

**Environmental Assessment**

**Safety Closure of the High Point Road Area  
for Target Shooting**

**USDA-Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region  
Palomar Ranger District, Cleveland National Forest  
San Diego County, California**

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# Chapter 1 – Purpose and Need

## **1.1 Introduction**

The Palomar Ranger District of the Cleveland National Forest (Cleveland NF) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) have received numerous complaints from local residents and homeowners of stray and ricocheting bullets hitting structures and nearly hitting persons on private property in the vicinity of High Point Road and the State Route 79 corridor in northern San Diego County.

On May 7, 2004, a temporary emergency closure was implemented by the Cleveland NF to protect public health and safety. Recreational shooting in the High Point Road area posed an immediate threat to the lives and property of nearby residents, as well as other users of national forest and BLM land. The temporary closure on Cleveland NF land was imposed via 36 CFR 261.58(m); the corresponding closure on BLM land was imposed via 43 CFR 8364.1.

## **1.2 Proposed Action**

For reasons of public health and safety the Cleveland NF, in conjunction with the BLM, proposes to make permanent the current temporary emergency closure of the High Point Road area for target shooting. Foot and vehicle access to High Point Road would not be affected by the proposed action. The permanent closure would not apply to persons discharging firearms while engaged in the lawful pursuit of game animals, as regulated by the California Department of Fish and Game. An area 0.5 miles in width on national forest land on both sides of High Point Road (8S05) and Oak Grove Road (9S09) up to the junction with Palomar Divide Road (9S07) would be closed to target shooting.

The Cleveland NF and the BLM are preparing separate environmental assessments to analyze the effects of the possible closure on resources administered by each agency.

**Location.** The area proposed for permanent closure is located in sections 3, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 23, 24, and 25, Township 9 South, Range 1 East, and sections 18, 19, and 30, Township 9 South, Range 2 East, San Bernardino Meridian, San Diego County (see Map 1).

## **1.3 Purpose And Need For Action**

The purpose and need for this project is to provide an enforceable way to eliminate the threat of stray rounds being fired from the vicinity of High Point Road and striking private structures and endangering the lives and property of residents in and around the State Route 79 corridor.

## **1.4 Forest Plan Direction**

The High Point Road area is located in the Back Country Zone within the Aguanga Place, as described in the Cleveland NP Land Management Plan (Forest Plan). The Back Country Zone is managed for motorized public access on designated roads and trails. The Aguanga Place is to be maintained as a natural appearing landscape functioning as a

rural backdrop for southern Riverside County. Recreation Strategy 2 in the Forest Plan states that the Cleveland NF should analyze, stabilize, and restore areas in which visitor use has a negative impact on public safety and environmental resources.

**1.5 Decision To Be Made**

As a result of the environmental analysis contained in this environmental assessment, documents found in the project record, and other supporting documentation and information, the responsible official will decide whether to choose the proposed action or an alternative to the proposed action.

## **Chapter 2 – Alternatives**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses scoping and public participation, issues derived from public comments, alternatives eliminated from further consideration and alternatives that were analyzed.

### **2.2 Scoping And Public Comment**

The Cleveland NF requested public comment on the High Point Road area safety closure via the schedule of proposed actions, direct mailings, information published in newspapers of record, and a public open house.

#### **2.2.1 Schedule of Proposed Actions**

Information regarding this project appears in the Cleveland NF's quarterly schedule of proposed actions (SOPA), which is sent to approximately 900 interested parties. The SOPA is available for viewing and downloading on the USDA-Forest Service Internet website (<http://www.fs.fed.us/sopa>).

#### **2.2.2 Mailings**

A letter dated May 18, 2005 and co-signed by Cleveland NF and BLM officials was mailed to interested members of the public. The letter summarized the purpose and need for the project, explained the proposed action, and notified the public of an open house to be held the following month.

#### **2.2.3 Public Open House**

On June 11, 2005, a public open house was held at the Oak Grove Community Center to provide the public with the opportunity to ask questions and get information regarding the proposed action. Personnel from the BLM and the Cleveland NF were on hand. Some 26 members of the public signed the register at the open house.

#### **2.2.4 Summary of Scoping Comments**

Approximately 50 persons commented on the proposed action during the scoping period, either by email or by submitting handwritten comments. A few persons provided essentially the same statements in separate emails to the Cleveland NF and the BLM. These duplicative statements are counted as representing only one comment per individual.

### **2.5 Issues From Comment Letters**

The Cleveland NF considered public comments and developed a list of issues to address. As instructed by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and its accompanying regulations, the Cleveland NF separates issues based on significance and non-significance. Significant issues are those that are directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action. Non-significant issues are those that are either:

1. Outside the scope of the proposed action;

2. Already decided by law, regulation, the forest plan, or other higher level decisions;
3. Irrelevant to the decision to be made; or
4. Conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence.

The Council on Environmental Quality requires federal agencies to identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not significant or which have been covered by prior environmental review.

### **2.5.1 Non-significant issues**

Some persons commented that if the High Point Road area were closed to target shooting for safety reasons, another shooting area at a different location on the national forest should be opened. Analyzing the potential of other locations on national forest or BLM land for shooting areas, while it may form the substance for future environmental analysis, is outside the scope of the proposed action.

Some persons believed that the safety closure of the High Point Road area would affect hunters. This is an issue that has already been decided by laws and regulations. All hunting on Cleveland NF land is regulated by the California Department of Fish and Game. The safety closure of the area would not apply to the use of firearms by persons engaged in the lawful pursuit of game animals.

### **2.5.2 Significant issues**

Some persons commented that an alternative should be developed that would allow target shooting to occur in the High Point Road area, but only with firearms that would not result in rounds reaching private residences. An alternative addressing this issue is analyzed in section 2.2.

## **2.2 Alternatives Eliminated from Further Study**

### **2.2.1 Allowing Non-Rifle Target Shooting**

Based on public comment during the scoping period, an alternative was discussed that would allow non-rifle target shooting by persons using firearms that do not have the potential to reach private residences. This alternative would allow continued use of shotguns and handguns for target shooting in the High Point Road area.

This alternative was not carried forward into further analysis because, based on input from both the Cleveland NF and BLM law enforcement officers, it would be difficult and costly to enforce. Therefore this alternative would not meet the purpose and need of the project.

## **2.3 Alternatives Considered**

### **2.3.1 Alternative 1: Proposed Action**

Under this alternative, the High Point Road area would be closed to firearm use to provide for the safety of residents in the area. Cleveland NF land would remain open to

firearm use during the lawful pursuit of game animals. Foot or vehicle access to High Point Road would not be affected by this proposed action.

Persons wishing to target practice with firearms on Cleveland NF land would be able to use the shooting area at Orosco Ridge, which is on the Palomar Ranger District (see Map 1 inset). Use of the Orosco Ridge shooting area would be subject to all applicable laws and regulations governing the use of firearms and would be subject to seasonal closures based on fire danger or adverse weather conditions.

Signs in both English and Spanish would be placed at locations in the High Point Road area to inform the public of the safety closure.

### **2.3.2 Alternative 2: No Action**

Under this alternative, the High Point area would remain open for target shooting, subject to all applicable statutes, regulations, policies, and land use plans. Residents in the vicinity and other members of the public would continue to have their health, safety, and property threatened by stray rounds of ammunition.

## **Chapter 3 – Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter describes the physical and biological environment that might be affected by the proposed action and alternatives to the proposed action.

#### **3.1.1 Direct, indirect, and cumulative effects**

A direct effect is caused by an action and occurs at the same time and place as the action. An indirect effect is caused by an action and occurs later in time or at another location, yet is reasonably foreseeable in the future. A cumulative effect results from the incremental effect of an action when added to the effects of other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions, regardless of what agency or person undertakes the other actions and regardless of land ownership on which the other actions occur.

Cumulative effects were analyzed in light of the July 24, 2005 memorandum by the Council on Environmental Quality titled “Guidance on the Consideration of Past Actions in Cumulative Effects Analysis.” In addition, the USDA-Forest Service Region 5 white paper “Analysis of Cumulative Effects in NEPA” was used in the effects analysis.

### **3.2 Affected Environment: Sensitive, Threatened, Endangered And Candidate Species**

#### **3.2.1 Threatened and endangered species**

The project area contains modeled habitat for the southwestern willow flycatcher, the arroyo toad, the mountain yellow-legged frog, the California red-legged frog, Nevin’s barberry, and Vail Lake ceanothus.

Modeled habitat for these species is found along drainages that run downslope from Aguanga Ridge or along Cottonwood Creek, adjacent to Oak Grove and High Point roads. Although Cottonwood Creek lies within the 0.5-mile buffer of the roads, it lies in the bottom of a steep canyon which is separated from the roads by steep and densely vegetated topography. The potential is low for aquatic species that may be found in the creek to travel cross-country to areas directly impacted by target shooting in the High Point Road area.

#### **3.2.2 Sensitive species**

The project area contains known locations of the San Diego horned lizard, San Felipe monardella, Hall’s monardella, and Payson’s jewelflower. In addition, the project area contains potential habitat for the pallid bat, the San Diego ringneck snake, the two-striped garter snake, and the coastal rosy boa.

### **3.3 Environmental Consequences: Sensitive, Threatened, Endangered, and Candidate Species**

#### **3.3.1 Alternative 1: Proposed Action**

*Direct, indirect, and cumulative effects.* The implementation of the proposed action would likely result in a beneficial effect to sensitive, threatened, endangered, and candidate species. The reduction in vehicle traffic, garbage dumping, and high-impact public use may allow some disturbed land to recover and may halt any further destruction of occupied and potential habitat. Closure of the area to target shooting would have no negative direct or indirect effects on these species, and would result in lesser cumulative effects.

#### **3.3.2 Alternative 2: No Action**

*Direct effects.* If the High Point Road area were not permanently closed to target shooting, direct effects include damage from shooting, piling of refuse and debris, soil compaction, and damage to species from vehicles creating or traveling on unauthorized roads.

*Indirect effects.* Indirect effects of the no action alternative may include a build up of dust on sensitive plants from vehicles traveling the dirt road and the possibility of fires started by vehicle sparks, shooting, or persons being careless with campfires or cigarettes.

*Cumulative effects.* The no action alternative may combine with other projects and activities in the area, resulting in cumulative effects. Overlapping and adjacent projects that may contribute toward cumulative effects include: the Aguanga Ridge, Cottonwood, and High Point fuelbreaks; and the Kohler, Northslope, and Cottonwood prescribed burns. Additionally, continuing residential and commercial development in Riverside County may add to cumulative effects, as may recreation activities such as hunting, hiking, biking, and driving. The potential effects of these projects and activities if combined with the no action alternative would be continuing degradation of habitat as well as loss of potential habitat and loss of individuals of these species.

### **3.4 Affected Environment: Heritage Resources**

#### **3.4.1 Prehistoric period (12,000 years before present until 1769)**

The prehistory of southern California is divided into the Paleo-Indian period (12,000 years to 8,000 years before present), the Archaic period (8,000 to 2,000 years before present), and the Late Prehistoric period (2,000 years before present until 1769). The Paleo-Indian period is typified by artifact assemblages of the San Dieguito complex, which is represented almost exclusively by flaked stone artifacts, including large projectile points, choppers, and scrapers. The Archaic period is typified by the La Jollan and Early Milling Stone Horizon cultural traditions. The Late Prehistoric period is marked by the appearance of arrow points, ceramics, bone tools and various ornaments. Habitation sites vary from small camps to larger sites that exhibit extensive occupation. Sites are found primarily on plateaus and creek terraces in or near bedrock outcroppings.

### **3.4.2 Spanish Period (1769-1821)**

During the Spanish period, the San Diego presidio and the San Diego, San Luis Rey, and San Juan Capistrano missions were established and horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, corn, wheat, olives and other agricultural goods and implements were introduced. Spanish influence continued beyond the year 1821, when California came under Mexican rule, because missions continued to operate, though with reduced funding and support. Laws governing land distribution were also retained. Forest lands were only occasionally penetrated during this period because of the relatively small numbers of Spaniards, a colonial settlement pattern that focused on coastal missions and presidios, and the resistance of inland/mountain native peoples to Spanish intrusion.

### **3.4.3 Mexican Period (1821-1846)**

The Mexican period includes the retention of Spanish laws and practices until shortly before secularization of the San Gabriel, San Luis Rey, San Juan Capistrano, and San Diego de Alcalá missions in the 1830s. Although several Spanish land grants were made prior to 1834, after secularization vast tracts of land were granted and the Rancho era began. Cattle ranching prevailed over other agricultural activities and development of the hide and tallow trade increased during the early part of this period. The Pueblo of San Diego was established, Los Angeles and San Gabriel became major settlements, and transportation routes expanded. The Mexican Period ended with the Mexican-American War in 1846 to 1848. Although Mexican landowners pushed further into the interior hills and mountains than had the Spaniards, settlement and extensive land use still focused on the coastal plain and nearby inland valleys.

### **3.4.4 American Period (1848-present)**

The American period began when Mexico ceded California to the United States under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. The California Lands Commission was created by the State of California in response to the Act of 1851 that provided a means of validating land ownership throughout the state through settlement of land claims. Lands that now comprise the Cleveland NF possessed potential for lumber, gold, silver, and water. As result of increasing population pressures, the Cleveland NF was one of the first areas of reserved land created under the Forest Reserve Act of 1891. This act repealed the Timber Culture Act of 1873 that granted settlers land in exchange for tree cultivation to promote timber growth on the western prairies.

## **3.5 Environmental Consequences: Heritage Resources**

### **3.5.1 Alternative 1: Proposed Action**

*Direct, indirect, and cumulative effects.* This alternative is primarily an administrative change that does not recommend any ground-disturbing actions with the exception of the installation of a few signs in the High Point Road area to inform the public of the safety closure. The proposed action is expected to have no direct, indirect, or cumulative effects on heritage or cultural resources.

### **3.5.2 Alternative 2: No Action**

*Direct, indirect, and cumulative effects.* Shooting activity in the High Point Road area has a limited potential to affect National Register Eligible Heritage Sites. Alternative 2 is expected to have no direct, indirect, or cumulative effects on heritage or cultural resources.

### **3.6 Affected Environment: Socioeconomics**

A civil rights impact analysis (CRIA) was issued on April 9, 2004 prior to the temporary emergency closure. Over a 2.5-year period prior to the issuance of the CRIA, recreational shooters were observed to have the following demographic characteristics:

<b>Gender:</b>	Male – 85 percent Female – 15 percent
<b>Race:</b>	Caucasian – 80 percent Hispanic – 9 percent Asian – 9 percent Other – 2 percent
<b>Disabled:</b>	0 percent

Other than the data reported in the CRIA, no direct studies or surveys of the social or economic environment have been undertaken. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, before restrictions were enacted to disallow shooting in the area for safety reasons, members of the public from San Diego, Los Angeles, and Riverside counties, among others, used the area for target shooting. The US Census Bureau projects population in the southern California area to increase in the coming years. Presumably, the demand for target shooting areas and facilities will also increase, though at an undetermined rate.

### **3.7 Environmental Consequences: Socioeconomics**

#### **3.7.1 Alternative 1: Proposed Action**

*Direct effects.* This alternative would make permanent the current temporary emergency closure of the High Point Road area for target shooting. Persons who previously used the area for target shooting would be required to find other locations in which to recreate or, if unable to do so, may be forced to discontinue target shooting.

Residents of the State Route 79 corridor would no longer be subject to risks to their health, safety, and property from weapons lawfully discharged in the High Point Road shooting area.

The CRIA concluded that although the proposed action may be of concern to some forest users, it would not result in unacceptable civil rights impacts.

*Indirect effects.* Other target shooting areas on public land, including the Orosco Ridge shooting area on the Cleveland NF approximately 20 air miles south of the High Point Road area, as well as privately owned indoor and outdoor shooting ranges, would likely have increased rates of use.

Potential exists for illegal use of the High Point Road shooting area. Such use could result in damage to the health, safety, and property of residents along the State Route 79 corridor but would be punishable by applicable laws and regulations.

*Cumulative effects.* The BLM is undergoing parallel environmental analysis on land it manages in the vicinity of the High Point Road. If the BLM decides to make permanent the temporary closure of its land in the vicinity, the cumulative effect of the Cleveland NF proposed action would be a greater reduction of public land open to target shooting in the area. If the BLM decides not to make permanent the temporary closure of its land, increased use of BLM land for target shooting is likely.

### **3.7.2 Alternative 2: No Action**

*Direct effects.* Shooting activity in the High Point area would have a continued impact on residents who live along the State Route 79 corridor. Direct impacts include the potential for residents to be injured or killed, or to have their property damaged, by stray ammunition.

*Indirect effects.* Private property value may be lost if current residents choose to sell their homes because, due to the safety threat posed by continued targets shooting, the selling price would likely be less than under normal market conditions.

*Cumulative effects.* The BLM is undergoing parallel environmental analysis on land it manages in the vicinity of the High Point Road. If the BLM decides to make permanent the temporary closure of its land in the vicinity, the cumulative effect of the Cleveland NF no action alternative would likely be an increase in use of Forest Service land for target shooting. If the BLM decides not to make permanent the temporary closure, residents of the State Route 79 corridor would be subject to continued risk from ammunition discharged in the High Point Road area.

### **3.8 Connected, Similar And Cumulative Actions (40 CFR 1508.25)**

*Connected actions* are those actions that are so closely related to a proposed action that they should be discussed within the same analysis. The Cleveland NF is not pursuing any actions closely related to the proposed safety closure of the shooting area.

*Similar actions* are those that, when viewed with other foreseeable or proposed agency actions, have similarities that provide a basis for a combined evaluation of the consequences of each action. The Cleveland NF is not currently considering any other actions similar in nature to the proposed safety closure of the shooting area.

*Cumulative actions* are those actions that, when viewed with past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions have cumulatively significant impacts and should

be discussed in the same environmental analysis. Past and ongoing actions on the Cleveland NF in the vicinity of the proposed action include analysis and activities associated with the Cindy B-Cryogenie Mine, the U.S. Navy Survival, Escape, Resistance and Evasion (SERE) camp, Indian Flats road and campground, the Pacific Crest Trail, a water tank and pipeline for Puerta La Cruz Conservation Camp, and post-fire restoration and fuels reduction activities.

## **Chapter 4 – List of Preparers**

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## **Chapter 5 – List of Acronyms and Abbreviations**

Bureau of Land Management	BLM
California State Historical Preservation Office	SHPO
Cleveland National Forest	Cleveland NF
Code of Federal Regulations	CFR
Land Management Plan	Forest Plan
National Environmental Policy Act	NEPA
United States Department of Agriculture	USDA