

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
PALM SPRINGS-SOUTH COAST FIELD OFFICE**

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
EA Number CA-660-06-18**

DATE: September 15, 2006
TITLE / PROJECT TYPE: High Point Target Shooting Closure
APPLICANT / PROPONENT: BLM – PSSC Field Office

LOCATION OF PROPOSED ACTION: T. 9S., R.1E., Section 2 W1/2, Section 11 NE1/4, Section 12 NW1/4 SBM, San Diego County. The High Point shooting area is located east of Temecula, California just off of State Route 79 in the Aguanga Valley. The area is located along the Palomar/Aguanga Divide which is the dividing line for the Palomar Ranger District, Cleveland National Forest and the Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office, BLM. This area serves a user public from at least three different counties – Orange, Riverside and San Diego.

PROJECT ACREAGE:	BLM	<u>440 Acres</u>
	Other Federal	<u>0</u>
	State	<u>0</u>
	Private	<u>0</u>
	Other (specify)	<u>0</u>

USGS TOPOGRAPHIC MAP: Aguanga 7.5 minute quad

LAND USE PLAN CONFORMANCE and Other Regulatory Compliance:

Land Use Plan Conformance. In accordance with Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations 1610.5-3, the proposed action and alternatives are in conformance with the *South Coast Resource Management Plan and Record Decision* (1994).

Endangered Species Act. A determination of “no affect” to Federally-listed species was made; formal consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in accordance with the Endangered Species Act is not required.

Cultural Resources and Native American Concerns. Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), as implemented (36 CFR Part 800), requires Federal agencies to take into account the effects of their undertakings on historic properties. The State Protocol Agreement (2004) between the California State Director of the BLM and the California State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) defines the roles and relationships between the SHPO’s office and the BLM under the National Programmatic Agreement. The State protocol is intended

to ensure that the BLM operates efficiently and effectively in accordance with the intent and requirements of the NHPA. The protocol streamlines the Section 106 process by not requiring case-by-case consultation with the SHPO on most individual undertakings.

Valid existing rights shall not be affected by any proposed action or alternatives outlined in this environmental assessment. The BLM has no authority over private, County, State or other Federal lands. No decisions shall be made by BLM regarding use of firearms on private, County, State or other Federal lands. The San Diego County Sheriff's Office is the appropriate contact for any firearms issues on private, County or State lands.

NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

The BLM and the Cleveland National Forest have received numerous complaints from local landowners regarding stray and ricocheting bullets hitting structures and nearly hitting persons on private property in the vicinity of High Point Road and State Route 79 corridor in northern San Diego County. The Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office law enforcement officer made on-site visits to near-by private property owners' to view impacts from stray and ricocheting bullets. One private property owner filed a complaint with the San Diego County Sheriff's department regarding stray bullets coming onto his property. Finally, a private property owner obtained legal council to represent local residents that had been affected by stray and ricocheting bullets from target shooters along the High Point Road.

On May 7, 2004, temporary emergency closures were implemented by the Bureau of Land Management, Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office and the Palomar Ranger District of the Cleveland National Forest to protect public health and safety. Recreational target shooting in the High Point Road area posed an immediate threat to the lives and property of nearby residents, as well as other users of the national forest and BLM administered lands. The temporary closure on the BLM administered lands was imposed via Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations section 8364.1 authorizing BLM to issue closure and restriction orders which provide for the protection of persons, property and public lands and resources. These regulations are issued under the provisions of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (Pub. L. 94-579, 90 stat. 2743, 43 U.S.C. 1701).

The purpose and need for this action is to provide an enforceable way to permanently eliminate the threat of stray rounds being fired from the vicinity of High Point Road and striking private structures and endangering the lives of residents in and around the State Route 79 corridor, as well as public land visitors.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION and ALTERNATIVES

A. Proposed Action

For reasons of public health and safety the BLM in conjunction with the Cleveland National Forest, proposes to issue a permanent closure order which would prohibit target shooting along the High Point Road (8S05) in the Aguanga Valley. Approximately 440 acres of BLM

administered lands would be affected by the closure (T.9 S., R.1 E., Section 2 W1/2, Section 11 NE1/4, Section 12 NW1/4, SBBM). Refer to Map. Foot and vehicle access would not be restricted by the proposed action. In order to effectively implement the closure, BLM proposes to (1) install closure order signs at the beginning of the High Point Road and, (2) install plastic “No Target Shooting” signs along the High Point Road at the target shooting sites. The area would remain open to hunting for the legal pursuit of game consistent with California Department of Fish and Game regulations and seasons; and law enforcement officers while in the performance of their official duties. The closure order would be published in local media and in the *Federal Register* as a permanent closure order under 43 CFR 8365.1-6 Supplementary rules.

The BLM and the Cleveland National Forest are preparing separate environmental assessments that will analyze the effects of the proposed closure on resources administered by each agency.

B. No Action Alternative

The Proposed Action would not be undertaken. The BLM administered lands along the High Point Road would remain open to target shooting, subject to applicable statutes, regulations, policy and land use plans.

C. Alternatives Eliminated from Further Study

Allowing Non-Rifle Target Shooting:

Based on public comment during the scoping period, an alternative was discussed that would allow non-rifle target shooting by persons using firearms that do not have the potential to reach private residences. This alternative would allow continued use of shotguns and handguns for target shooting in the High Point Road area.

This alternative was not carried forward into further analysis because, based on input from both the BLM and Cleveland National Forest law enforcement officers, it would be difficult and costly to enforce as continued use of the area for target shooting would provide a cover for unauthorized shooters. Nearby residents and recreational users (hikers, horseback riders, off-highway vehicle users) using the High Point Road would remain susceptible to cross fire, stray and ricocheting bullets.

Comments received during the scoping process and public “Open House” wanted BLM and the Cleveland National Forest to address opening an alternative location for target shooting.

Analyzing the potential of other locations on BLM administered land or the national forest for target shooting areas, is outside the scope of the proposed action. Since BLM administered lands are open to target shooting unless administratively closed through a closure order, alternative target shooting locations could be available in San Bernardino, Riverside, and San Diego Counties. The public land user has the responsibility of locating a safe and accessible area in which to target shoot on BLM administered lands.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

A. Area Description

The High Point Road (8S05) is located in the Aguanga Valley east of Temecula, California. The road is the main access route on to the east side of the Palomar Divide and the Cleveland National Forest, Palomar Ranger District. Located just west of State Route 79 the maintained dirt road starts on private property owned by the California RV Resort and snakes along a ridgeline to the top of Palomar Divide. The BLM administered lands begin approximately 1.5 miles to the southeast of the private land and straddles the road and ridgeline for about 1.3 miles.

A small ridgeline runs north and south to the east of the High Point Road. To the west is the base of Palomar Mountain on the Forest Service lands. The BLM administered lands are primarily of a chaparral community vegetation type, intermixed with non-native species such as mustard.

B. Recreation

The BLM administered lands along the High Point Road are used for numerous types of recreational activities because of easy access onto undeveloped lands. The open and undeveloped BLM and Forest Service lands along the High Point Road attract all types of recreational users from horseback riders, to hikers, to target shooters and hunters. The area has attracted target shooters from all over southern California because of its close proximity to urban areas and easy access onto public lands. The exploding population growth in southern California has brought a heavy volume of recreational shooting activity onto the public lands along the High Point Road. The target shooting sites along the road have also become littered with trash and debris as shooters bring and leave targets and bullet casings. The development of the surrounding private lands and the increasing shooting activity and other recreational activity has made the BLM administered lands and contiguous Forest Service lands unsafe and inappropriate for target shooting.

C. Wildland-Urban Interface

The BLM administered lands within the project area are bordered on the west and south by undeveloped lands within the Cleveland National Forest. To the north of the BLM lands is the development of the California RV Resort. Approximately 1.5 miles to the east is State Route 79. Between the BLM administered lands and the highway is a long strip of private property which consists of numerous small ranchitas. Most of the ranchitas consist of a primary dwelling with numerous outbuildings, corrals, water tanks, and fences. Over the past 25 years the private lands surrounding the BLM administered lands have experienced increased development. Several adjacent landowners have experienced stray and ricocheting bullets strike their homes and outbuildings. These landowners are now in harms way of target shooting activities taking place on the adjoining BLM and National Forest lands.

Because of easy access into the area and the establishment of shooting sites due to debris left by target shooters, the area has over the years attracted illegal dumping of household trash. Discarded household items, appliances and furniture have provided additional targets for

shooters. Yearly volunteer cleanup projects have removed tons of trash and debris from the BLM and National Forest lands as well as adjoining private property along the High Point Road.

D. Threatened and Endangered Species

The project area contains modeled habitat for the southwestern willow flycatcher, the arroyo toad, the mountain yellow-legged frog, the California red-legged frog, Nevin's barberry, and Vail Lake ceanothus.

Modeled habitat for these species is found along drainages that run downslope from Aguanga Ridge or along Cottonwood Creek, adjacent to Oak Grove and High Point Roads. Although Cottonwood Creek lies within the 0.5-mile buffer of the roads, it lies in the bottom of a steep canyon which is separated from the roads by steep and densely vegetated topography. The potential is low for aquatic species that may be found in the creek to travel cross-country to areas directly impacted by target shooting in the High Point Road area.

E. Sensitive Species

The project area contains known locations of the San Diego horned lizard, San Felipe monardella, Hall's monardella, and Payson's jewelflower. In addition, the project area contains potential habitat for the pallid bat, the San Diego ringneck snake, the two-striped garter snake, and the coastal rosy boa.

F. Cultural Resources

The occupation of human settlement in southern Californian began approximately 12,000 years before the present day (BP). Several periods of settlement have existed in southern California from the Paleo-Indian period, through the Spanish occupation, Mexican settlement, and into the present day American period.

The Paleo-Indian period, dating from 12,000 years to 8,000 years B.P., is represented by artifact assemblages of the San Dieguito complex. This complex is represented almost exclusively by flaked stone technology and an absence of milling technology. The San Dieguito complex apparently represents nomadic groups focused on hunting, gathering, and collecting.

The Archaic period (8,000 – 2,000 B.P.) in southwestern California is typified by the La Jolla and Early Milling Stone Horizon cultural traditions. The presence of milling implements reflects the increased importance of seeds and plant foods and a shift away from hunting during the Archaic Period. A reduction in projectile point size indicates the use of dart and atlatl technology.

The Late Prehistoric period is marked by the appearance of arrow points and ceramics. In inland San Diego the late prehistoric is represented by several complexes- including the San Luis Rey complex. Subsistence during this period included hunting and gathering with an emphasis on acorns. Bedrock mortars, millingstones, ceramics, and triangular arrow points are associated with this complex. The Luiseno culture is believed to have derived from the San Luis Rey

complex. The project area lies at the edge of Luiseno territory. The Cahuilla people to the north share cultural and language traditions with the Luiseno.

The Spanish period began with the establishment of the San Diego presidio and the San Diego, San Luis Rey, and San Juan Capistrano missions. The Spanish introduced horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, corn, wheat, olives and other agricultural goods and implements as well as Christianity and European diseases. Inland Native American groups were less affected by the coastal missions and maintained more traditional subsistence and settlement practices.

During the Mexican occupation, beginning in 1821, landowners pushed further into the interior hills and mountains, resulting in conflict between Mexican rancheros and Native Americans. Some Indians were able to secure land grants and the Mexican government established some pueblos for Indian rancherias. Much of this land was lost to increasing pressure from the Mexican ranchos.

Occupation by European settlers began when Mexico ceded California to the United States in 1848. Much of the land that once constituted rancho holdings became public land and therefore available for settlement. Conflicts between Native Americans and Euro-American settlers led to the establishment of reservations in the late 1870's.

Historic events such as the gold rush of 1849, the establishment of stage and railroad lines, and the homestead acts led to an increase in European occupation throughout the late 1800's. Aguanga, less than 2 miles north of the project area, was a station on the Yuma to Los Angeles stage line and Butterfield Overland mail route. The project area adjoins lands managed by the US Forest Service. Forest lands were seen as reserves of lumber, minerals, and water threatened by increasing population pressures. The Cleveland National Forest was one of the first areas of reserved land created under the Forest Reserve Act passed in 1891.

No cultural resources have been recorded on BLM managed lands within the closure area, but several prehistoric sites have been recorded on adjacent Forest lands. These resources include lithic and/or ceramic concentrations and sites described as temporary camps. Government Land Office survey maps from 1855-56 and 1884 indicate the presence of an Indian Rancheria in the north half of Section 3 and the "road from Aguanga to Oak Grove Valley" cutting across Section 2 from northwest to southeast. The historic Thompson Ranch, established prior to 1900, is located north of the proposed closure area.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Critical Elements

The following table summarizes potential impacts to various elements of the human environment, including the "critical elements" listed in BLM Manual H-1790-1, Appendix 5, as amended. Elements for which there are no impacts will not be discussed further in this document.

Environmental Element	Proposed Action	No Action Alternative
Air Quality/Noise	Reduce noise levels	No change
ACECs	No effect	No effect
Cultural Resources	No effect	No effect
Native American Concerns	No effect	No effect
Farmlands	No effect	No effect
Floodplains	No effect	No effect
Energy (E.O. 13212)	No effect	No effect
Minerals	No effect	No effect
T&E Animal Species	Potential increase in habitat	No effect
T&E Plant Species	Potential increase in habitat	No effect
Invasive, Nonnative Species	No effect	No effect
Wastes (hazardous/solid)	Reduce target shooting waste	No change
Water Quality (surface and ground)	No effect	No effect
Wetlands/Riparian Zones	No effect	No effect
Wild and Scenic Rivers	No effect	No effect
Wilderness	No effect	No effect
Environmental Justice	No effect	No effect
Health and Safety Risks to Children	Reduce shooting hazards for local residents	No change
Visual Resource Mgmt.	No effect	No effect

B. Discussion of Impacts

Proposed Action:

Closing the 440 acres of BLM administered lands along the High Point Road would reduce hazards from stray and ricocheting bullets landing in and hitting near by residences. Trash and debris left on the public lands from shooters would be reduced or eliminated. Noise from the discharge of guns and rifles would also be reduced, adding to the comfort level of recreational users in the area. Opportunities for target shooting would still exist on other BLM administered lands in the region. Recreational target shooters would have to explore the numerous parcels of BLM administered lands in the region to obtain a location that provides the physical landscape characteristics required for a safe shooting area. Access onto these alternate lands could be somewhat restricted due to lack of roads and proximity to private land.

The reduction in vehicle traffic, trash dumping, and high-impact public use may allow some disturbed land to recover and provide for potential habitat for sensitive, threatened, endangered, and candidate species in the area.

No cultural resources inventories have been completed and no cultural resources have been recorded on BLM managed lands within the closure area. The project does not have the potential to adversely affect cultural resources or historic properties: the proposed closure is an administrative action. Surface disturbance will be limited to installation of signs along High Point Road which will inform the public that the area is closed to target shooting. The installation of signs on shoulders of existing roads qualifies as an undertaking exempt from further cultural resources review per the 2004 State Protocol Agreement: Exemption A20.

The reduction in trash dumping and intensive, high impact, public recreation use may have a positive effect on cultural resources.

No Action Alternative

Under this alternative, target shooting would continue to be allowed on the public lands administered by the BLM along the High Point Road. Despite regulations and ordinances requiring use of an appropriate backstop for target shooting, stray bullets would continue to strike nearby residences. The threat would continue that a stray bullet would strike a resident. BLM would continue to receive complaints from local residents about this hazard.

Trash and debris would accumulate at the sites where target shooting is occurring. These areas would continue to draw residents to dump household trash and goods. BLM and the Forest Service would continue to conduct yearly clean-up projects in the area.

Target shooting areas along the High Point Road would continue to be denuded of vegetation. Potential habitat for sensitive, threatened, endangered and candidate species would not have the opportunity to develop in the area where target shooting is taking place. These species would be unlikely to inhabit these locals because of lack of vegetation, constant human activity and noise from target shooting. Horseback riders, hikers and mountain bikers would travel the High Point Road on a limited basis, during the times when target shooters are not utilizing the area.

C. Mitigation Measures. None identified.

D. Cumulative Impacts

As urban development continues to spread into the wild lands of southern California, more and more pressure will be placed on BLM and the Cleveland National Forest to control or eliminate target shooting from the public lands. The next best option is to provide for target shooting in designated areas with more intensive management oversight, such as private gun clubs or through public-private management partnerships.

The no action alternative may combine with other projects and activities in the area, resulting in cumulative effects. Overlapping and adjacent projects on Forest Service lands may contribute toward cumulative effects: the Aguanga Ridge, Cottonwood, and High Point fuelbreaks; and the Kohler, Northslope, and Cottonwood prescribed burns. Additionally, continuing residential and commercial development in Riverside County may add to cumulative effects, as may recreational activities such as hunting, hiking, biking, and driving. The potential effects of these projects and activities if combined with the no action alternative may be the loss of potential habitat and potential loss of species.

PERSONS / AGENCIES CONSULTED:

Cleveland National Forest, Palomar Ranger District
Attendees of Open House

LIST of PREPARERS:

Janaye Byergo, South Coast Project Manager, BLM
Joyce Schlachter, Wildlife Biologist, BLM
Pete Gomben, NEPA Coordinator, Cleveland NF
Megan Jennings, Biologist, Palomar Ranger District, Cleveland NF
Margaret Hangan, Heritage Program Manager, Cleveland NF
Wanda Raschkow, Cultural Resources Specialist, BLM

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION:

A letter dated May 18, 2005 and co-signed by the BLM and Cleveland National Forest officials was mailed to interested members of the public. The letter summarized the purpose and need for the project, explained the proposed action, and notified the public of an open house to be held the following month.

On June 11, 2005, a public open house was held at the Oak Grove Community Center to provide the public with the opportunity to ask questions and get information regarding the proposed action. Personnel from the BLM and the Cleveland National Forest were on hand. Some 26 members of the public signed the register at the open house.

Approximately 50 persons commented on the proposed action during the scoping period, either by email or by submitting handwritten comments. A few persons provided essentially the same statements in separate emails to the BLM and the Cleveland National Forest.

On October 11, 2006, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office and the U.S.D.A. Forest Service, Cleveland National Forest, Palomar Ranger District jointly released environmental assessments for a 30 day public comment review. Approximately 215 letters and emails requesting comment on the environmental assessments were sent to members of the public, political representatives, tribal groups and others. Four comment letters or emails were received during the public comment period. Refer to Attachment – Response to Comments.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT CONSIDERATIONS:

Public comments submitted for this environmental assessment, including names and street addresses of respondents, will be available for public review at the Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office during regular business hours (7:45 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.), Monday through Friday, except holidays. Individual respondents may request confidentiality. If you wish to withhold your name or address from public review or from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your comments. Such requests will be honored to the extent allowed by law. All submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, will be made available for public inspection in their entirety.

REVIEWED BY: \S\Greg Hill
Environmental Coordinator

1/26/07
Date

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
PALM SPRINGS-SOUTH COAST FIELD OFFICE**

**DECISION RECORD
CA-660-06-18**

NAME of PROJECT: High Point Target Shooting Closure

DECISION: It is my decision to approve the proposed action as described in Environmental Assessment (EA) number CA-660-06-18. The Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office will impose a permanent closure to target shooting on BLM administered lands located along the High Point Road (T.9 S., R.1 E., Section 2 W1/2, Section 11 NE1/4, Section 12 NW1/4, SBBM, San Diego County).

The target shooting closure is being imposed to protect the safety of the public accessing the lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management within the High Point Road corridor and nearby residents. These lands will be closed to the discharge of firearms. This closure does not apply to licensed hunters in the lawful pursuit of game animals, as regulated by the California Department of Fish and Game, or law enforcement officers while in the performance of their official duties. In addition, the closure will not limit foot or vehicle access to the area.

RATIONALE: The approved action will help to reduce shooting hazards for residents and public land user within the vicinity of High Point Road. The approved action will not cause unnecessary or undue degradation, and is in conformance with the following applicable land use plan: *South Coast Resource Management Plan and Record of Decision* (1994).

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT: Environmental impacts associated with the proposed action have been assessed. Based on the analysis provided in the attached EA, I conclude the approved action is not a major federal action and will result in no significant impacts to the environment under the criteria in Title 40 Code of Federal Regulations 1508.18 and 1508.27. Preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement to further analyze possible impacts is not required pursuant to Section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969.

APPEALS: This decision may be appealed to the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of the Secretary, in accordance with the regulations at Title 43 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 4, and the information provided in Form 1842-1 (enclosed). If an appeal is taken, your notice of appeal must be filed in the Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Department of the Interior, 690 West Garnet Avenue, P.O. Box 581260, North Palm Springs, California 92258, within 30 days from receipt of this decision. The appellant has the burden of showing that the decision appealed from is in error.

