



Field Office, Fire and Fuel Reports DESERT ADVISORY COUNCIL

DECEMBER 2023



Barstow Field Office (BAFO)



Photo: Desert tortoise enjoying the shade. Remember to check under and around your vehicle to avoid injuring these creatures.

Archaeology and Cultural Resources

Old Spanish National Historic Trail

BLM Action: The BLM completed and submitted a nomination for the National Register of Historic Places of a segment of the Old Spanish National Historic Trail (OSNHT) known as Emigrant Pass.

Partners: Old Spanish Trail Association

Status: The nomination has been reviewed. In FY2023, BLM completed 193 acres of Class III surveys along the OSNHT. Quarterly consultation with the Old Spanish Trail Association is ongoing and a collaborative mapping project was completed in FY2023.

BLM Contacts: Alexis Francois, Archaeologist and Marc Stamer, Field Manager

Recreation

Special Recreation Permits

BLM Action: The BAFO issued special recreation permits (SRPs) for recreation activities and vending.

Status: In FY2023, 161 SRPs were administered, including vendor permits for King of the Hammers. The SRPs included a variety of recreation events, mostly motorized race events (e.g., European scramble, vehicle testing, UTV races, car/truck race, speed timing trials, hare and hound, sand drags, dual sport ride), and several multi-event permits. The BAFO issued letters of agreement for various events (e.g., LA Police Baker to Las Vegas Race).

BLM Contacts: Marc Stamer, Field Manager

Wildlife

Amargosa Vole Demographic and Disease Study, Habitat Enhancement and Population Augmentation Program

BLM Action: A multi-year study of the Amargosa vole in the Tecopa area is being conducted to determine the extent of disease, vole genetics, and vole habitat needs. A captive breeding effort has also been established. These studies provided information to help guide management actions and prevent the extinction of this highly vulnerable species.

Partners: California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), Inyo County Road Department, Purdue University, US Geological Service, University of California (UC) Davis, University of California Berkeley and United States Fish and Wildlife Service

Status: UC Davis/CDFW completed a range-wide survey of the Amargosa vole last spring / summer. The initial study results indicated there was no need for immediate emergency actions. The report emphasized long-term water management is a key factor to address the recovery of the Amargosa Vole.

The BAFO received funding to initiate a “mega-marsh” project with UC Davis to create a large marsh complex near “Borehole Marsh” to serve as a refugia / breeding site. Planning efforts are continuing for this multi-year project. A marsh has been restored on adjacent private lands and was successfully repopulated with Amargosa voles making the first-time voles have been present in this marsh for more than 120 years. Monitoring is continuing and potential additional supplementations are being conducted. Recent monitoring efforts have confirmed translocated voles have successfully reproduced in the new habitat.

In November 2021, BAFO installed 1,000 feet of post-and-cable fencing near Borehole Marsh to address incursion issues in the area. There are continuing issues with illegal fires, trash accumulation, and human waste and BAFO is working with partners to resolve these issues.

Due to improving vole populations and habitat improvements, the ad hoc Amargosa Vole Team decided the insurance captive colony at UC Davis is no longer needed and all captive voles have been released. Vole numbers and habitat conditions continue to be monitored, and there is a contingency plan in place to re-establish the captive colony if necessary.

BLM Contact: Chris Otahal, Wildlife Biologist

Amargosa River Monitoring Studies / Management Actions

BLM Action: The BAFO is involved in various monitoring studies / management actions associated with the Amargosa River including: Amargosa niterwort population monitoring sensitive bird species spot mapping/Cowbird Management Program, tamarisk control efforts, SCAN monitoring, fish monitoring, hydrology studies including U.S. Geological Survey stream gauges, habitat restoration, endangered plant studies and spring studies.

Partners: Amargosa Conservancy, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, California Department of Transportation, The Nature Conservancy, Point Blue Conservation Science, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Geological Survey

Status: The BAFO continues to implement tamarisk management on the Amargosa River. The BAFO is developing a burn plan to address a large stand of tamarisk not suitable for treatment through other means. The BAFO worked with Point Blue Conservation Science to

conduct the 18th year of long- term bird monitoring efforts. Field work for 2023 is complete.

The BAFO established eight Assessment, Inventory and Monitoring (AIM) study sites on the Amargosa River in 2021. In 2023, several of these sites were re-sampled and some additional sites that could not be surveyed in 2022 were added. Volunteers from Adventure Scientists continued collecting water samples for analysis as part of their national Wild and Scenic Rivers Program in 2023.

Our partners at Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden finished their rare plant survey / mapping effort in 2022 and provided a summary of the BLM-funded two-year project. As part of this survey effort, two new populations of the endangered Niterwort plant were discovered. The BAFO is working with partners to resolve management issues that could potentially impact these populations and a Niterwort Working Group is engaging in this effort.

The BAFO is continuing to work with CalTrans to implement additional plantings in the Shoshone vicinity to add to restoration efforts in the area. In January 2023, the Nature Conservancy planted approximately 11,000 coyote willow and 880 screwbean mesquites on a 2.74-acre portion of the Shoshone site and planted 8,000 coyote willows on a 0.75-acre site at the confluence of the Amargosa River and Willow Creek. The BAFO received additional funding to expand this project. Initial work on this project has been initiated and will be completed over the next three years.

The BAFO has received California State OHV funds to move forward with signing open/closed routes within the Amargosa North and Amargosa South Areas of Critical Concern which will allow time to address unauthorized route usage in the vicinity of the Amargosa River.

The BAFO initiated a partnership with researchers to study the massive Screwbean Mesquite die-off observed on the Amargosa River. This project will feed into a larger project looking at this issue on a regional scale. The BAFO is working with the Mojave Native Plant Program to obtain seed collections from the Shoshone area to ensure the populations' genetics are preserved– and to serve as a seed source for future re-planting of screwbeans in the area. Two new screwbean mesquite research projects are scheduled to be initiated in FY2024.

The BAFO is working with University of Las Vegas researchers on a study to measure plant response to ongoing drought, potential native plant recovery, and develop tools for land managers to use in response to drought from climate change. The BAFO is working with another group of researchers who will conduct a study of using biocrusts (soil crusts created by fungi and mosses) in route restoration efforts. Both studies are in the Chicago Valley area near the Amargosa Wild and Scenic River. The BAFO is also working with a researcher to investigate the microbiology of springs, including those associated with the Amargosa River.

BLM Contact: Chris Otahal, Wildlife Biologist

Afton Canyon Wildlife Habitat Enhancement Efforts

BLM Action: The BAFO is continuing a focused wildlife habitat enhancement program on the Afton Canyon portion of the Mojave Trails National Monument. The section of the Mojave River flowing through the Afton Canyon Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) is currently considered “eligible” under the National Wild and Scenic River Act and is managed to maintain the scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, and cultural outstanding and remarkable values on which this determination was based. The

BAFO is collecting data to help develop the management plan for the Mojave Trails National Monument.

Partners: 3M Corporation, Amargosa Conservancy Point Blue, California Alliance for Tamarisk Biocontrol, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, California Institute of Technology, Living Desert Zoo and Gardens, Mojave Desert Land Trust, Oregon State University, Princeton University, Townson University, University of California, Santa Barbara, and USGS

Status: The BAFO has been working with the Mojave Desert Land Trust to implement the Women in Science Discovering Our Mojave (WISDOM) program. Through WISDOM, minority female interns collect resource data from Afton Canyon to enhance their training in science, technology, engineering, and math. In 2023, the BAFO received funding to continue tamarisk beetle studies associated with this program. The Mojave Desert Land Trust is planning a celebration to highlight work over the last five years and follow some of the 33 interns' career paths after graduating from the WISDOM program.

The BAFO, through the Fire and Fuels Program, has continued tamarisk treatments within Afton Canyon and approximately 200 acres of tamarisk were treated / re-treated in 2023. The BAFO continues to work with partners at USGS and The Living Desert to develop a captive breeding / re-introduction program for the Southwestern Pond Turtle in Afton Canyon. With funding from BAFO, The Living Desert will upgrade their head start facility and develop an implementation plan for this species.

The BAFO continues to work with Southern California Edison and Brightline on restoration projects in Afton Canyon and to integrate with other on-going restoration efforts. The BAFO is working with California Institute of Technology researchers on a research project looking at natural methane emissions as it relates to climate change. Afton Canyon will be one of the study sites. The BAFO is also working with NASA on an Autonomous Vehicle research project using Afton Canyon as their testing grounds.

BLM Contact: Chris Otahal, Wildlife Biologist

Other / Misc.

Recovery and Sustainment Partnership (RASP) Initiative

BLM Action: The BAFO continues working with the Marine Corps, Army, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop and implement the RASP Mojave Desert Tortoise Recovery Implementation Plan completed in 2022. To date, six projects have been approved and include restoration and OHV education outreach efforts within the Fremont-Kramer, Superior-Cronese, and Ord-Rodman ACECs. The BAFO coordinates the implementation of these approved projects.

Partners: National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Army, Marine Corps, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Status: The BAFO provided input on the scope and priorities of the FY2022 Request For Proposal (RFP) and is working with partners on project selection and RFP development for FY2023 funds.

El Centro Field Office (ECFO)



Photo: Volunteers and BLM staff at Lark Canyon Day Use area for National Public Lands Day 2023

Minerals and Mining

SMP Gold Corp. Exploration Plan of Operations Update

BLM Action: SMP Gold Corporation plans to conduct exploratory drilling activities at the Oro Cruz historic mining area in the Cargo Muchacho Mountains in eastern Imperial County.

Partners: Imperial County Planning and Development Services

Status: The BLM received documentation concluding consultation from State Historic Preservation Office for the cultural resources inventory and BLM findings and determinations under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The Environmental Assessment/Mitigated Negative Declaration, Finding of No Significant Impact, Decision Record, and responses to public comments are on its ePlanning website. The BLM will continue consultation with Tribes on the monitoring and discovery plan.

BLM Contact: Mayra Martinez, Geologist

Western Mesquite Mines, Inc. Rainbow East Exploration Plan of Operations

BLM Action: The BLM received a plan of operations from Western Mesquite Mines, Inc. to conduct exploratory drilling activities at the Rainbow East project site in eastern Imperial County. The project proposes new access roads, road improvements, and 22 drill pads. Activities at the project area will disturb approximately two acres of public lands.

Partners: Imperial County Planning and Development Services

Status: The BLM has reviewed the plan of operations, and it meets all surface management requirements. Next steps will be pre-NEPA information gathering.

BLM Contacts: Mayra Martinez, Geologist

Recreation

Visitor Services Unit

BLM Action: Since October 1, 2023, Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area visitation reached 146,405 and staff responded to 79 emergency medical care or rescue calls, a 34 percent increase in calls. The ECFO was awarded \$200,000 in state OHV grant funds for labor and supplies to support rescue operations. In October 2023, Camp RZR had the highest recorded visitation at about 110,000 visitors: a 39 percent increase from previous years.

Partners: Imperial County Emergency Medical Services, American Medical Response ambulance, Reach Air (medical helicopter), Mercy (medical helicopter), El Centro Regional Medical Center, Pioneer Memorial Hospital, BLM Alaska Fire Service, BLM Law Enforcement Operational Medical Unit, El Centro and Yuma Sector Border Patrol, Homeland Security Investigators (HSI) and L.A.N.D.S. non-profit organization.

Status: The ECFO Ranger Stations opened on October 13, 2023. Visitor Services Staff are in the field available for calls Friday-Sunday until the ranger stations close for the summer.

BLM Contact: Alex Schlumpberger, Park Ranger

Outreach

BLM Action: The ECFO held two National Public Lands Day events: the Lark Canyon Day Use Area Clean Up in McCain Valley and the Fish Creek Mountains Trigger Trash Clean Up. Volunteers painted restrooms, performed weed maintenance, conducted trigger trash clean up and campground maintenance. The 2023/2024 Lands Recreation Guide was completed. Central Union High School students visited ISDRA for a hike in the North Algodones Dunes Wilderness and learned about wilderness characteristics, biodiversity of the Imperial Valley and human impacts. Two public hikes were staffed: Scorpion Walk at the ISDRA, and an interpretive walk at the Tumco Mining District.

Partners: Central Union High School, Imperial Valley Desert Museum, Southern California Wildlife Society Chapter -Imperial County, Jeep Clubs

Status: The ECFO staff attended high school and college career fairs at Calexico High School, Central Union High School, and the San Diego State University Imperial Valley campus. Future hikes are being planned with Imperial Valley Desert Museum and a second field trip for Central Union High School students is planned for Spring 2024.

BLM Contact: Michael Mujica, Park Ranger, Ismael Ramirez, Natural Resource Specialist, Neil Hamada, Assistant Field Manager - Support Services

Renewable Energy and Transmission

East Mesa Solar Facility Renewable Energy Project

BLM Action: The BLM accepted the initial plan of development submitted by Intersect Power Land Holdings, LLC (IP) accompanying its right-of-way application for a proposed 500-to-1,150-megawatt solar energy facility on public lands designated as a Development Focus Area under the Desert Renewable Energy and Conservation Plan in southern Imperial County. The project includes arrays of solar photovoltaic panels and facilities and a battery energy storage system. The BLM held its second pre-application meeting in August 2023.

Partners: California Energy Commission

Status: The BLM is coordinating with IP on cultural resource surveys and other pre-NEPA related data gathering.

BLM Contact: Tristan Riddell, Realty Specialist

Salton Sea Solar Renewable Energy Project

BLM Action: The BLM received an application from Indio Solar Partners II, LLC to construct, operate, maintain, and decommission an approximately 500-megawatt alternating current solar photovoltaic facility and battery energy storage system project on approximately 3,861 acres in western Imperial County. The project is west of the community of Westmorland and would interconnect with an Imperial Irrigation District 161 kilovolt transmission line that transects the eastern portion of the project site. The proposed project would also include a gen-tie, inverters, substation, perimeter fencing, roads, and a supervisory control and data acquisition system.

Partners: Imperial County Planning and Development Services

Status: The BLM is reviewing the initial plan of development and preparing for initial interdisciplinary team review.

BLM Contact: Tristan Riddell, Realty Specialist

Truckhaven Geothermal Exploration Update

BLM Action: Geothermal wells have been approved in the Truckhaven area. For additional project details, see previous DAC reports. To date, Ormat has completed grading of the access road and pad for two drill sites, drilling of both wells, and flow tests for both wells. Ormat is revising a utilization plan proposing the construction of two energy facilities, a solar field, a transmission line, additional injection and production wells, and pipelines on a combination of BLM, state, and private lands.

Partners: Imperial County Planning and Development Services, California State Parks, California State Lands Commission

Status: The revised utilization plan will be submitted to the BLM soon.

BLM Contact: Mayra Martinez, Geologist; Matthew Wokosin, BLM Petroleum Engineering Technician

Wild Horse and Burro

BLM Action: The ECFO completed the Picacho State Recreation Area and Seiler Farms nuisance wild burro gather on September 30, 2023. Approximately 45 wild burros were gathered from PSRA and 66 from Seiler Farms, removing a total of 101 wild burros from private land.

Partners: California Department of Parks & Recreation Picacho State Recreation Area

Status: Gather complete

BLM Contact: Ismael Ramirez, Natural Resource Specialist

Wildlife and Biological Resources

BLM Action: The American Conservation Experience Crew completed the 2023 Flat-tail Horned Lizard (FTHL) demography and occupancy surveys. Thirteen out of 45 occupancy plots had FTHL present with three rounds of occupancy surveys completed. All four demography plots were completed: Navy, West Mesa, East Mesa and Yuha. A total of 87 FTHL were found on the demography plots. In 2023, Chicago Botanic Gardens crew members completed 21 operational and standard collections of native seed for the ECFO Seeds of Success program.

Partners: American Conservation Experience and Chicago Botanic Gardens

Status: FTHL training and monitoring for partners will be held in Spring 2024.

BLM Contact: Ismael Ramirez, Natural Resource Specialist

Other / Misc. Law Enforcement

Law Enforcement Updates

BLM Action: The ECFO Law Enforcement (LE) staff includes nine LE Rangers and recently hired an evidence technician to process crime scenes for prosecution.

Partners: Imperial County Sheriff's Office, California Highway Patrol, United States Border Patrol, Imperial County District Attorney's Office.

Status: The ECFO LE staff continues to patrol BLM managed public lands to help educate the public and increase the protection of public lands.

BLM Contact: Michael Carpenter, Acting Chief Ranger

Facilities/Maintenance Projects

BLM Action: The ECFO continues to repair storm damage to access roads in the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area. In September, for National Public Lands Day, the BLM, So. CA Jeep Junkies, and Tread Lightly cleaned a shooting area on the west side of Fish Creek Mountain Wilderness Area. The ECFO installed a new kiosk panel and three new wayside panels at Tumco Historic Townsite to improve experiences for visitors. Maintenance staff are helping process SRPs, collect fees, maintain campgrounds and conduct outreach events.

Partners: Tread Lightly! and several OHV clubs

Status: Ongoing

BLM Contact: Neil Hamada, Assistant Field Manager Support Services

Needles Field Office (NFO)



Photo: South of Whipple Mountain Wilderness by BLM

Lands and Realty

Brightline West High-Speed Train, Ivanpah Substation

BLM Action: The BLM received an application to construct, operate, and maintain an electric highspeed train from Victorville to Las Vegas by Brightline West. As a part of that approval, a substation, converter station, and transmission line will need to be constructed near Ivanpah Dry Lake. The BLM determined the NEPA previously prepared by the Federal Railroad Administration was not adequate to authorize these facilities.

Partners: Federal Railroad Administration Brightline West and Southern California Edison

Status: The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), the lead agency for Section 106 compliance, completed the programmatic agreement and draft Historic Properties Treatment Plan Overview. The NFO reviewed the environmental assessment and the right-of-way for the project has been offered and accepted. The project is complete.

BLM Contacts: John Russell Hansen, Realty Specialist; Mike Ahrens, Field Manager

Cadiz MLA Assignment

BLM Action: The BLM received an application from Cadiz Real Estate, LLC to assign a portion of a natural gas pipeline held by El Paso Natural Gas Company to Cadiz Real Estate.

Partners: N/A

Status: The NFO completed the Land Services Survey Report clarifying the ownership of the underlying lands for the pipeline, in particular, lands associated with Edwards Air Force Base. The base has concurred with the assignment of the pipeline right of way to Cadiz. The BLM is reviewing public comments received regarding the project.

BLM Contacts: John Russell Hansen, Realty Specialist; Mike Ahrens, Field Manager

Frontera Solar Project

BLM Action: The BLM received an application from Boulevard Associates to construct a 700-megawatt solar facility on public lands in Inyo and San Bernardino counties. The project will be on a mixture of Development Focus Area lands, General Purpose Lands, and private lands. Nine solar photovoltaic units would be constructed and connected by collection lines in project utility corridors. Transmission would originate in California, pass through Nevada, and connect to the Gradiance 230kV transmission line from an off-site substation, and connect to battery energy storage system facilities.

Status: This project requires a land use plan amendment and is on hold.

BLM Contacts: John Russell Hansen, Realty Specialist; Mike Ahrens, Field Manager

Agricultural Inspection Station

BLM Action: The BLM received an application from the California Department of General Services to construct a new agricultural inspection station near Goffs to replace the existing station east of Needles. The inspection station would be in an existing Federal Highway Administration right-of-way adjacent to Interstate 40 and west of Goffs road. The current on-ramp from Goffs road to westbound Interstate 40 would be replaced with a new on-ramp through the inspection station. The inspection station east of Needles would be removed and restored.

Status: The BLM reviewed the jurisdictional status of the lands. Several maps showed the lands in the Mojave National Preserve managed by the National Park Service. The BLM determined the lands associated with the project are managed by the NFO. Cost recovery has been established and the environmental review is underway.

BLM Contacts: John Russell Hansen, Realty Specialist; Mike Ahrens, Field Manager

Minerals & Mining

Castle Mountain Mine Modification to Plan of Operations

BLM Action: The NFO received a proposed plan modification from Castle Mountain Mine to expand the mine operation. Castle Mountain Mine is an open pit gold mine in the Hart Mining District of San Bernardino County. The expansion of mining will occur on private and public lands in the previous Castle Mountain Mine planning area.

Partners: NPS, BLM Las Vegas Field Office, and San Bernardino County.

Status: The BLM is reviewing an updated submission of the proposed expansion plan and will determine the necessary level of NEPA to analyze the proposed action.

BLM Contacts: Mitch Owens, Assistant Field Manager, and Rose Pettiette, Geologist

TETRA Technologies Modification to Fringe Acreage Lease Operations

BLM Action: The BLM received a proposal from TETRA to install an additional brine supply well and extend existing utility lines within their Sodium Fringe Acreage Lease area

located near the northeastern edge of Bristol Lake.

Partners: San Bernardino County

Status: The BLM requested additional information to continue processing TETRA's modification to those operations which support production of commingled sodium chloride under their federal lease.

BLM Contacts: Mitch Owens, Assistant Field Manager, and Rose Pettiette, Geologist

Recreation

East Mojave Heritage Trail Interpretation and Partnership

BLM Action: The NFO and the Mojave Desert Heritage and Cultural Association (MDHCA) received funding from the California Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Fund and General Tire to install an interpretive educational kiosk along the East Mojave Heritage Trail (EMHT). The EMHT is a 733-mile interpretive loop overlanding trail which uses existing open designated routes to provide education and interpretation of the history and natural resources of the East Mojave Area. The trail is divided into four segments with a corresponding guidebook explaining the route, history, and natural and cultural resources. The loop begins and ends in Needles, with most of the 733-mile loop on NFO-managed lands. Other jurisdictions include the BLM Barstow and Las Vegas field offices and the Mojave National Preserve.

Partners: Mojave Desert Heritage and Cultural Association, BLM Barstow and Las Vegas Field Offices, Mojave National Preserve.

Status: The BLM and MDHCA are jointly designing kiosk and way-side exhibits at key points along the portion of the EMHT in the NFO to provide safety and environmental awareness messaging. Signs are being placed to provide guidance on the appropriate use of the trail in each of the jurisdictions it crosses.

BLM Contacts: Ramona Daniels, Outdoor Recreation Planner and Mitch Owens, Assistant Field Manager

National Monuments

Mojave Trails National Monument Planning process

BLM Action: The NFO is in the pre-planning stage of the MTNM Plan.

Partners: Numerous cooperating agencies and stakeholders have been identified and Tribal involvement has been solicited.

Status: The Notice of Intent for the MTNM-Monument Management planning process has been published and public scoping is complete. The BLM is working on drafting responses to comments, analysis, and a science strategy.

BLM Contacts: Mojave Trails National Monument Manager

Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office (PSSCFO)



Photo: Sand to Snow National Monument by Jihadda Govan, BLM

Renewable Energy and Transmission

The Palm Springs South Coast Field Office (PSSCFO) manages more than three dozen individual operational and proposed renewable energy development projects. The following are updates on projects that have occurred since October 2023.

Crimson Solar Project

BLM Action: The BLM issued a right-of-way grant to Sonoran West Holding, LLC for the battery energy storage system, substation, access roads, and an operations and maintenance building. The applicant applied to add a second gen-tie to the project west of the Colorado River Substation.

Partners: Sonoran West Holdings, LLC and Recurrent Energy, LLC

Status: The BLM is reviewing the application of a second gen-tie to the project. The battery energy storage system was completed in October 2022. Fieldwork authorizations to conduct geotechnical investigations for the solar facility were approved in August 2023. The BLM is reviewing pre-construction plans prior to issuing approval for construction.

BLM Contacts: Dan Kasang, PSSC Team Leader - Renewable Energy Support Team, Tamara Faust, Project Manager, CDD Priority Project Support Team

Arica Solar Project and Victory Pass Solar Projects

BLM Action: In June 2022, the Department of the Interior announced the final approval of the Arica and Victory Pass Solar Projects for full construction of the photovoltaic solar projects. The combined projects will generate up to 465 megawatts of electricity and provide up to 400 megawatts of battery storage. The BLM issued the final approval for construction for the Arica and Victory Pass Solar Projects in June 2022. Construction completion anticipated in FY2024.

Partner: Clearway Solar

Status: Authorization granted

BLM Contacts: Dan Kasang, PSSC Team Leader - Renewable Energy Support Team, Caroline Woods, Project Manager, CDD Project Support Team

Oberon Solar

BLM Action: Intersect Power filed a right-of-way application in September 2019, for a solar project on roughly 6,000 acres of public lands near the Desert Center area. The proposed project area was reduced to roughly 2,600 acres. The project currently consists of a 500 MW photovoltaic facility with an optional battery storage.

The BLM released the environmental assessment in August 2021, and the 30-day comment period ended September 2021. Endangered Species Act consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was initiated in September 2021. The project was approved in January 2022 and will generate up to 500 megawatts of renewable energy and have capacity for 200 megawatts of battery storage. The BLM issued the final approval for construction for the Oberon Solar Project in July 2022. Construction completed in November 2023.

Partner: Intersect Power

Status: Authorization granted

BLM Contacts: Dan Kasang, PSSC Team Leader - Renewable Energy Support Team, Jamie Palmer, Project Manager, CDD Project Support Team

Desert Sunlight Storage

BLM Action: A right-of-way grant was issued in December 2021, to Sunlight Solar LLC (a subsidiary of NextEra Energy) for construction of a 230-MW battery energy storage system on approximately 94 acres wholly within the Desert Sunlight project right of way authorization; additionally, it would tie into the existing Desert Sunlight 230-kV gen-tie line and connect to the Red Bluff Substation. A new right-of-way application has been submitted for construction of a second battery energy storage system within the Desert Sunlight project.

Partner: Sunlight Solar LLC

Status: Authorization granted

BLM Contacts: Dan Kasang, PSSC Team Leader - Renewable Energy Support Team, Regan Watt, Project Manager, CDD Project Support Team

Desert Quartzite Solar

BLM Action: An amended right-of-way for reduced footprint was issued March 2022 and a phased notice to proceed was issued January 2023. Construction began February 2023 and is ongoing.

Partner: EDF Renewables

Status: Authorization granted

BLM Contacts: Dan Kasang, PSSC Team Leader - Renewable Energy Support Team, Joan Patrovsky, Project Manager, CDD Project Support Team

Easley Solar

BLM Action: The BLM initiated public scoping for the proposed Easley project and is in the process of developing the scoping report. The BLM will review the issues identified through scoping and will analyze the project through an issue-based approach.

Partner: Intersect Power

Status: Review and environmental compliance

Sapphire Solar

BLM Action: The BLM conducted the preliminary meeting with Tribes and stakeholders and has received updated information from the applicant. The BLM is preparing a public notice package to initiate public scoping.

Partner: EDF Renewables

Status: Review

Lands and Realty

Santa Ana Wash Congressional Land Exchange

BLM Action: The John D. Dingell Jr. Conservation, Management and Recreation Act directs the Secretary of the Interior to convey approximately 417 acres of public land in San Bernardino County currently managed by the BLM to the San Bernardino Valley Water Conservation District (Conservation District). In exchange, the Conservation District would convey up to 369 acres of land to the BLM. The land to be exchanged lies within the Upper Santa Ana Wash Land Management and Habitat Conservation Plan (Plan) area and hosts nearby cities, county, mining companies, wildlife agencies, and water organizations. The area is regionally important for mineral aggregates, flood control, groundwater recharge, recreation, and habitat for threatened and endangered species. Section 1003 of the Dingell Act requires the Conservation District to pay all related exchanges costs. Upon completion of the exchange, and pursuant to the Dingell Act, the Conservation District could continue maintenance, operation, construction, or relocation of, or expansion of, groundwater recharge facilities on the lands conveyed to the BLM to accommodate groundwater recharge of the Bunker Hill Basin if the activities do not in conflict with the Plan. The non-federal lands within portions of the area are encumbered with easements, leases, and agreements to which the exchange will be subject.

Partner: San Bernardino Valley Water Conservation District

Status: The environmental site assessment was submitted in June 2022. Resolution of trespass issues and cleanup of the BLM and Conservation District lands have been completed. The BLM is reviewing title documentation prior to exchanging the lands.

BLM Contact: Dara J. Glass, Associate Field Manager

Customs and Border Patrol Make Safe Project

BLM Action: U.S. Customs and Border patrol applied for a right-of-way grant to complete construction activities along the international border and remediate disturbed areas that were previously waived from NEPA requirements.

Partners: U.S. Customs and Border Patrol

Status: The BLM has entered an interagency agreement with U.S. Customs and Border Patrol and will schedule a meeting to discuss the project.

BLM Contact: Dan Kasang, Assistant Field Manager

Customs and Border Patrol Relocatable Towers

BLM Action: U.S. Customs and Border patrol applied for a right-of-way grant to temporarily place autonomous surveillance towers, integrated surveillance towers, and emergency beacons at various locations along the international border.

Partner: U.S. Customs and Border Patrol

Status: The BLM has entered an interagency agreement with U.S. Customs and Border Patrol and will schedule a meeting to discuss the project.

BLM Contact: Dan Kasang, Assistant Field Manager

Cultural and Tribal

Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)

BLM Action: The PSSCFO finalized the reburial of indigenous ancestor remains and funerary items that had been illegally removed from a cultural site several decades ago. The remains and associated funerary items were secured at the Field Office after BLM law enforcement discovered an illegal excavation at the site, confiscating the remains and funerary items during the investigation. The BLM finalized the Plan of Action and consulted with Tribes on the reburial.

Partners: Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians and Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe

Status: Completed

BLM Contact: Bryce Danner, Archaeologist

National Monuments

Sand to Snow National Monument Planning

BLM Action: Develop a land use management plan. The Sand to Snow National Monument (SSNM) is jointly managed by the BLM and U.S. Forest Service through a Service-First Agreement. Both agencies are initiating actions to meet the new responsibilities in managing this national monument. A joint BLM-USFS interdisciplinary team was assembled in 2022 and developed an early draft Analysis of the Management Situation (AMS). The draft AMS identifies the current and existing baseline management for the SSNM, as it applies to items in the monument proclamation. The draft AMS is the first step in the planning process for the Monument Plan. The Monument Plan will provide for the proper care and management of the objects of historical and scientific interest for which the monument was designated, and

conserve and protect the cultural, ecological, and scientific resources found in the monument.

Partners: U.S. Forest Service San Bernadino National Forest

Status: The BLM and Forest Service hosted three public information meetings and are preparing to begin the activity planning process.

BLM Contact: Jihadda Govan, Sand to Snow National Monument Manager

Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument

BLM Action: Trails in the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument have experienced increased use over the past year and has led to the creation of new/modified trails, non-compliance of rules, and safety issues with user conflicts on multi-use trails. The PSSCFO will continue to host events to educate the public on responsible recreation and bring more attention to Leave No Trace principles. The BLM is hosting twice monthly outdoor yoga lead by a BLM Park Ranger. The BLM is also working with the U.S. Forest Service, Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, and Friend of the Desert Mountains to restore illegally created mountain bike trails.

Partners: San Bernadino National Forest, US Forest Service, Friends of the Desert Mountains, Coachella Valley Conservation Commission, and others.

Status: The new education and outreach program is ongoing throughout 2023-2024.

BLM Contact: Dani Ortiz, Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Manager

Other/Misc.

Law Enforcement

BLM Action: BLM law enforcement officers work with other federal, state, and local agencies on a variety of issues, including responding to fellow law enforcement agencies for support with search and rescue and medical emergencies. The PSSCFO LEO's assist with national events to include high-visitation holiday weekends at the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area, Saving America's Border Resources, the Eradication and Prevention of Illicit Cannabis, Burning Man, support fire season, and Emergency Support Function throughout the country during national emergencies.

Partners: More than 20 law enforcement agencies, U.S. Border Patrol, National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Drug Enforcement Agency, the counties of Riverside, San Bernardino, and San Diego, local jurisdictions within the Coachella Valley.

Status: The PSSCFO continues year-round law enforcement operations to protect public safety and resources.

BLM Contact: Kevin M. Maclean, Acting Chief Law Enforcement Ranger, PSSCFO.

Ridgecrest Field Office (RFO)



Photo: The Ridgecrest Field Office hosted a National Public Lands Day Event on October 29, 2023, to cleanup Fossil Falls campground.

Grazing

Kelso Valley Grazing Permits Renewal Process

BLM Action: The RFO and Bakersfield Field Offices continue to renew grazing permits for remaining portions of the Rudnick Common Allotment and adjacent allotments along the field office boundary. A voluntary relinquishment of the Rudnick Common Allotment in the California Desert Conservation Area in 2021 required this allotment to be reconfigured. Three pastures of the Rudnick Common Allotment remain, including Pinyon Well, Cane Canyon, and Rocky Point. The renewal process on grazing permits for Kelso Peak and Woolstalf Creek began in May 2022.

Partners: Two BLM grazing permittees holding permits on remaining pastures and allotments.

Status: The Final Grazing Decision was appealed with a petition to stay by Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project and Wilderness Watch in May 2023. Their petition to stay was denied in July 2023. Western Watersheds Project appealed the IBLA's decision to deny the stay in August 2023. All parties agreed the case was suitable for summary judgment motions and there should not be a need for discovery. The administrative record was sent to the ALJ and Appellants in September 2023. Deadline for Appellants to complete their review and serve any objections was November 6, 2023. The new grazing permit for Kelso Peak Allotment has been mailed to permittee for signature.

BLM Contacts: Priscilla Watson-Wynn, Natural Resource Specialist (Range); Tom Bickauskas, Acting Field Manager

Deep Springs Valley, South Oasis, Eureka Valley, and Last Chance Allotment Grazing Permit Renewals

BLM Action: The RFO is preparing two environmental assessments to renew the grazing permits for four allotments in our northern field office: Deep Springs Valley, South Oasis, Eureka Valley and Last Chance. Field work to assess rangeland health began in 2022.

Partners: Permittees -Deep Springs Trustees and Denver Square BLM Grazing Lease, LLC.

Status: The RFO completed external scoping and rangeland health assessments. Development

of the environmental assessment and coordination with permittees is on-going.

BLM Contacts: Priscilla Watson-Wynn, Natural Resource Specialist (Range)

White Wolf and Oasis Ranch Allotment Rangeland Health Assessments

BLM Action: The RFO will conduct rangeland health assessments on two allotments: White Wolf and Oasis Ranch. These assessments will be used in conjunction with an environmental assessment to process the renewal of these grazing permits.

Partners: Permittees: Triple D Ranches and White Mountain Ranch, LLC.

Status: The RFO will conduct the assessments in 2024.

BLM Contacts: Priscilla Watson-Wynn, Natural Resource Specialist (Range)

Lands and Realty - Major Rights-of-Ways

Indian Well Valley Ground Water Authority

BLM Action: The RFO received an application for 98 geotechnical boring locations for a future water conveyance pipeline from California City to Ridgecrest. The pipeline would be 50.6 miles in length of which 20.6 miles of the pipeline are on Public Lands and 30 miles on private and state lands.

Partners: Provost & Prichard Engineering Group.

Status: The RFO is processing the application for the geotechnical boring locations.

BLM Contacts: Paul Rodriquez, Realty Specialist; Dana Stephenson, Supervisor; Tom Bickauskas, Acting Field Manager

Indian Well Valley Ground Water Authority

BLM Action: The RFO received an application for a 24-inch buried water conveyance pipeline from California City to Ridgecrest. The pipeline would be 50.6 miles in length with 20.6 miles of the pipeline on public lands and 30 miles on private and state lands.

Partners: Provost & Prichard Engineering Group.

Status: The RFO is processing the application for the buried conveyance pipeline.

BLM Contacts: Paul Rodriquez, Realty Specialist; Dana Stephenson, Supervisor; Tom Bickauskas, Acting Field Manager

Southern California Edison – Ivanpah to Control Transmission Line

BLM Action: The RFO received an application to upgrade seven existing 115-kilovolt transmission lines across 360 miles of the Ivanpah-Control line to meet transmission line safety and reliability requirements.

Partners: Southern California Edison

Status: A draft environmental impact assessment is expected to publish in Summer 2024. Key issues include cultural and visual impacts with a proposed action to demolish existing lattice towers and replace with steel monopoles. The BLM is awaiting survey data for an alternative to reroute the line around three Areas of Critical Environmental Concern in Owens Valley.

BLM Contacts: Joan Patrovsky, Project Manager; Paul Rodriquez, Realty Specialist

Southern California Edison – Control to Silver Peak Transmission Line

BLM Action: The RFO received an application to replace poles to increase clearance of a 55-kV transmission powerline that travels across BLM managed-lands and USFS Inyo National Forest Lands in Mono and Inyo counties.

Partners: Southern California Edison

Status: A notice to prepare an environmental impact statement is pending publication in the *Federal Register*. Scoping meetings are scheduled in January 2024 and a 45-day comment period will be provided. Key issues are cultural concerns in White Mountain ACEC, Bi-state sage-grouse, and recreation access.

BLM Contacts: Joan Patrovsky, Project Manager; Paul Rodriquez, Realty Specialist

Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area Withdrawal

BLM Action: The RFO is working to issue a new withdrawal for the expired Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area (DTRNA) Withdrawal. The RFO will expand the withdrawal to include the original DTRNA footprint and the portion of fenced area within the Western Rand Mountains Area of Critical Environmental Concern. The approximate acreage for the withdrawal is 30,000 to 40,000 acres. The RFO is working to create a legal land description and then create and submit the application/petition.

Status: The RFO will continue to work on creating a legal land description.

BLM Contacts: Paul Rodriquez, Realty Specialist; Dana Stephenson, Supervisor

Deep Rose Water Pipeline

BLM Action: The BLM received an application for a proposed 12-inch buried polyethylene water pipeline within the existing road right-of-way, which supports a geothermal plant on California State Trust Land.

Partners: Deep Rose, LLC

Status: The RFO continues to process the application with completion anticipated in 2024.

BLM Contacts: Paul Rodriquez, Realty Specialist

Minerals and Mining

Exploratory Drilling by Gold Discovery Group LLC

BLM Action: The BLM approved a plan of operation for Gold Discovery Group, LLC to explore for placer gold in the area surrounding Johannesburg, Red Mountain, and Atolia. The approved activity includes allowing the operator to enter and gather samples of material from 32 unpatented placer mining claims, drive a drill rig along routes to those claims, drill 293 sample holes, refill and plug the same holes with the excess material, and rake tire tracks upon completion. The exploration holes are in an area designated as critical tortoise habitat.

Partners: Gold Discovery Group, LLC

Status: The environmental assessment has been completed. A Finding of No Significant Impact and Decision Record were signed in August 2023.

BLM Contacts: Dana Stephenson, Assistant Field Manager; Kevin Schrecengost, Geologist

Keeler Shale Pit Exploratory Trenching/Drilling by LA Department of Water and Power

BLM Action: The BLM received a request to implement exploratory trenching and drilling in a previously authorized free use permit for a mineral material pit off State Route 136. The scope of work consists of digging up four temporary excavation areas to assess the sites' soil characteristics. If more detailed soil information is needed, up to two borings will be drilled to collect samples for lab testing. The exploration area will not exceed one acre with material disturbance of up to 150 cubic yards. All excavated areas and boring holes will be backfilled. Exploration activities are anticipated to take 12 to 24 months with no impacts outside of the previously authorized footprint.

Partners: Los Angeles Department of Water and Power

Status: The BLM is preparing and planning for a categorical exclusion to authorize the project.

BLM Contacts: Dana Stephenson, Assistant Field Manager; Kevin Schrecengost, Geologist

Recreation

Volunteers Events

BLM Action: The RFO hosted two National Public Land Day volunteer events in October 2023. The first event, in partnership with the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee Inc., volunteers fixed fences, installed signs, and picked up trash. The second event was at Fossil Falls Campground, the RFO's only developed campground. Volunteers and staff cleaned out fire rings, wiped down picnic tables, removed invasive weeds, and picked up trash.

Partners: Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee Inc.

BLM Contacts: LaReina Van Sant, Wildlife Biologist; Aly Heare, Outdoor Recreation Planner

Wild Horses and Burros

Centennial Herd Management Area at China Lake Naval Air Weapons Station

BLM Action: The Centennial Herd Management Area Wild Horse Drive Trapping Gather on

the Naval Air Weapons Station - China Lake occurred November 21 - 23, 2023. The gather was successful and resulted in removing 148 animals (56 wild horses and 92 wild burros).

Partners: China Lake Navy Air Weapons Center

Status: Complete

BLM Contacts: Alex Neibergs, Wild Horse, and Burro Specialist

FY 2023 California Desert District Wild Horse and Burro Gather and Removal Statistics

Removal numbers FY 2023

13 wild burros from outside Chemehuevi HA - nuisance burros

101 wild burros from Paloverde / PSR - nuisance burros

3 wild burros outside Fort Irwin - nuisance burros

2 wild burros Panamint HA - public safety

2 wild horses from Chicago Valley - HMA management

56 wild horses from Centennial HA – mission safety

92 wild burros from Centennial HA - mission safety

Total wild burros removed: 211 - Total wild horses removed: 58

Ridgecrest Regional Wild Horse and Burro Corral

BLM Action: The Ridgecrest Regional Wild Horse and Burro Corral remains open to the public with adoptions on the second and fourth Fridays of most months. Wranglers continue to prepare horses and burros from the Johnnie Gather near Pahrump, NV and Reveille Gather from Nevada in July /August 2023.

Status: Adoptions for FY23 include 58 horses and 65 burros adopted to appropriate homes. Sales for FY23 include combined total of 178 horses and burros.

BLM Contacts: Alex Neibergs, Wild Horse, and Burro Specialist

Wildlife

South Oasis Windmill Russian Thistle Project

BLM Action: The RFO is working on a multi-year project to treat noxious weeds and restore rangelands to improve wildlife habitat quality and forage production for cattle in the South Oasis allotment. About 130 acres of Russian thistle dominate the landscape, outcompeting native vegetation. The goal of the project is to reduce the Russian thistle seed bank and restore native vegetation.

Partners: Lake Mead Inter-Regional Invasive Plant Management Team, NPS; Deep Springs College- Permittee of South Oasis allotment; Sierra Club

Status: The project is in its third year. This year the Lake Mead Team sprayed 28 acres of herbicide. The BLM will continue to treat the project area in spring of 2024. A service trip with Sierra Club is organized for July 2024.

BLM Contacts: Martha Dickes, Wilderness Specialist; Priscilla Watson-Wynn, Natural Resource Specialist (Range); Tom Bickauskas, Acting Field Manager

California Desert Interagency Fire Program (CDIFP)



Photo: Lake Mathews Prescribed Burn October 2023

Fire Incidents

Fires as of October 31, 2023

BLM Action: There were 67 fires on lands protected by the California Desert Interagency Fire Program (CDIFP) as of October 31, 2023. These fires burned 12,278 acres of BLM-managed lands and 76,398 acres in the Parks. The unit responded to an additional 178 fires that threatened its lands but were stopped short of burning CDIFP protected lands.

Partners: The CDIFP has cooperative fire agreements with several counties and cities and other federal and California State partners. Partners include Riverside County Fire, San Bernardino County Fire, Kern County Fire, Redlands City Fire Department, Apple Valley City Fire Department, Victorville City Fire Department, Palm Springs City Fire Department, Canyon Lake City Fire Department, the City of Highland, CAL FIRE, U.S. Forest Service, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The CDIFP has filled six requests for assistance by cooperating agencies.

Status: All the fires mentioned above are out.

BLM Contacts: Paul Gibbs, District Fire Management Officer; Freddie Espinoza, Assistant Fire Management Officer

Fuels Projects

BLM Action: Fuels treatments meet a variety of objectives from community and infrastructure protection to habitat restoration and invasive plant management. Using methods such as hand, mechanical, chemical, and prescribed burning, the unit completes these treatments to protect lives, property, and natural/cultural resources.

Partners: Partners for the BLM and National Park Service (NPS) fuels treatments include the California Conservation Corps, Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency, and the Morongo Band of Mission Indians. Other BLM partners include San Bernardino Valley Water Conservation District, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, The Wildlands Conservancy, Center for Natural Lands Management, Cleveland National Forest, Resource Conservation District of Greater San Diego County, Ramona Band of Cahuilla Indians, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

Status: In FY2023, the CDIFP received funding to treat 3,485 acres. In May, the fuels program received additional Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding to treat another 8,817 acres for a total planned treatment of 12,302 acres to be completed by next summer. In FY2023, the unit completed 6,634 acres of fuels treatments. To date, the unit has treated 180 acres. In addition to community protection in wildland-urban interface areas, Joshua tree refugia areas were treated to provide clearance for individual trees during potential fires. Prescribed fires were managed to restore habitat for Stephens' kangaroo rat in Riverside County and marsh habitat for Yuma Ridgway's rail at the Dos Palmas Preserve. The unit planned for 39 other treatments but tentatively only 11 were funded in FY2024. If fully funded, approximately 44,222 acres would have been treated in the California Desert District, Joshua Tree National Park, and Mojave National Preserve.

BLM Contacts: James Gannon, Unit Fuels Program Manager

Mitigation and Education Projects

BLM Action: In FY2023, the BLM completed 53 community assistance activities to help communities withstand the effects of wildfires and build resilience if a fire were to occur. Staff worked with cooperators and communities to plan and implement fuels treatments such as the Sunrise Community Fuel Break in Julian and the North Mountain Fuel Break near Poppet Flats. Both treatments protected the communities from wildfires including the 2003 Cedar Fire and 2006 Esperanza Fire. Ongoing maintenance occurs to ensure effectiveness.

Partners: California Fire Safe Council (FSC), San Diego County FSC, Border Agencies Fire Council, and 28 of the community fire safe councils throughout the unit, U.S. Forest Service, CAL FIRE, and various local government agencies.

Status: The BLM held educational events and activities at the Los Angeles County Fair, Temecula Balloon and Wine Festival, and California State Fair. Two additional wildland-urban interface workshops are planned for San Diego County along with Community Wildfire Protection Plan updates. Planning is underway for a mitigation-education event in the Morongo Basin with Joshua Tree National Park. BLM staff trained Fire Safe Councils and community members at the Last Chance Survival simulation and Wildland-urban Interface for Fire Safe Councils Workshop.

BLM Contacts: Garth Crow and Jason Winbigler, Mitigation-Education Specialists

Hiring Updates

Workforce Transformation

BLM Action: The California Desert District will host a job fair from December 1-3 in Riverside advertising permanent and temporary firefighter positions.

Status: The BLM and NPS received additional funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to temporarily increase firefighters' salary by 50% or \$20,000 (whichever is less) since early 2022 to recruit and retain federal wildland firefighters.

BLM Contacts: Paul Gibbs, District Fire Management Officer and Freddie Espinoza, Assistant Fire Management Officer