

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
PALM SPRINGS-SOUTH COAST FIELD OFFICE**

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
EA Number CA-660-05-54**

DATE: April 19, 2005

TITLE / PROJECT TYPE: Coachella Valley OHV Restoration

CASE FILE / PROJECT NO: N/A

FUNDING CODE: 7123 **PROGRAM ELEMENT:** JA

BLM OFFICE: Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office
690 W. Garnet Avenue, P.O. Box
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North Palm Springs, CA 92258-1260

APPLICANT / PROPONENT: BLM

LOCATION OF PROPOSED ACTION: Coachella Valley, Riverside County

PROJECT ACREAGE: **BLM** 1000

USGS TOPOGRAPHIC MAP: East Deception Canyon, Seven Palms Valley, West Berdoo Canyon, Myoma, Cathedral City

LAND USE PLAN CONFORMANCE and Other Regulatory Compliance:

In accordance with Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations 1610.5-3, the proposed action and alternatives are in conformance with the following approved land use plan: *California Desert Conservation Area Plan, 1980; Coachella Valley CDCA Plan Amendment, 2002.*

Fish and Wildlife Consultation

The USFWS was consulted informally during this process. A determination of beneficial affect was made by the BLM and the USFWS and formal consultation was not required.

NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

The Coachella Valley Preserve Area of Critical Environmental Concern (hereafter ACEC) is bordered by urban portions of the greater Palm Springs area on approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of its perimeter. Joshua Tree National Park lies approximately five miles to the north of the ACEC boundary. The preserve encompasses a diverse array

of habitats such as highly eroded hills, sand dunes, and Fan-Palm Oases. Two federally endangered species and two threatened species can also be found inside the ACEC.

Most off-highway vehicle (OHV) routes inside the ACEC boundary were closed under the CDCA Plan Amendment and prior actions, however there are open routes along its borders (CV043, CV067, CV074-076) and a few open routes that enter the ACEC (CV200, CV051-054). There are also numerous non-designated routes in the ACEC, especially in sandy hill habitats such as the Willow Hole area, which are closed to OHV use. At Willow Hole, a barbed-wire fence protecting the ACEC has been repeatedly cut in several locations, and OHV routes cover more than half the surface area of the parcel (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. OHV damage at Willow Hole, CVPS.

In order to minimize soil erosion and loss of native vegetation and otherwise protect natural resources, BLM proposes to restore closed routes and non-designated offshoots from open routes and city streets that are on public land inside the ACEC and its surrounding areas (defined on the north by Joshua Tree National Park, south by Interstate 10, east by Dillon Road, and west by Palm Drive, see Figure 1). These routes are identified in Table 1. There are 16 closed routes and 18 open routes in the project area. Restoring closed and non-designated routes encourages OHV's to stay out of areas that are closed to their use. Increased OHV compliance together with increased plant cover and diversity of shrubs, forbs, and grasses is expected to improve wildlife habitat, increase wildlife populations, and restore ecosystem processes.

A timely response by BLM for soil protection and vegetation restoration in the ACEC will afford greater protection to species of special concern and outstanding scenic landscapes, thereby meeting public expectations for environmental protection and

enhancement of settings for recreational activities

Table 1. OHV routes in the project area, their length on BLM land, number, and Restoration Treatment.

Route Number <i>(CV00##)</i>	Length on BLM <i>(miles)</i>	CDCA Route Designation <i>(open or closed)</i>	Restoration Treatment <i>(route or offshoots)</i>
38	1.2	open	offshoots
39	0.7	closed	route
40	0.4	open	offshoots
41	0.3	open	offshoots
42	0.5	closed	route
43	0.5	open	offshoots
44	0.4	closed	offshoots
45	1.7	closed	route
46	0.2	open	offshoots
47	0.4	closed	route
49	0.2	both	none
50	1.1	closed	none
51	0.2	open	none
52	2.1	open	none
53	0.3	open	offshoots
54	0.5	open	offshoots
55	1.1	closed	none
56	1	closed	none
57	2.5	closed	route
58	1	closed	route
59	0.8	closed	route
60	0.6	open	none
61	0.6	closed	route
62	1.8	closed	route
63	0.3	closed	route
64	0.9	closed	route
65	0.7	open	offshoots
66	0.4	open	offshoots
67	1.4	open	offshoots
68	0.9	closed	offshoots
70	0.2	open	offshoots
74	0.6	open	offshoots
75	1.1	open	offshoots
76	1.2	open	offshoots
Thousand Palms Rd.	4.5	open	offshoots

Restoration Techniques:

Decompaction

Unauthorized vehicle routes exhibiting evidence of repeated vehicle traffic may require soil decompaction to increase water infiltration. Improving water infiltration allows plants to establish and burrowing animals such as ants, rodents, and foxes to inhabit the soil again. Workers would use hand tools such as soil spades, spading forks, and shovels to loosen the top two to six inches of soil.

Soil Pitting

Soil pitting contours the soil to direct water flow and draw wind-blown seeds to focal points on the ground. Pitting first creates bowls approximately one to two feet wide and six inches deep. This practice creates microsites in the bowls to increase seed germination and small plant growth.

Soil Imprinting

Soil imprinting entails raking small trenches to roughen the texture on surface soil and to collect wind-blown seed. Hand tools such as shovels and rakes would be used.

Raking

Treatment of unauthorized trails formed after a single vehicle pass, as well as trails with little or no vegetation trampling or soil compaction resulting from vehicular passages, would entail raking or sweeping the top one inch of soil with a broom to hide the evidence of tracks. Soils may also be contoured to match surrounding land. Only hand tools would be used.

Large Rocks

Barricades may consist of a row of large rocks and boulders to deter use in especially fragile areas. Placement of rocks requires no equipment and little or no soil disturbance is associated with their use. Fencing would entail soil disturbance, but no areas have been identified thus far where fencing is necessary.

Barricading with Rice Straw Bales

Certified weed-free bales of rice straw would be placed to obstruct OHV travel in areas once used for hill climbs and on unauthorized OHV trails. The bales reduce soil erosion by slowing and diffusing water flow down slopes. Over time, rice straw bales break down and provide mulch for plants grown from seeds trapped on the upslope side of the decomposing bale. A truck to transport bales would be the only mechanical equipment required.

Terracing with Berms

Berms or terraces slow and disperse water flow. Work crews would use hand tools to disturb the top one to six inches of soil.

Vertical Mulching

Dead plant material placed at the beginning of unauthorized trails where they intersect

with the administrative vehicle route or the loop trail can disguise these trails and deter further use. Large desert shrubs on the soil surface act as barricades. Similarly, dead shrubs or branches planted upright in the soil make the trail blend in with surrounding vegetation. Vertical mulch also benefits restoration by trapping wind-blown seeds and lessening wind erosion just above the ground surface. This work would be primarily accomplished with hand tools. Little soil disturbance would be needed except where mulch is “planted,” thus requiring a small hole to anchor the material.

Planting Vegetation

Re-vegetation involves directly planting native species to the line-of-sight point from a trail that is available for use. This accelerates improvements to soil stability, vegetation cover and diversity, and wildlife habitat. Eventually re-vegetation disguises trails. Planting would make use of hand tools (shovels) and some mechanized equipment (augers) to dig holes up to two feet deep and one foot wide for the largest transplants. In extraordinary cases, transplantation of larger plants would require somewhat larger holes potentially up to three feet deep and three feet wide. During FY 2005, available stock of that size will not be available. After planting, soil may be contoured to direct the flow of rainwater or irrigation water to plant roots.

Planting vegetation requires considerable advance work. First, restoration ecologists would gather local provenances of seeds for native shrub, forb, and grass species. In dry years, it may be necessary to irrigate specimens of plant species desired for propagation by seed. To propagate plants from seed and to hold young plants before outplanting, BLM could enter into a contract with Joshua Tree National Park Nursery for such services, or construct portable lath houses to undertake these activities on its own.

Seeding

Seeding requires rakes to collect seed from seed banks in the soil or from dried seedpods still attached on plants. Hand sowing would spread seeds across the soil surface. Raking would disturb at most the top one-inch of soil. Hand seeding may also be accomplished concurrent with soil pitting (see above) to improve seed germination rates.

Signing

Insufficient or ambiguous signs may cause responsible OHV riders to accidentally ride on unauthorized routes or in closed areas. To help riders, the restoration ecology team shall work closely with the ECO trail maintenance team to maintain existing signs and place new signs wherever necessary. Various signs may be appropriate to site needs; recreational, directional, special designation, or informational signs may be needed. Special designation signing would indicate areas of re-vegetation to prevent unintended trampling. Signing work may include use of a Carsonite signpost driver that can disturb soil to a one-foot depth but with a minimal surface disturbance due to the small sign profile.

Removing Manufactured Materials

The restoration team would remove litter and other unsightly or potentially dangerous manufactured materials less than 50 years old. If the restoration team discovers previously undocumented materials that appear to be more than fifty years old, they would consult with the cultural resources specialist at the Palm Springs Field Office (FO). The cultural resources specialist would assess whether removing materials older than 50 years is appropriate and what documentation or mitigation is appropriate.

Eradicating Noxious Weeds

The restoration crew would remove noxious non-native plants and perennial shrubs growing in unauthorized routes and trails by hand or with hand tools. If the infestation of noxious weeds appears to require applications of herbicides (as with *Tamarix* sp), restoration ecologists would consult with the BLM Palm Springs FO the noxious weed program coordinator to arrange for herbicide treatments. In the case of *Tamarix* sp., chainsaws may be used by certified personnel under the supervision of a natural resource specialist.

Maintaining Site Integrity

Vandalism of barriers and trampling of plantings may occur. To minimize costly irreversible damage, rehabilitated sites may require on-going maintenance as they are undergoing natural restoration. Restoration ecologists may undertake additional restoration efforts and install new barriers on a case-by-case basis.

Summary of work: Assuming that each of the 16 closed routes will require 900 (linear) feet of restoration work, this equates to 2.7 linear miles of restoration work. There are 18 open routes with a total length of 16.4 miles on BLM land. Assuming that the average density of non-designated offshoots in the area is one per quarter mile, there will probably be approximately 66 sites requiring restoration. Assuming the average length of a restoration site will be 350 feet, this equates to another 4.4 linear miles of restoration work, bringing the total miles of proposed restoration work to 7.1.

2. No Action Alternative

The Proposed Action would not be undertaken. Existing management and use of the site would continue subject to applicable statutes, regulations, policy and land use plans.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

1. Area Description

A description of the affected environment can be found in the California Desert Conservation Area Plan (1980, with amendments 1982-2002) and EIS and is incorporated by reference.

The critical elements of the human environment that BLM resource specialists identified

as likely to be impacted by the Proposed Action are: recreation, wildlife (including threatened and endangered species), soils, and vegetation.

Wildlife Habitat

Restoration of non-designated trails to natural conditions would occur on sites with pre-existing disturbances from OHV traffic. Restoration activities would create new but temporary, small-scale disturbances to set natural soil recovery and re-vegetation processes in accelerated motion for site rehabilitation and improved wildlife habitat.

Sensitive Wildlife Species

Reptiles

Desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*): Desert tortoise are widely distributed in the desert: from as far north as Olancha south to Mexican border and from the Colorado River west to near Lancaster. The Desert Tortoise (Mojave Population) Recovery Plan shows two major populations or recovery units. These are the Northern Colorado Desert and Eastern Colorado Desert Recovery Units. The highest densities of tortoises are in Chemehuevi and Ward Valleys, on Chuckwalla Bench. Causes for declines include habitat loss, diseases, excessive predation on young tortoises by raven, collecting, shooting, highway and vehicle kills, and other factors.

Their food preference has been shown to be overwhelmingly native annuals and perennials rather than exotic species such as *Schismus* sp., *Erodium cicutarium* or *Bromus madritensis* ssp. *rubens*. The native plants are much richer in nutrients and may be essential for health and reproduction. The desert tortoise is a Federal Threatened Species (Mojave Population only) and State-listed Threatened Species.

Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard (*Uma inornata*): The Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard is federally listed as threatened, and state listed as endangered. The species is found primarily in the Coachella Valley Preserve. The Preserve was created in 1986 to protect the remaining habitat of the Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard.

Their sandy habitats are fragile and have been heavily impacted by industrial and residential development. Remaining habitat has also been impacted by off highway vehicles. The lizard's diving-under-sand escape response makes them particularly vulnerable to injury from off highway vehicles. Potential indirect impacts on habitat are associated with the disruption of ecosystem processes involving sand sources, wind transport, and sand corridors.

Flat-tailed horned lizard (*Phrynosoma mcallii*): Flat-tailed horned lizards occur throughout the southern portion of the Colorado Desert from the Coachella Valley southward and eastward into Arizona and south into neighboring Sonora. Large portions of the historic range have been lost to inundation of the Salton Sea, urbanization, and agricultural development. Despite considerable effort over the past 15 years, population sizes and trends are unknown due to difficulties in finding an

effective population estimation procedure. A population has been found and recorded in the Coachella Valley Preserve. The flat-tailed horned lizard is a BLM California Sensitive Species and a State Species of Special Concern.

Mammals

Desert bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis* subspecies *nelsoni*). Bighorn sheep occur in small, isolated subpopulations (demes) within the Sonoran metapopulation. Specific trend data for the subpopulation is not available, but some have declined in recent years. It has been shown that population sizes of 50 individuals or less went extinct in less than 50 years, while populations of greater than 100 sheep persisted for up to 70 years. Movement between subpopulations functions to reduce inbreeding in small subpopulations and to maintain genetic vigor in the larger metapopulation. Movement between mountain ranges is necessary to recognize extirpated ranges. Desert bighorn sheep is a BLM California Sensitive Species and a State Fully Protected Species and a Game Species.

Palm Springs round-tailed ground squirrel (*Spermophilus terraticotus chlorus*): The round-tailed ground squirrel is found in desert regions of California from the Mexican border to southern Inyo County. Optimum habitats are desert succulent shrub, desert wash, desert scrub, alkali desert scrub, and levees in crop land habitat. Also found in urban habitat. Found from -60 to 900 mm (-180 to 2900 feet) elevation. This species prefers seeds, leaves, flowers, and other plant parts of grasses, forbs, and shrubs. Green vegetation is in the diet in all months of the year. The squirrel will also take insects and spiders. Feeds on the ground surface and climbs in shrubs and trees. It burrows at the base of shrubs, uses levees in agricultural habitats, and open, flat, grassy areas in fine-textured, sandy soil. A mixture of shrub species is preferred; habitats dominated by creosote bush had fewer squirrels than those without it. The squirrel prefers sandy soil for hibernation. Density is correlated with winter rainfall. It tends to occur in disjunct populations. Diurnal; hibernates from late August or early September to January or February. Activity is bimodal in summer, peaking early and late in the day, and unimodal in fall and spring, peaking at midday. It is more active after rain. Populations are restricted to the Coachella Valley, Riverside County, and are reduced by urbanization, cultivation, and development.

Mountain Lion (*Felis concolor*): Within the Study Area mountain lion are restricted to the southern Colorado Desert from Joshua Tree National Park south and west to the Colorado River. They are found in very low numbers primarily in the mountains and wash systems in Imperial County. Burro deer, the primary prey, are known to spend the hot summer and fall in riparian areas along the Colorado River and in dense microphyll woodlands near the Coachella Canal. In winter and spring they move up major washes north from the Coachella Canal and west from the Colorado River. Presumably mountain lions respond to these movements. It may be that mountain lions in the Study Area are merely transient individuals wandering out of other areas and not part of a resident population of mountain lions.

Habitat fragmenting factors, such as Interstate Highways (especially Interstate 10) and aqueducts (especially the Coachella Canal), that affect the distribution and movements of burro deer are probably important to the distribution of mountain lions in the Study Area. Deer populations along the Colorado River have declined as tamarisk has replaced native riparian vegetation; mountain lion numbers have probably declined with this primary prey. The mountain lion in the Study Area is sometimes referred to as Yuma puma (f.c. browni). Under that name it is a State Species of Special Concern.

Birds

Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*): Prairie falcons breed throughout the arid West from southern Canada to central Mexico. The overall distribution appears to be stable. Prairie falcons are uncommon residents and migrants of open grassland, savannah, and desert scrub habitats. They are found in areas of the dry interior where cliffs provide secure nesting sites. In the desert they are found in all vegetation types, though sparse vegetation provides the best foraging habitat.

They prey mostly on small mammals, birds, and reptiles, hunting mostly in the early morning and late afternoon except when feeding nestlings or when prey is scarce. During the nesting season, they typically forage within 6 miles of the nest.

Within the Study Area it is not known to what extent they move seasonally, but wintering populations in the Study Area are larger than breeding populations.

Historic impacts have included eggshell thinning from pesticide residues, conversion of habitat to agriculture, robbing of eyries by falconers, and shooting. Prairie falcon is a State Species of Special Concern.

LeConte's thrasher (*Toxostoma lecontei*): LeConte's thrashers are distributed from the Mojave Desert east into southern Utah and northern Arizona, and south into northern Mexico. A disjunct population occurred in the San Joaquin Valley, but most of that range has been lost to agricultural and urban development. LeConte's thrashers are distributed throughout the Study Area, but many areas with suitable habitat are unoccupied. LeConte's thrasher is a State Species of Special Concern.

Burrowing owl (*Speotyto cunicularia*): Burrowing owls range from Texas west to California and from southern Canada south into Mexico. In northern climates they migrate south into the area in the winter. Burrowing owls were formerly common throughout much of California prior to the 1940's, but populations in central and southern California have declined in many areas due to agricultural development and urbanization. Little is known of the status of the burrowing owl in the California desert. Concentrations probably occur in agricultural drainage ditches of the Study Area, just as they do throughout the Imperial and Coachella Valleys. Threats to burrowing owls are habitat conversion and destruction of ground squirrel burrows. Other threats may be accumulated pesticides, direct mortality from ground squirrel poisons, roadside shooting, and burrow destruction from canal and road maintenance. The burrowing owl

is a State Species of Special Concern, BLM Sensitive Species, and a USFWS Sensitive Species.

Sensitive Plant Species

Coachella Valley milkvetch (*Astragalus lentiginosus* var. *Coachellae*)

A winter annual or short-lived perennial associated with low-elevation Sonoran Desert Scrub (Desert Sand-verbena Series). It prefers the fine sandy soils of dunes and sandfields. This is an aeolian endemic with fewer than 25 occurrences in the Coachella Valley and four recent records in the Chuckwalla Valley. Natural disturbance from fluvial or aeolian processes are apparently necessary for seedling establishment. Blooming period is from February to May. In the Coachella Valley, heavy vehicle use can destroy plants and development can result in loss of habitat or disruption of natural process. Coachella Valley milkvetch is federally listed as endangered, a BLM sensitive species, and categorized as a California Native Plant Society 1b (rare in California and elsewhere) species.

Mecca Woody Aster (*Xylorhiza cogntata*)

A perennial shrub associated with Sonoran Desert Scrub (Creosote Bush Series). Rare and found only in Riverside CO. This species prefers low-elevation dry canyons and gypsum, clay soils. We have seven records for this species, all from the Mecca Hills. Mecca-aster is a BLM Sensitive Species and is categorized as a California Native Plant Society 1b species.

2. Land Status

1. **Land Use Classification:** Lands in the project area are “Closed” and “Unclassified” for Motorized Vehicle Access. The Project Area Contains the Coachella Valley Preserve ACEC.
2. **Valid Existing Rights:** Any existing right-of-ways in the project area and will remain open and unobstructed.

2. Cultural Resources

The project area encompasses the northern Coachella Valley and the foothills of the Little San Bernardino Mountains. The mountains roughly marked the boundary between the Cahuilla and Serrano peoples at the time of European entry into the area.

The Coachella Valley was inhabited by the Cahuilla prior to the founding of the Spanish missions along the coast in 1769. During the subsequent century, the Cahuilla became increasingly familiar with Spanish, Mexican, and Euro-American cultures, while maintaining the integrity of their own culture. In 1877, reservations were established in Southern California, and access to lands off-reservation became increasingly difficult to the Cahuilla; nevertheless, the religious and cultural importance of landscapes, places, and resources off-reservation was remembered.

Landscape features (such as mountains, rock formations, and boulders) may have religious significance, as may specific places inhabited by clans and lineages which are marked by cultural artifacts and features such as rock art. Edom Hill and other landscape features are considered sacred by the Cahuilla.

The Serrano followed a life way similar to their southern neighbors, the Cahuilla. Ethnographic sources indicate that economic, ceremonial and social relationships existed between the Serrano and the Cahuilla. Both groups occupied villages situated to take advantage of ecotones and water supplies so that the majority of necessary plant and animal foods and materials were available within a short distance.

Segments of the Cocomaricopa Trail (CA-RIV-53T) have been recorded in the valley between the Indio Hills and Little San Bernardino Mountains. Originally recorded in the 1950's by Francis and Patricia Johnston, the Cocomaricopa trail consists of a network of prehistoric trails running from the Colorado River to the San Bernardino Valley. Additional trails run through the Little San Bernardino Mountains and connect the Coachella Valley with Yucca and Morongo Valleys.

The opening of the Bradshaw Road and the Colorado Stage and Express Line in 1862 led to an increase in Euroamerican travel through San Geronimo Pass and the Coachella Valley. The Bradshaw Trail was developed initially to serve the mining camps at La Paz and followed portions of the Cocomaricopa Trail. Stage and wagon stops were typically located near springs or other water sources. The Southern Pacific Rail Road was constructed in 1875 and 1876.

General Land Office survey maps from the late 1850s and early 1900s indicate the presence of "Indian Trails", "Indian villages", "Old Roads" and other features throughout the valley. Many of these trails and roads are associated with springs and water sources in the canyons of the Little San Bernardino Mountains or with the oases that have formed at the base of the Indio Hills.

The Colorado River Aqueduct was constructed through the foothills of the Little San Bernardino Mountains during the 1930's. Worker's camps were located in Morongo and Long Canyons, west and east of the current project area respectively. The Division 4 Headquarters camp was located in Berdoo Canyon. Historic sites associated with workers' residential camps may be found in the canyons and on the alluvial slopes at their mouths. Dillon Road was built to serve the aqueduct construction project. Paved roads running into the canyons of the Little San Bernardino Mountains are also the relics of the construction effort.

Historic period mines, and archaeological sites associated with them, also occur in the project area. Homesteading and farming were encouraged by the Federal Desert Land Entry Act of 1885 and the 5-Acre Tract Law of 1938. Completion of Highway 60 and 62 in the 1930's contributed to an increased rate of growth and visitation in the Coachella

Valley.

Cultural resources inventories are generally conducted in advance of projects or developments which have the potential to affect cultural properties. The Coachella Valley Preserve has been relatively free of surface-disturbing projects and therefore little inventory has been conducted within its boundaries. Despite the lack of extensive survey, numerous prehistoric occupation sites and trails have been recorded. Historic sites related to development of the valley have also been identified. The project area has the potential to include unrecorded significant historic and prehistoric cultural resources: historic properties eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Critical Elements

The following table summarizes potential impacts to various elements of the human environment, including the "critical elements" listed in BLM Manual H-1790-1, Appendix 5, as amended. Elements for which there are no impacts will not be discussed further in this document.

Environmental Element	Proposed Action	No Action Alternative
Air Quality	Short-term	No Impact
ACEC's	Improve ACEC	Scars remain
Cultural Resources	May affect	May affect
Native American Concerns	No effect	No effect
Farmlands	No impact	No impact
Floodplains	No impact	No impact
Energy (E.O. 13212)	No impact	No impact
Minerals	No impact	No impact
T&E Animal Species	No Impact	No impact
T&E Plant Species	No impact	No impact
Invasive, Nonnative Species	Beneficial impact	No impact
Wastes (hazardous/solid)	No impact	No impact

Critical Elements (continued)

Environmental Element	Proposed Action	No Action Alternative
Water Quality (surface and ground)	No impact	No impact
Wetlands/Riparian Zones	No impact	No impact
Wild and Scenic Rivers	No impact	No impact
Wilderness	No impact	No impact
Environmental Justice	No impact	No impact
Health and Safety Risks to Children	No impact	No impact
Visual Resource Mgt.	Conforms to VRM Class 2 management objectives	Does not conform to VRM Class 2 management objectives

B. Discussion of Impacts

AIR QUALITY

A. Discussion of Impacts

1. Proposed Action: An increase in fugitive dust during wind storms could occur due to the soil disturbance as a result of the proposed action. Vehicle use on the access road will generate PM-10 emissions throughout the project. Emissions from the proposed action will be minimal. No significant offsite impacts are anticipated. Control measures are not included and are not necessary to reduce emissions from the proposed project. The proposed project does not exceed the de minimus emission levels and no further conformity determination is necessary.

2. No Action Alternative: Impacts would continue to occur at current levels. Disturbed, exposed surfaces such as roads and trails experience increased wind erosion/fugitive dust.

B. Mitigation Measures

1. Use water as necessary to limit fugitive dust blowing off the site during the work if fugitive emissions exceed state and/or Riverside Co. APCD standards.
2. Curtail activities when wind speeds exceed 25 MPH.

C. Residual Impacts

No long term residual adverse effects on air resources are expected from the proposed action. The impacts are expected to occur during the duration of the proposed action. Once the action is completed the site should return to pre disturbance stability.

WILDLIFE

A. Discussion of Impacts

1. Proposed action:

Restoration of non-designated trails to natural conditions would occur on sites with pre-existing disturbances from OHV traffic. Restoration activities would create new but temporary, small-scale disturbances to set natural soil recovery and re-vegetation processes in accelerated motion for site rehabilitation and improved wildlife habitat.

Restoring soil contours and vegetation would create wildlife habitat, including habitat for desert tortoise and desert bighorn sheep. Restoration work may occur during active periods in the seasonal cycles of desert tortoise and desert bighorn sheep. It is not likely that burrows would be found in the trail or route beds. Desert tortoise may burrow into berms and water ditches along the sides of undesignated trails and routes that receive very little use. Changing these features during restoration could impact the burrows of tortoises and might injure individuals.

2. No Action Alternative: Some negative impacts to wildlife resources would continue to occur because of continuing vegetation loss and soil erosion occurring on non-designated OHV trails. This results in a reduction in available food resources and impaired water quality, which could cause population decreases for all species, including Threatened and Endangered Species. Also, desert tortoises would continue to be threatened by vehicular travel on the non-designated and designated 'closed' routes.

B. Mitigation Measures

All personnel and equipment will be brought in through designated "open" routes. All work, including hand preparations, transplanting, equipment operation for ripping roads and trails, the moving of dead debris and boulders and maintenance and monitoring activities will be conducted only on the currently impacted areas of unauthorized hill climbs, roads and trails. These areas are presently devoid of vegetation and suffer from moderate to severe compaction. In addition to the environmental protection measures incorporated in the section on the spectrum of Proposed Actions, BLM resource specialists have adapted guidelines from the US Fish and Wildlife Service for mitigating desert tortoise impact (see Appendix 1).

C. Residual Impacts

No long term residual adverse effects on wildlife are expected from the proposed action.

SOILS

A. Discussion of Impacts

1. Proposed Action: Restoration of non-designated trails and routes would impact soils by modifying texture, particle size distribution, chemical properties, and biological content in affected soils. Pitting of some soils (i.e. desert pavement) may create areas with a different color, drawing attention to the restored area. Positive impacts from a restoration can include a reduction of wind and water erosion in the long-term. Smoothing and scarifying soil can expose soil to wind erosion. In addition, some temporary soil loss from wind blown erosion is likely. However, in the long-term, soil loss would decline because of increased vegetation.

2. No Action Alternative: Under the No Action Alternative, some impacts to soils would continue to occur. This includes compaction by vehicular traffic, and wind and water erosion.

B. Mitigation Measures

Sites with the desert pavement soil type, or those with marked changes in soil color in the top 10 cm of soil, will not be pitted or decompacted. In addition to the other environmental protection measures incorporated in the Proposed Action, BLM resource specialists may select from the list of additional mitigation measures outlined in BLM manuals/handbooks and other documents.

C. Residual Impacts

There would be few residual impacts to soils after mitigation from rehabilitation activities. Generally, these activities will increase infiltration and percolation rates in affected soils, increase available water, breakup soil compaction and loss of organic matter.

VEGETATION

A. Discussion of Impacts

1. Proposed action:

Most of the non-designated trails to be restored are already partially or entirely devoid of vegetation. Restoration under this EA would improve the vegetative cover and create more wildlife habitat with native vegetation. Populations of early-stage shrubs would be the first species to increase while in the long-term late-stage shrubs such as creosote would establish themselves in restored shrublands.

Restoration sites will be surveyed for special status plants. The crew would reexamine the sites for newly emerged special status plants before they begin work, and cease work and call a BLM Natural Resource Specialist if they suspect any special status plants are present. If the special status plants are not correctly identified, they may be impacted by soil disturbance.

Some non-native plant species may be eradicated locally.

Indirect impacts would be in the form of dust settling on the nearby vegetation stands, which may reduce photosynthetic capabilities.

2. No Action Alternative: Some impacts to vegetation resources would continue, such as trampling of vegetation by continued OHV travel on routes and trails that have not been approved for such use.

B. Mitigation Measures

No soil disturbance would occur within a meter of special-status plants. Restoration sites with known populations of an annual plant species of concern would not be restored while the annual plant species are growing, flowering, or spreading seed. In addition to environmental protection measures incorporated in the Proposed Action, BLM resource specialists may select from the list of additional mitigation measures outlined in BLM manuals/handbooks and other documents. Weed treatments with herbicides will require special approval and coordination with the Palm Springs FO Weed Specialist.

C. Residual Impacts

No long term residual adverse effects on vegetation are expected from the proposed action

RECREATION

A. Discussion of Impacts

1. Proposed Action: The requirements for vehicular access, be they recreational, administrative, or for other purposes, were considered during the route designation process for the CDCA Plan Amendment for the Coachella Valley (CV Plan). The approved network of vehicle routes is deemed satisfactory in meeting access needs for recreation while protecting various other resource values, particularly those related to wildlife, wildlife habitats, and cultural resources. The proposed restoration of vehicle routes, trails, and tracks that were not approved for vehicle use through the CV Plan, therefore, would result in no adverse impacts to recreation; use of these vehicle ways is not necessary for the enjoyment of recreational resources in CVPS.

2. No Action Alternative: Motorized-vehicle activities on routes, trails, and tracks not approved for such use does not conform to BLM's land use plan. The proposed action is one element of a strategy to implement route designation decisions made through the CV Plan. Absent this or other actions to encourage the use of approved routes, recreationists could be issued citations for traveling where it is inappropriate and illegal to do so, thereby adversely affecting their recreational experience. Further, degradation of resource values (such as soil erosion, crushing of vegetation, and wildlife mortality) from vehicular use of closed or non-approved routes, trails, and tracks would adversely affect opportunities for such recreational endeavors as sightseeing, nature study, and photography.

B. Mitigation Measures

A program to inform the public about the restoration of closed and non-approved vehicle routes, trails, and tracks should be established. The intent of the program would be to encourage the use of approved routes for motorized-vehicle activities, and describe the adverse impacts associated with the use of non-approved vehicle ways.

C. Residual Impacts

No residual adverse impacts to recreation are anticipated.

CULTURAL RESOURCES

A. Discussion of Impacts

Under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), the BLM is charged with managing public lands in a manner that will “protect the quality of scientific, scenic, historical, ecological, environmental, air and atmospheric, water resource, and archaeological values”. Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, as implemented at 36 CFR Part 800, requires Federal agencies to take into account the effects of their undertakings on historic properties.

In general, site-specific cultural resources inventories and assessments are conducted as part of the NEPA process and prior to project approval. However, since specific restoration sites have not been identified for the Coachella Valley OHV Restoration project, cultural resources review cannot be completed at this time. Cultural resources review will be conducted when specific restoration sites are identified and will be completed prior to implementation of any restoration actions. The Palm Springs FO archaeologist may determine that archaeological inventory and/or monitoring is necessary. *No project work will be initiated without written documentation of completed cultural resources review.*

1. Proposed Action:

Direct impacts to historic properties can occur through breakage and displacement of artifacts and features as a result of surface-disturbing actions. Positive impacts are possible where restoration activities prohibit vehicle use into areas with significant cultural resources. Indirect negative impacts may occur if OHV users are displaced into new areas as a result of closure of existing trails.

2. No Action Alternative:

Project activities that may affect cultural resources would not occur. However, continued vehicle access could result in surface disturbance and effects similar to those described above.

Vehicle traffic may cause breakage and displacement of artifacts and features directly and through erosion. Vehicle access to remote cultural sites also makes them vulnerable to looting and collecting of artifacts. Under the No Action Alternative impacts to cultural resources, if any are located within the project area, will continue.

B. Mitigation Measures

Cultural resource inventories will be performed prior to initiating project activities. If a historic property is identified, the preferred course of action will be to redesign the restoration project to avoid impacts to the resource. If impacts to the resource cannot be avoided, mitigation will be required. Mitigation may include detailed documentation of the resource, data recovery through excavation, or other appropriate action to be determined in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer.

If any previously unidentified cultural resources or artifacts are encountered during restoration activities, all work will cease in the area of the discovery and the PSSC Cultural Resources Specialist will be notified.

C. Residual Impacts

No residual adverse impacts to cultural resources are anticipated.

Cumulative Impacts

1. Proposed Action: The resource impacts of the restoration efforts would have no long term cumulative impacts to soils, vegetation, wildlife habitat, cultural, or visual resources. Restoration of illegal OHV routes would have a long term positive impact to the soils, vegetation, and wildlife habitat of the Coachella Valley Preserve System (CVPS). By removing existing illegal routes, future use of these routes, and continued resource degradation would be reduced.

2. No Action: Taking no action, and not completing restoration of illegal routes, would result in continued use of routes by OHV's. Route proliferation and impacts to soils, vegetation, wildlife habitat, cultural, and visual resources would increase, leading to continued cumulative impacts to these resources over time.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT CONSIDERATIONS:

Public comments submitted for this environmental assessment, including names and street addresses of respondents, will be available for public review at the Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office during regular business hours (7:45 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.), Monday through Friday, except holidays. Individual respondents may request confidentiality. If you wish to withhold your name or address from public review or from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your comments. Such requests will be honored to the extent allowed by law. All submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, will be made available for public inspection in their entirety.

PREPARED BY:

Starry Sprenkle, ECO Restoration Ecologist
Wanda Raschkow, BLM Archaeologist

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT: Environmental impacts associated with the proposed action have been assessed. Based on the analysis provided in the attached EA, I conclude the approved action is not a major federal action and will result in no significant impacts to the environment under the criteria in Title 40 Code of Federal Regulations 1508.18 and 1508.27. 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.

Signed by Gail Acheson
Field Manager
Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office
USDI Bureau of Land Management
690 W. Garnet Avenue; P.O. Box 581260
North Palm Springs, CA 92258-1260

Date

Appendix 1: *Desert Tortoise Mitigation*

The following tortoise mitigation measures will apply .

1. Desert tortoise sign and presence pre-restoration surveys will be conducted at all sites. If during these surveys a tortoise or burrow is observed within the route to be restored or the 15 m buffer on each side of the centerline, a qualified biologist monitor must be present during restoration activities at that site and work will only take place during the desert tortoise inactive season, November 1 – March 1. The biologist will thoroughly survey the project site for presence of tortoises each day before and during construction activities. This biologist shall have authority to halt any action that might result in harm to a tortoise. No soil disturbance shall occur within 3 meters of a desert tortoise burrow.
2. An employee education program must be presented to all on-site workers prior to beginning work. The program may consist of a class or video presented by a qualified biologist (BLM or contracted) or a video. Wallet-sized cards with important information for workers to carry are recommended. All on-site workers shall participate in a tortoise education program prior to initiation of restoration activities. The operator is responsible for ensuring that the education program is developed and presented prior to conducting activities. The program shall cover the following topics at a minimum:
 - Distribution of the desert tortoise,
 - General behavior and ecology of the tortoise,
 - Sensitivity to human activities,
 - Legal protection,
 - Penalties for violations of State or Federal laws,
 - reporting requirements, and
 - Project protective mitigation measures.
3. During restoration, if a tortoise is observed within 15 m of the centerline of the route to be restored (area of impact), all activities potentially affecting the individual tortoise will cease and will not continue until the individual has moved out of the area of impact. If a previously undetected tortoise burrow is discovered in the area of impact, work will not continue until a biological monitor is on-site.
4. Desert tortoises will not be handled in order to move them out of the project area. The only case in which they would be handled would be in order to take them to a qualified veterinarian (see Item 7).
5. The area of disturbance shall be confined to the smallest practical area, considering topography, placement of facilities, location of burrows, public health and safety, and other limiting factors. Work area boundaries shall be delimited with flagging or other marking to minimize surface disturbance associated with vehicle straying. Special habitat features, such as burrows, identified by the qualified biologist shall be protected by at least a two meter buffer with no soil

disturbance.

6. Upon locating a dead or injured tortoise, the operator (restoration crew) is to notify the BLM. The BLM must then notify the appropriate field office (Carlsbad) of USFWS by telephone within three days of the finding. Written notification must be made within fifteen days of the finding. The information provided must include the date and time of the finding or incident (if known), location of the carcass, a photograph, cause of death, if known, and other pertinent information. Tortoise remains shall be collected, delivered to the BLM, and frozen as soon as possible. Injured animals shall be transported to a qualified veterinarian for treatment at the expense of the project proponent. If an injured animal recovers, the USFWS should be contacted for final disposition of the animal.
7. All trash and food items shall be promptly contained within closed, raven-proof containers. These shall be regularly removed from the project site to reduce the attractiveness of the area to ravens and other tortoise predators.