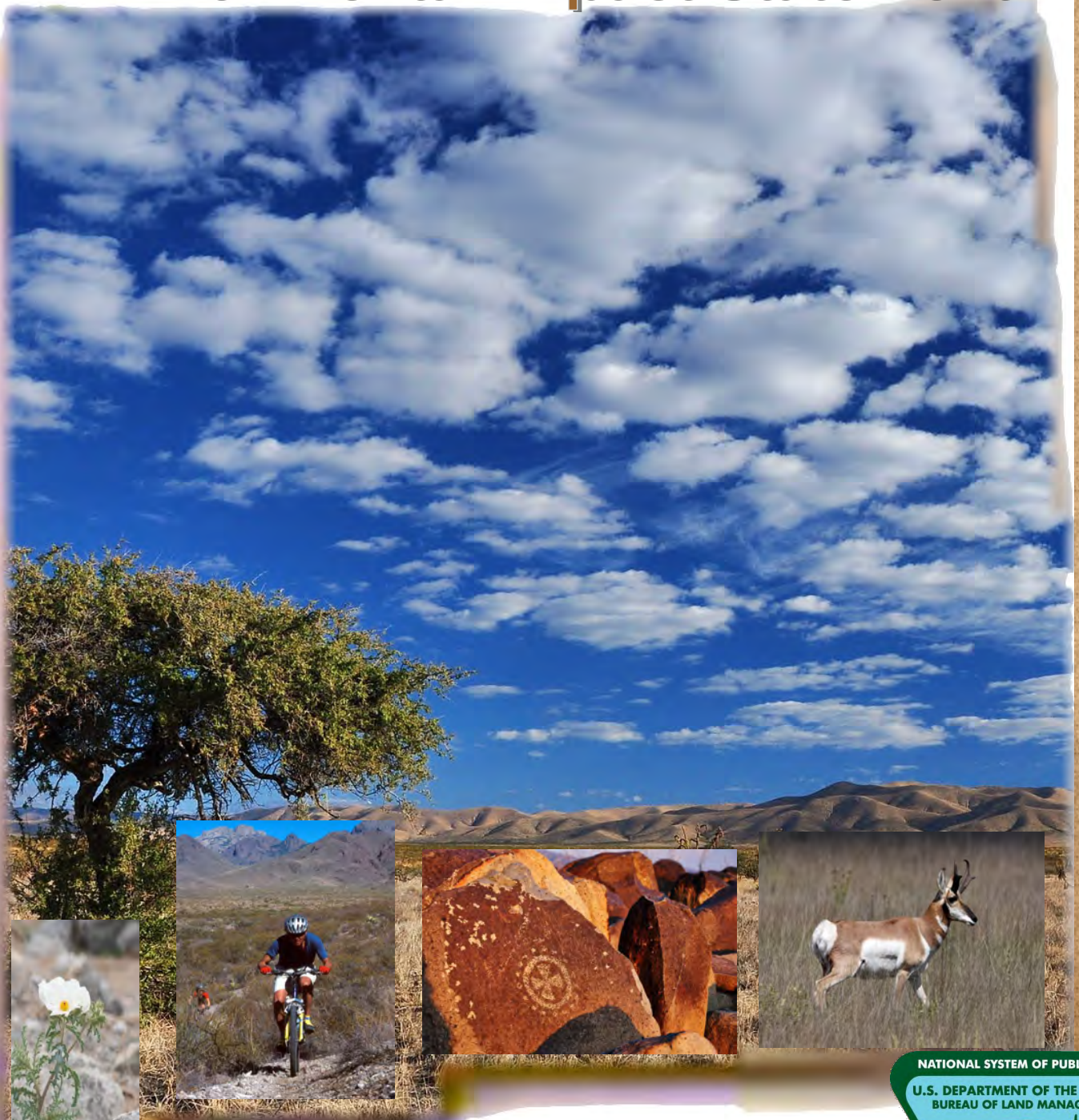
TriCounty
Draft Resource Management Plan/ Environmental Impact Statement



BLM

NATIONAL SYSTEM OF PUBLIC LANDS
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Volume 1

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BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

The Bureau of Land Management is responsible for the balanced management of the public lands and resource and their various values so that they are considered in a combination that will best serve the needs of the American people. Management is based upon the principals of multiple-use and sustained yield, a combination of uses that takes into account the long-term needs of future generations for renewable and nonrenewable resources. These resources include recreation, range, timber, minerals, watershed, fish and wildlife, wilderness and natural, scenic, scientific and cultural values.

BLM/NM/PL-13-03-1610

READER'S GUIDE

The *TriCounty Draft Resource Management Plan (RMP)/Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)* is actually two plans in one document. In one case, the RMP is a revision of the *White Sands RMP* completed in 1986. A revision is essentially a complete rewrite of and replaces the existing land use plan or RMP. In the other case, the RMP is an amendment of the *Mimbres RMP* completed in 1993. An amendment changes one or more decisions in an existing land use plan in response to new issues or uses of resources. The amendment portion of the *TriCounty RMP* amends decisions pertaining only to Doña Ana County in the original *Mimbres RMP*. All other decisions will remain in force. At the conclusion of this planning process, two separate management plans and two Records of Decision will be issued -- one covering Sierra and Otero Counties and one covering Doña Ana County.

Following is a brief overview of the organization and content of this *TriCounty RMP/EIS* to aid in your review and understanding of the proposed decisions and actions. All the chapters are arranged in the same order or arrangement of the various sections.

The document begins with a **Dear Reader Letter** explaining what BLM is doing, the purpose of the document, a schedule of public meetings and a request for public comments on the RMP. This is followed by a **Table of Contents**. The Table of Contents is comprehensive and most helpful to locate discussion of particular resource programs such as land tenure, special designations, minerals management, wildlife habitat management and so forth, as well as a list of all the maps to complement the text and show geographically the proposed decisions. Next is a comprehensive **Executive Summary** of the document. After that is the main text of the document as described below.

VOLUME I

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 identifies the purpose and need for the RMP, defines the Planning Area and Decision Area, and explains the public participation process. This chapter identifies the planning criteria used as guidelines influencing all aspects of the planning process. These guidelines are based on law, regulations, and policy and help to ensure that the document meets policy and regulatory requirements and provides adequate management direction for future users. Also included in this chapter is a description of the involvement of the State, local, and other Federal agencies and various American Indian Tribes. A list of the cooperating agencies participating in the planning process as well as a description of their roles is included here as well. The issues developed through internal and public scoping are listed along with management considerations for resolving resource conflicts addressed in the RMP.

CHAPTER 2
ALTERNATIVES

Chapter 2 presents the various strategies for achieving the management goals and objectives of the various resources and resource uses in the Decision Area and to resolve the issues and management concerns identified in Chapter 1. The alternatives described in Chapter 2 are the essence of the RMP and around which the entire document is constructed. The RMP provides management guidance for the BLM-administered land in the three-county area for up to 20 years. However, the long-term vision for accomplishing objectives may be much greater than that and may not be completely achieved under any alternative during the life of these two plans.

The chapter begins with a brief description of the theme of each alternative. Four alternatives are identified, characterized by different intensities of use and management direction to achieve the desired range of conditions. A section describing alternatives considered but eliminated from further analysis in the document. A No Action Alternative is included as required by law and regulation and to form a baseline comparison for impact analysis. The chapter provides a detailed description of the decisions and actions proposed under each alternative and for each resource and resource use. Each alternative would meet the management goals and objectives; however, the means for meeting each goal, the rate at which they would be met, and the impacts to resources may differ among the alternatives.

CHAPTER 3
AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

Chapter 3 contains an overview of the *Planning and Decision Areas* and briefly describes both the physical environment and management situation for each of the resources and resource uses. The chapter describes the living and non-living components of the environment that may be affected by the management prescriptions of the alternatives. Other components of the environment that may not be affected by the proposals are described in order to portray a complete picture of the *Planning Area*. Current management direction is briefly described for each resource and resource use.

CHAPTER 4
ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Chapter 4 contains the analysis of impacts or environmental consequences of the various actions proposed under the alternatives in Chapter 2. Impacts result from the changes to the physical environment and existing conditions described in Chapter 3 as a result of implementing the management strategies of the alternatives described in Chapter 2. Several general analytical assumptions which apply to all alternatives are discussed at the beginning of the chapter as well as at the beginning of the discussion of some of the resources and uses. These are intended to help the reader understand how the writer arrived at his or her conclusions regarding impacts.

CHAPTER 5
CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

Chapter 5 contains a summary of key events of the consultation and coordination process prior to and during preparation of the Draft RMP/EIS. It lists those agencies, organizations, and individuals who were contacted and provided comments and information for the document. It summarizes Public Scoping at the beginning of the process, and lists and describes all public meetings held during the planning process.

Cooperating agencies are also listed along with their role in the preparation of the document. Also listed are the contractor personnel who prepared the Draft RMP/EIS and the BLM interdisciplinary team members who worked on the project.

GLOSSARY AND REFERENCES

These sections contain the glossary with definitions of the terms and technical language used in the text; and the bibliography of the references cited in the document to assist the reader in the review process.

MAPS AND ACREAGES

All acres for geographical designations or references and all polygons such as areas of critical environmental concern, disposal parcels, visual resource management classes, and so forth are calculated based on the most up-to-date field information available and using current BLM Geographic Information System technology. In all cases, acreages are approximate and may change as better information becomes available or technology changes. Consequently, no warranty is made as to the accuracy of the data contained herein and is for use for gross analysis only.

Likewise, the maps contained in the document depicting the various designations and management actions are for illustration purposes only and are of such a small scale that locations of boundaries or points and sizes of areas are only approximate and should not be used for any other purposes than those intended by BLM in the preparation of this document. In other words, acres, locations, specific points, boundaries, etc., are inexact in all cases and could be changed at any time as better information becomes available.

VOLUME II

APPENDICES

Volume II of the Draft RMP/EIS (CD format only) contains appendices which provide additional supporting or background information to that contained in the Volume I. The appendices contain information such of the laws, regulations and policies that are authorize the preparation of RMPs; a list and description of best management practices; livestock grazing allotment statistics; designated routes in Wilderness Study Areas and Areas of Critical Environmental Concern; and the lands and mineral disposal policy; and other supporting information.

United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
Las Cruces District Office
1800 Marquess Street
Las Cruces, New Mexico 88005
www.blm.gov/nm

In Reply Refer To:

1610-5.G.1.4 (L0310)

April 2013

Dear Reader:

Enclosed for your review and comment is the Draft TriCounty Resource Management Plan/Draft Environmental Impact Statement (Draft RMP/EIS) for the New Mexico Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Las Cruces District Office. The BLM prepared this document in consultation with cooperating agencies, and in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, as amended, implementing regulations, the BLM's Land Use Planning Handbook (H-1601-1), and other applicable law and policy.

The TriCounty Planning Area (Sierra, Otero, and Doña Ana Counties) consists of about 9.3 million acres of land which includes about 2.82 million surface acres and 3.98 million acres of Federal mineral estate (subsurface) managed by the Las Cruces District Office. When approved, this RMP will replace the White Sands RMP (1986) and portions of the Mimbres RMP (1993) and will guide the management of public land administered by the Las Cruces District Office into the future. The Draft TriCounty RMP/EIS and supporting information is available on the project web site at: http://www.blm.gov/nm/lascruces.

The BLM encourages the public to provide information and comments pertaining to the analysis presented in the Draft RMP/EIS. We are particularly interested in feedback concerning the adequacy and accuracy of the proposed alternatives, the analysis of their respective management decisions, and any new information that would help the BLM as it develops the plan. The development of the Draft TriCounty RMP/EIS has taken an unusually long time - scoping began in 2006. This protracted process means that public input is important to help the BLM identify outdated information, errors, and inadvertent omissions. For example, as we readied this document for print, we discovered that we omitted a proposed unit for the Robledo Mountains Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). Please refer to Appendix G for the description of this ACEC.

In developing the Proposed RMP/Final EIS, which is the next phase of the planning process, the decision maker may select various management decisions from each of the alternatives analyzed in the Draft RMP/EIS for the purpose of creating a management strategy that best meets the needs of the resources and values in this area under the BLM multiple-use and sustained yield

mandate. As a member of the public, your timely comments on the TriCounty Draft RMP/EIS will help formulate the Proposed RMP/Final EIS. Comments will be accepted for 90 calendar days following the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) publication of its Notice of Availability in the *Federal Register*. The BLM can best utilize your comments and resource information submissions if received within the review period.

Comments may be submitted electronically at: BLM_NM_LCDO_Comments@blm.gov. Comments may also be submitted by mail to: Jennifer Montoya, RMP/EIS Team Leader, BLM Las Cruces District Office, 1800 Marquess Street, Las Cruces, NM 88005. To facilitate analysis of comments and information submitted, we strongly encourage you to submit comments in an electronic format.

Your review and comments on the content of this document are critical to the success of this planning effort. If you wish to submit comments on the Draft RMP/EIS, we request that you make your comments as specific as possible. Comments will be more helpful if they include suggested changes, sources, or methodologies, and reference to a section or page number. Comments containing only opinion or preferences will be considered and included as part of the decision making process, although they will not receive a formal response from the BLM.

Before including your address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, be advised that your entire comment - including your personal identifying information - may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

The BLM will hold public meetings in Truth or Consequences, Alamogordo and Las Cruces, New Mexico. All meetings will be held from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. Public meetings to provide an overview of the document, respond to questions, and take public comments will be announced by local media, website, and/or public mailings at least 15 days in advance.

Copies of the Draft RMP/EIS have been sent to affected Federal, State and local government agencies, American Indian Tribes, members of Congress, Las Cruces District Resource Advisory Council, and other local and affected citizens and groups. Copies of the Draft RMP/EIS are available for public inspection at the BLM Las Cruces District Office, the BLM New Mexico State Office in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the Albuquerque District BLM Office, the Socorro BLM Field Office, the Carlsbad BLM Field Office and the Pecos District Office in Roswell, New Mexico as well as public libraries in Las Cruces, Alamogordo, Anthony, and Truth or Consequences.

Thank you for your continued interest in the TriCounty RMP/EIS. We appreciate the information and suggestions you contribute to the planning process. For additional information

or clarification regarding this document or the planning process, please contact *Jennifer Montoya, RMP/EIS Team Leader, BLM Las Cruces District Office at (575) 525-4300 or by email at jamontoy@blm.gov*.

Sincerely,

Bill Childress
District Manager

1 Enclosure

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ES-1

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION 1-1
1.1 Purpose and Need for the RMP and Environmental Impact Statement 1-1
1.2 Planning Area Description 1-3
1.2.1 Land Management Status in the Planning Area 1-4
1.3 Overall Vision for the RMP/EIS 1-6
1.3.1 State Director Priorities 1-6
1.3.2 RMP Goals 1-7
1.4 Issues to be Addressed in the TriCounty RMP/EIS 1-7
1.4.1 Planning Issues 1-7
1.4.2 Issues Considered but Not Further Analyzed 1-9
1.5 Planning Criteria 1-10
1.6 Legal Considerations 1-12
1.6.1 Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 1-12
1.6.2 National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 1-12
1.6.3 The Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009 1-13
1.6.4 Other Legislation 1-13
1.6.5 Court Decisions 1-13
1.7 Planning Process for TriCounty RMP/EIS 1-13
1.8 Relationship to BLM Policies, Plans, and Programs 1-15
1.8.1 RMP Amendment for Fluid Minerals Leasing and Development 1-16
1.8.2 Standards for Public Land Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management 1-16
1.8.3 Wind, Solar, and Geothermal Programmatic EISs 1-17
1.8.4 Other BLM Land Use Plans 1-18
1.9 Collaboration and Consultation 1-18

CHAPTER 2 ALTERNATIVES 2-1
2.1 General Description of the Alternatives 2-1
2.2 National Environmental Policy Act 2-2
2.3 Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Further Analysis 2-2
2.3.1 Removal of Two Wilderness Study Area Designations 2-2
2.3.2 Elimination of Livestock Grazing 2-3
2.4 Alternatives Considered in Detail 2-4
2.4.1 Special Designations 2-4
2.4.2 Lands With Wilderness Characteristics 2-25
2.4.3 Resources 2-27
2.4.3.1 Air Resources 2-27
2.4.3.2 Soil and Water 2-28
2.4.3.3 Vegetation and Woodlands 2-30
2.4.3.4 Wildlife and Fish Habitat 2-34
2.4.3.5 Special Status Species 2-38
2.4.3.6 Cultural Resources 2-41

(TABLE OF CONTENTS–CONTINUED)

Page

2.4.3.7 Paleontology 2-44
2.4.3.8 Visual Resources 2-47
2.4.3.9 Fire and Fuels Management 2-50
2.4.4 Resource Uses 2-52
2.4.4.1 Livestock Grazing 2-52
2.4.4.2 Comprehensive Trails and Travel Management 2-56
2.4.4.3 Recreation and Visitor Services 2-61
2.4.4.4 Lands and Realty 2-69
2.4.4.5 Renewable Energy 2-79
2.4.4.6 Minerals 2-84
2.5 Summary Of Impacts 2-91

CHAPTER 3 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT 3-1
3.1 Introduction 3-1
3.2 Special Designations 3-1
3.2.1 Areas of Critical Environmental Concern 3-1
3.2.2 Historic Trails 3-1
3.2.3 Backcountry Byway 3-2
3.2.4 Wilderness Study Areas 3-2
3.2.5 Wild and Scenic Rivers 3-3
3.3 Resources 3-5
3.3.1 Lands with Wilderness Characteristics 3-5
3.3.2 Air Resources 3-5
3.3.3 Soil Resources 3-12
3.3.4 Water and Watershed Resources 3-13
3.3.5 Geology 3-15
3.3.6 Vegetation 3-21
3.3.7 Fish and Wildlife Habitat 3-28
3.3.8 Special Status Species 3-35
3.3.9 Cultural Resources 3-41
3.3.10 Paleontology 3-47
3.3.11 Visual Resources 3-49
3.3.12 Fire and Fuels Management 3-52
3.4 Resource Use 3-55
3.4.1 Livestock Grazing 3-55
3.4.2 Comprehensive Trails and Travel Management 3-57
3.4.3 Recreation and Visitor Services 3-59
3.4.4 Lands and Realty 3-64
3.4.5 Renewable Energy 3-72
3.4.6 Minerals 3-74
3.4.7 Abandoned Mine Lands 3-79
3.5 Socioeconomic Conditions 3-80
3.5.1 Demographics 3-80
3.5.2 Key Industries 3-87
3.5.3 Place-Based Values 3-94
3.6 Environmental Justice 3-95

(TABLE OF CONTENTS–CONTINUED)

Page

CHAPTER 4 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES 4-1
4.1 Introduction 4-1
4.1.1 Types of Impacts 4-1
4.1.2 Analytical Assumptions 4-2
4.1.3 Incomplete or Unavailable Information 4-3
4.2 Impacts of Alternatives 4-3
4.2.1 Impacts on Special Designations 4-8
4.2.2 Impacts on Lands with Wilderness Characteristics (LWCs) 4-15
4.3 Impacts on Resources 4-17
4.3.1 Impacts on Air Resources 4-17
4.3.2 Impacts on Soil and Water 4-21
4.3.3 Impacts on Vegetation and Woodlands 4-28
4.3.4 Impacts on Fish and Wildlife Habitat 4-35
4.3.5 Impacts on Special Status Species Habitat 4-43
4.3.6 Impacts on Cultural Resources 4-46
4.3.7 Impacts on Paleontological Resources 4-50
4.3.8 Impacts on Visual Resources 4-54
4.3.9 Impacts on Fire and Fuels Management 4-57
4.4 Impacts on Resource Uses 4-61
4.4.1 Impacts on Livestock Grazing 4-61
4.4.2 Impacts on Comprehensive Trails and Travel Management 4-67
4.4.3 Impacts on Recreation and Visitor Services 4-69
4.4.4 Impacts on Lands and Realty 4-75
4.4.5 Impacts on Renewable Energy 4-80
4.4.6 Impacts on Minerals: Fluid, Mineral Materials, and Locatable Minerals ..4-82
4.4.7 Socioeconomic Conditions 4-90
4.4.8 Impacts on Environmental Justice 4-96
4.4.9 Impacts on Public Health and Safety 4-97
4.5 Cumulative Impacts 4-101
4.5.1 Cumulative Analysis Methodology 4-101
4.5.2 Cumulative Impacts by Resource 4-107

CHAPTER 5 CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION 5-1
5.1 Planning Bulletins and Web Site 5-2
5.2 Public Scoping 5-2
5.3 Cooperating Agencies 5-4
5.4 Tribal Consultation and Coordination 5-4
5.5 Other Formal Consultation 5-5
5.5.1 Threatened and Endangered Species 5-5
5.5.2 Cultural Resources 5-5
5.6 Community-Based Collaborative Planning 5-6
5.7 Meetings with Grazing Allottees 5-7
5.8 Newsletter #4 and Responses 5-7
5.9 Summary of Public Involvement 5-9
5.10 Related Plans 5-10
5.11 Draft RMP/EIS Distribution List 5-14
5.12 Comments on the Draft RMP/EIS 5-16
5.13 List of Preparers 5-16

(TABLE OF CONTENTS–CONTINUED)

Page

GLOSSARY GL-1

REFERENCES R-1

INDEX IN-1

APPENDICES

VOLUME II – CD

A Acts of Authority and Mandates for the BLM
B New Mexico Standards and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management
C Process for Watershed Prioritization
D Best Management Practices
E Grazing Allotment Summary
F Recreation Management Areas
G Nominated ACECs – Evaluation Summaries
H Riparian Data
I Special Status Species Potentially Occurring in the Planning Area by County
J Maps—WSAs, ACECs, and Other Special Designations
K Fluid Mineral Leasing Stipulations
L Visual Resource Management Classes and Objectives
M Lands and Minerals Disposal Policies
N Safety Zones for Recreational Target Shooting
O Off-Highway Vehicle Areas and Route Designations
P Wild and Scenic Rivers Eligibility Evaluation

LIST OF TABLES

Page

Table S-1 Summary Comparison of Land Use Allocations by Alternative S-12

Table 1-1 Surface Management or Ownership in the TriCounty Planning Area 1-6
Table 1-2 Federal Mineral Estate by Surface Owner Administered by BLM within the TriCounty Decision Area 1-6

Table 2-1 Existing ACEC Acreage in TriCounty Planning Area by Alternative 2-6
Table 2-2 Proposed ACEC Acreage by Alternative 2-7
Table 2-3 Existing ACECs: Management Prescriptions & Acreage by Alternative 2-10
Table 2-4 Proposed Areas of Critical Environmental Concern Management Prescriptions by Alternative 2-19
Table 2-5 Management Prescriptions for Other Special Areas 2-23
Table 2-6 Existing Wilderness Study Areas 2-9
Table 2-7 Management of Lands with Wilderness Characteristics 2-26
Table 2-8 Vehicle Use Designations by Alternative 2-59

(TABLE OF CONTENTS-CONTINUED)

Page

Table 2-9 Recreation Management Area Designation and Management by Alternative 2-65
Table 2-10 Public Land Identified for Disposal by County by Alternative 2-73
Table 2-11 Summary of Proposed Fluid Minerals Management by Alternative 2-87
Table 2-12 Summary of Impacts by Alternative 2-92
Table 3-1 ACECs, Research Natural Area, and National Natural Landmark on BLM-Administered Land 3-2
Table 3-2 Wilderness Study Areas 3-4
Table 3-3 Wild and Scenic River Eligible Segments 3-5
Table 3-4 New Mexico Ambient Air Quality Standards 3-7
Table 3-5 Criteria Pollutant Monitored Concentrations in Doña Ana County 3-7
Table 3-6 Standard Visual Ranges from IMPROVE Monitors near the Planning Area 3-9
Table 3-7 Climate Normals (1981-2010) Las Cruces 3-9
Table 3-8 Climate Normals (1981-2010) Alamogordo 3-9
Table 3-9 Climate Normals (1981-2010) Truth or Consequences 3-9
Table 3-10 Watersheds with 303(d) Listed Waters in the Planning Area 3-15
Table 3-11 Land Cover in Decision Area 3-21
Table 3-12 Decision Area Riparian Condition 3-23
Table 3-13 New Mexico Rangeland Ecological Assessment Status for Land Cover Types 3-24
Table 3-14 Annual Acreage of Vegetation Restoration Projects Under Restore New Mexico in the TriCounty Planning Area 2005-2010 3-25
Table 3-15 Restoration Opportunities for Land Cover Types 3-26
Table 3-16 Noxious Weeds Present (by Species) in Sierra, Otero, and Doña Ana Counties 3-27
Table 3-17 Standard Habitat Site Acreages in the Decision Area 3-29
Table 3-18 Special Status Cultural Resources in the Planning Area 3-45
Table 3-19 Cultural Use Allocation Categories and Descriptions 3-46
Table 3-20 Designated Cultural Use Allocations 3-46
Table 3-21 Potential Fossil Yield Classification System 3-48
Table 3-22 Fossils Found in Planning Area 3-50
Table 3-23 Visual Resources Inventory Classes on BLM 3-51
Table 3-24 Acres of Public Land Within Each Visual Resource Management Class 3-51
Table 3-25 Fire Regime Current Condition Classes 3-52
Table 3-26 Category Overview of Approved Fire Management Units 3-53
Table 3-27 Description of Wildland Fire Management Strategies by Fire Management Unit 3-54
Table 3-28 Billed AUMs Within the TriCounty Planning Area, 1991 to 2010 3-56
Table 3-29 Decision Area OHV Use Designations By County 3-59
Table 3-30 Visitor Use Data for Three Rivers Petroglyph Site 3-61
Table 3-31 Annual Visitation at Aguirre Spring Campground and Dripping Springs Natural Area, 2000-2008 3-62
Table 3-32 Special Recreation Permits Issued by the Las Cruces District Office 3-63
Table 3-33 FLPMA Sales Within Planning Area 3-66
Table 3-34 Recreation and Public Purpose Act Conveyance 3-68
Table 3-35 Existing Withdrawals Within the Planning Area 3-69
Table 3-36 Existing Rights-of-Way Within the Planning Area 3-71
Table 3-37 Communication Site Plans Within Planning Area 3-72
Table 3-38 Areas Open, Closed or Restricted for Fluid Mineral Leasing 3-75

(TABLE OF CONTENTS-CONTINUED)

		Page
Table 3-39	Commercial Mineral Material Production from BLM-Administered Mineral Estate Fiscal Year 2010 (October 1, 2009 to September 30, 2010)	3-78
Table 3-40	Comparison of County Populations 1990, 2000, 2010	3-80
Table 3-41	Ethnicity in the Planning Area	3-83
Table 3-42	2008 Employment by Industry	3-84
Table 3-43	Trends in Per Capita Income and Average Earnings Per Job	3-85
Table 3-44	2008 Personal Income and Earnings	3-86
Table 3-45	PILT Acres and Annual Payments 2000-2010	3-88
Table 3-46	Registered Mines in the Planning Area and Percent of Operators Extracting Federal Minerals	3-90
Table 3-47	Ranches with Grazing Authorizations by Federal Agency	3-90
Table 3-48	Authorized AUMs by County and Grazing Fees, 1991 to 2010	3-91
Table 3-49	Special Recreation Permits Issued by the Las Cruces District Office	3-92
Table 3-50	Average Expenditures per Visitor to Local BLM Sites	3-93
Table 3-51	Minority and Low Income Populations (2000)	3-96
Table 4-1	Types of Impacts	4-1
Table 4-2	Summary Comparison of Land Use Allocations by Alternative	4-4
Table 4-3	Areas of Overlap Between WSA and ACEC Designations	4-9
Table 4-4	Habitat Types in Protectively Managed Areas by Alternative	4-37
Table 4-5	Acres of Wildlife Habitat Type Most Degraded by Alternative	4-38
Table 4-6	Acres Open to Development with Mitigation by Alternative and Habitat Type	4-38
Table 4-7	Visual Resource Inventory Values for the TriCounty Decision Area	4-57
Table 4-8	Past, Present, and Reasonably Foreseeable Future Actions	4-102
Table 5-1	Planning Bulletins Distributed	5-2
Table 5-2	Public Scoping Meeting Dates, Locations, and Attendance	5-3
Table 5-3	Community Open-House Meetings	5-6
Table 5-4	Summary of Key Public Involvement Events During Preparation of the TriCounty RMP	5-9
Table 5-5	List of Preparers and Reviewers	5-17

LIST OF MAPS

CHAPTER 1

Map 1-1	Planning Area	1-5
Map 1-2	Surface Management	follows 1-6

CHAPTER 2 MAPS ARE <u>ALL</u> LOCATED AT THE END OF THE CHAPTER.

Map 2-1	Habitat Management Plans Alternatives A, B, C, D
Map 2-2	Special Designations Alternative A
Map 2-3	Special Designations Alternative B
Map 2-4	Special Designations Alternative C
Map 2-5	Special Designations Alternative D
Map 2-6	Visual Resource Management Alternative A
Map 2-6A	Visual Resource Inventory
Map 2-7	Visual Resource Management Alternative B
Map 2-8	Visual Resource Management Alternative C
Map 2-9	Visual Resource Management Alternative D
Map 2-10	Travel Management- Off-Highway Designation Alternative A

(TABLE OF CONTENTS-CONCLUDED)

Map 2-11 Travel Management- Off-Highway Designation Alternative B
Map 2-12 Travel Management- Off-Highway Designation Alternative C
Map 2-13 Travel Management- Off-Highway Designation Alternative D
Map 2-14 Special Recreation Management Area Alternative A
Map 2-15 Special Recreation Management Area Alternative B
Map 2-16 Special Recreation Management Area Alternative C
Map 2-17 Special Recreation Management Area Alternative D
Map 2-18 Land Tenure Alternative A
Map 2-19 Land Tenure Alternative B
Map 2-20 Land Tenure Alternative C
Map 2-21 Land Tenure Alternative D
Map 2-22 Utility Corridor and Right-of-Way Avoidance and Exclusion Alternative A
Map 2-23 Utility Corridor and Right-of-Way Avoidance and Exclusion Alternative B
Map 2-24 Utility Corridor and Right-of-Way Avoidance and Exclusion Alternative C
Map 2-25 Utility Corridor and Right-of-Way Avoidance and Exclusion Alternative D
Map 2-26 Fluid Minerals Alternative A
Map 2-27 Fluid Minerals Alternative B
Map 2-28 Fluid Minerals Alternative C
Map 2-29 Fluid Minerals Alternative D
Map 2-30 Solar Energy Sites Alternative A
Map 2-31 Solar Energy Sites Alternative B
Map 2-32 Solar Energy Sites Alternative C
Map 2-33 Solar Energy Sites Alternative D
Map 2-34 Wind Energy Sites Alternative A
Map 2-35 Wind Energy Sites Alternative B
Map 2-36 Wind Energy Sites Alternative C
Map 2-37 Wind Energy Sites Alternative D
Map 2-38 Mineral Materials Alternative A
Map 2-39 Mineral Materials Alternative B
Map 2-40 Mineral Materials Alternative C
Map 2-41 Mineral Materials Alternative D
Map 2-42 Firearms Discharge Restrictions Alternative A
Map 2-43 Firearms Discharge Restrictions Alternative B
Map 2-44 Firearms Discharge Restrictions Alternative C
Map 2-45 Firearms Discharge Restrictions Alternative D

CHAPTER 3

Map 3-1 Groundwater Basins ..... follows page 3-14
Map 3-2 Geology ..... follows page 3-16
Map 3-3 Vegetation Communities ..... follows page 3-22
Map 3-4 Standard Habitat Sites ..... follows page 3-30
Map 3-5 Paleontological Resources ..... follows page 3-48
Map 3-6 Fire Management ..... follows page 3-52
Map 3-7 Grazing Allotments ..... follows page 3-56
Map 3-8 Photovoltaic Results ..... follows page 3-74
Map 3-9 Concentrating Solar Power Results ..... follows Map 3-8
Map 3-10 Federal Mineral Ownership ..... follows Map 3-9
Map 3-11 Potential for Oil and Gas Resources ..... follows Map 3-10
Map 3-12 Potential for Geothermal Resources ..... follows page 3-76

Executive Summary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In accordance with the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is responsible for management of public land and its resources based on the principle of multiple-use and sustained health, diversity, and productivity for present and future generations. The land use plan provides management direction, which is used to determine appropriate uses and allocate resources, develop strategies to manage and protect resources, and establish systems to monitor and evaluate the status of resources and effectiveness of management decisions over time. The Las Cruces District Office of the BLM has prepared the *TriCounty Draft Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* (*TriCounty Draft RMP/EIS*) to analyze alternative management approaches and their corresponding impacts, which provide a framework for managing public land and for allocating resources on the BLM-administered land in Sierra, Otero, and Doña Ana counties in New Mexico.

The Las Cruces District Office manages public land in Sierra, Otero, Doña Ana, Hidalgo, Luna, and Grant counties in southern New Mexico. The area identified for this planning effort includes Sierra, Otero, and Doña Ana counties. The three-county area varies greatly in resource diversity, production, and potential due to differences in elevation, climate, soils, and a topography that exhibits influences from the Chihuahuan desert, Mexican Highlands, southern Rocky Mountains, and Mogollon Plateau Physiographic Regions. The "*Planning Area"* referred to in this document includes all land within Sierra, Otero, and Doña Ana counties. The term "*Decision Area*" applies to all public land and its resources that are managed by the BLM, including Federal mineral estate within the three counties.

Lands administered by the BLM, whether surface or subsurface estate, are referred to in this document as BLM-administered land or public land.

The *TriCounty Planning Area* of Sierra, Otero, and Doña Ana counties consist of about 9.3 million acres which includes all Federal, State trust, private and tribal lands in the three counties.

Within the *Planning Area* is the *Decision Area* which includes approximately 2.82 million surface acres (about 33 percent of the total acres) and 3.98 million acres of Federal mineral estate. Federal mineral estate includes unified surface and subsurface (mineral) estate and subsurface beneath other surface ownership or administration (split estate) administered by the BLM.

The BLM Las Cruces District Office manages a number of special resource protection management areas including 13 areas of critical environmental concern (ACECs); two research natural areas; 10 wilderness study areas (WSAs); one National Natural Landmark (NNL); one Backcountry Byway; one National Historic Trail and one National Monument. The Prehistoric Trackways National Monument, designated through the Omnibus Public Lands Act of 2009, will have a separate stand-alone RMP so its management is not addressed in this RMP/EIS.

The BLM-administered surface and subsurface estate in Sierra and Otero counties is currently managed according to direction provided by the *1986 White Sands RMP,* and public surface and subsurface estate in Doña Ana County is managed under the *1993 Mimbres RMP*. The Las Cruces District Office has determined that the *White Sands RMP* needs to be revised and updated to provide a more comprehensive framework for management guidance in the two counties. The *Mimbres RMP* needs to be amended to address issues associated with the growth in Doña Ana County and nearby El Paso, Texas, that have affected changes in demographic characteristics as well as increased use of public land. The goals and management decisions under the *Mimbres* and *White Sands* RMPs no longer adequately address the demographics or resource conditions of the region, nor are they compatible with policies changes that

have occurred over the years. As a result, the BLM Las Cruces District Office has prepared the *TriCounty Draft RMP/EIS* to analyze BLM's management of public land in the *Planning Area*, to identify alternative management approaches for public land, and to analyze the associated impacts of each alternative on the human and natural environment. The EIS prepared with the RMP is intended to satisfy the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Council on Environmental Quality regulations implementing NEPA (Title 40 Code of Federal Regulations Sections 1500 through 1508), and other associated regulations.

The planning process to revise the RMP was initiated on January 28, 2005, with the public scoping phase, which included public meetings, newspaper articles, workshops, and informal presentations to interested groups as well as other activities to identify management concerns. The results of the scoping process are summarized in the *TriCounty RMP/EIS Scoping Report* (June 2005) which is available at the Las Cruces District Office or online at http://www.blm.gov/nm/st/en/fo/Las_Cruces_District_Office/*TriCounty*_rmp.html. Issues identified during scoping and considered throughout the planning process were related to transportation, access, recreational opportunities, special designations, and renewable energy.

An Analysis of the Management Situation (AMS) was prepared in June 2006 to compile baseline resource data and trends and to analyze the potential for changes to the management of BLM's *Decision Area*. Alternative management plans that are evaluated in the *TriCounty Draft RMP/EIS* were derived from the Management Opportunities section of the AMS. The alternatives were further refined based on the goals and objectives identified for each resource and resource use, and the issues that were identified in pre-planning and public scoping processes.

Management alternatives for the *TriCounty Draft RMP/EIS* are discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 provides a description of the existing environment, and Chapter 4 includes an analysis of the potential impacts that would result from the changes to the existing environment as a result of implementing each alternative. Cumulative impacts that consider past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions are analyzed at the end of Chapter 4. Chapter 5 contains a brief summary of the public outreach that was conducted during the preparation of the Draft RMP.

ALTERNATIVES

BLM has considered four management alternatives in the RMP/EIS: a no action alternative and three action alternatives briefly described as follows:

- **Alternative A** is the No Action Alternative. This does not mean "no management," but means that management direction would continue according to decisions in the *White Sands RMP* and *Mimbres RMP*. Those decisions would continue to be implemented, and no changes or new decisions would be made.

- **Alternative B** emphasizes conservation and preservation of resources and places the most restrictions on resource use. With this alternative, the BLM would manage and conserve resources for long-term use rather than using them primarily for short-term gain, while still providing for multiple-uses.

- **Alternative C (Preferred Alternative).** The BLM's preferred alternative at the time of the *Draft RMP/EIS* aims to find a balance between long-term conservation and the mandate to provide for multiple-use. Measures to protect sensitive resources would be implemented, but they would be less restrictive than under Alternative B.

- **Alternative D** emphasizes resource use, access, and production but still provides for resource protection only to the point necessary to meet regulatory or legislative requirements. Long-term preservation and use of resources on public land may not be possible under this alternative.

A major factor within each alternative is the determination of special designations and their associated management prescriptions. Special designations that are addressed in the alternatives include ACECs, WSAs, an NNL, and national historic trails. The number, the size, and the management prescriptions for ACECs vary across the alternatives. In addition, proposed management decisions within each alternative typically address off-highway vehicle (OHV) use, rights-of-way; minerals management; and renewable energy projects. Management prescriptions for existing WSAs, the NNL, and the National Historic Trail are carried forward from previous legislation, policy or land use plans.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

Documentation of the existing condition of resources, resource uses, and other features of the *Planning Area* are discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 3 is organized by sections corresponding to the following resources and resource uses:

- Special Designations
- Lands With Wilderness Characteristics
- Air Resources
- Soil Resources
- Water and Watershed Resources
- Geology
- Vegetation
- Fish and Wildlife Habitat
- Special Status Species
- Cultural Resources
- Paleontology
- Visual Resources
- Fire and Fuels Management
- Livestock Grazing
- Comprehensive Trails And Travel Management
- Recreation And Visitor Services
- Lands and Realty
- Renewable Energy
- Minerals
- Abandoned Mine Lands
- Socioeconomic Conditions
- Environmental Justice

Special Designations

Special designations are areas that the BLM has set aside for conservation purposes. Many of these areas have been assigned protective management prescriptions that limit surface disturbing activities. Special designations include ACECs, WSAs, backcountry byways, National Historical Trails, National Scenic Trails, Wild and Scenic Rivers, natural conservation areas, and national monuments. The *Planning Area* includes 9 WSAs, 13 ACECs, the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail, and the Lake Valley Backcountry Byway. Three historic trails pass through public land in the *TriCounty Planning Area*: the Mormon Battalion Trail, the Butterfield Overland Trail, and El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro. El Camino Real is a designated National Historic Trail that runs north and south through Doña Ana and Sierra Counties. Historically the trail connected Mexico City with northern New Mexico.
The 9 WSAs are located in areas with wilderness characteristics totaling approximately 261,793 acres. Certain surface disturbing activities are allowed in WSAs; however, management decisions are geared toward limiting surface disturbance and maintaining existing wilderness characteristics. Wilderness

inventories were completed for the *Planning Area* in 1980. Additional inventories have been conducted and WSAs designated on land acquired since 1980.

Lands with Wilderness Characteristics

Section 201 of FLPMA requires the BLM to maintain on a continuing basis an inventory of all public land and its resources and other values, which includes wilderness characteristics. In accordance with policy outlined in Instruction Memorandum 2011-154 (*Requirement to Conduct and Maintain Inventory Information for Wilderness Characteristics and to Consider Lands with Wilderness Characteristics in Land Use Plans*), this RMP addresses the wilderness characteristics of lands in the *Decision Area*. Where lands are found to contain wilderness character, the BLM considers a full range of alternatives for such lands. This RMP will analyze the effects of (1) plan alternatives on lands with wilderness characteristics and (2) management of lands with wilderness characteristics on other resources and resource uses.

The Las Cruces District Office determined that four areas, Nutt Grasslands, Bar Canyon, Peña Blanca South and Peña Blanca North, totaling approximately 11,494 acres in the *Decision Area* contain wilderness characteristics.

Air Resources

Air quality in the *Planning Area* involves ambient concentrations of criteria air pollutants, levels of visibility, and the presence of permitted and nonpermitted air pollutant sources. The major source of air pollution in the *Planning Area* is particulate emissions from road dust (EPA 2002). Significant PM_{10} emissions also occur during naturally occurring high wind events (dust storms) (NMED 2006). Criteria pollutants must meet the New Mexico Ambient Air Quality Standards and the National Ambient Air Quality Standards. Motorized vehicles represent the largest single air pollutant source category in the *Planning Area* and include emissions of NO_2, CO, and PM_{10}.

Soil Resources

Three broad categories of soils are found in the *Planning Area*: (1) very shallow to deep, well-drained sandy loams with small rock fragments found on mesas, hills, mountains, ridges, slopes, and upland plains; (2) clay loams ranging from deep, well-drained, and very stony material to very fine, sandy, and silty loams found on fan terraces, bajadas, and swales; and (3) deep, poor- to well-drained clay loams to loamy, fine sands in the floodplains of the Rio Grande Basin.

Water and Watershed Resources

The New Mexico Office of the State Engineer, as delineated by statute and judicial decision, has divided the state into declared groundwater basins to assess and adjudicate water resources. The *Planning Area* contains important surface water resources, including the Rio Grande, Elephant Butte, and Caballo reservoirs as well as Tularosa Creek and Percha Creek. Surface water on public land maintains existing riparian vegetation, provides water for wildlife and livestock, provides recreational opportunities, and recharges aquifers.

Vegetation

Vegetation in the *Planning Area* is grouped into five land cover categories based on the dominant natural vegetation in a location. These categories are: (1) forest-woodland, (2) grassland herbaceous, (3) shrub-scrub, (4) barren, and (5) developed and agricultural.

Forest and woodland cover types are limited to places with adequate soil moisture, and, in the *Planning Area*, typically occur at elevations above 5,000 feet. Shrub-scrub areas are commonly associated with a less moist environment and include herbaceous grass or forb understories. In parts of the *Planning Area*, degradation of the grassland-herbaceous cover types has increased shrub-scrub and shrubland cover area. This cover type typically appears as scattered trees or shrubs, although some areas may exhibit small patches of dense vegetation. Barren and sparsely vegetated cover types have a small amount of plant cover, and soil development is limited.

Woodland vegetation cover types within the *Planning Area* occur primarily in Otero County and the higher elevations in Sierra and Doña Ana counties. The direction for the management of woodlands is determined by the management of vegetation, wildlife, or fire and fuels that restoring ecological health.

According to New Mexico law, a "*noxious weed*" is any species of plant that is liable to be damaging or destructive and difficult to control or eradicate. Common locations for noxious weed infestations in the *Planning Area* include roadsides and areas that are highly disturbed or degraded.

Fish and Wildlife Habitat

The BLM is responsible for managing fish and wildlife habitats in the *Planning Area*, while State and Federal wildlife management agencies are responsible for managing fish and wildlife species and populations. Nineteen different standard habitat sites (SHSs) occur in the *Planning Area*. Most of these are fairly well-represented in all three counties. The fauna in the *TriCounty Planning Area* includes a diversity of game and nongame wildlife species, as well as migratory birds. Land use patterns in the *Planning Area* have influenced wildlife species distribution and habitat conditions. Loss or degradation of habitat and habitat fragmentation are the major factors affecting habitat quality and quantity. Actions contributing to degradation and fragmentation of habitat and wildlife corridors include road construction, oil and gas exploration and development, OHV use, renewable energy development including transmission lines and corridors, and almost any other changes in land use.

Special Status Species

Special status species include plants and animals that are listed as Endangered, Threatened, proposed for listing, or species of concern by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), State of New Mexico, or the BLM. Within the *TriCounty Planning Area*, 10 species are protected under the ESA including 8 endangered species and 2 threatened species. There is one candidate species for listing under ESA in the *Planning Area*. Approximately 78 special status animal species and 85 special status plant species potentially occur in the *Planning Area*.

Cultural Resources

Cultural resources include any prehistoric or historic district, site, building, structure, or object considered important to a culture, subculture, or community for scientific, traditional, religious, or other purposes. Cultural resources also include archeological resources. The BLM's cultural resources program has recorded 380 archeological and historical sites in Sierra and Otero counties and 3,838 archeological and historical sites in Doña Ana County.

Paleontology

Paleontological resources include the bones, teeth, bodily remains, traces, or imprints of plants and animals preserved in the earth through geologic time. Paleontological resources can include related geological information such as rock types. The highest potential for significant fossil finds and geological formations in Otero County occur in the southern Tularosa Valley and in portions of the Sacramento and Capitan mountains. Rocks of the early Paleozoic crop out along escarpments of the San Andres, Organ, and other mountains in the *Planning Area*.

Visual Resources

Visual resources are natural and manmade physical features that give a landscape its character and value. Results of the 2010 Visual Resource Inventory Class Ratings are as follows:

- Visual Resource Inventory Class I – 0 acres
- Visual Resource Inventory Class II – 706,111 acres
- Visual Resource Inventory Class III – 1,028,709 acres
- Visual Resource Inventory Class IV – 1,085,332 acres

Fire and Fuels Management

BLM managers recognize fire as a natural disturbance in healthy ecosystems. The BLM managers use fire to restore the existing condition and character of the landscape and to assist in meeting other resource management goals and objectives. Fire Regime Condition Classes integrate the concept of historical fire regimes and use them as a qualitative measure against which current conditions are compared.

Livestock Grazing

Ranchers are authorized to use public land to support livestock grazing operations in conjunction with a BLM authorized grazing permit on a grazing allotment. There are 300 grazing allotments within the *Planning Area*. Grazing allotments can include Federal, State trust, and private lands. Guidance for livestock grazing on public land in the *Planning Area* is found in *White Sands RMP*, the *Mimbres* RMP, and the *New Mexico Standards for Public Land Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management* (BLM 2001). These guidelines describe the desired approach to changing grazing management when it is determined that livestock grazing is preventing public land from meeting the standards.

Comprehensive Trails and Travel Management

Road networks within the *Planning Area* include a series of Federal and State highways, county roads, BLM-maintained roads, primitive roads, and trails. All public land must be identified as open, closed, or limited to motorized vehicle use. These designations establish guidelines and limitations to OHV use. The majority of public land in Sierra and Otero counties is currently managed as open to OHV use.

Recreation and Visitor Services

The *TriCounty Planning Area* provides many public recreational opportunities in diverse natural settings. These opportunities occur on lands managed by the BLM as well as the US Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Mescalero Apache Tribe, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, New Mexico State Parks, New Mexico State Land Office, counties, and cities. Recreation in the *Planning Area* includes sightseeing, hiking, fishing, boating, wildlife viewing, scenic driving, hunting, horseback riding, caving, mountain biking, picnicking, OHV use, and camping.

Lands and Realty

The *1993 Mimbres RMP* and the *1986 White Sands RMP* designated specific land for retention and disposal in order to maintain land of value for certain resources and resource uses and to make land easier to manage. Retention areas include concentrated blocks of public land, and smaller parcels of higher resource values. Disposal areas typically consist of tracts of land that are difficult and uneconomical to manage, and parcels that could provide for expansion of communities and economic development. Only minor land tenure adjustments have been implemented in the *Planning Area* since adoption of the existing RMPs.

The BLM Las Cruces District Office manages rights-of-way through a system of designated corridors, right-of-way exclusions, and avoidance areas. Utility corridors have not been established for public land within Sierra and Otero counties.

Renewable Energy

The *Planning Area* has high potential for solar energy development and moderate potential for wind energy development. The Las Cruces District Office has received several applications for renewable energy projects but none have been approved or process.

Minerals

Three classifications of mineral estate are found on public land in the *Planning Area*: locatable (metallic and nonmetallic minerals), leasable (coal, geothermal, oil and gas, other solid leasables), and mineral material (sand, gravel, aggregate or other building stone). The BLM is responsible for managing approximately 4 million acres of Federal mineral estate within the *Planning Area*, which includes subsurface minerals underlying land that is managed by private, State, and other Federal agencies.

Locatable Minerals

Locatable minerals are minerals that can be prospected and mined under the General Mining Law of 1872, as amended. They are sometimes referred to as "hardrock" minerals and consist of both metallic and nonmetallic minerals such as gold, silver, copper, lead, barite, and a host of others. The *Decision Area* has several locatable mineral mining districts with significant mineral deposits.

Leasable Minerals

Opportunities for oil and gas development are limited in the *Planning Area*. Exploratory wells have been drilled, and there have been shows of oil and gas reported in all three counties; however, there has been no economic production to date. Consequently, the *Planning Area* is considered to have low to moderate potential for oil and gas production.

Mineral Materials

Mineral materials include sand, gravel, stone, pumice, pumicite, cinders, and ordinary clay. Sand, gravel, aggregate, limestone, cinders, and building stone are the most common salable minerals. There are several inactive or intermittently operated aggregate pits in the *Planning Area*, with the most activity occurring in Doña Ana County. The most common mineral materials in all counties include sand, gravel, and stone.

Socioeconomic Conditions

Social conditions, economic conditions, health and safety, and Tribal treaty rights are all considered as part of the socioeconomic conditions. Sierra and Otero counties' populations are generally rural with large proportions of land historically used for agriculture and ranching. Doña Ana County is the most populated county in the *Planning Area*, and also has the greatest projected population growth (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

Government and government services currently provide the largest share of employment in the *Planning Area* (ranging approximately from 18 percent in Sierra County, 36 percent in Otero County, and 24 percent in Doña Ana County) and statewide (19 percent).

Environmental Justice

Federal agencies are required to identify and address, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations in accordance with NEPA, Executive Order 12898: Environmental Justice, and other applicable laws and regulations. The majority of New Mexico's population (54 percent) is part of a minority group. Doña Ana County and the Mescalero Apache Nation exceeded the State of New Mexico's minority population proportion. The *Planning Area* exceeded the State of New Mexico's low-income population rate of 18 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). The only geographic area that did not exceed the statewide poverty rate was the City of Alamogordo.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

The predicted consequences, or potential effects, on the environment that would result from the implementation of the alternative management strategies are identified in the *TriCounty RMP/EIS*. An impact, or effect, is defined as a modification to the environment, as it presently exists, that is brought about by an outside action. Impacts may differ in significance from no change or an only slightly noticeable change to a full modification or elimination of the environmental condition. The following resource sections summarize the results from the impact analysis for each alternative.

Land Use Allocations

Table S-1 shows a summary of the land use allocations by acres by alternative.

Alternative A

This alternative represents the No Action Alternative, or continuation of the existing management direction in accordance with the management decisions outlined in the *1986 White Sands RMP* for Sierra and Otero counties and the 1993 *Mimbres RMP* for Doña Ana County. Under Alternative A, resources and use would continue to be managed as under existing management direction, and current management strategies would remain the same. This alternative represents the baseline to which the action alternatives (Alternatives B, C, and D) are compared.

Alternative B

Under Alternative B, management actions would reduce or restrict surface-disturbing activities, closing areas to vehicle use, limiting vehicle use to existing or designated routes in 99 percent of the *Decision Area*. Alternative B would close or defer in the short-term, fluid mineral leasing, and increase the areas of avoidance and exclusion for rights-of-way including siting renewable energy projects. These management actions would reduce surface disturbance, soil erosion, vegetation loss, and increase control of noxious weeds. The potential for maintaining and improving wildlife habitat would be greatest under Alternative B because commodity use or development would occur on fewer acres. The potential for maintaining and improving lands with wilderness characteristics would be greatest under Alternative B. The management of public land within Special Recreation Management Areas (SRMAs) and Extensive Recreation Management Areas (ERMAs), 122,000 acres, have the potential to increase visitor use due to specific designations of roads and trails and the presence of developed facilities. Solar energy development would be confined to the Afton Solar Energy Zone (SEZ) where up to 30,000 acres could be used for installation of solar collectors.

Alternative C (Preferred Alternative)

Vehicle use on 99 percent of the *Decision Area* would be limited to existing or designated routes. Approximately 42,000 acres would be managed as open to OHV use and 20,000 acres would be closed. This would reduce potential surface disturbance and damage to vegetation, cultural resources, and wildlife habitat compared to Alternative A and would be similar to impacts under Alternative B.

Under Alternative C, approximately 304,000 acres would be designated and managed as ACECs, which would result in impacts similar to Alternative B but on less acreage. Reducing the number of acres set aside as ACECs leaves more acres open for surface disturbance and could lead to increased soil erosion and potential vegetation and wildlife habitat damage outside the ACEC.

The acres allocated and managed as lands with wilderness characteristics would be approximately 803 acres, less than under Alternative B. Reducing the number of acres managed to protect lands with wilderness characteristics leaves more acres open for surface disturbance and impacts to wilderness characteristics.

The acres allocated and managed as SRMAs and ERMAs would be approximately 151,000 acres, greater than under Alternative B and impacts would be the same but for a larger area.

Under Alternative C, renewable energy actions and impacts would be the similar as described under Alternative B, but solar energy projects would be considered outside of the Afton SEZ after appropriate NEPA analysis.

Alternative D

Alternative D is primarily oriented toward accommodating more extensive and diverse resource uses in the *Decision Area*. Management actions taken to meet public land health standards in areas that are not currently achieving them would reduce soil erosion as well as vegetation and wildlife habitat damage. Acres open and closed to OHV use under this alternative would be similar as under Alternative C. Bar Canyon would be managed to preserve its wilderness characteristics under this alternative.

Under Alternative D, 194,000 acres would be managed as SRMAs and ERMAs, which is more than under Alternatives B and C. Concentrating recreational activities in these areas could indirectly protect resources outside these areas. However, SRMAs tend to attract more users and, depending upon the type of recreational activity and the amount of use, this would more heavily impact soil, vegetation, and wildlife habitat resources in these areas.

Renewable energy actions and impacts would be the same as described under Alternative C; however, a greater area could be potentially available for wind energy developments because less acreage would be classed as avoidance and exclusion areas under Alternative D.

CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

The *TriCounty RMP/EIS* is being completed in consultation with other Federal agencies; State, county, Tribal, and local governments; and the public. Consultation under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act has been initiated with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and a Biological Assessment will be completed prior to BLM publishing the Proposed RMP and Final EIS. The NMDGF, State Historic Preservation Office, several tribes (White Mountain Apache Tribe, Mescalero Apache Tribe, Fort Sill Apache Tribe, Ysleta del Sur Pueblo, Isleta Pueblo, Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Kiowa Tribe, Comanche Indian Tribe, Laguna Pueblo, Acoma Pueblo, and Tesuque Pueblo), and government officials have been contacted and invited to participate in the RMP/EIS planning process. The City of Las Cruces; Sierra, Otero and Doña Ana counties; NMDGF; New Mexico Department of Agriculture, U.S. Army Ft. Bliss, and U.S Army White Sands Missile Range accepted the invitation and are participating in this effort as cooperating agencies, with the BLM acting as the lead agency.

In 2003, the BLM initiated public involvement in the RMP process through informal community meetings then proceeded in subsequent years with formal scoping meetings in 2005, planning bulletins and newsletters, and information on the BLM websites. Despite the protracted RMP schedule, the BLM has continued to accept public input on the document.

A notice of the availability of the Draft *TriCounty RMP*s and EIS will be sent to individuals, groups, agencies, and businesses on the Las Cruces District mailing list for this project when it is completed. The complete draft document will also be posted on the Las Cruces District Office website at that time.

TABLE S-1 SUMMARY COMPARISON OF LAND USE ALLOCATIONS BY ALTERNATIVE				
LAND USE	**Acres[1]**			
	Alternative A	**Alternative B**	**Alternative C**	**Alternative D**
Special Designations				
WSAs (number, acres)	10 261,793	10 261,793	10 261,793	10 261,793
ACECs (number, acres) Existing	13 89,723	13 91,477	12 87,731	12 85,977
Proposed	0 0	16 425,997	11 216,311	0 0
Total ACECs	13 89,723	29 517,774	23 304,042	12 85,977
Kilbourne Hole NL (number, acres)	1 5,500	1 5,500	1 5,500	1 5,500
Wild & Scenic River Suitability (miles)	0	3.5	0	1.4
Lands with Wilderness Characteristics				
LWCs (number, acres)	0 0	4 11,917	3 803	1 423
Vegetation				
Vegetation allocation changes as a result of grassland restoration treatments.	No allocation priorities.	Reserved for watershed function and wildlife.	Reserved to meet the needs of watershed function. Excess allocated to wildlife and livestock, with wildlife receiving priority.	Allocated to wildlife and livestock with neither having priority.
Fish and Wildlife Habitat				
Habitat Management Plans (number, acres)	9 1,188,349	4 1,416,965	4 1,416,729	4 1,416,729
Visual Resource Management				
Class I	38,521	343,253	271,406	265,526
Class II	578,348	893,669	638,331	689,513
Class III	840,655	806,869	809,938	810,179
Class IV	1,375,138	789,420	1,113,396	1,066,866

TABLE S-1 SUMMARY COMPARISON OF LAND USE ALLOCATIONS BY ALTERNATIVE				
LAND USE	**Acres[1]**			
	Alternative A	**Alternative B**	**Alternative C**	**Alternative D**
Livestock Grazing				
Area Closed To Grazing	2,049 acres of sensitive resources (wildlife and cultural)	Discontinue the authorization of livestock grazing in allotments, in whole or in part, with unmanageable conflicts. 17,602 acres of allotments that have no grazing authorization or with conflicts would be closed conflicts.	Discontinue the authorization of livestock grazing in allotments, in whole or in part, with unmanageable conflicts only after (1) a land health assessment/ evaluation, (2) a determination , and (3) a decision to reallocate the lands to a public purpose that precludes livestock grazing. 17,602 acres of allotments that have no grazing authorization or with conflicts would be closed.	1,156 acres of sensitive resources (wildlife and cultural)
Livestock Grazing Adjustments	Changes made on an as needed basis, case-by-case, based on monitoring.	25% reduction of AUMs on areas with limited restoration potential (950,000).	Changes to grazing made in priority watersheds based on monitoring of vegetation, soils, hydrology, and other variables associated with healthy ecological systems	Changes made on an as needed basis, case-by-case, based on monitoring.
Comprehensive Trails and Travel Management				
Open to OHV use	1,635,694	38,966	41,908	41,908
Limited to Existing Routes	878,636	2,003,188	2,284,102	2,496,266
Limited to Designated Routes	272,021	531,994	492,616	277,336
Closed to OHV Use	42,953	259,891	19,218	17,485

TABLE S-1 SUMMARY COMPARISON OF LAND USE ALLOCATIONS BY ALTERNATIVE				
LAND USE	**Acres[1]**			
	Alternative A	**Alternative B**	**Alternative C**	**Alternative D**
Recreation and Visitor Services				
SRMA (numbers, acres)	2 69,151	3 83,003	3 83,003	4 83,233
ERMA (number, acres)	0 0	2 38,954	3 68,407	5 110,340
Closed to Discharge of Firearms	10,440	44,770	40,310	37,550
Lands and Realty				
Land Identified for Disposal	213,199	38,273	108,450	186,523
ROW Avoidance Areas	13,222	109,074	422,910	453,000
ROW Exclusion Areas	518,839	919,953	343,060	308,000
Utility Corridors	17,613	149,835	208,891	224,875
Renewable Energy				
Solar Energy Zones (number, acres)	0 0	1 29,964	1 29,964	1 29,964
Exclusion and avoidance[4] Solar Wind	532,061 532,061	2,759,149 1,598,929	1,559,146 1,618,659	1,562,616 1,532,657
Minerals				
Segregated from mineral entry	10,976	10,976	10,976	10,976
Oil and Gas				
Existing Leases	52,705	52,705	52,705	52,705
Open with Standard Lease Terms & Conditions	3,655,138	0	0	0
Open – No Surface Occupancy	27,534	856	856	856
Open – Controlled Surface Use	169,710	0	0	0
Open with Lease Notice	239,307	0	0	0
Discretionary Closure	75,020	75,020	75,020	75,020
Non-discretionary Closure[2]	258,186	258,186	258,186	258,186
Deferred from New Leasing	-	3,593,047	3,593,047	3,593,047
Geothermal Leasing				
Existing Leases	440	440	440	440
Discretionary Closure[2]	75,020	571,930	358,045	75,020
Non-Discretionary Closure[2]	258,186	258,186	258,186	258,186
Open with Stipulations or Standard Terms and Conditions	3,194,610	3,154,014	3,222,397	3,630,721

TABLE S-1 SUMMARY COMPARISON OF LAND USE ALLOCATIONS BY ALTERNATIVE				
LAND USE	**Acres[1]**			
	Alternative A	**Alternative B**	**Alternative C**	**Alternative D**
Locatable Minerals				
Open to entry under General Mining Laws[3]	4,331,744	3,649,337	3,993,937	4,277,979
Recommended withdrawal under the General Mining Laws	71,488	682,407	337,807	53,765
Mineral (Salable) Materials				
Open Mineral Material Sales[3]	3,908,761	3,771,434	3,644,196	3,996730
Closed Mineral Material	441,239	705,804	456,719	353,270

NOTES:
[1] Because of overlap with other designations, exclusion of some areas from the particular use, or other reason, total acres for any alternative may not add to the *Decision Area* Total for either surface or mineral estate.
[2] Where WSA acres (non-discretionary closure) and ACEC acres (discretionary closure) overlap, the more restrictive management (WSA-nondiscretionary closure) will prevail.
[3] Includes all subsurface estate regardless of surface ownership
[4] In many cases, acres of avoidance and exclusion overlap for both types of renewable energy projects.

Chapter 1

Purpose and Need

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Resource Management Plans (RMPs) are the principal instruments used by the U.S. Department of the Interior (USDI), Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to manage public land and resources, including subsurface Federal mineral estate. According to the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), the BLM is responsible for managing public land and resources to allow for multiple-use while assuring the sustained yield, diversity, and productivity of public land for present and future generations. This general mandate can be realized in a number of ways, and each RMP is a reflection of the unique set of issues, management concerns, resource conditions, and community needs and desires attached to a management area. Because circumstances, legislation, and policies change or evolve over time, RMPs are periodically reviewed for relevance and effectiveness.

Two existing plans are addressed in this document: The *White Sands RMP* (USDOI BLM1986a) and the *Mimbres RMP* (USDOI BLM1993). The *White Sands RMP* is being completely revised and the *Mimbres RMP* is being amended in part. The result will be the *TriCounty RMP* which will replace the *White Sands RMP* and supersede the *Mimbres RMP* for Doña Ana County. Consequently, a new *Planning Area* which did not previously exist, The *TriCounty Planning Area*, will be created for the Las Cruces District. This revision and amendment are jointly addressed along with an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in this document. Together the RMP Revision and RMP Amendment and associated EIS are called the *TriCounty Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement.* The *Mimbres RMP* will continue to guide the management of public land in Luna, Grant, and Hidalgo Counties in the remainder of the Las Cruces District.

1.1 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE RMP AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

FLPMA directs the BLM to manage the public land and resources to allow for multiple-use while assuring the sustained yield, diversity, and productivity of that land for present and future generations. As directed by FLPMA, the primary way of accomplishing this mandate is through the development and updating of resource management plans. The BLM Las Cruces District has determined that the two primary RMPs it relies on to direct management of public land in the Las Cruces District, *White Sands RMP* covering Sierra and Otero Counties and the *Mimbres RMP* for Doña Ana County, are inadequate for a number of resources and need to be revised or amended to conform with latest policies and to provide updated management direction. The *Mimbres RMP* will continue to apply to Luna, Grant and Hidalgo Counties. Once the Record of Decision is issued for the *TriCounty* RMP, all public land management decisions pertaining to Sierra, Otero, and Doña Ana Counties will be contained in the *TriCounty* RMP.

The purpose for revising the existing RMPs is to consolidate, update, and establish appropriate goals, objectives, land use allocations, management actions, priorities, and procedures, within a multiple-use management context, for the BLM public land resource programs administered by the Las Cruces District Office within Sierra, Otero and Doña Ana Counties. The RMP is to provide a land use plan consistent with current laws, regulations and policies, and to update resource management direction to allow the Las Cruces District Office to meet nationwide BLM goals and objectives and to ensure actions taken are consistent with current BLM policy.

The need for revising the two RMPs is that new issues have arisen and new policies have been developed and implemented regarding renewable energy siting, outdoor recreation management, special status species habitat, and proposals for special designations. Neither of the existing plans adequately addresses these issues, policies, and guidance. The *White Sands RMP* does not conform with or adequately address current policy on off-highway vehicle (OHV) use and route designations. The *Mimbres RMP* identified

as suitable for disposal a large area of the public land between Las Cruces and the Organ Mountains. Since the adoption of that plan, the interest in retaining public land in Federal ownership has increased. The impacts of potential land disposals on adjacent military operations, on Section 15 grazing leases, and on community lifestyle were not adequately addressed in the existing RMPs. Neither of the existing RMPs reflects new policies or guidance on planning for recreation management; nor does either plan specifically address renewable energy projects siting. The plans will update guidance on other programs as well including wildlife habitat management, fire management, vegetation restoration, and the impacts of a growing population on the use of nearby public land. In short, over the last 20-25 years the management situation of the public land within the Las Cruces District has changed significantly. A new RMP is necessary to address this changing situation.

Some of the relevant law, policy, and guidance changes that have occurred since the previous plans were signed and need to be considered in the revised RMP include:

- Manual 6400, Wild and Scenic River Policy and Program Direction for Identification, Evaluation, Planning and Management (USDOI BLM 2012)
- Manual 6330, Management of Wilderness Study Areas (USDOI BLM 2012).
- National Fire Plan (DOI and USDA 2000)
- New Mexico Standards for Public Land Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management (BLM 2001a)
- National Management Strategy for Motorized Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) Use on Public Lands (USDOI BLM 2001)
- Manual 6840, Special Status Species (USDOI BLM 2001c)
- Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003
- Manual H-8410-1, BLM Visual Resource Inventory, Section V. Visual Resource Classes and Objectives (USDOI BLM 2003)
- Energy Policy Act of 2005
- Handbook H-1601-1, Land Use Planning Handbook (USDOI BLM 2005d)
- BLM Instruction Memoranda and Executive Orders

The RMP will establish consolidated guidance and updated objectives and management actions for the public land within the *TriCounty* area. It will be comprehensive in nature and will address issue categories applicable within the Decision Area that have been identified through agency, interagency, and public scoping efforts. Preliminary issues for the *TriCounty Planning Area* have been identified by BLM personnel, other State and Federal agencies, and other stakeholders. These issues include:

- Renewable energy development for solar, wind, and geothermal power;
- Management of rights-of-way for renewable energy and other uses;
- Visual Resource Management (VRM) Classes;
- Land tenure adjustments to meeting community growth needs;
- Disposal of public land adjacent military operations;
- Population growth and urban interface;
- Open space;
- Economic and Social Conditions;

- Management of split estate land;
- Evaluation of existing and potential new Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC);
- OHV designations and Special Resource Management Areas (SRMAs);
- Recreation management; and
- Grazing management

The EIS for the *TriCounty* RMP will identify the potential impacts that land use plan decisions could have and the appropriate measures to mitigate those impacts. The primary purpose of the EIS is to analyze and document the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of the reasonably foreseeable future actions resulting from BLM's management decisions. By law, these impacts must be analyzed before the BLM makes an irreversible commitment of public land resources. This EIS satisfies the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), Council on Environmental Quality regulations implementing NEPA (Title 40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] Sections 1500 to 1508), FLPMA, and other associated regulations.

1.2 PLANNING AREA DESCRIPTION

BLM's Land Use Planning Handbook (H-1601-1) differentiates between geographic areas associated with planning. They include the *Planning Area, Decision Area*, and *Analysis Area*.

The *Planning Area* is the region within which BLM will propose management decisions during a planning effort. The three-county area addressed in this document is referred to as the *TriCounty Planning Area*. It includes all land—public and private, regardless of jurisdiction or ownership—in Sierra, Otero, and Doña Ana Counties in south-central New Mexico (Map 1-1).

The *Decision Area* includes all public land in the *Planning Area* for which BLM has authority to make land use decisions (Table 1-2). Generally, the BLM has jurisdiction over all BLM-administered lands (surface and subsurface) and over subsurface minerals in areas of split estate (the surface is owned by a non-Federal entity such as with State Trust land or private land).

The *Analysis Area* includes any lands, regardless of jurisdiction, for which the BLM synthesizes, analyzes, and interprets information that relates to planning for BLM-administered land. The analysis area generally comes into consideration in the Cumulative Impacts analysis in Chapter 4.

The *TriCounty Planning Area* of Sierra, Otero and Doña Ana counties consists of about 9.3 million acres. This includes about 2.82 million Federal surface acres (about 32 percent of the total *Planning Area* acres) and 3.98 million acres of Federal mineral estate (subsurface) that are administered by the BLM. The BLM is the largest single owner/administrator of land within the *Planning Area*. BLM administered land is officially known as the National System of Public Lands or public land. BLM-administered land, BLM-managed land, BLM land, and public land is used interchangeably throughout this document.

While this RMP addresses only management of the public land and resources, management decisions for public land can and do have an effect on non-BLM lands. These effects are analyzed in Chapter 4 as appropriate.

Within the *Planning Area*, the BLM manages 26 special management areas: 13 ACECs; one research natural area (RNA); 10 wilderness study areas (WSAs); one National Natural Landmark; one Backcountry Byway; and one National Historic Trail.

Other areas of Federally-managed land in the *Planning Area* include portions of the military installations of White Sands Missile Range, which extends partially into each of the three counties; McGregor Range and Holloman Air Force Base in Otero County; and Doña Ana Range, which extends into Otero and Doña Ana counties. U. S. Forest Service units include portions of the Gila National Forest and the Cibola National Forest in Sierra County; and the Lincoln National Forest in Otero County. A large portion of the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation in Otero County is also within the *Planning Area*.

Although much of the 606,157-acre McGregor Range consists of public land managed by the BLM, it is withdrawn from the public domain for military use, and special restrictions apply in that area. Management of the Range is addressed in the *McGregor Range RMP Amendment,* which amended the 1986 *White Sands RMP* and replaced the 1990 *McGregor Range RMP Amendment*. A Record of Decision (ROD) approving the RMP Amendment was issued by the BLM Las Cruces District Office in May 2006, and since that RMP amendment is still valid, the Range is excluded from consideration in the *TriCounty Range RMP/EIS*. However, McGregor Range is considered as part of the *Planning Area*.

Physically, the *TriCounty Planning Area* encompasses a diversity of landscapes, vegetation communities, and wildlife in the Chihuahuan Desert, Mexican Highland, southern Rocky Mountains, and Mogollon Plateau. Elevations in the *Planning Area* range from 3,800 to 9,000 feet, with desert-mountains rising abruptly from gently sloping plains. Approximately 490 species of vertebrate wildlife are known to inhabit the region. Archaeological and historical studies indicate that a succession of different cultural groups have inhabited the region for about the past 12,000 years.

1.2.1 LAND MANAGEMENT STATUS IN THE *PLANNING AREA*

Table 1-1 shows the surface management/administration by agency or entity by county in the *Planning Area*. In addition to BLM, other Federal land managers in the *Planning Area* are: the Department of Agriculture, Department of Defense, Forest Service, National Park Service (NPS), Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the Bureau of Reclamation. Many isolated parcels of State Trust land (administered by the New Mexico State Land Office) and isolated parcels of private land are interspersed with public land throughout the *Planning Area*. Table 1-1 and Map 1-2 show the surface ownership of acreage in the *TriCounty Planning Area* that is managed by Federal agencies, American Indian tribes, the State of New Mexico, or private owners.

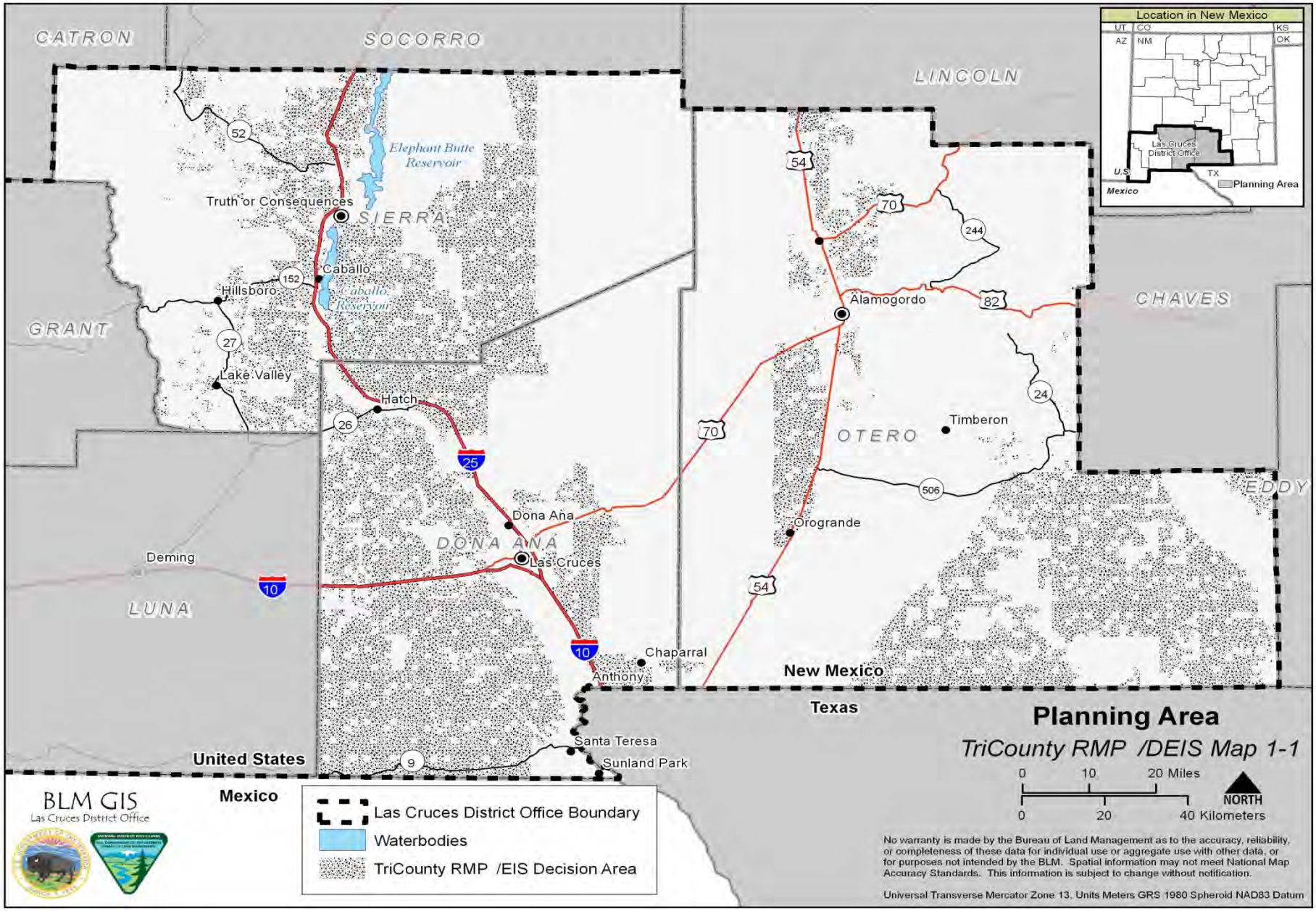

CATRON
SOCORRO
LINCOLN
SIERRA
GRANT
CHAVES
OTERO
EDDY
DONA ANA
LUNA
Elephant Butte Reservoir
Caballo Reservoir
Truth or Consequences
Caballo
Hillsboro
Lake Valley
Hatch
Dona Ana
Las Cruces
Deming
Chaparral
Anthony
Santa Teresa
Sunland Park
Alamogordo
Timberon
Orogrande
52
152
27
26
25
10
9
54
70
244
82
24
506
Location in New Mexico
UT
CO
KS
AZ
NM
OK
Las Cruces District Office
U.S.
Mexico
TX
Planning Area
United States
Mexico
New Mexico
Texas
BLM GIS
Las Cruces District Office
Las Cruces District Office Boundary
Waterbodies
TriCounty RMP /EIS Decision Area
Planning Area
TriCounty RMP /DEIS Map 1-1
0 10 20 Miles
0 20 40 Kilometers
NORTH
No warranty is made by the Bureau of Land Management as to the accuracy, reliability, or completeness of these data for individual use or aggregate use with other data, or for purposes not intended by the BLM. Spatial information may not meet National Map Accuracy Standards. This information is subject to change without notification.
Universal Transverse Mercator Zone 13, Units Meters GRS 1980 Spheroid NAD83 Datum

TABLE 1-1 SURFACE MANAGEMENT OR OWNERSHIP IN THE TRICOUNTY PLANNING AREA					
ACRES PER COUNTY					
SURFACE MANAGER	**SIERRA**	**OTERO**	**DOÑA ANA**	**TOTAL**	**PERCENT OF *PLANNING AREA***
FEDERAL					
Department of Agriculture	0	0	109,464	109,464	1.2
Department of Defense	516,996	711,793	490,881	1,719,670	18.5
Bureau of Land Management	773,222	1,537,837	1,116,247	3,427,306[1]	36.8
Bureau of Reclamation	125	0	837	962	0.0
Forest Service	378,440	555,827	0	934,267	10.0
Fish and Wildlife Service	0	0	56,775	56,775	0.6
National Park Service	0	91,876	52,548	144,424	1.5
AMERICAN INDIAN TRIBES	0	459,719	0	459,719	4.9
STATE OF NEW MEXICO	360,844	338,532	228,079	927,445	10.0
PRIVATE	681,173	469,919	387,139	1,538,231	16.5
Totals	**2,710,800**	**4,165,503**	**2,441,970**	**9,318,263**	**100**
NOTE: [1] Includes 606,157 acres in McGregor Range but which are not addressed in the *TriCounty* RMP. Total BLM surface ownership in the Decision Area is 2,821,149 acres.					

Table 1-2 shows the Federally-owned surface and mineral estate within the Decision Area and to which the decisions in this RMP apply. BLM managed surface estate is approximately 2.82 million acres and subsurface estate, including split estate lands, is approximately 3.98 million acres.

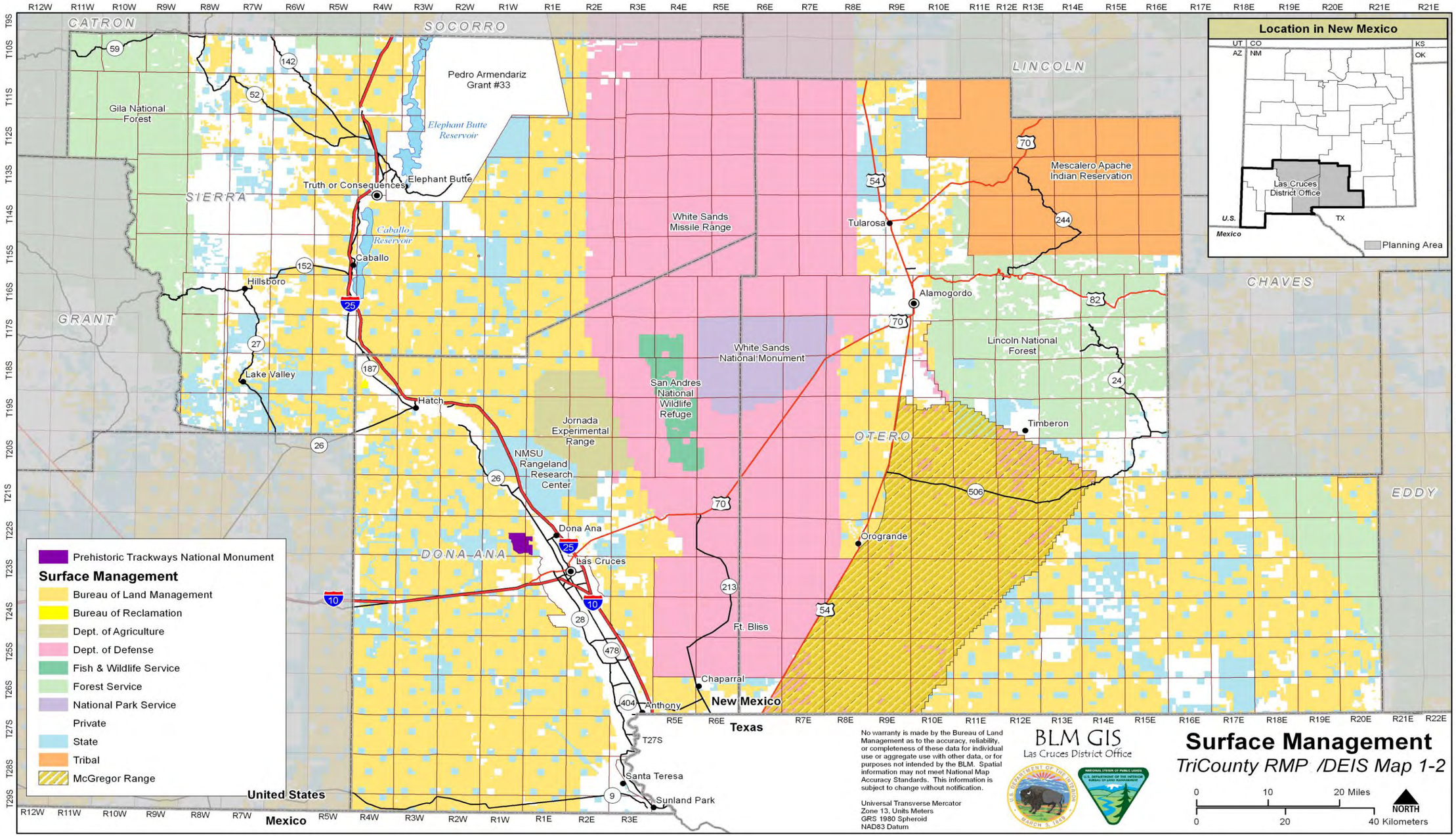
TABLE 1-2 FEDERAL MINERAL ESTATE BY SURFACE OWNER ADMINISTERED BY BLM WITHIN THE TRICOUNTY DECISION AREA[1]				
ACRES PER COUNTY				
SURFACE MANAGER	**SIERRA**	**OTERO**	**DOÑA ANA**	**TOTAL**
BLM Surface Ownership	773,222	931,680	1,116,247	2,821,149
BLM Surface, Federal Minerals	769,385	931,252	1,099,248	2,799,885
Non-BLM Surface, Federal Minerals	274,669	638,887	270,815	1,184,371
Federal Mineral Ownership	1,044,054	1,570,139	1,370,063	3,984,256
NOTE: [1.] Decision Area is the BLM-administered surface and subsurface estate within the three counties to which the decisions within this RMP apply. It does not include military land, McGregor Range, or other withdrawals.				

1.3 OVERALL VISION FOR THE RMP/EIS

Since the *TriCounty* RMP is intended to guide management over the next 15-20 years, a long-term view of resource goals and the overall vision for management of the public land underlies the planning process. Establishing an overall vision ensures that the resource-specific steps taken during implementation of the RMP contribute to the larger goals for management of the public land, and the management direction in the *Planning Area* is consistent and mutually supportive with public land management throughout the State and agency. The overall vision for the RMP is provided by the State Director priorities, and goals which are specifically identified for the RMP.

1.3.1 STATE DIRECTOR PRIORITIES

The New Mexico State Director has identified several priorities for the management of the public land in New Mexico to be accomplished in the long-term:


Location in New Mexico
UT
CO
KS
AZ
NM
OK
Las Cruces District Office
U.S.
Mexico
TX
Planning Area
CATRON
SOCORRO
LINCOLN
SIERRA
GRANT
CHAVES
OTERO
EDDY
DONA ANA
Pedro Armendariz Grant #33
Gila National Forest
Elephant Butte Reservoir
Elephant Butte
Truth or Consequences
Caballo Reservoir
Caballo
Hillsboro
Lake Valley
Hatch
White Sands Missile Range
White Sands National Monument
San Andres National Wildlife Refuge
Jornada Experimental Range
NMSU Rangeland Research Center
Tularosa
Alamogordo
Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation
Lincoln National Forest
Timberon
Orogrande
Dona Ana
Las Cruces
Ft. Bliss
Chaparral
Anthony
New Mexico
Texas
Santa Teresa
Sunland Park
United States
Mexico
Prehistoric Trackways National Monument
Surface Management
Bureau of Land Management
Bureau of Reclamation
Dept. of Agriculture
Dept. of Defense
Fish & Wildlife Service
Forest Service
National Park Service
Private
State
Tribal
McGregor Range
No warranty is made by the Bureau of Land Management as to the accuracy, reliability, or completeness of these data for individual use or aggregate use with other data, or for purposes not intended by the BLM. Spatial information may not meet National Map Accuracy Standards. This information is subject to change without notification.
Universal Transverse Mercator
Zone 13, Units Meters
GRS 1980 Spheroid
NAD83 Datum
BLM GIS
Las Cruces District Office
Surface Management
TriCounty RMP /DEIS Map 1-2
0 10 20 Miles
0 20 40 Kilometers
NORTH

- Restore watershed health
- Protect special landscapes
- Reclaim "*legacy*" lands (lands that have been damaged by historic use or extraction of resources)
- Help local communities meet future needs
- Enhance habitat for special status species
- Consolidate land ownership patterns
- Resolve mineral conflicts

1.3.2 RMP GOALS

Based on the State Director's priorities, and the issues identified in the *TriCounty Planning Area*, the goals for this RMP include the following:

- Manage for long-term sustainability and to meet the Standards for Public Land Health for Upland Sites, Biotic Communities, and Riparian Sites.

- Within the capability of the *Planning Area*'s natural and cultural resources, provide tourism, recreational, educational, and research opportunities;

- Provide for production of goods and services from the public land while protecting the natural and cultural resources of that land for future generations.

- Within the capability of the *Planning Area* resources, provide a predictable, sustained flow of economic benefits to individuals and local communities; and

- Work with local American Indian Tribes and local communities to meet their needs within the mission of the BLM.

1.4 ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED IN THE TRICOUNTY RMP/EIS

The BLM, cooperating agencies, other Federal and State agencies, and the general public raised a number of issues and concerns to be addressed in the RMP. The BLM land use planning process is driven by these issues and concerns to resolve resource management problems and take advantage of management opportunities. The following sections summarize the broad scope of issues and management concerns that determined the alternatives and the scope of analysis for the *TriCounty RMP/EIS.*

1.4.1 PLANNING ISSUES

A planning issue can be defined as an opportunity, conflict, or problem regarding the use or management of the public land and resources. The Preparation Plan for the *White Sands RMP Revision* and *Mimbres RMP Amendment,* prepared by the BLM in 2003, identified several preliminary issues and management concerns to be addressed in the *TriCounty RMP/EIS* (USDOI BLM 2003a). In addition, the BLM began conducting informal public information meetings in 2003 to help the BLM understand community interests related to public land, gather information to help frame a comprehensive set of issues regarding management of public land in the *Planning Area*, and identify opportunities to improve public land management. This was prior to official public scoping which started in January of 2005.

The issues identified through this process were grouped into four general categories. These categories are framed as questions here. Each issue contains a list of management decisions to be made, also framed as questions.

ISSUE 1

How can the conditions of the natural and cultural resources be managed or enhanced given the public's desire to use public land in a variety of ways, including recreation and commercial uses?

Questions to be considered in addressing Issue 1:

- *What decisions and measures would assure that known and unknown cultural, archaeological, and paleontological resources are preserved and protected?*

- *Which areas provide opportunities for recreation close to communities, and which areas provide opportunities for more remote, unstructured recreational experiences, and how should these areas be managed?*

- *What lands in the Decision Area should be identified for disposal, retention, and acquisition to improve development and manageability of BLM's land ownership pattern to effectively manage its resource programs?*

- *How should lands that are found to have wilderness characteristics (naturalness, solitude, and opportunities for primitive recreation), be managed?*

- *How should mineral resources be managed to minimize conflicts in areas of intense recreational use?*

- *How should vegetation be managed to provide forage for livestock and wildlife while protecting and sustaining watersheds in areas that are increasingly urbanized or under pressure for mineral and energy development?*

- *What decisions would help identify strategies and measures for improving and coordinating the control of noxious weeds?*

ISSUE 2

How can public land be used to promote the social and economic well-being of the population in general and the interest of specific subgroups of the populations, given the need to protect cultural and natural resources?

Questions to be considered in addressing Issue 2:

- *Which areas should be designated open, closed, or limited to OHV use?*

- *Which specific vehicle routes or "ways" in ACECs, special recreation management areas (SRMAs) and WSAs should be available for motorized use and what kinds of limitations (i.e., season of use, type of vehicle) should be applied to those routes?*

- *Which areas should be designated as ACECs, SRMAs, or other designations, and how should they be managed?*

- *Should existing special designations be dropped from certain areas?*

- *How will visual resource management classifications be applied throughout the Decision Area as to protect scenic values and, at the same time, conform to other resource allocation decisions?*

- *Which areas should be protected for wilderness characteristics and how?*

ISSUE 3

What BLM support, facilities, and/or services are needed to accommodate growing demands on public land in the *Planning Area*?

Questions to be considered in addressing Issue 3:

- *How should BLM pursue and acquire legal and physical access to public land where it is needed to meet management objectives?*

- *How will travel management areas be determined in the Decision Area?*

- *Which areas should be designated as right-of-way corridors, and which areas should be designated for avoidance or exclusion of rights-of-way?*

- *What management decisions would be implemented to protect fish and wildlife species and habitat?*

ISSUE 4

How should BLM manage and provide for development of energy resources, both renewable and nonrenewable, on public land in the *Planning Area*?

- *How should BLM address the court's decision on previous analysis of oil and gas management in Sierra and Otero Counties?*

- *How should fluid minerals be managed while protecting natural and cultural resources?*

- *How should the Las Cruces District incorporate the best management practices and policy direction from the BLM's Renewable Energy Programmatic EISs; and which areas, if any, within the Decision Area should be identified as most suitable for the development of utility-scale wind and solar energy facilities?*

1.4.2 ISSUES CONSIDERED BUT NOT FURTHER ANALYZED

Although all issues were considered, not all issues raised during the public involvement process are analyzed in the RMP/EIS. Other issues are relevant to site-specific or implementation-level decisions, but are not relevant to this RMP/EIS process. Several such issues, which were considered but not analyzed further, are presented below, by issue category.

Issues Beyond BLM's Regulatory Authority: Some of the issues identified during scoping were outside BLM's regulatory authority. Some of the issues are more relevant to the oversight of other agencies, or simply unregulated by any agency. For example:

- *Regulation of hunting of nonnative species,*
- *Designating WSAs,*
- *Estimating the risk of flooding due to retention-pond failure on private property,*
- *Establishing grazing rates,*
- *Preservation and protection of cultural resource sites such as Fort Selden State Monument, Mount Cristo Rey, and the Lucero Wash petroglyphs.*

None of these fall under the scope of BLM's authority or responsibility.

Issues Related to Financial Impacts: An analysis of the financial costs associated with several management actions was requested as part of the RMP/EIS process. Issues included socioeconomic impacts and quantitative costs related to fisheries, loss of productivity of irrigated crops, and the spread of noxious weeds as a result of oil and gas development. Other issues were raised about the long-term economic cost of water pollution and lack of water recharge and about the cost of funding road maintenance and personnel (based on OHV use) that would occur under some of the alternatives. However, the economic impacts of these issues are impossible to quantify for the broad planning decisions made in the RMP, largely because the impacts would occur on a site-specific basis as a result of future activities that could be subject to additional NEPA compliance. However, the socioeconomic environment and potential impacts were considered to be within the purpose and scope of this document.

Issues Addressed In Previously Adopted RMPs: One commenter suggested that the RMP/EIS support development of the Camino Real Trail; however, *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail Comprehensive Management Plan and RMP Amendment* which BLM and National Park Service (NPS) share responsibilities for administering provides trail-related decisions that the Las Cruces District Office will carry forward in the *TriCounty* RMP (USDOI BLM 2004).

Issues Associated with Infrastructure Availability: With development occurring east of Las Cruces, the availability of water and natural gas to accommodate future demands and the costs of additional sewage treatment facilities, roads, bridges, electrical infrastructure, schools, and parks emerged as issues of concern during scoping. The BLM is not obligated to propose or develop community infrastructure; however, as part of the RMP/EIS process, BLM is coordinating with local jurisdictions to identify land that could be available for disposal to accommodate facilities such as schools and parks.

1.5 PLANNING CRITERIA

BLM planning regulations (43 CFR 1610) require the preparation of planning criteria preliminary to the development of all plans. Planning criteria provide direction for the RMP process and are established early, in conjunction with cooperating agencies. Planning criteria establish the principles that will guide the development of the Plan and influence all aspects of the planning process, including collection of resource and resource use inventory data, development of alternatives, analysis of impacts, and ultimately the selection of a preferred alternative. In effect, planning criteria assure that the planning process remains focused on the identified issues and prevent unnecessary data collection and analysis.

Planning criteria are developed on the basis of applicable laws, agency guidance, public involvement, data analysis, and professional judgment and in coordination with other Federal, State, and local governments.

The following general planning criteria have guided the preparation of the RMP and will continue to guide land use decisions made in the future:

- Comply with all laws, regulations, policies and orders regarding management of public land and resources as listed in Appendix A.

- Apply the principles of multiple-use and sustained yield as set forth in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act and other applicable laws.

- Use a systematic, interdisciplinary approach to achieve integrated consideration of physical, biological, economic, social, and environmental aspects of public land management.

- Give priority to the identification, designation, protection, and special management of ACECs.

- Consider the relative significance of the public land products, services, and uses to local economies.

- Rely on available inventories of the public land, its resources, and other values with updating the inventory to the extent necessary to reach sound management decisions.

- Consider present and potential uses of the public land including short-term and long-term management of oil and gas leasing.

- Consider incomplete and unavailable information related to fluid mineral potential and impacts when considering future planning decisions.

- Consider the relative scarcity of the values involved and the availability of alternative means (including recycling) and sites for realization of those values.

- Weigh long-term benefits and detriments against short-term benefits and detriments.

- Comply fully with applicable pollution control laws, regulations, and policies, including State and Federal air, water, noise, or other pollution standards or implementation plans.

- Coordinate (BLM) resource inventory, planning, and management activities with the resource planning and management programs of other Federal departments and agencies, State and local governments, and American Indian Tribes to the extent consistent with the laws governing the administration of the public land.

- Provide for public involvement including early notice and frequent opportunity for citizens and interested groups and others including American Indian Tribes to participate in and comment on the preparation of plans and related guidance.

- Comply fully with all Federal laws that guide management of specific resources such as the Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, National Historic Preservation Act, Taylor Grazing Act, and others.

- Comply fully with the BLM National policy on special status species.

- Reflect Federal land management agency obligations under applicable Tribal treaties and laws or executive orders relating to American Indian reserved rights, religious freedoms, traditional use areas, etc.

- Consider the importance of military missions.

- Comply with Executive Order 13443 – Facilitation of Hunting Heritage and Wildlife Conservation.

- Comply with the District Court and the Tenth Circuit Court decisions regarding fluid mineral leasing and management decisions for Sierra and Otero Counties.

- The planning team will work cooperatively with county and municipal governments; Federal, State, and local agencies; and interested groups and individuals. A process of collaborative public involvement and participation will continue throughout this process.

- The revision and the amendment will protect and enhance the biodiversity in the *Planning Area* while allowing the public the opportunity for access to public land in a productive and meaningful way.

- The revision and the amendment will recognize valid existing rights related to the use of the public land.

- The process will involve American Indian tribal governments and will provide strategies for protection of cultural resources on public land.

- Every effort will be made to ensure that decisions are compatible with existing plans and policies of adjacent local, State, and Federal governments and agencies while recognizing that decisions must be made in conformance with relevant laws, regulations, and BLM management policies.

1.6 LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

1.6.1 FEDERAL LAND POLICY AND MANAGEMENT ACT OF 1976

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) constitutes the so-called "*organic act*" for the BLM and governs most uses of the Federal public land, including grazing. The Act requires the Bureau to execute its management powers under a land use planning process that is based on multiple-use and sustained yield principles. Even though the Act declares that it is public policy to retain the public land in Federal ownership, the Act also provides for public land sales, withdrawals, acquisitions and exchanges.

1.6.2 NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT OF 1969

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requires that the Federal Government cannot undertake any "*major Federal action*" unless and until the environmental consequences of that action have been thoroughly assessed. The Act requires that the Federal Government adhere to a standard procedure for determining the environmental impact of decisions or projects, and encourages decision-makers in Federal agencies to consider the environmental impact of every major project with Federal involvement. NEPA also requires Federal agencies to involve interested groups and the public in its decision-making process (Title 42 United States Code Part 4331). An EIS is being prepared as part of this land use planning process to identify the potential effects that implementation of the RMP Amendment and the RMP Revision could have on the environment and provides measures to minimize or mitigate those effects at a broad scale, if appropriate.

1.6.3 THE OMNIBUS PUBLIC LANDS MANAGEMENT ACT OF 2009

The Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009 designated the Prehistoric Trackways National Monument at the south end of the Robledo Mountains. The Act required that a stand-alone management plan be prepared for the area. Consequently, that area is not further considered in the RMP and is not part of the *Decision Area*.

1.6.4 OTHER LEGISLATION

Numerous Federal laws, Executive Orders, and the regulations and policies based on those laws and orders guide development of BLM RMPs. Key laws applicable to this planning effort and the development of the planning criteria are listed in Appendix A.

1.6.5 COURT DECISIONS

On April 29, 2009, in *New Mexico v. BLM*, 565 F.3d 683 (10th Cir. 2009), the Tenth Circuit invalidated the BLM's Record of Decision adopting a Resource Management Plan Amendment concerning "*Federal Fuels Mineral Leasing in Sierra and Otero Counties*" (RMPA). The Tenth Circuit also affirmed the district court's determination in *New Mexico ex rel. Richardson v. BLM*, 459 F. Supp. 2d 1102 (D.N.M. 2006), that the RMP Amendment complied with FLPMA, affirmed the District Court's finding that NEPA requires BLM to conduct further site-specific analysis before leasing, and reversed the District Court's conclusion that BLM complied with NEPA in the RMP Amendment analysis. On December 7, 2009, the District Court set aside the invalid RMP Amendment and ordered the BLM not to *"execute the 2005 Bennett Ranch Unit lease without first conducting an appropriate environmental analysis pursuant to NEPA."*

1.7 PLANNING PROCESS FOR *TRICOUNTY* RMP/EIS

The RMP preparation process employs several steps according to the BLM Land Use Planning Handbook, H-1601 (USDOI BLM 2005d). The public is encouraged to participate throughout the planning process, and the BLM is mandated to support and allow for public participation and review. This process also requires the expertise of an interdisciplinary team of resource specialists to complete each step.

STEP 1 – PREPARATION PLAN

Potential issues were identified through internal discussions among the BLM staff at the District Office, State Office, and Washington Office levels prior to the beginning of the project. Local BLM staff also met with local governmental agencies and organizations and various user and interest groups. The official start of scoping and the RMP/EIS process began with the publication in the *Federal Register* of the Notice of Intent to update the RMP, prepare an EIS, and conduct public scoping meetings. The Notice of Intent was published on January 28, 2005. After the discussions, meetings with agencies and organizations, public scoping meetings, and review of public comments, the issues described in Section 1.4.1 were identified to be carried forward for analysis in the *TriCounty Draft RMP/EIS*.

Planning criteria were established to provide focus for data collection efforts, achieve compliance with legal mandates, and facilitate decision making. The planning criteria used to guide the development of the RMP/EIS are detailed in Section 1.5.

STEP 2 – SCOPING

Scoping is the process by which the BLM solicits both internal and external input to identify relevant issues and concerns that need to be addressed within the scope of the RMP. These issues and concerns are analyzed in detail in the EIS as required by the NEPA. During scoping, the Las Cruces District Office engaged the public, local and State governments, Native American Tribes, and other Federal agencies to identify these issues and concerns. The scope of the analysis was then narrowed to those issues and concerns. The BLM held four public meetings in Las Cruces, Alamogordo, Truth or Consequences and Anthony, New Mexico. A scoping report was made available to the public on the BLM website in June 2005.

STEP 3 – ANALYZE MANAGEMENT SITUATION

The *TriCounty Analysis of the Management Situation* is an assessment of the current situation as it relates to natural and cultural resource management and resource use on public land in the *TriCounty* area. That document does not compile all available data, but it does provide information appropriate to address the planning issues identified during scoping. The *TriCounty Analysis of the Management Situation* provides a profile of the resource concerns on the public land in Sierra, Otero, and Doña Ana counties; a description of the existing management situation as it pertains to management of the resources; and an analysis of opportunities to modify the existing management situation. The *TriCounty Analysis of the Management Situation* and accompanying resource maps are on file at the BLM Las Cruces District Office.

STEP 4 – FORMULATE ALTERNATIVES

Four alternatives—A, B, C, and D—are examined in these *TriCounty RMP/EIS*. These alternatives were developed to respond to issues identified through scoping and management concerns. They explore alternatives to the existing management situation, and comply with the FLPMA requirement of managing for multiple-use and sustained yield on public land.

STEP 5 - ESTIMATE EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVES

The predicted effects resulting from each of the alternatives were identified and evaluated. Mitigation measures also were considered in evaluating impacts. A description of the existing environment in the *Planning Area* is included in Chapter 3, and potential environmental consequences are discussed in Chapter 4.

STEP 6 – IDENTIFY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

Based on the information generated in Step 6, the BLM Las Cruces District Manager identified and recommended Alternative C to the BLM State Director as the preferred alternative.

STEP 7 – PREPARE THE DRAFT RMP/EIS

A Draft RMP/EIS describing the purpose and need for the plan, the affected environment, the alternatives for managing public land, the environmental impacts of those alternatives, and the consultation and coordination in which the Las Cruces District Office engaged in developing the plan was distributed to the public initiating a 90-day review and comment period.

STEP 8 – PREPARE A PROPOSED RMP AND FINAL EIS

Based on the results of public review and comments on the *TriCounty Draft RMP/EIS,* the BLM Las Cruces District Manager will recommend, and the BLM State Director will select, an alternative or a combination of the alternatives for the Proposed RMP and will publish that Proposed RMP and the Final EIS analyzing the impacts of the proposed plan.

STEP 9 – PROVIDE A PROTEST PERIOD AND RESOLVE PROTESTS

A 30-day protest period will be provided during which individuals who participated in the planning process may protest any or all land use planning decisions contained in the Proposed RMP. The BLM Director must resolve all protests prior to issuing a Record of Decision (ROD) for the RMP. Implementation decisions contained in the RMP cannot be protested but can be appealed at the time of their implementation. These decisions and the appeal process will be identified in the proposed RMP.

STEP 10 – GOVERNOR'S CONSISTENCY REVIEW

Concurrent with the 30-day protest period the BLM must provide a 60-day review period to the Governor of New Mexico to ensure consistency with State and local plans, policies and programs. Any responses from the Governor on consistency must also be resolved before the BLM issues a ROD.

STEP 11– PREPARE AND PUBLISH A ROD AND APPROVED RMP

The approved RMP is typically the proposed RMP as modified in response to protests, the Governor's consistency review, or other considerations. The plan is officially approved when the State Director signs the ROD adopting the RMP. The BLM will then publish the ROD and approved RMP in a single document, making it available to all interested parties.

STEP 12 – IMPLEMENT, MONITOR, AND EVALUATE PLAN DECISIONS

Over time, the BLM will implement, monitor, and evaluate actions, resource conditions, and trends to determine if implementation of the RMP is occurring as planned, if management goals and objectives are being met, and whether there are unanticipated results from implementation. Monitoring and evaluation are essential components of an adaptive management approach, which will enable BLM to detect issues early enough to adjust implementation strategies as necessary to assure that goals and objectives are achieved. The RMP will be kept current through minor maintenance, amendments, or revisions as demands on resources change or new information is acquired.

1.8 RELATIONSHIP TO BLM POLICIES, PLANS, AND PROGRAMS

The *TriCounty RMP/EIS* will replace the *White Sands RMP* and supersede the *Mimbres RMP* for Doña Ana County. In some cases, decisions from existing plans are brought forward to this RMP unchanged. For example, the ACEC designations that were made through the *RMP Amendment for Areas of Critical Environmental Concern in Otero County* (USDOI BLM 1997a*)* are incorporated into this RMP revision for Sierra and Otero Counties.

The BLM will continue to manage public land and mineral estate in accordance with the current, unrevised RMPs until the *TriCounty RMP/EIS* is completed and a ROD is signed.

1.8.1 RMP AMENDMENT FOR FLUID MINERALS LEASING AND DEVELOPMENT

In 2005, the BLM completed the RMP Amendment for fluid mineral leasing and development in Sierra and Otero Counties. The BLM intended to carry the management decisions in that plan amendment into the *TriCounty* RMP for the two counties and, where appropriate, apply those decisions to Doña Ana County. However, the District Court decision setting aside the RMP Amendment nullified the decisions in the plan. Consequently, management of oil and gas leasing reverts back to the decisions made in the *White Sands* and *Mimbres RMPs*. The BLM has previously determined that these planning decisions are insufficient for management of this resource and that there is a need to develop a management strategy for oil and gas leasing in the *TriCounty Planning Area* prior to any further leasing. To allow additional time for the BLM to gather and analyze the further information needed for the comprehensive analysis of fluid minerals leasing as identified by the courts in *New Mexico v. BLM*, 565 F.3d 683 (10th Cir. 2009) and *New Mexico ex rel. Richardson v. BLM*, 459 F. Supp. 2d 1102 (D.N.M. 2006), and in the interest of pursuing other decisions for all the many, crucial, non-fluid mineral resources in the *Planning Area*, the BLM will defer all oil and gas leasing in the *Planning Area* until the BLM prepares a new programmatic environmental analysis of oil and gas leasing upon completion of this RMP which in turn will operate to amend this RMP with respect to oil and gas development.

The primary area of concern regarding oil and gas leasing is the Otero Mesa in southern Otero County. Consistent with the courts' opinions in *New Mexico*, 459 F. Supp. 2d 1102 and *New Mexico*, 565 F.3d 683, the BLM needs to gather and evaluate additional information for this area, including impacts to vegetation, wildlife habitat and special status species and groundwater in the Salt Basin Aquifer including extent, amount, depth of the aquifer and potential effects from drilling and wastewater disposal. Air quality impacts also would have to be assessed and possibly modeled according to the interagency Air Quality Memorandum of Understanding (BLM MOU WO-200-2011-04).

Consequently, the Las Cruces District, has determined that in order not to delay the resource decisions analyzed in the *TriCounty* RMP any further, analysis of oil and gas leasing and development will take place in an RMP Amendment accompanied by suitable programmatic NEPA analysis for the program once the *TriCounty* RMP is completed. Until the programmatic NEPA analysis and the RMP Amendment are completed, oil and gas leasing in the *TriCounty Planning Area* will be deferred. The impacts of this deferral are analyzed accordingly for the *TriCounty* RMP.

1.8.2 STANDARDS FOR PUBLIC LAND HEALTH AND GUIDELINES FOR LIVESTOCK GRAZING MANAGEMENT

The alternatives analyzed in the RMP and EIS include management direction intended to complement or support, rather than replace, "*Standards for Public Land Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management*" (BLM 2001). These standards and guidelines were developed by the New Mexico State Director in consultation with the New Mexico Resource Advisory Committee (RAC). They were approved by the Secretary of the Interior in January 2001.

The fundamentals of rangeland health stated in 43 CFR 4180 include four elements: watershed, ecological processes, water quality, and plant animal habitats. The objectives for the public land health standards are to promote healthy, sustainable ecosystems; to accelerate restoration and improvements of public land to properly functioning conditions; and to provide for the sustainability of industry and communities that depend upon productive, healthy public land. The alternatives analyzed in the Draft RMP/EIS incorporate the principle that cumulative effects of all management activities, including Federally-authorized activities, determine whether the standards for land health would be achieved. Consequently, the effects of livestock grazing are not the only concern.

The New Mexico "*Standards for Public Land Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management*" are explained in detail in Appendix B (USDOI BLM 2000a)

1.8.3 WIND, SOLAR, AND GEOTHERMAL PROGRAMMATIC EISs

The BLM, in conjunction with other agencies including the Department of Energy (DOE), has prepared a number of BLM-wide programmatic EISs dealing with renewable and alternative energy development. In all cases, the *TriCounty* RMP/EIS incorporates by reference these documents and specific material from these documents has been quoted or summarized in various sections as may be appropriate and necessary to clarify discussion, description, and analysis. These documents include the following:

*Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for the Designation of Energy Corridors in Eleven Western States (*2009). The PEIS identified energy corridors throughout BLM to facilitate future siting of oil, gas, and hydrogen pipelines, as well as renewable energy development projects and electricity transmission and distribution facilities on Federal lands in the West to meet the region's increasing energy demands while mitigating potential harmful effects to the environment. Three corridors identified in the PEIS fall within the *TriCounty* Decision Area and are analyzed in this RMP/EIS.

Final Programmatic EIS on Wind Energy Development on BLM-Administered Lands in the Western United States (USDOI BLM 2005e). From this PEIS, BLM produced its wind energy development policy and best management practices. This also established consistency in processing right-of-way applications and management authorizations for wind energy site testing and development on public land. Any right-of-way applications for wind energy projects within the Decision Area would follow these procedures.

Resource Management Plan Amendments for Geothermal Leasing in the Western United States (2008). This document allocated BLM land as open to be considered for geothermal leasing or closed to leasing; and adopted stipulations, best management practices, and procedures for geothermal leasing and development. The EIS identified approximately 5 million acres open within the Las Cruces District.

Because geothermal leasing information for the *Planning Area* was compiled and addressed in the Resource Management Plan Amendments for Geothermal Leasing and policy and best management practices were developed in that document, the Las Cruces District believes that, in contrast to oil and gas fluid minerals, there is information and guidance sufficient to serve as grounds to analyze geothermal leasing decisions in the *TriCounty* RMP.

Solar Energy Development in Six Southwestern States Programmatic EIS (US DOI BLM 2012). The PEIS evaluates the agency's proposed actions to establish a new BLM Solar Energy Program applicable to utility-scale solar energy development on BLM-administered land in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah. This includes establishing policy direction and best management practices as well as identifying areas as available for consideration of siting utility-scale solar energy projects including the *TriCounty Decision Area*.

El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail Comprehensive Management Plan (USDOI NPS and BLM 2004). This plan, written in cooperation with the National Park Service, responds to the Trail's congressional designation and the requirements of the National Trails System Act. It identifies strategies to meet the following goals: a high-quality visitor experience, coordinated interpretation and education, effective administration, and active resource protection.

1.8.4 OTHER BLM LAND USE PLANS

The 2006 *McGregor Range RMP Amendment* decisions will continue to be implemented and are not revised as part of the *TriCounty RMP*.

An RMP is being prepared for the Prehistoric Trackways National Monument (PTNM). That plan will be consistent with the *TriCounty* RMP but is a stand-alone plan that is outside the *TriCounty Decision Area.* Management of the Monument will be governed entirely by the PTNM RMP when it is completed.

The BLM *Las Cruces District Office Fire Management Plan* (USDOI BLM 2004a) and the 2004 *Statewide Resource Management Plan Amendment for Fire and Fuels* are used to coordinate the fire management program of the BLM Las Cruces District Office in the Gila-Las Cruces and the Lincoln fire management zones (USDOI BLM 2004b). The Joint Powers Master Agreement outline agreements and commitments among Federal agencies and the State of New Mexico for wildland fire protection, joint fire management, and large-fire support (USDOI BLM 2003b). The agencies jointly conduct mutual interest projects, within their authority, to maintain or improve fire management capability. While not all areas within the authority of the BLM Las Cruces District Office are entirely in the *Planning Area*, fire management resources from all areas may be used in the *TriCounty Planning Area*. Effective fire management will require close coordination among local and regional jurisdictions. The 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy provides guiding principles for Federal agencies that are fundamental to the success of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Program.

1.9 COLLABORATION AND CONSULTATION

Council on Environmental Quality regulations, which are contained in 40 CFR 1501.6 and 1508.5, implement the NEPA mandate that Federal agencies responsible for preparing NEPA analysis and documentation do so "*in cooperation with State and local governments*" and other agencies with jurisdiction by law or special expertise, as stated in Title 42 United States Code Parts 4331(a) and 4332(2). Cooperating agency status allows interested agencies to assume responsibilities beyond attending public meetings and to both review and comment on plan documents.

The BLM solicited several local, state and Federal Agencies to participate as Cooperating Agencies in the preparation of the *TriCounty* RMP/EIS. Initially, six agencies responded and became cooperators: City of Las Cruces, Doña Ana County, Otero County, Sierra County, New Mexico Department of Agriculture, and New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. In 2009, the U.S. Army White Sands Missile Range and U.S. Army Ft. Bliss requested cooperator status and it was granted.

In formulating the RMP, the BLM has worked collaboratively with local communities, the public, interested groups, and all levels of government to assure that the resulting plans have considered future needs.

A 60-day public scoping period was initiated in January 2005 with the publication of a Notice of Intent to prepare an RMP/EIS. BLM held four public meetings in Las Cruces, Alamogordo, Truth or Consequences and Anthony, New Mexico. The BLM also received 323 written comments during public scoping. Concerns or interests most addressed at the meetings and in the comments included management of biological resources, motor vehicle use, trails and access, special designations, and land disposal and retention.

Three public workshops were held in December 2006 to receive public input on the draft alternatives BLM had developed to that point. A total of 329 people attended those workshops.

Four newsletters were sent to the RMP mailing list during preparation of the document. The fourth newsletter asked for comments regarding changes to the RMP in fluid minerals management, renewable energy development, and livestock grazing management. Over 2,500 responses were received, 99 percent of which were form letter emails.

During the development of the *TriCounty* RMP/EIS, the BLM consulted with adjacent communities, military and other government agencies to determine to what extent these entities wanted to see land available for disposal to achieve their objectives for community expansion or other needs. The parcels identified for disposal under the various alternatives have been determined to meet the FLPMA criteria for disposal in terms of BLM needs and BLM management objectives; and to meet future growth needs of communities within the *Planning Area*. The BLM has made no determination as to whether the disposal parcels would be suitable for management and use by other Federal agencies. The BLM is not in a position to make that determination and other such uses are not addressed in this document.

Consultation has been initiated with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and a Biological Assessment will be completed prior to BLM issuing the Proposed RMP/Final EIS. The State Historic Preservation Office also has been consulted regarding this RMP/EIS effort. The BLM also contacted local tribes and government officials to inform them of the planning effort, request the identification of traditional cultural places and resources that should be considered, and invite them to participate in the preparation of the RMP/EIS.

In recent years, illegal activities along the US and Mexico border has increased dramatically involving the smuggling of illegal drugs, contraband, and persons, as wells as illegal border crossing by individuals. This increased activity is evident along the southern boundary of Doña Ana County. Consequently, US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Office of Border Patrol (CBP-BP) activities have increased as well. In 2008, anti-personnel and anti-vehicle barriers were installed on the Mexico/New Mexico border in Doña Ana County. In March 2006, the Departments of the Interior, Agriculture and Homeland Security and all of their respective constituent Bureaus entered into a Nationwide Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to provide consistent goals, principles, and guidance related to border security, such as law enforcement operations; tactical infrastructure installation; utilization of roads; minimization or prevention of significant impacts on or impairment of natural and cultural resources; implementation of the Wilderness Act, Endangered Species Act, and other related environmental law, regulation, and policy across land management agencies; and provide for coordination and sharing information on threat assessments and other risks, plans for infrastructure and technology improvements on Federal lands, and operational and law enforcement staffing changes. In meeting the purpose and scope of the 2006 MOU, BLM and CBP-BP meet regularly to discuss, plan and coordinate the two agencies' activities along the border. Parties to the MOU strive to resolve conflicts and delegate resolution authority to the lowest field operational level as possible.