

SCOPING NOTICE for PROGRAMMATIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OF SMALL MINING OPERATIONS

Dear Interested Citizen:

The Ridgecrest Field Office is in the early stages of preparing a programmatic environmental assessment that considers when, where, under what circumstances and with what design features small-sized mining operations subject to the 1872 Mining Law would be authorized. These small operations would include actions that require BLM-authorized plans of operation, but are limited in size. Typical actions may include bulk testing, excavation, pits, drilling exploration, road construction, mining and reclamation. This programmatic E.A. does not assess a specific on-the-ground action, but would be used as a source of tiering & reference for future analysis and approval of site specific plans of operation.

Three alternatives are considered. These alternative choices are-

1. No action. Each received plan of operation would continue to be assessed on an individual case-by-case basis and without prior consideration of location, type or design features.
2. Plans of operation involving less than an acre of new disturbance and less than 1000 yd³ of material.
3. Plans of operation disturbing less than five cumulative acres of public land.

The purpose of an environmental assessment is twofold: to help BLM managers decide whether a proposal merits an Environmental Impact Statement, and to help BLM managers decide what performance standards should be stipulated as a condition of approval. This assessment also will briefly discuss factors helpful to guiding the analysis & range of alternatives, including -

- Notice-level vs. plan-level operations.
- Influence & importance of Multiple Use Classifications in BLM land-use plans.
- Mineral management of Unclassified public lands in Red Rock Canyon State Park.
- BLM Management of mining operations subject to the California Surface Mining & Reclamation Act.
- Exemption from tortoise habitat compensation fees for small mining operations.

BLM is required to assess the environmental effect(s) associated with approving a plan of operations, but is not required to write a new E.A. for actions that have already been adequately described. When BLM administratively determines that a previous analysis already satisfies NEPA requirements for a proposed action, that internal finding is documented with a Determination of NEPA Adequacy (DNA). Future plans of operations within the scope of this present environmental assessment would receive a DNA, Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and Decision Record. Plans of operation not within the scope of this E.A. would receive a new environmental assessment. Regardless of the alternative chosen, all authorizations for plans of operation continue to remain subject to the Endangered Species Act and National Historic Preservation Act. This programmatic environmental assessment will exclude operations determined to have significant resource impacts.

We wish to appropriately evaluate issues pertinent to this level of operation. If you are interested, please take this opportunity to say what topics BLM managers should consider before making this decision. Please send comments & feedback within the next 30 days to Randall Porter, Geologist, rporter@blm.gov. If sent by email, please include "programmatic environmental assessment" in the title of the message.

Sincerely,

Carl B. Symons
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