoid or reduce environmental harm. Indeed, one of the primary reasons for developing this plan is to conserve the environment, consistent with the local jurisdictions' effort to develop a multi-species habitat conservation plan. Through BLM's Coachella Valley planning effort, the BLM has committed approximately 95% of the public land base to be managed consistent with the multi-species habitat conservation objectives established through the CVSMHCP.

Future activities and projects on the BLM-managed lands must be in conformance with the land use decisions outlined in the approved Coachella Valley Plan (43 Code of Federal Regulations 1610.5-3(a)). The BLM may impose mitigation measures as a condition of approval for activities and projects to ensure conformance with the Coachella Valley Plan, and to ensure compliance with applicable State and Federal law and regulations. The following is a summary of the more pertinent mitigation programs to be applied to future activities and projects that have been incorporated into the Coachella Valley Plan.

Air Quality. Authorized uses would include terms and conditions to minimize fugitive dust emissions, based on the current Coachella Valley PM10 State Implementation Plan. Some possible fugitive dust minimization techniques include: install sand fencing, apply surface surfactants, and install cattle guards between dirt and paved roads. Proposed projects (such as construction projects or mining operations) that may exceed National Ambient Air quality Standards shall include in the environmental analysis, a dust control plan prepared in coordination with the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

Cultural Resources. All management actions shall comply with the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which provides for the protection of significant cultural resources. In furtherance of this Act, the 36 Code of Federal Regulations 800 procedures shall be conducted pursuant to the State Protocol Agreement (1998) between the BLM and the California State Historic Preservation Officer. An appropriate level of inventory shall be conducted for all actions with a potential to affect cultural resources.

Native American Concerns. For all public land activities adjacent to reservation lands, the BLM shall consult with the relevant tribes to determine potential impact to Native American trust assets and cultural values and to develop mitigation measures as needed.

Threatened and Endangered Species. To be exempt from the prohibitions of section 9 of the Endangered Species Act, BLM must comply with or ensure that any permittee complies with the terms and conditions outlined in the Biological Opinions addressing the Coachella Valley Plan, which specify reasonable and prudent measures and outline reporting and monitoring requirements. These terms and conditions are non-discretionary. In order to minimize adverse impacts to special status species and to avoid future listings, the BLM would continue to confer or consult, as necessary, with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on all special status species. Adherence to the terms and conditions presented in subsequent Biological Opinions shall be required as a condition of approval for proposed projects.

Vector Prevention and Control. In addition to complying with California Health and Safety Code, all permittees on BLM land would be encouraged to consult with the local vector (i.e., carriers of disease-producing viruses) control agency to adopt the best methods for vector prevention and control, including minimizing any areas of standing water or managing such areas (in sand and gravel mines, etc.). BLM would consult with local vector control agencies to follow practices to decrease the probability of mosquito breeding and allow for routine vector surveillance (or abatement if necessary) and maintenance. BLM would include vector control in outreach programs and materials.

Water Quality. Best Management Practices shall be implemented to protect and achieve water quality standards. Appropriate mitigation measures shall be applied to mining and utility projects to protect water resources and hydrology, such as 1) setting maximum pit depth above maximum anticipated groundwater levels, 2) location of mining pits outside of active watercourse channels, and 3) reduction of pit slope angles on active alluvial fans to reduce upstream head cutting and erosion.

PLAN MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Land use plan monitoring is the process of tracking the progress towards implementing land use planning decisions, and assessing the relative success of implementing those land use planning in meeting the goals and objectives of the affected programs. Findings obtained through monitoring, together with research and other new information, will provide a basis for adaptive management changes to the Coachella Valley Plan. The processes of monitoring and adaptive management share the goal of improving effectiveness and permitting dynamic responses to increased knowledge and a changing landscape. The monitoring program itself will not remain static. Monitoring would be periodically evaluated to ascertain if the monitoring questions and standards are still relevant, and the program would be adjusted as appropriate. Some monitoring items may be discontinued and others added as knowledge and issues change. These changes to the monitoring of the plan are a part of plan maintenance.

Land use plan evaluation is the process of reviewing lands use plans, assessing the efficacy of these plans, and determining if amendments or revisions to these plans are needed. Bureau manual guidance recommends that land use plans be evaluated at least every five years (BLM Manual H-1601-1, V.B.). As this Coachella Valley Plan was developed in close coordination with the local jurisdictions' planning

efforts, monitoring and evaluation for the Coachella Valley Plan shall be conducted in tandem or at least in coordination with the local jurisdictions and their respective plan monitoring and evaluation efforts.

BLM land use plans periodically require maintenance (43 Code of Federal Regulations 1610.5-4) to further refine or document previously approved decisions incorporated into the plan. Provided no new decisions are being made, additional NEPA review is not required. Several of BLM's CDCA Plan Amendment alternatives are contingent upon the conservation boundary to be established through the CVMSHCP. Most of the CVMSHCP conservation boundary has been largely delineated. The outstanding issues are on non-federal lands. Pending completion of the CVMSHCP, the BLM shall utilize the proposed conservation boundary, which has been agreed to by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California Department of Fish and Game, and the Coachella Valley Association of Governments as of the date of the Record of Decision for the BLM CDCA Plan Amendment. The final, approved CVMSHCP boundary would be updated in the CDCA Plan Amendment through plan maintenance as uses or restrictions on the BLM-managed public lands would not change substantially.

AGENCY AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Throughout development of the Coachella Valley Plan, BLM strived to create as open a planning process as possible. This planning process was designed to engage and involve local government, State agencies, other Federal agencies, and Native American tribes to a very high level, so that land management activities would be coordinated across jurisdictional boundaries. The following is a summary description of the collaborative planning process which led to this Record of Decision for the Coachella Valley Plan.

Plan Development and Public Scoping. The California Desert Conservation Area Plan Amendment for the Coachella Valley was developed in partnership with the local jurisdictions of the Coachella Valley, special interest groups, and State and Federal agencies in support of a 1996 memorandum of understanding (MOU) to initiate preparation of the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan. The CVMSHCP is being prepared under the direction of the Coachella Valley Association of Governments (CVAG) as the lead agency. The purpose of the CVMSHCP is to utilize a landscape-based approach to provide for the long-term conservation of multiple sensitive species and their habitats, while streamlining "take" permitting processes. The BLM-administered lands are an integral part of the CVMSHCP, comprising 28% of the Coachella Valley landscape. Development of BLM's Coachella Valley Plan was prepared in tandem with the CVMSHCP, sharing many of the same public meetings to discuss both plans.

Informal scoping and information gathering for the CVMSHCP and BLM's Coachella Valley Plan began in 1996 when nine Coachella Valley cities, Riverside County, State agencies, the BLM and other Federal agencies signed a memorandum of understanding initiating a planning process that would balance biodiversity conservation with community and economic stability.

Formal public scoping was initiated upon publication of a Notice of Intent to prepare a Desert Conservation Area Plan Amendment for the Coachella Valley, the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan, and associated environmental impact statements, in the Federal Register on June 28, 2000 (pages 39920-39922). BLM and CVAG co-sponsored public scoping meetings, held on July 10, 11, and 12, 2000 in the cities of Cathedral City, Rancho Mirage and La Quinta. An addendum to the original notice of intent was published in the Federal Register on April 12, 2002 (pages 18022-18023), which presented draft planning criteria for public review and announced May 13, 2002 as the end of the scoping period.

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Since 1996, there have been numerous public meetings to discuss development of the CVMSHCP and BLM's Coachella Valley Plan, including monthly public meetings, called the Policy Action Group, held the fourth Thursday of every month at either the local BLM or CVAG office. The Policy Action Group provides a public forum for input from an array of interests, and is regularly attended by representatives from the signatory agencies of the 1996 MOU, other public agencies including the Coachella Valley Water District and the University of California, and private sector groups including the Building Industry Association, the Sierra Club, The Nature Conservancy, the Center for Natural Lands Management, and the Riverside County Farm Bureau.

Various elements and status of the plan were also discussed at several of the BLM's Desert Advisory Council and the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains Monument Advisory Committee public meetings. Maps of 7.5-minute topographic quadrangles showing the existing motorized vehicle route network were made available for public review. A public mailing list of more than 600 individuals, interest groups, and agencies was developed by the BLM for the Coachella Valley Plan. Notifications were sent to this list upon release of the Draft Plan/EIS, Proposed Plan/EIS and this Record of Decision.

Draft Coachella Valley Plan/ Draft EIS. The Draft Coachella Valley Plan/Draft EIS was made available for a 90-day public review period from June 7, 2002 through September 5, 2002. The document's availability was made known to the public through publication of two Federal Register notices (one by BLM on May 31, 2002 (page 38145) and one by the Environmental Protection Agency on June 7, 2002 (pages 39383-39384)), a news release mailed out to more than 600 individuals/entities, two news articles published in the local newspaper, and publication of the document at BLM's website.

Copies of the Draft Plan/EIS were mailed to anyone who had participated in the planning process, including Federal, State and local agencies, Native American tribal councils, the California Desert Advisory Council, the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Advisory Committee, interest groups, Federal, State and local elected officials, and various individuals. A copy was also sent to anyone who requested it.

The public was notified through a news release, two news articles in the local press, and a notice on BLM's California website, of three formal public meetings held in July 2002 to gather comments on the Draft Coachella Valley Plan/Draft EIS. The BLM provided briefings to the California Desert Advisory Council and the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Advisory Committee. BLM also accepted invitations to attend meetings sponsored by other agencies and groups, providing overviews about the Draft Coachella Valley Plan/Draft EIS to individuals, interest groups, local governments, and tribal councils. BLM also notified the public that motorized vehicle route designation proposals identified in the Draft Coachella Valley Plan/Draft EIS were available for public review on 7.5-minute topographic quadrangle maps.

BLM received more than 200 comment statements in 23 letters/facsimile messages and from 12 individuals testifying at the public meetings. Pertinent transcript pages from the BLM's Desert Advisory Council meeting on June 29, 2002 and the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Advisory Committee meeting on August 3, 2002 were included with the public comments on the Draft Plan/EIS.

Coordination with Local Jurisdictions. In September 1994, CVAG, representing the County of Riverside and the nine incorporated cities of the region, took the lead in developing a landscape-level conservation plan. The goal of the plan is to preserve habitat adequate to ensure long-term survival of the valley's unique habitat and natural communities. The plan area covers about 1.2 million acres, of which BLM administers about 337,000 acres, or 28 percent. About 42 percent of the lands within the Coachella

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Valley are in private ownership, with the remaining lands under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, the U.S. Forest Service and various Native American tribes such as the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.

In 1996, BLM signed a Memorandum of Understanding for preparation of the Plan together with six State, Federal and county agencies and nine cities. A community-wide workshop on conservation planning was held in November 1996 to introduce the multi-species habitat conservation plan and the Natural Communities Conservation Program planning concept to the Coachella Valley. Numerous public meetings and workshops have been held since then, gathering public input towards development of the CVMSHCP and CDCA Plan Amendment. CVAG contracted with the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy to prepare the non-federal lands portion of the Plan, while BLM prepared its Plan Amendment in support of the overall planning effort. All the parties, including BLM's biologists, worked closely with a Science Advisory Committee. A Geographic Information System (GIS) Team, with members from BLM, the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy, and Riverside County, performed the GIS work. BLM met numerous times with the local jurisdictions to discern their interests and needs. Sometimes meetings were within the framework of the regularly scheduled monthly planning meetings; sometimes they were meetings with an individual city or centered on a group of jurisdictions with common interest in an individual issue.

Consultation with Tribal Governments. Government-to-government consultation was initiated by letter in November of 2000. The letter introduced the need for and intent of the planning process and invited Native American comment and participation in the planning process. The Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, Augustine Band of Mission Indians, Cabazon Band of Mission Indians, Morongo Band of Mission Indians, Santa Rosa Band of Mission Indians, Torres-Martinez Band of Desert Cahuilla Indians, and Twenty-Nine Palms Band of Mission Indians were contacted. Follow-up discussions occurred with staff members of the Agua Caliente and Morongo Bands. In a parallel planning effort, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians recently published its Final Draft Tribal Habitat Conservation Plan for the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation (November 2002).

In March of 2002, as the planning document evolved and potential land management actions became more clearly defined, a second letter was sent to update tribes and to continue government-to-government consultation. This letter outlined potential effects to cultural resources and solicited comments related to cultural resources or areas of traditional cultural importance. This second letter was sent to the following Tribes: Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, Augustine Band of Mission Indians, Cabazon Band of Mission Indians, Cahuilla Band of Indians, Colorado River Indian Tribes, Fort Mojave Indian Tribe, Los Coyotes Band of Indians, Morongo Band of Mission Indians, Ramona Band of Mission Indians, Santa Rosa Band of Mission Indians, Torres-Martinez Band of Desert Cahuilla Indians, and Twenty-Nine Palms Band of Mission Indians. Follow-up discussions were conducted with representatives of the Augustine, Morongo, Santa Rosa, and Fort Mojave groups. The BLM also requested a record search of the sacred lands files of the Native American Heritage Commission. Copies of the Plan were mailed directly to each of the Tribes.

Given their parallel planning effort and the inter-related nature of some decisions, BLM met regularly with the Tribal council and staff of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians to coordinate planning alternatives, proposals and analysis. Specific areas of coordination included management of the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument, management of cultural resources, control of exotic plants (e.g. tamarisk), and the status of wild horses in Palm Canyon.

Taylor Grazing Act Consultation and Coordination. The BLM initiated final consultation and coordination in compliance with the Taylor Grazing Act on September 6, 2002 with the livestock

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permittee on Whitewater Canyon Allotment based upon the alternatives released in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement and the public comment received. During consultation the permittee identified five issues to be addressed or considered. The Proposed Plan was modified in response to input received during consultation and coordination with the permittee. Specifically, the language was modified to be consistent with a similar decision developed for other BLM plans, in which the allotment would become unavailable for grazing upon voluntary relinquishment of the permitted use by the current lessee.

Consultation with State and Federal Agencies. The BLM requested formal consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act in a memorandum dated August 6, 2002. In a memorandum dated August 29, 2002, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service acknowledged receipt of BLM's biological evaluation and consultation request, and indicated that all required information was accessible. BLM submitted an amendment to the consultation on November 5, 2002 to include the Proposed Coachella Valley as presented in the Final Environmental Impact Statement. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued its Biological Opinion to BLM on December 24, 2002.

As part of the interagency planning process and in direct meetings, BLM also consulted informally with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game. As an interim measure, BLM initiated formal consultation on January 31, 2001 on the current CDCA Plan (1980 as amended) as implemented. The interim consultation included temporary management measures initiated pending completion of the Coachella Valley Plan.

BLM initiated consultation with the California State Historic Preservation Officer by letter on September 19, 2001. In accordance with the State Protocol Agreement between the California State Director of the BLM and the California State Historic Preservation Officer (1998), BLM provided an early notification and invitation to participate in identification of issues. The BLM identified route designations as the plan elements with the greatest potential to adversely affect historic properties. In February 2002, BLM briefed staff members of the State Historic Preservation Office and presented a proposal for completing cultural resources inventories in support of the planning effort. This proposal was submitted formally for review on March 25, 2002. The State Historic Preservation Officer concurred with the proposed strategy for inventory along routes of travel and requested that additional consultation take place as additional survey strategies for proposed off-highway vehicle use areas were developed. This additional consultation was completed.

Copies of the Draft and Final EIS were submitted to the State Historic Preservation Office upon publication. On October 30, 2002, BLM submitted a letter summarizing the results of inventories conducted in support of the planning effort. Thirty-five new sites were recorded as a result of the inventories; site forms were updated for seven previously recorded sites. Of these 42 sites, 20 have qualities that may make them eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. For management purposes, per the State Protocol Agreement Section V.B.3, the BLM will manage these sites as eligible until such time as further evaluation may be warranted. Field verification and evaluation of sites adjacent to designated open routes is ongoing.

On October 16, 2002, the BLM submitted to the South Coast Air Quality Management District (AQMD) for review, a detailed air quality conformity analysis for the Coachella Valley Plan. In a letter dated November 7, 2002, the South Coast AQMD concurred with BLM's conformity determination, noting consistency with the recently adopted 2002 Coachella Valley PM10 State Implementation Plan. Subsequent activities on public lands must comply with all applicable AQMD regulations and the most current State implementation plan. BLM must assure that PM10 and other pollutants are minimized during construction and development activities as specified in the Air Quality Best Management

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Practices. Measures will also be taken to protect the San Gorgonio, San Jacinto and Santa Rosa Wilderness Areas and the wilderness portions of Joshua Tree National Park as designated Class I air quality areas. The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument is a Class II airshed. Class I areas exceed national standards for air quality and are assigned the most stringent air quality standards to protect this status.

In accordance with the NEPA regulations, BLM submitted five copies of the Draft EIS to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for review and input. The EPA provided comments to the BLM in a letter dated September 5, 2002. The EPA commended “BLM for its thorough analysis of impacts associated with the action alternatives. Issues have been clearly articulated, and the impact analysis does an excellent job of discussing potential impacts in the context of each issue area. We also appreciate efforts taken to identify related planning efforts so that this plan can be considered in its appropriate planning context.” Accordingly, the EPA assigned a rating of LO (Lack of Objectives) to the Draft EIS.

Bighorn Sheep Information Gathering Efforts. One of the more controversial challenges BLM is facing in the planning area is how to promote recovery of the Peninsular Ranges bighorn sheep while still providing reasonable recreational opportunities in bighorn sheep habitat at the urban interface. Despite the great body of research that has been done on bighorn sheep, there is not widespread agreement among scientists as to how human use of bighorn sheep habitat affects bighorn sheep behavior, survivability and recoverability. In the course of developing an overall bighorn sheep recovery strategy for the Coachella Valley Plan, BLM conducted an extensive coordinated effort over the past three years to consider the best available scientific information and various professional viewpoints on bighorn sheep management.

The BLM sponsored a facilitated public workshop called “Trails, Bighorn Sheep & You” at the Living Desert in Palm Desert on the evening of June 24, 1999. As an outcome of the workshop, the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy and BLM then facilitated a series of 13 open meetings commonly known as the Bighorn Sheep and Trails Working Group, held between August 19, 1999 and November 8, 2001. BLM sponsored a televised forum at Palm Springs City Hall, which included presentations on bighorn sheep biology and the opportunity for the public to ask questions of the biologists present.

With public participation, BLM conducted a focused effort to gather input from sheep biologists, many of whom could not attend the working group meetings. The intent was to define, to the degree possible, which biological concepts were supported by peer reviewed studies, by “gray” literature (e.g., analysis and argumentation in journals), by widely shared expert opinion, or by an untested hypothesis or opinion. This then could be matched to available facts regarding sheep populations within the planning area. BLM held a joint meeting with the Recovery Team at University of California at Davis September 28-29, 2000 to review the status of the bighorn sheep science as it related to trail use. Sheep biologists beyond those who were on the Recovery Team were also invited to the meeting and several attended. A draft literature review related to sheep and trails was reviewed and edited.

BLM held individual meetings or discussions with sheep biologists cited in the peer-reviewed literature who could not attend the meeting but wanted to contribute their ideas. A copy of the Draft Coachella Valley Plan/Draft EIS, with a cover letter requesting a strong review of the science used in the analysis was mailed to 44 bighorn sheep biologists and land managers in nine western states, including members of the Peninsular Ranges and Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep recovery teams. Twenty-one sheep biologists responded with comments. An additional draft of the “Status of the Science” was made available to all those who contributed during the editing process (via internet) as a check on the accuracy of the literature citations and representations. The final “Status of the Science” document was then placed on BLM’s web page for public review and use at <http://www.ca.blm.gov/palmsprings/whcbighorn.html>.

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Coachella Valley California Desert Conservation Area Plan Amendment

Proposed Plan/Final EIS. Based on review and consideration of the public comments received, BLM revised the draft plan/EIS to produce the Proposed Coachella Valley Plan and Final EIS. Copies of the public comment letters, facsimiles, and public meeting transcripts were included in the Final EIS. The public comments were helpful in enabling BLM to strengthen, refine, and clarify the text, proposed decisions, analyses, and conclusions.

The release of the Proposed Coachella Valley Plan/Final EIS initiated a 30-day public review and protest period, beginning October 18, 2002, the day the Environmental Protection Agency published the notice of availability in the Federal Register. The protest period ended on November 18, 2002. Individuals and organizations that submitted comments or received a copy of the Draft Plan/EIS automatically were sent copies of the Proposed Coachella Valley Plan/Final EIS. Requests for copies of the document from additional parties were also honored. The Proposed Plan/Final EIS was also posted on the BLM California website.

Consistency Requirements. In accordance with planning regulations at 43 Code of Federal Regulations 1610.3-2(e), the Coachella Valley Plan/Final EIS was sent to the Governor of California on October 11, 2002, for a 60-day review of consistency with State or local plans, policies, and programs. As of December 23, 2002, no inconsistencies were identified.

Plan Protest Resolution. The BLM Director has dismissed all protests on the Coachella Valley Plan. By regulation (43 Code of Federal Regulations 1610.5-2) the decision of the Director on plan protests is the final decision of the Department of the Interior.