

Environmental Assessment

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT El Centro Field Office

EA Number: CA-67-EA05-01

Proposed Action Title/Type: Adoption of the Flat-tailed Horned Lizard Rangewide Management Strategy, 2003 Revision, An Arizona-California Conservation Strategy (Strategy)

Location of Proposed Action: This Environmental Assessment only covers the management areas identified in the Strategy that are also managed by the BLM El Centro Field Office. These lands are located in Imperial County, CA. However the Strategy also applies to land in Riverside County, San Diego County, CA and Yuma County, AZ which is not managed by the BLM El Centro Field Office. Please see Appendix 3 of the Strategy (attached) for the legal descriptions of each management area.

Applicant (if any): none

Conformance With Applicable Land Use Plans: This proposed action is subject to the following land use plan: California Desert Conservation Area Plan, as amended
Date Initial Plan Was Approved: 1980

Need for Proposed Action: BLM El Centro Field Office is one 13 participants in the Strategy. BLM has signed the 2003 Strategy as well as the previous 1997 Strategy. BLM has implemented the Strategy (both the 2003 and the 1997 versions) on a case by case basis for each project. Since the Strategy requires a formal designation of the flat-tailed horned lizard (FTHL) Management Areas (MAs), BLM proposes to evaluate formally incorporating the Strategy into BLM's land use planning and formally adopting the management areas in this Environment Assessment. However, incorporation of the Strategy into BLM's land use planning and adoption of the management areas will not change the manner that BLM implements the Strategy, as BLM will continue to apply the Strategy, both within and outside management areas, to projects on a case by case basis.

The Strategy identifies and prioritizes numerous planning actions. Planning Action 1.2 states "Designate and complete NEPA process for the East Mesa FTHL MA as shown in Figure 5. Planning Action 1.3 states "Designate and complete NEPA process for the West Mesa FTHL MA as shown in Figure 6. Planning Action 1.4 states "Designate and complete NEPA process for the Yuha Desert FTHL MA as shown in Figure 7." The Management Implementation Schedule identifies these planning actions as "Priority 1: An action that must be taken in the near term to conserve the species and prevent irreversible population declines." The Strategy identifies numerous additional land use planning actions.

Since the Strategy is clear on the exact locations for the MAs and the specific planning actions, this Environmental Assessment will evaluate the Strategy as written and signed. BLM has considered changing the boundaries of the MAs and changing some of the planning actions, but has decided to limit the scope of this Environmental Assessment to evaluating the Strategy as signed. Since the Strategy was recently updated and signed, it is unlikely that the Strategy will be updated for several years. Therefore, it would not be a good investment of time to evaluate other options at this point in time. In

the future, as additional monitoring and other information about the FTHL become available, additional changes to the Strategy could be considered by BLM and the other participants in the Strategy as an update to the Strategy. At that point in time BLM, in collaboration with the other participating agencies, can reevaluate the specific MAs and planning actions.

Amendment to the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) Plan, as amended: The proposed action would amend the CDCA Plan by formally incorporating the Strategy into BLM's land use planning and formally adopting the management areas. This would adopt the East Mesa Flat-tailed Horned Lizard Management Area, West Mesa Flat-tailed Horned Lizard Management Area, and Yuha Desert Flat-tailed Horned Lizard Management Area, as described in the attached copy of Appendix 3 of the Strategy, into the CDCA Plan, as amended

The no action alternative would not amend the CDCA Plan, the Strategy would not be incorporated into BLM's land use planning and the management areas would not be formally adopted.

Description of Proposed Action: The proposed action is to incorporate the Strategy into BLM's land use planning as the strategy is written and formally adopt the management areas as the management areas are designated in the Strategy. The current practice of fully implementing the planning actions in the Strategy would still occur. The Strategy is already being implemented by applying each of the planning actions to the preferred alternative in every project as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance is written for the specific proposed project. This proposed action would limit future alternatives on a project specific level to only alternatives that fully complied with the Strategy. The "on the ground" changes on a project specific basis would be the same for the no action alternative as the action alternative.

Alternative 1: No Action

This alternative will not formally incorporate the Strategy into BLM's land use planning. It also would not formally designate the management areas. However, the current practice of fully implementing the planning actions in the Strategy and applying the management area requirements in the Strategy would still occur. The Strategy is already being implemented by applying each of the planning action to the preferred alternative in every project that is located in a MA. However, some of the alternatives that are evaluated for specific future projects may not include all aspects of the Strategy. This would allow a Decision Maker to fully evaluate the benefits of the Strategy for each project. The "on the ground" changes on a project specific basis would be the same for the no action alternative as the action alternative.

Affected Environment:

The affected environment related to vegetation, threatened & endangered vegetation, wildlife, wetland and riparian areas, ACECs, air quality, noise, social economics, demographics, cultural resources, soils and recreation is described in the *Environmental Assessment and Draft Plan Amendment for Western Colorado Desert Routes of Travel Designation CA-670-EA2002-2* dated October 2002. This project area does not include and neither alternative is expected to impact wilderness areas, prime or unique farmland, floodplains, and wild and scenic rivers. These items are not further evaluated in the impacts section.

The project area contains the San Sebastian Marsh and San Felipe Creek ACEC. This area has surface water that supports the desert pupfish. The underlying groundwater in the project area ranges from poor to drinkable. Neither alternative is expected to impact water quality, so a full description of this environment is not included.

The project area, on occasion, will contain hazardous and solid wastes due to illegal dumping. Neither alternative is expected to impact hazardous or solid wastes, so a full description of this environment is not included.

The visual resource management objective class for the involved BLM lands is Class 3. Visual resource management objectives for Class 3 lands are to partially retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be moderate. The degree to which an action affects the visual quality of the landscape can be measured in terms of the impacts to the elements of form, line, color, and texture of the landscape. The landscape is a focal one, with a limited central focus point and which has a repetitive creosote vegetation sequence. The overall texture is a medium one, with patchy and broken vegetation dominant. The desert colors are muted shades ranging from desert brown and sand beige to juniper green (Munsell Soil Color Charts). Both the proposed and no action alternative would not raise the contrast rating and are not expected to impact visual resources.

Environmental Impacts:

The proposed action has been analyzed to assess direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts to critical elements of the human environment listed below. Those elements not present or significantly affected by the proposed action are checked "No". Some elements are discussed in further detail following the checklist.

Critical Element	Affected		
	Yes	No	Initial
Air Quality		x	_____
ACECs		x	_____
Cultural Resources		x	_____
Hazardous & Solid Wastes		x	_____
Noise		x	_____
Recreation		x	_____
Social Economics/Demographics		x	_____
Soils		x	_____
Vegetation (T&E)		x	_____
Visual Resources		x	_____
Water Quality		x	_____
Wildlife (T&E)		x	_____
Wetlands/Riparian Zones		x	_____

Description of Impacts:

Air Quality: Implementing the Strategy through either alternative would have a positive affect on air quality. This positive affect would be through reduced project specific ground disturbing impacts in the MAs. The impacts for the action and the no action alternative would be expected to be the same since the resulting project specific actions would be expected to be the same. Formally incorporating the Strategy into BLM's land use planning would not impact the air quality. Air Quality impacts will be evaluated further on a project specific level.

ACECs: Implementing the Strategy through either alternative would have a positive affect on ACECs. This positive affect would be through reduced project specific ground disturbing impacts in the MAs. The impacts for the action and the no action alternative would be expected to be the same since the resulting project specific actions would be expected to be the same. Formally incorporating the Strategy into BLM's land use planning would not impact the ACECs. ACEC impacts will be evaluated further on a project specific level.

Cultural Resources: Implementing the Strategy through either alternative would have a positive affect on cultural resources. This positive affect would be through reduced project specific ground disturbing impacts in the MAs. The impacts for the action and the no action alternative would be expected to be the same since the resulting project specific actions would be expected to be the same. Formally incorporating the Strategy into BLM's land use planning would not impact the cultural resources and would not be expected to impact Native American relations. Generally, Native Americans would be more interested in the specific project and its impacts rather than a procedural matter. However, some Native Americans would favor the action alternative and consider it a stronger commitment to the Strategy. Conservation of FTHL and its habitat is important to many Native Americans. Cultural Resource impacts will be evaluated further on a project specific level.

Hazardous & Solid Wastes: Implementing the Strategy through either alternative would have a positive affect on hazardous and solid wastes. This positive affect would be through reduced recreational use due to the project specific route and camping planning actions for the MAs. The impacts for the action and the no action alternative would be expected to be the same since the resulting project specific actions would be expected to be the same. Formally incorporating the Strategy into BLM's land use planning would not impact hazardous and solid wastes. Hazardous and solid waste impacts will be evaluated further on a project specific level.

Noise: Implementing the Strategy through either alternative would have a positive affect on noise. This positive affect would be through reduced recreational use due to the project specific route and camping planning actions for the MAs. The impacts for the action and the no action alternative would be expected to be the same since the resulting project specific actions would be expected to be the same. Formally incorporating the Strategy into BLM's land use planning would not impact noise. Noise impacts will be evaluated further on a project specific level.

Recreation: Implementing the Strategy through either alternative would have a negative affect on recreation. This negative affect would be through reduced recreational use due to the project specific route and camping planning actions for the MAs. The impacts for the action and the no action alternative would be expected to be the same since the resulting project specific actions would be expected to be the same. Formally incorporating the Strategy into BLM's land use planning would not impact recreation. Recreation impacts will be evaluated further on a project specific level.

Social Economics, Demographics: Implementing the Strategy through either alternative would have a negative affect on economics. This negative affect would be through reduced recreational use due to the project specific route and camping planning actions for the MAs. Implementing the Strategy through the proposed action could have a positive affect on the social feelings of wellness for individuals and groups that are interested in conserving the FTHL as they may view the incorporation Strategy as a higher commitment to follow the Strategy. On the other hand, implementing the Strategy through the proposed action may reduce the feelings of wellness for some recreational users who may view this as restricting their recreational opportunities. Implementing the Strategy through either alternative would have a no affect on the demographics of Imperial County. The actual impacts for the action and the no action alternative would be expected to be the same since the resulting project specific actions would be expected to be the same. Formally incorporating the Strategy into BLM's land use planning would not impact the demographics or economics. However, it could impact the social feelings of wellness, as discussed above. Social, economic and demographic impacts will be evaluated further on a project specific level.

Soils: Implementing the Strategy through either alternative would have a positive affect on soils. This positive affect would be through reduced ground disturbing activities and reduced recreational use due to the project specific route and camping planning actions for the MAs. The impacts for the action and the no action alternative would be expected to be the same since the resulting project specific actions would be expected to be the same. Formally incorporating the Strategy into BLM's land use planning would not impact soils. Soil impacts will be evaluated further on a project specific level.

Vegetation, including threatened & endangered vegetation: Implementing the Strategy through either alternative would have a positive affect on vegetation. This positive affect would be through reduced ground disturbing activities and reduced recreational use due to the project specific route and camping planning actions for the MAs. The impacts for the action and the no action alternative would be expected to be the same since the resulting project specific actions would be expected to be the same. Formally incorporating the Strategy into BLM's land use planning would not impact vegetation. Vegetation impacts will be evaluated further on a project specific level.

Visual Resources: Implementing the Strategy through either alternative would have a positive affect on visual resources. This positive affect would be through reduced ground disturbing activities and reduced recreational use due to the project specific route and camping planning actions for the MAs. The impacts for the action and the no action alternative would be expected to be the same since the resulting project specific actions would be expected to be the same. Formally incorporating the Strategy into BLM's land use planning would not impact visual resources. Visual resource impacts will be evaluated further on a project specific level.

Water Quality: Implementing the Strategy through either alternative would have a positive affect on water quality. This positive affect would be through reduced recreational use around surface water bodies due to the project specific route and camping planning actions for the MAs. The impacts for the action and the no action alternative would be expected to be the same since the resulting project specific actions would be expected to be the same. Formally incorporating the Strategy into BLM's land use planning would not impact water quality. Water quality impacts will be evaluated further on a project specific level.

Wildlife, including threatened & endangered wildlife: Implementing the Strategy through either alternative would have a positive affect on wildlife. This positive affect would be through reduced ground disturbing activities and reduced recreational use due to the project specific route and camping planning actions for the MAs. The impacts for the action and the no action alternative would be expected to be the same since the resulting project specific actions would be expected to be the same. Formally incorporating the Strategy into BLM's land use planning would not impact wildlife. Wildlife impacts will be evaluated further on a project specific level.

Wetland and Riparian Areas: Implementing the Strategy through either alternative would have a positive affect on wetland and riparian area. This positive affect would be through reduced ground disturbing activities and reduced recreational use due to the project specific route and camping planning actions for the MAs. The impacts for the action and the no action alternative would be expected to be the same since the resulting project specific actions would be expected to be the same. Formally incorporating the Strategy into BLM's land use planning would not impact wetland and riparian areas. Wetland and riparian area impacts will be evaluated further on a project specific level.

Residual Impacts: No residual impacts would be expected from either alternative.

Cumulative Impacts: Cumulatively, the Strategy could reduce recreational opportunities. The cumulative impacts for this project are similar to the cumulative impacts described in the *Environmental Assessment and Draft Plan Amendment for Western Colorado Desert Routes of Travel Designation CA-670-EA2002-2* dated October 2002 and to those described in the *Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area Management Plan and Proposed Amendment to the California Desert Conservation Plan 1980, May 2003*.

Neither alternative is expected to impact environmental justice issues or the energy policy.

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