

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION IX
75 Hawthorne Street
San Francisco, CA 94105

March 15, 2007

Rebecca Heick
Bureau of Land Management
Yuma Field Office
2555 East Gila Ridge Road
Yuma, AZ 85365

Subject: Yuma Field Office Draft Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), California and Arizona [CEQ #20060501]

Dear Ms. Heick:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has reviewed the above referenced document. Our review and comments are provided pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations (40 CFR Parts 1500-1508), and our NEPA review authority Section 309 of the Clean Air Act (CAA).

The Draft EIS assesses alternatives for the management of 1.3 million acres along the lower Colorado River in southwest Arizona and southeast California. The land is administered by the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Yuma Field Office. The Draft EIS is well organized and provides much useful information regarding the resources in the Yuma Field Office area. We commend BLM for a well-written programmatic document.

Based on our review, we have rated the DEIS as Environmental Concerns – Insufficient Information (EC-2) (see enclosed "Summary of Ratings"). We have concerns regarding environmental impacts from off-highway vehicles (OHV), particularly in non-attainment areas, and the lack of clarity on the BLM OHV Travel Management Network planning process.

To address air quality impacts, EPA recommends restricting OHV use in non-attainment areas and implementing mitigation measures to reduce the impacts of OHV use to air quality. EPA specifically recommends that the BLM not open the Blaisdell OHV Management Area because of potential air quality and habitat impacts.

We also recommend that the Final EIS include a comprehensive description of the OHV management planning process, including the type of environmental analysis planned in conjunction with the establishment of the Travel Management Network. EPA's recommendations are further discussed in our Detailed Comments (attached).

We appreciate the opportunity to review this Draft EIS and request a copy of the Final EIS when it is officially filed with our Washington, D.C., office. If you have any questions, please call me at (415) 972-3846, or have your staff contact Ann McPherson at (415) 972-3545 or mcperson.ann@epa.gov.

Sincerely,

/s/ Laura Fujii for

Nova Blazej, Manager
Environmental Review Office

Enclosures: Summary of Rating Definitions
EPA Detailed Comments

Off Highway Vehicles (OHV) – Environmental Impacts and Protections

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) thoroughly documents the potential environmental impacts from Off Highway Vehicles (OHVs) including: 1) impacts to air quality (pg. 4-5); 2) impacts to soils from compaction (pg. 4-13); 3) impacts to vegetation from dust, compaction, crushing (pg. 4-22) and dispersal of non-native invasive plant species (pg. 2-171); 4) impacts to wildlife from alteration and fragmentation of habitat, disturbance from noise and dust, and death by collisions (pg. 4-32); and 5) impacts to cultural resources from increased access, damage and vandalism (pg. 4-49). Cross-country OHV use in open areas has the potential to cause the greatest amount of harm to soil, vegetation, and wildlife.

Air Quality Impacts

OHV travel can result in an increase in concentrations of particulate matter less than 10 microns in diameter (PM₁₀) not only when vehicles are in use, but also after the cessation of activity, due to the physical disturbance of soils and resulting erosion. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has designated 400 acres at Ehrenberg Sandbowl as an open OHV Management Area. The Preferred Alternative E would open an additional 2,000 acres of public lands to OHVs, increasing the potential for impacts to air, soil, vegetation, wildlife, and cultural resources. The Preferred Alternative E includes expanding the Ehrenberg Sandbowl (800 acres) and opening the Blaisdell OHV Management Area (1,300 acres), and the Martinez OHV Management Area (300 acres; table 4-3; pg. 4-8). The two proposed Open OHV Management Areas are located within a PM₁₀ non-attainment area and currently have numerous existing routes (pg. 4-8; table 4-3). The DEIS states that it is unknown if increased dust emissions would occur as a result of this action because of existing use in the areas (pg. 4-8).

Recommendation:

EPA recommends that BLM consider selecting Alternative D as the preferred alternative, which does not include opening new OHV Management Areas within PM₁₀ non-attainment areas. Under Alternative D, OHV use would only be permitted in the Ehrenberg Sandbowl OHV Management Area (400 acres), which is located outside of the PM₁₀ non-attainment area. If additional open OHV areas must be designated, EPA recommends that BLM prohibit expansion in PM₁₀ non-attainment areas.

Recommendation:

EPA recommends that the BLM not open the Blaisdell OHV Management Area (1,300 acres). In addition to being located within a PM₁₀ non-attainment area, opening this area would directly impact more than 600 acres of Category III

Sonoran Desert tortoise habitat (pg 4-40). Wildlife habitat is more likely to be maintained or enhanced if OHV use were prohibited in this area.

Recommendation:

EPA recommends that the BLM fully evaluate current OHV usage in regulated and non-regulated areas; estimate PM₁₀ emissions from OHV use; and address permitting and enforcement efforts. BLM can evaluate the consequences of OHV management decisions if baseline conditions have been established initially. This information should be included in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS).

Recommendation:

EPA recommends that BLM adopt general mitigation measures to reduce OHV impacts on air quality, especially in areas of non-attainment: 1) motorized competitive races should not occur in PM₁₀ non-attainment areas; 2) BLM should prohibit all OHV use in the PM₁₀ non-attainment areas on high pollution days as forecasted by the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality; 3) use gates, fences, and other barriers to minimize emissions/fugitive dust; and 4) require permits to manage OHV use.

Closures of OHV Management Areas

Within Closed OHV Management Areas, no motorized travel would be allowed. Closed OHV Management Areas have beneficial impacts to air quality, soil resources, vegetation, wildlife, and cultural resources. Closing OHV Management Areas reduces fugitive dust emissions in the planning area and benefits soil resources and vegetation by reducing compaction, preventing erosion, and reducing the dispersion of non-native plants. Closed OHV Management Areas presented in the Preferred Alternative E include: Designated Wilderness (167,800 acres), Fortuna Wash (100 acres), and La Paz Valley (1,000 acres) (table 2-25). Alternative D recommends additional closures at Dripping Springs (600 acres), Laguna Mountains (4,400 acres), Muggins Mountain (1,900 acres), North Bank Milpitas Wash (100 acres), Sears Point (1,400 acres), and Wilderness Characteristics (56,600 acres). Several of these areas contain extensive heritage resources.

Recommendation:

EPA recommends that BLM close the OHV Management Areas described in Alternative D, which would provide protection for 233,800 acres of sensitive lands, soil resources, vegetation, and cultural resources, as compared to the Preferred Alternative E, which would provide protection for 168,900 acres. Closing areas with extensive heritage resources would reduce direct and indirect impacts on cultural resources.

Recommendation:

The Draft RMP/EIS does not propose any new OHV closures until a subsequent TMP is released (pg. 4-5); however, different closures scenarios are discussed

within the various alternatives. The reviewer assumes that “additional closures” refers to closures not outlined in table 2-25. Please clarify if this assumption is incorrect.

OHV Access Management Process

The BLM requires that road and trail access and OHV management guidance are incorporated into every Resource Management Plan (RMP), and that each RMP will divide planning areas into OHV area designations (open, limited, or closed). OHV travel in limited areas would be limited to existing inventoried routes, until the Travel Management Network (TMN) has been established. BLM has issued new guidance which specifies that when route designations cannot be completed within the planning process, they can be completed during the plan’s implementation phase, preferably within five years.

The Proposed Route Inventory is a key component of the OHV Management Plan. The Yuma Field Office (YFO) has compiled an inventory of approximately 3,200 miles of recreational routes. The BLM has invited the public to comment on the accuracy of the YFO Route Inventory (pg. 2-99) but does not identify the large format maps which contain the information. These maps are included on the CD; however, hard copies were not placed in the map book, nor referenced in Section 2.12.3.

Recommendation:

EPA recommends that the FEIS describe BLM’s overall guidance for addressing OHV management in RMPs and specifically how the guidance will be implemented by the YFO. The FEIS should describe the planning process and the implementation phase in greater detail, at the beginning of Section 2.12. The FEIS should describe the overall process for addressing OHV management including: 1) delineation of Travel Management Areas (TMA); 2) designation of OHV Management Areas; 3) establishing the Route Inventory; 4) route evaluation/designation process; 5) Travel Management Plan (TMP); and 6) TMN.

Recommendation:

The locations of inventoried routes need to be clearly illustrated on maps and referenced appropriately in the FEIS. The large format maps (TMA-1, TMA-2, TMA-3, TMA-4, and TMA-5) that contain this information should be referenced in Sections 2.12, 2.12.1, and 2.12.3. Map 3-23 should also be referenced in Section 2.12.3.

Recommendation:

A list of all of the maps should be included in the table of contents and placed at the front of the map book. If the large format maps are not included in the map book but are included on the CD, this fact should be noted in the table of contents.

Recommendation:

The FEIS should provide additional information on the implementation phase including: the route evaluation/route designation process; the TMP; and the TMN. EPA is concerned that the routes identified in the Route Inventory may be approved without adequate environmental review. Per my conversation with Micky Baily (BLM) on 3/9/07, I understand that some type of environmental analysis (Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement) is planned for each of the Travel Management Areas within five years. The FEIS should describe the environmental review process in greater detail and elaborate on the issues that will be examined during the implementation phase. OHV usage in desert washes and streambeds should be evaluated during this process and restricted, if necessary. OHV noise-related impacts, as well as permitting and enforcement issues, should be discussed and evaluated during this process.

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern/Coordinated Management Areas

Federal agencies are directed to protect and conserve ecosystems in need of “special management attention” by designating them as “areas of critical environmental concern” (ACEC) in their land use planning process (pg. 2-13). These areas must have substantial significance and value and require special management actions. BLM is evaluating five proposed ACECs and the expansion of two existing ACECs under various alternatives. The Preferred Alternative E identifies three areas, totaling 44,700 acres, for ACEC designation: Big Maria Mountain, Dripping Springs, and Sears Point. All three of these areas were specifically identified in part to protect important cultural resources. Alternative D would designate seven areas, totaling 670,500 acres, for ACEC designation: Big Maria Mountain, Dripping Springs, Gila River Terraces and Trails, Limitrophe, Palomas Plain, Sears Point, and Walter’s Camp.

BLM has proposed to classify the Limitrophe as a Coordinated Management Area (CMA), rather than an ACEC. The intent of this classification is to unite the mandates of multiple jurisdictions while attempting to protect the riparian, cultural, and traditional resource values of the area (pg. 2-24).

Recommendation:

The FEIS should specify why BLM selected Preferred Alternative E, which contains three ACECs, rather than Alternative D, which contains seven ACECs. The FEIS should also clarify why the Limitrophe should be classified as a CMA, rather than an ACEC. On March 9, 2007, we spoke to Micky Baily (BLM) who provided additional clarification on this topic. The explanations she provided regarding the designations were reasonable and should be incorporated in the FEIS. The reasons for this decision and the benefits associated with it should be more clearly described in the FEIS.

Recommendation:

EPA recommends that the BLM and Bureau of Reclamation provide the funds necessary to implement the CMA, including funds for stakeholder meetings,

development of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and management plan, and implementation. A commitment to funding these activities should be made in the FEIS and the Record of Decision.

Utility Corridor

The YFO Draft RMP/EIS may need to be amended due to construction associated with the North Baja Pipeline Expansion project. North Baja Pipeline, LLC has submitted an amended Right-of-Way Grant application to the BLM for the crossing of Federal lands. Approval of the application would require an amendment to the California Desert Conservation Plan and the Yuma District RMP, due to pipeline construction across the Milpitas Wash Special Management Area. Table 2-30 does not reference this utility corridor.

Recommendation:

EPA recommends that table 2-30 be revised to include references for the construction associated with the North Baja Pipeline Expansion project.

Miscellaneous Comments

Table ES-2 states that Alternatives A & B each have 1,005,800 acres available to livestock grazing and that 312,200 acres are unavailable. The amount of available grazing areas shown in Map 2-4a and Map 2-4b differ and appear to be incorrect. Map 2-4-c illustrates grazing management Alternatives C and E, with 387,100 acres available to livestock grazing and 930,900 acres unavailable to livestock grazing. Map 2-4-c appears to be incorrect as well.

Map 3-1 illustrates the PM₁₀ Non-Attainment Area. The Martinez Lake Open OHV Area is shown on Maps 2-8b, 2-c, 2-e, which illustrates Travel Management Areas and OHV Area Designations. Based on the PM₁₀ designations shown on Map 3-1, it appears that Martinez Lake Open OHV Area is not located in the PM₁₀ non-attainment area; however, the DEIS states that it is located inside the PM₁₀ non-attainment area (table 4-3; pg. 4-8).