

United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Environmental Assessment # DOI-BLM-CA-D070-2014-0075

Finding of No Significant Impact

Plank Road Interpretive and Access Improvement Project

Imperial County, California

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
El Centro Field Office
1661 South 4th Street
El Centro, CA 92243

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Proposed Action Title/Type: Plank Road Interpretive and Access Improvement Project

Applicant/Proponent: Bureau of Land Management (BLM) El Centro Field Office

Location of Proposed Action: Plank Road T16S, R20E, Sec32, SE¹/₄SE¹/₄SE¹/₄

INTRODUCTION

The current access road to the western terminus of the Plank Road (from Gray's Well Road) is poorly designed and compromises visitor safety due to a nearly 180° turn from Gray's Well Road to the access road. Similarly, vehicles exiting from the Plank Road access road onto Gray's Well Road are not afforded a clear view to check for oncoming traffic. The proposed action to install a new off ramp at a 90° angle to Gray's Well Road will eliminate this safety issue.

The current parking area ends in a small dead end near the Plank Road Monument and immediately adjacent to popular RV camping spots. Often, campers spill onto the paved surface, blocking day use parking and access to the historic Plank Road. The proposed action to increase the size of the parking area 22' immediately to the north with a hard pack gravel surface will allow day users an opportunity to visit the site without fear of getting stuck in the soft sand. Two parking sites which meet the ADA/ABA accessibility standards will be installed, increasing access to the site.

Existing interpretive waysides and informational signs currently in place around the Plank Road and within the protective fence are outdated and severely worn – with several of them almost completely buried. The BLM proposes to remove these old signs and waysides entirely, and replace or relocate them in the area of the expanded parking area. Again, this will increase overall visitor access. A duplicate of the Plank Road exhibit (two wheel paths) will be constructed and placed in the new parking area – allowing visitors an opportunity to both view a replica of the old road as well as try their hand at driving upon it. The parking area and exhibits/waysides will be protected from cross traffic with a series of large boulders. A BLM truncated sign will be installed directly east of the new off-ramp to identify the location.

The existing access road shows excessive wear in the asphalt; the proposed action to resurface this road from the newly constructed off-ramp to the parking area will facilitate visitor access.

CONSISTENCY WITH LAND USE PLANS, LAWS, REGULATIONS AND POLICIES

The proposed action and alternatives are in conformance with the following approved land use plans, as required by 43 CFR 1610.5:

- Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area Management Plan and Proposed Amendment to the California Desert Conservation Area Plan and Record of Decision, June 2013.

- Northern and Eastern Colorado Desert Coordinated Management Plan and the Western Colorado Desert Route of Travel Plan, July 2002.
- Plank Road Area of Critical Environmental Concern Management Plan, 1985.

SELECTED ALTERNATIVE

The environmental assessment (EA) for this project analyzed a proposed action and a no action alternative. The selected alternative is the proposed action as described in the introduction of this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and in chapter 2 of the EA.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

The El Centro Field Office interdisciplinary review and analysis determined that the proposed action would not trigger significant impacts on the environment based on criteria established by regulations, policy and analysis.

Based on the findings discussed herein, I conclude that the proposed action is not a major Federal action and will result in no significant impacts to the environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the general area. No environmental effects meet the definition of significance in context or intensity as defined in 40 CFR 1508.27 and do not exceed those effects described in applicable land use plans. Therefore, 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.

This determination is based on the rationale that the significance criteria, as defined by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) (40 CFR 1508.27) have not been met. “Significantly” as used in NEPA requires considerations of both context and intensity.

In making this FONSI, the following criteria have been considered, in accordance with the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), 40 C.F.R. 1508.27.

Context: This means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human, national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. For instance, in the case of a site-specific action, significance would usually depend upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Both short and long term effects are relevant.

Environmental impacts associated with the proposed action and alternatives have been assessed by an interdisciplinary team and described in EA # DOI-BLM-CA-D070-2014-0075. The context of the EA analysis was determined to be at a local and regional scale in Imperial County, California. The effects of the action are not applicable on a national scale since no nationally significant values were involved.

Intensity: This refers to the severity of impact. The following discussion is organized around the Ten Significance Criteria described in 40 CFR 1508.27 and supplemental Instruction

Memorandum, Acts, regulations and Executive Orders. The following have been considered in evaluating intensity for this proposal:

1) Impacts can be both beneficial and adverse and a significant effect may exist regardless of the perceived balance of effects.

Beneficial Effects: A safe and accessible visitor area will be provided to the public by extending the current parking area 22 feet to the north to provide additional parking spots which meet the American's with Disabilities Act and the Architectural Barriers Act (ADA/ABA) accessibility standards, increase accessibility to interpretive waysides and exhibits, resurface the existing access road, and construct a safer off-ramp from Gray's Well Road to the access road. The proposal will also provide aesthetic site improvements with the installation of a truncated sign identifying the location.

Adverse Effects: During construction of the selected action, visual and auditory impediments may occur. As these are temporary they are not considered significant.

2) The degree to which the selected alternative will affect public health or safety.

The selected alternative will improve public health and safety by providing smooth roads, ample parking, and access to facilities and information that is not currently available.

3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

The selected action is within the Plank Road Area of Critical Environmental Concern adjacent to Gray's Well Road and located adjacent to the Plank Road Monument, about 130 feet from the fenced area of the Plank Road, a cultural resource that may be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (refer to page 7 & 10 of the EA).

4) The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

The selected alternative is not likely to be controversial as it is for the improvement of the existing roadways, parking lot, and information centers to benefit the visiting public.

5) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

The selected alternative is not likely to cause any effects on the human environment which could be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks as this project is improving existing facilities, roadways, and parking lot.

6) The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

The selected alternative will not establish a precedent for future action with significant effects as future maintenance activities will only occur to keep the area in a condition which is safe and usable for the visiting public.

7) Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts – which include connected actions regardless of land ownership.

The selected alternative does not include nor is it related to any action with significant cumulative impacts as this action is isolated and construction will be temporarily in nature.

8) The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or other objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

The selected action will not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or other objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Nor will it cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources as the area is heavily disturbed from years of vehicular travel, both on the existing paved roads as well as the desert area between the paved roads (refer to page 10 of the EA). The remnants of the Plank Road will be avoided.

9) The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, or the degree to which the action may adversely affect: 1) a proposed to be listed endangered or threatened species or its habitat, or 2) a species on BLM's sensitive species list.

A biological monitor will be on site during construction activities to preform clearance surveys to ensure that the selected action will not adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat.

10) Whether the action threatens a violation of a federal, state, local, or tribal law, regulation or policy imposed for the protection of the environment, where non-federal requirements are consistent with federal requirements.

The selected action does not violate any federal, state, local, or tribal law, regulation or policy.

Reviewed by: _____
Nicollee Gaddis, Planning & Environmental Coordinator Date _____

Approved by: _____
Thomas F. Zale, Field Manager Date _____
El Centro Field Office