

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
PALM SPRINGS-SOUTH COAST FIELD OFFICE

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT  
Ea Number CA-660-05-32

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**Date:** March 4, 2005

**Name of Proposed Action:** Mesquite, Barn, Yucca Ridge, Canyon & Desert Willow Trail repair at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

**Case File/Project No.:** CA-660-05-31

**Legal Description:** T1S, R4E, Sec 33, NE ¼, SBBM

**Land Use Plan conformance:** In compliance with 43CFR1610.5-3 and BLM MS1617.3, the proposed action is in conformance with the *California Desert Conservation Area Plan (amended 2002)*.

**LAND USE PLAN CONFORMANCE and Other Regulatory Compliance:**

In accordance with Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations 1610.5-3, the proposed action and alternatives are in conformance with the following approved land use plan: South Coast Resource Management Plan (1994). The resource condition objectives for the Riverside-San Bernardino County Management Area include providing for recreation opportunities, which are compatible with sensitive species management objectives.

**NEED FOR PROPOSED ACTION:**

The BLM's Priorities for Recreation and Visitor Services (BLM Workplan Fiscal Years 2003-2007)

**Objective 3:** Ensure public health and safety, and improve the condition and accessibility of recreation sites and facilities.

**Milestone 3:** Manage and maintain recreation sites and facilities to acceptable operational standards, with priority given to reducing the backlog of identified deferred maintenance projects.

**Action #1:** Improve annual maintenance capabilities at developed recreation sites to reduce the backlog of deferred maintenance projects.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION and ALTERNATIVES**

**Background:** The Mesquite, Barn, Yucca Ridge and Desert Willow Trail have all experienced erosional damage due to higher than normal rainfall. This project will consist of an increase in routine maintenance upon the trail system at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. The project would require the replacement of wooden footbridges, installation of rock cribbing, steps, and

waterbars, redirecting water off the trails system and back into their normal flow directions. Palm Springs South Coast Field Office volunteers and staff members will conduct the maintenance projects. The removal of rotting wooden steps for safety purposes has occurred on the Mesquite trail, immediately behind the old barn, and recycled concrete steps will replace them. This will reduce the angle of the trail slope as well as further erosion caused by foot traffic. The Yucca Ridge and Desert Willow Trail will have rock cribbing, steps and waterbars installed. A rockslide area located east of the Yucca Ridge Trail will be the collection source for rock materials. For safety purposes, on the Mesquite, Barn and Canyon Trail old, rotting footbridges are to be removed and new bridges will be installed. The bridges will rest on a footprint, which supports the structure off the ground. When possible the more efficient geogrid and geocell material will be combined with gravel, and added to the trail system. This new introduction will reduce the number of footbridges, culverts, ditches and waterbars, reducing public safety concerns and allow water to move freely through an existing trail giving the site a more natural appearance.

No Action Alternative

The Proposed Action would not be undertaken. Existing management and use of the site would continue subject to applicable statutes, regulations, policy and land use plans. Habitat degradation will continue from OHV intrusions. Any revegetation will occur naturally.

**AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT**

1. Area Description

The lands included in the Big Morongo Canyon ACEC contain several significant resource values, which contribute to the areas relevance and importance. Sensitive resources, which occur within the Big Morongo Canyon ACEC, are listed in the following Table.

| SPECIES  | STATUS                      |
|--|-----------------------------|
| Desert tortoise ( <i>Gopherus agassizii</i> )  | Federal/State Threatened    |
| Desert bighorn sheep ( <i>Ovis canadensis</i> )  | State Protected             |
| Mountain lion ( <i>Felis concolor</i> )  | Specially Protected         |
| Mule deer ( <i>Odocoileus hemionus</i> )   | Game animal                 |
| Gamble quail ( <i>Lophortyx gambelii</i> )   | Game Bird                   |
| Burrowing owl ( <i>Athene cunicularia</i> )  | State Species of Concern    |
| Triple-ribbed milkvetch ( <i>Astragalus tricarinatus</i> )                             | Federal Endangered          |
| Little San Bernardino Mountains Gilia ( <i>Gilia maculata</i> ) - now <i>Linanthus</i> | Fed. Candidate Listing (C1) |
| Robison's monardella ( <i>Monardella robisonii</i> )                                   | Fed. Candidate Listing (C2) |

Reptiles. The Desert tortoise is a Federal and California Threatened species that is found in the arid sandy or gravelly locales of the Mojave Desert. It favors vegetation communities dominated by creosote (*Larrea tridentata*) or saltbush (*Atriplex sp.*) and cactus and can also be found in hills, washes, canyon bottoms and oases. During the spring and early summer periods of activity, tortoises can be found foraging mainly on the hillsides, while during the latter months, as it heats up; more of their time is spent foraging in the sandy washes. Their food preference has been shown to be overwhelmingly native annuals and perennials rather than exotic species such as *Schismus sp.*, *Erodium cicutarium* or *Bromus madritensis ssp. rubens*. The native plants are much richer in nutrients and may be essential for health and reproduction. The more sandy flat areas in the bottoms of the two canyons and the hillsides where habitat rehabilitation is proposed provide potential desert tortoise habitat, though no sightings have been reported by Big Morongo Canyon Preserve personnel or during the pre-restoration survey.

Mammals. Desert bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis ssp. nelsoni*) are found in the Desert Mountains of the Mojave Desert, including the Santa Rosa, the San Jacinto and the Little San Bernardino Mountains. Bighorn sheep live most of the year close to the desert floor, ascending the mountains only as summer progresses, following the retreat of good forage on the lower desert floor. After the winter rains, the sheep return in early spring to the lower canyons, such as Little Morongo Canyon, where the lambs are born. Bighorn sheep require ready access to water and must remain close to permanent water holes. Such permanent sources of water are to be found in the higher reaches of the two canyons where habitat rehabilitation is proposed. These two canyons also serve as the major corridor for the Little San Bernardino Mountain herd, estimated to be approximately 50 sheep, as it moves from its summer range in the San Gorgonio Wilderness/San Bernardino National Forest uplands to its winter range in the Joshua Tree National Park area.

Other mammals which can be found in the canyon are mountain lion (*Felis concolor*), mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), ring-tailed cat (*Bassariscus astutus*), coyote (*Canus latrans*) and other small game species.

Birds. Though bird diversity is one of Big Morongo Canyon's trademarks, most bird life is seen in the permanent riparian habitats at the northern end of Big Morongo Canyon near the town of Morongo. Within the limits of the two canyons where habitat rehabilitation is proposed, potential habitat for only one species of concern, the burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*), may be encountered. This small, terrestrial oriented owl is found in open country near areas of high rodent density. Some of the more open areas of the canyons floor are suitable for burrowing owls, though no sightings have been reported by Big Morongo Canyon preserve personnel.

Sensitive Plant Species. The triple-ribbed milkvetch (*Astragalus tricarinatus*) is a short-lived perennial plant known only from the Big Morongo Canyon area. It is federally listed as endangered due to disturbance in most of its limited habitat, which includes exposed rocky slopes and canyon walls such as are found in the two canyons proposed for habitat rehabilitation. There are no records of any observations of this species within the proposed project area according to Big Morongo Canyon preserve personnel.

The little San Bernardino Mountain Gilia is a tiny annual that has been observed in sandy washes

and flat areas within the Little San Bernardino Mountains. Because of its limited range it has been federally listed as a Category 1 candidate. Potentially suitable habitat can be found in the several wide, sandy areas on the floor of the two canyons, though no verified sightings have been reported.

Robison's monardella (*Monardella robisonii*) is a small short-lived perennial shrub found in rocky habitats within Pinyon and juniper woodlands in the higher elevation portion of Little Morongo Canyon. It is endemic to California and occurs infrequently within its limited distribution in the Little San Bernardino Mountains. It is currently federally listed as a Category 2 candidate.

### Cultural Resources.

During the ethnographic period the Serrano occupied the Morongo Valley area. The Serrano followed a lifestyle similar to their southern Cahuilla neighbors and engaged in trade and social exchange with the Cahuilla. Villages were usually established near a reliable source of water and within reasonable distance of staple foods and other resources.

Covington Park and Big Morongo Preserve are the location of a previously recorded archaeological site(SBr-561). In 1971 P. Wilke recorded the presence of a "large camp of some permanence". The available water and diverse plant resources would have made the location attractive for occupation. Wilke reported that even at that time, the site had been damaged by artifact collecting and much of it had been plowed.

During the 1900's a large ranch was established in the Covington Park area. The old barn and other features at the Big Morongo Preserve are remnants of this period of use. Until the establishment of Highway 62 in the 1930's, Big Morongo Canyon was the location of a road that connected Desert Hot Springs and the Morongo Valley.

Although activities associated with the historic ranching period have disturbed much of the ground surface, there is still a potential for subsurface artifacts and features related to the prehistoric occupation of the area. Indeed, isolated pottery fragments have been identified in areas that have been plowed and are regularly mowed or otherwise modified. In addition, there is the potential for the discovery of historic period artifacts as some material may have been buried on site.

A qualified archaeologist or archaeology technician will monitor all surface-disturbing activities. Excavated soil will be screened and examined for cultural material.

If previously unidentified cultural resources are encountered during project activities, all work will cease in the immediate area and the PSSC Cultural Resources Specialist will be notified.

## 2. Land Status

1. **Land Use Classification:** Area of Critical Environmental Concern
2. **Valid Existing Rights:** None of the work occurs on private lands, and none will

obstruct private right of ways. All routes that access power lines (SCE right of ways) will remain open and unobstructed.

## 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.

| <b>Environmental Element</b>        | <b>Proposed Action</b> | <b>No Action Alternative</b> |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|
| Air Quality                         | Short-term             | No Impact                    |
| ACEC's                              | Improve ACEC           | No effect                    |
| Cultural Resources                  | No effect              | No effect                    |
| Native American Concerns            | No effect              | No effect                    |
| Farmlands                           | No impact              | No impact                    |
| Floodplains                         | No impact              | No impact                    |
| Energy (E.O. 13212)                 | No impact              | No impact                    |
| Minerals                            | No impact              | No impact                    |
| T&E Animal Species                  | No Impact              | No impact                    |
| T&E Plant Species                   | No impact              | No impact                    |
| Invasive, Nonnative Species         | Beneficial impact      | No impact                    |
| Wastes (hazardous/solid)            | No impact              | No impact                    |
| Water Quality (surface and ground)  | Improves Quality       | Increased Sediment Levels    |
| Wetlands/Riparian Zones             | Improves Quality       | Increased Erosion            |
| Wild and Scenic Rivers              | No impact              | No impact                    |
| Wilderness                          | No impact              | No impact                    |
| Environmental Justice               | No impact              | No impact                    |
| Health and Safety Risks to Children | Improves Quality       | Increases Risk               |
|                                     |                        |                              |

|                      |           |           |
|----------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Visual Resource Mgt. | No impact | No impact |
|----------------------|-----------|-----------|

B. Discussion of Impacts

1. **Proposed Action**

Project Impacts on Desert Tortoise. Since the desert tortoise is known to forage for native annuals and perennials on hillsides during the early spring months, a tortoise might traverse one of the hill climbs while foraging for food during restoration activities. However, since all hill climb efforts will be conducted by hand and by personnel experienced in working around sensitive plant and animal species, no impact is expected. If a tortoise appears on site while restoration activity is occurring, work will stop until the tortoise has exited the site. No handling of the tortoise will occur. Habitat that might be suitable for the desert tortoise will not be impacted by this project

Project Impacts on Sensitive Plant Species

The most commonly occurring plants in the project area are catclaw acacia (*acacia greggii*), cheesebush (*Larrea tridentata*), sweetbush (*Bebbia juncea*), desert willow (*Chilopsis linearis*), black-stem rabbitbrush (*Chrysothansum paniculatus*), brittle-brush (*Encelia farinosa*), bladderpod (*Isomeris arborea*), silver cholla (*Opuntia echinocarpa*), and sandpaper plant (*Petalonyx thurberi* ssp. *thurberi*). Of the sensitive plant species listed above, only the San Bernardino gilia is likely to occur in the project area. The proposed restoration would have a potential for impact only during the months of April and May when the plant is flowering.

2. **No Action Alternative:**

Trails would continue to erode and footbridges would become dangerous for use. The removal of bridges without trail repair would lead to damage within the riparian zone. Desert tortoise habitat and native plant populations would continue to degrade from impacts by erosion and foot traffic. Without restoring existing unauthorized trails, the creation of additional unauthorized trails, leading from the SCE road, could potentially occur.

C. Mitigation Measures

*Desert Tortoise Mitigation*

Desert tortoise clearance surveys will occur prior to all project activities. If a tortoise is observed within 100 feet of the project area, all activities potentially affecting individual tortoise will cease and will not continue until the individual has moved out of the area of impact. Any desert tortoise burrows observed within 100 feet of project activities will be avoided. The following standard tortoise mitigation measures will apply:

1. An employee education program must be presented to all on-site workers prior to beginning work. The program may consist of a class or video presented by a qualified biologist (BLM or contracted) or a video. Wallet-sized cards with important information for workers to carry are recommended. All on-site workers shall participate in a tortoise education program prior to initiation of reclamation activities. The operator is responsible

for ensuring that the education program is developed and presented prior to conducting activities. The program shall cover the following topics at a minimum:

- Distribution of the desert tortoise,
  - General behavior and ecology of the tortoise,
  - Sensitivity to human activities,
  - Legal protection,
  - Penalties for violations of State or Federal laws,
  - reporting requirements, and
  - Project protective mitigation measures.
2. Only biologists authorized by the USFWS and the BLM shall handle desert tortoises. The BLM or the proponent shall submit the name(s) of the proposed authorized biologist(s) to the USFWS for review and approval at least 15 days prior to the onset of activities. No activities shall begin until an authorized biologist is approved. Authorization for handling shall be granted under the auspices of consultation through the small project programmatic EA.
  3. The authorized biologist shall be required on-site during the activities. The biologist will thoroughly survey the project site for presence of tortoises each day before and during construction activities. This biologist shall have authority from the operator to halt any action that might result in harm to a tortoise.
  4. The area of disturbance shall be confined to the smallest practical area, considering topography, placement of facilities, location of burrows, public health and safety, and other limiting factors. Work area boundaries shall be delimited with flagging or other marking to minimize surface disturbance associated with vehicle straying. Special habitat features, such as burrows, identified by the qualified biologist shall be avoided to the extent possible. To the extent possible, previously disturbed areas within the testing site shall be utilized for the stockpiling of excavated materials, storage of equipment, digging of slurry pits, location of office trailers, and parking of vehicles. The qualified biologist, in consultation with the project proponent, shall ensure compliance with this measure.
  5. To prevent tortoises from falling in, holes shall be either fenced or covered as much of the time as possible and at all times when not attended.
  6. Desert tortoises may be handled only by the authorized biologist and only when necessary. New latex gloves shall be used when handling each tortoise to avoid the transfer of infectious diseases between animals. Aside from the initial site clearance, any tortoise moved shall be placed in the shade of a shrub in the direction in which it was facing when found or at the entrance to a burrow if hibernating. In general, tortoises should be moved the minimum distance possible to ensure their safety.
  7. The authorized biologist shall maintain a record of all desert tortoises handled. This information shall include for each tortoise:
    - 1) The locations (narrative and maps) and dates of observations;
    - 2) General condition and health, including injuries and state of healing and whether animals voided their bladders;

- 3) Location moved from and location moved to;
  - 4) Diagnostic markings (i.e., identification numbers or marked lateral scutes).
8. Upon locating a dead or injured tortoise, the operator is to notify the BLM. The BLM must then notify the appropriate field office (Carlsbad) of USFWS by telephone within three days of the finding. Written notification must be made within fifteen days of the finding. The information provided must include the date and time of the finding or incident (if known), location of the carcass, a photograph, cause of death, if known, and other pertinent information. Tortoise remains shall be collected, delivered to the BLM, and frozen as soon as possible. Injured animals shall be transported to a qualified veterinarian for treatment at the expense of the project proponent. If an injured animal recovers, the USFWS should be contacted for final disposition of the animal.
  9. All trash and food items shall be promptly contained within closed, raven-proof containers. These shall be regularly removed from the project site to reduce the attractiveness of the area to ravens and other tortoise predators.
  10. Structures that may function as raven nesting or perching sites are not authorized except as specifically stated in the plan of operation or notice. The project proponent shall describe anticipated structures to the BLM during initial project review.

### *Vegetation*

A pre-restoration survey for San Bernardino Mountains Gilia will be conducted by restoration staff for restoration work scheduled for the months of April and May. Any sites with potential occurrences of San Bernardino Mountains Gilia will be surveyed by a BLM botanist before restoration work will continue. Restoration sites with known populations of San Bernardino Mountains Gilia will not be restored during the months of April and May.

### D. Residual Impacts

No desert tortoise will be harmed through the implementation of the mitigation measure described in the previous section. By restoring unauthorized trails, the proposed project would have a beneficial effect on desert tortoise habitat.

### E. Cumulative Impacts

Maintenance to the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve Trail System will meet the BLM Priorities for Recreation and Visitor Services. It will provide for visitor safety and a benefit to recreational experience. The impacts would be minimal and would provide for continued care and a decrease of no natural structures within the preserve.

### **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.

**PERSONS / AGENCIES CONSULTED:**

**PREPARED BY:**

Mona Daniels, Outdoor Recreation Planner  
Wanda Raschkow, BLM Cultural Resources Specialist  
Starry Sprenkle, ECO Restoration Ecologist  
Jason Tinant, ECO Natural Resources Specialist

**REVIEWED BY:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Environmental Coordinator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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

**DECISION RECORD  
CA-660-05-03**

**NAME of PROJECT:** OHV Route Restoration

**DECISION:** It is my decision to approve the proposed action as described in Environmental Assessment (EA) number CA-660-05-03. Compliance with the mitigation measures identified in the EA is hereby required. These measures are incorporated into this decision record as stipulations by reference. A copy of this Decision Record and attendant conditions of approval (stipulations) shall be in the possession of the on-site operator during all undertakings approved herein.

**RATIONALE:** To return run-off to their natural flow routes and remove water from trail system. To repair or remove unsafe structures and restore trails to a more natural setting. The approved action is in conformance with applicable land use plans and will not cause unnecessary or undue degradation.

**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 1260, 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.

If you wish to file a petition for a stay of the effectiveness of this decision during the time that your appeal is being reviewed by the Board, pursuant to Title 43 of the Code of Federal Regulations, Part 4, Subpart E, the petition for a stay must accompany your notice of appeal. A petition for a stay is required to show sufficient justification based on the standards listed below. Copies of the notice of appeal and petition for a stay must also be submitted to each party named in this decision and to the Interior Board of Land Appeals and to the appropriate Office of the Solicitor (see 43 CFR 4.413) at the same time the original documents are filed with this office. If you request a stay, you have the burden of proof to demonstrate that a stay should be granted.

**Standards for Obtaining a Stay**

Except as otherwise provided by law or other pertinent regulations, a petition for a stay of a decision pending appeal shall show sufficient justification based on the following standards:

- (1) the relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied,
- (2) the likelihood of the appellant's success on the merits,
- (3) the likelihood of immediate and irreparable harm if the stay is not granted, and
- (4) whether the public interest favors granting the stay.

During the appeal to the State Director, all decisions from which the appeal is taken shall be effective during the pendency of the appeal.

If no appeal is taken, this decision constitutes final administrative action of this Department as it affects the mining claim(s). No appeal, protest or petition for reconsideration will be entertained from this decision after the appeal period has expired.

**APPROVED BY:**

Field Manager

Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office  
USDI Bureau of Land Management  
690 W. Garnet Avenue, P.O. Box 581260  
North Palm Springs, CA 92258-1260

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Date

