

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **PURPOSE AND NEED**

### **1.1 OVERVIEW**

The western Mojave Desert includes over 3.2 million acres of public lands that are administered by the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) California Desert District Office. It is located just north of the Los Angeles metropolitan area. The northwestern portion of this region is under the jurisdiction of the BLM's Ridgecrest Field office, while the BLM's Barstow Field Office administers the remainder. The Sierra Nevada and Tehachapi mountain ranges bound the area on the west, the San Gabriel and San Bernardino Mountains border the south, while the Mojave National Preserve and Death Valley National Park lie to the east and northeast.

The BLM is required to designate off-road vehicle routes on public lands as open or closed to motorized vehicle access, or as open on a limited basis. This designation process is a requirement of federal regulation, BLM policy and the BLM's California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) Plan. Two steps are involved in this process: (1) the designation of routes as open, closed or limited, and (2) amendment of the applicable BLM land use plan (in this case, the CDCA Plan) to incorporate the network of open and limited routes as a component of the Plan.

BLM must take into account the conservation of threatened and endangered plant and animal species and the ecosystems on which they depend as it designs a motorized vehicle access network for the 3.2 million acres of public lands within the western Mojave Desert. This area is rich in biological diversity because of its varied vegetation communities and landforms and because of its location adjacent to the Transverse Ranges, the Sierra Nevada, the Colorado Desert and the Great Basin. With its proximity to the growing cities of the Los Angeles basin, the western Mojave Desert is subject to increasing demand for community development, recreation and resource utilization. One result is an increasing loss and fragmentation of species habitat. This situation has led to the need for a motorized vehicle access network in the western Mojave Desert that meets the public's recreational and commercial access needs, but does so in a manner that is compatible with ongoing programs to conserve plant and animal species and their habitats and prevent future listings as threatened or endangered.

In the years since 1980, when the CDCA Plan was adopted, BLM completed the first step of that process: the designation of motorized vehicle routes throughout the western Mojave Desert. The most far-reaching designation effort took place between 1985 and 1987, and encompassed most of the region's public lands. Other significant efforts to designate motorized routes occurred both before and after the 1985-1987 effort as part of various planning efforts, primarily in connection with the preparation of management plans for Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), and in the late 1990s during a "pilot" designation process for the Ord Mountain region. The second step – amendment of the CDCA Plan – has not yet occurred.

The Western Mojave Desert Off Road Vehicle Designation Project (Designation Project) builds upon those earlier efforts. Its updates the previous route designation efforts, taking into account new or significant planning issues, such as the listing of the desert tortoise as a threatened species in 1990. It also ensures that all of the many designation efforts undertaken since 1980 complement each other and, collectively, form a seamless route network.

This Environmental Assessment addresses the impacts of adopting a motorized vehicle access network as a component of the CDCA Plan through amendment of that plan, and of implementing that network. The EA examines the environmental effects of both BLM's existing off road vehicle designations, and of a revised network on 1.4 million acres of desert tortoise critical habitat and other sensitive areas.

**Relationship between the Designation Project and the West Mojave Plan:** The Designation Project's public lands are within the region that is also being addressed by the West Mojave Plan, an interagency habitat conservation plan that is developing conservation strategies for over 100 sensitive plants and animals (including the threatened desert tortoise). Local cities and counties, along with state and federal agencies are collaborating to prepare the West Mojave Plan. A draft environmental impact report and statement (EIR/S) for the West Mojave Plan will be released in May 2003 for a 90-day public review. A federal decision on the West Mojave Plan will be made early in 2004, following the publication of a final Plan and EIR/S.

To ensure that the route network proposed by the BLM's Designation Project is compatible with the Plan's conservation strategies, the agencies preparing the West Mojave Plan will include a complete assessment of the Designation Project's route network in both the Draft and Final EIR/S. This will ensure that the Plan's conservation strategies and the Designation Project's route network complement each other, and that any additional cumulative impacts are addressed. Since the West Mojave Plan will also involve amendments to the BLM's CDCA Plan, any minor modifications of the network expected to be approved on or before June 30, 2003 by the Designation Project could be made through the West Mojave planning process, or by subsequent BLM CDCA plan amendments.

**Organization of the EA:** The EA is organized into the following parts:

- ?? **Chapter One - Introduction** provides an overview of the Designation Project, applicable statutes, regulations, and policies, and the history of the project.
- ?? **Chapter Two - Alternatives** describes the proposed and existing motorized vehicle access networks.
- ?? **Chapter Three - Affected Environment** describes those aspects of the natural and human environment that are likely to be affected by the adoption of the alternatives described in Chapter 2.
- ?? **Chapter Four - Environmental Consequences** presents an analysis of the effects that adoption of each of the alternatives could have on the natural and human environment.
- ?? **Appendices** that include supporting technical materials and a table describing the reasons why each route was recommended as open, limited or closed by the proposed action.

## **1.2 HISTORY OF THE DESIGNATION PROJECT**

### **1.2.1 Data Base**

The Designation Project is based upon the best science reasonably available. Between September 2001 and March 2002, thirteen field crews inventoried nearly 8,000 miles of motorized vehicle access routes within the western Mojave Desert. Both four wheel drive and motorcycle crews participated in the survey. Routes were recorded using global positioning system technology. The nature of the route (graded gravel, good dirt, motorcycle trail) was recorded, and nearly two-dozen types of pertinent desert features mapped (including campsites, mines, trailheads, and water sources). This information was transferred into the planning team's digital Geographic Information System (GIS) database. In addition, data collected by BLM field survey crews in 1985 and 1987, and during the preparation of BLM management plans for ACECs between 1980 and the late 1990s, was digitized and stored in the GIS database. This data was supplemented by digital analysis of routes identified from aerial photography taken in 1995 and 1996 covering most public lands within the planning area. As a route network was designed, this information, together with extensive biological data assembled for the West Mojave Plan, was applied to ensure that the network met both access and resource needs.

### **1.2.2 Task Groups Help Develop the ORV Designations**

In November 1999, as part of the West Mojave planning process, task groups were established to help develop components of the West Mojave Plan. One of these task groups (Task Group 2) was established to assist with the development of a motorized vehicle access network for the western Mojave Desert. Task group 2 met 12 times between December 1999 and the conclusion of their work in May 2002. To assist Task Group 2 and the route designation process, two subcommittees were formed: a field survey advisory group and a route designation technical committee.

As the task group process evolved, certain issues would emerge that would result in considerable public interest or controversy, including the design of the motorized vehicle access network and the role of equestrians. As a result, public information meetings were held throughout the desert on an irregular basis. Many persons who first became involved through these meetings later joined Task Group 2.

### **1.2.3 BLM Decisions and Approvals**

Implementation of the Designation Project on public lands requires approval by the BLM's California Desert District Manager through a Record of Decision (ROD), following the resolution of any protests. This approval includes the amendment of the CDCA Plan to incorporate the route network as a component of that plan.

### **1.3 RELATIONSHIP TO STATUTES, REGULATIONS AND POLICIES**

All BLM decisions and approvals must be consistent with applicable statutes, regulations and policies, including but not limited to the following:

- ?? Federal Endangered Species Act
- ?? National Environmental Policy Act
- ?? Federal Land Policy and Management Act
- ?? National Historic Preservation Act
- ?? California Desert Protection Act
- ?? Clean Water Act
- ?? Clean Air Act
- ?? Wilderness Act
- ?? Taylor Grazing Act
- ?? Sikes Act
- ?? Mining and Minerals Policy, and National Materials and Minerals Research and Development Acts
- ?? Mining, Mineral Leasing, Material Disposal and Reclamation Acts
- ?? Federal Executive Orders and Congressional Mandates

### **1.4 RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER REGIONAL PLANS**

Southern California and southern Nevada are the sites of a number of important regional planning efforts. These include regional habitat conservation plans, natural community conservation plans and federal land use plans and amendments. In fact, most of the land surface between Las Vegas, Nevada and San Diego, California lies within the scope of an ecosystem-planning program.

The West Mojave Plan was discussed in Section 1.1 above. The following is a brief summary of other major planning efforts being undertaken immediately adjacent to or within the western Mojave Desert.

**Coachella Valley Multiple Species Conservation Plan (CVMSCP):** The lead for this plan is the Coachella Valley Association of Governments. The planning area includes most of the urban and urbanizing area of the Coachella Valley as well as the Santa Rosa Mountains, within Riverside County, and lies adjacent to and southeast of the western Mojave Desert. As part of this planning effort, BLM has prepared a CDCA plan amendment applicable to CVMSCP's federal lands. Routes were designated for the Morongo subregion, a small area within the West Mojave administered by the Palm Springs Field Office. A Record of Decision for the BLM Coachella Valley CDCA Plan Amendments was signed in December 2002.

**Northern and Eastern Mojave Plan (NEMO):** The BLM's NEMO plan addresses recovery of the desert tortoise and management of a few additional species of concern on public lands. The NEMO planning area lies to the northeast of the western Mojave Desert, in the area that generally lies between Death Valley National Park and the Mojave National Preserve. The NEMO Plan included a motorized vehicle access network for public lands within desert tortoise conservation areas, or "DWMAs" (Desert Wildlife Management Areas). A Record of Decision for NEMO adopting both the plan and the access network was signed in December 2002. The route network for the remaining public lands within NEMO is currently under development and will be completed by June 30, 2004.

**Northern and Eastern Colorado Plan (NECO):** The NECO plan, like NEMO, primarily concerns the management of BLM lands located to the east and southeast of the western Mojave Desert. A motorized vehicle access network was developed for public lands within the NECO planning area. A Record of Decision for NECO adopting both the plan and the access network was signed in December 2002.

**Southern California Province Forest Plan:** This plan is being prepared by four National Forests located in Southern California, including the Angelus and San Bernardino National Forests, which are adjacent to and south of the western Mojave Desert. Decisions reached by the Southern California Province Plan would affect National Forest lands only. The most important cross-boundary issues that affect both the Forest Service planning efforts and the Designation Project involve the development of motorized vehicle access networks. The Forest Service was consulted on route designation where roads and trails enter the San Bernardino National Forest from the West Mojave Plan area.

**Military Integrated Resource Management Plans (INRMPs):** Each of the five military bases located within the western Mojave Desert has prepared, or is preparing, an INRMP to guide the management of natural resources on each base. The INRMPs affect military lands only, and do not include the development of motorized vehicle access network for public use.