

BLM California Desert Advisory Council
MEETING MINUTES
August 26, 2023 – In-person Meeting in Ridgecrest, CA

For complete meeting discussion, please see meeting transcript

Desert Advisory Council Members: Randy Banis (Chairperson), Nathan Francis, Hans Haas, Jennifer Henning, Richard Holliday, Robert Robinson

BLM Attendees: Shelly Lynch (virtual), Greg Miller, Michelle Van Der Linden, Julia Mogen, Marc Stamer, Paul Gibbs, Tom Bickauskas, Tim Gilloon, Jennifer Whyte, Mike Ahrens

Guests: Matthew Gibbs (Zoom tech), Ruth Hidalgo, Anitra Kass (virtual), Susan Herring, Greg Herring, Andrew Silva, Sophia Merk, Mary Grimsley, Kayla Browne, Liam Connelly, Will Lebseber, Libby Vincent, Sam Burke, Eileen Anderson (virtual).

Opening and Introductions:

District Manager Shelly Lynch opened the meeting and welcomed everyone. Michelle Van Der Linden, CDD Public Affairs Officer, went over Zoom, public comment period protocols and housekeeping for the meeting. Shelly introduced BLM employees and turned it over to Randy Banis, DAC Chairperson, to introduce Desert Advisory Council members. DAC members provided a brief update and introduction.

First presentation: Ridgecrest's JB Eastern Slope Durability Agreement

- Ridgecrest Field Manager Tom Bickauskas presented on the Ridgecrest Field Office's JB Eastern Slope Durability Agreement.
- Tom highlighted the 215,000 acres relinquished two years ago for habitat restoration and rehabilitation under the Durability Agreement. A Memorandum of Understanding is in place between the Department of Fish and Wildlife and BLM.
- The project will be implemented on BLM's Areas of Critical Environmental Concern and co-located on California desert National Conservation Lands. The BLM will maintain authority on where projects are located and will meet State biological requirements.
- In addition to the MOU with CDFW and BLM, a third-party renewable energy company, Avantus is involved in funding the restoration projects. Specific restoration tasks may include tortoise fencing, informational kiosk installation and maintenance, the enhancement of springs and streams and invasive plant management.
- Lastly, Tom highlighted the importance of erasing 1,140 miles of unauthorized routes within the acreage.
- Questions? Tom received positive feedback and clarifying questions about undesignated routes in the area and funding for the project. Full discussion and questions included in meeting transcript.

Morning break

Second presentation: Wild Horse and Burro Program

- Ridgecrest Wild Horse and Burro Specialist Alex Neibergs presented on the national Wild Horse and Burro program and its activities in the California Desert District. Karen Sanders, Administrative Assistant at the Wild Horse and Burros Corral in Ridgecrest co-presented.
- Alex spoke to the BLM's comprehensive animal health and welfare program and protections under the Wild Free Horse Act.
- Discussed national statistics and funding, including the number of facilities and appropriate management levels for herd areas in the CDD.
- National challenges include pulling together more long-term holding facilities to accommodate anticipated removals.
- Discussed the development and application of fertility control for wild horses and burros. GonaCon is the latest fertility control application selected by the BLM.
- Karen covered the corral operations in Ridgecrest, touching on the care of their animals and their adoption program. The facility is open to the public Tuesday through Friday from 8:00 to noon. People can visit the animals anytime and drive the perimeter of the facility.
- Next steps include plans to work with The Navy at China Lake Military Base on a gather event. BLM has a ten-year mission to reach AML for herds on public lands.

Questions: Challenges for the BLM and its partners in the Wild Horse and Burro program was discussed further by DAC members. Alex answered defining questions on AML. Full discussion and questions included in meeting transcript.

Lunch Break

District, Field Office, and Fire Overviews

Shelly Lynch presented on the new leadership in the District (Jennifer Whyte as Acting El Centro Field Manager). The BLM recently hosted five information forums to discuss the details of the Public Lands Rule and the public comment period closed on July 5th. Presented on priorities in OHV recreation thanks to new grant funding. Informed DAC members that several nomination packages are being reviewed, five previously nominated members will be announced and seven current positions on the DAC will expire at the end of the year.

- Field Managers from each of the five field offices reported on issues and projects. Full reports and discussion included in meeting transcript.
- Randy Banis, DAC Chairperson, read the Monument Advisory Committee's 12 recommendations for Mojave Trails National Monument. The Desert Advisory Council accepted the subgroup's recommendations to put forward to the BLM in its scoping phase of the monument plan.

Public comment period – 1:45 p.m.

- Randy Banis went over public comment period protocols. There were eight in-person public comments and three virtual public comments.

- Will Lebseber, a member of the Trona community, expressed concern over rock climbers at Trona pinnacles. If the activity continues, he expressed that people and the pinnacles are at risk of harm.
- Ruth Hidalgo, a member of the recreational rockhound community, suggested the DAC/BLM accept public comments after every presentation instead of at the meeting's end. Expressed praise for the MAC's recommendations for the BLM.
- Kayla Browne, Trail Ambassador at Friends of Inyo County and member of the Public Lands Roundtable, expressed issue with the timeline to submit public comment for the draft EIS, claiming the window is too narrow. Thanked BLM for the scoping period on Conglomerate Mesa.
- Greg Herring, representing owners within the Eagle Mountain Mining District, expressed concerns over the proposed establishment of Chuckwalla National Monument. Commented that more visitors to the area would affect owners mining claims, as well as disrupt sheep corridors around Joshua Tree National Park.
- Sam Burke expressed interest in maintaining in-person DAC meetings. She suggested BLM Field Offices stream virtual meetings and open their offices for public viewing for those who cannot attend in person.
- Liam Connelly, manager at the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, shared details on upcoming volunteer and fundraising events in Cal City and Redlands in October. Expressed gratitude to the DAC and BLM.
- Eileen Anderson, scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity requested the Indian Wells Groundwater Authority public comment period be extended.
- Anitra Kass, representing the Pacific Crest Trail Association, shared status updates on Southern California's PCT. Looks forward to Sand to Snow Monument planning. Thanked Randy and DAC members for their participation.
- Sam Burke requested in a letter shared with District Manager Greg Miller, that BLM assist tribal members with access to their sacred sites.
- Eileen Anderson expressed concern over BLM and CDFW MOU with Avantus. Asked the BLM to maintain strong communication during projects. Thanked BLM Field Managers for their reports.
- Full transcript of public comments available online.

Third presentation: Mojave Desert Sentinel Landscape

- Erin Adams, Director of Government and External Affairs at Marine Air Ground Task Force Training Command, presented on the Mojave Desert Sentinel Landscape proposal.
- The Mojave Desert Sentinel Landscape proposes a coalition federal, state and local governments sustain land use practices in and around military ranges. The project is focused on the recovery of the Desert Tortoise, while furthering a multiple-use mission.
- Erin presented on the background of Sentinel Landscapes across the U.S., the status of the Mojave Desert proposal and partnerships with nongovernmental organizations.

Afternoon break

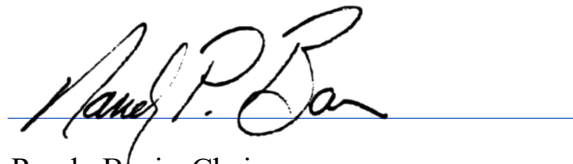
Discussion on Future Agenda Topics

- The DAC expressed interest in receiving an update on the Indian Wells Ground Authority pipeline; hearing from a solar representative on procedures for energy interchange, an update on the Sand to Snow National Monument, and updates on solar projects and conservation lands near I-10 freeway corridors.
- The DAC does not have quorum, so no official recommendations were made.

Wrap up and closing

- Shelly reminded the DAC of the next meeting on December 8, 9 in Palm Springs.
- Seven of the 10 remaining members are expiring in January 2024. Five nominations from 2022 have been approved and will be announced soon.

Meeting adjourned at 3:30 p.m.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Randy P. Banis", is written over a horizontal blue line.

Randy Banis, Chair
Desert Advisory Council