

## 4.0 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

### 4.17 Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative effects are those effects in a particular area which result from the incremental effects of a proposal added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions regardless of which agency or person undertakes them (40 CFR 1508.7). The analysis and disclosure of cumulative effects are important because they alert decision makers and the public to the context within which effects are occurring, and to the environmental implications of the interaction of proposed actions with other known and likely actions within the planning area and the region. The scope of this cumulative impact analysis addresses the entire *California Desert Conservation Area Plan* (1980, as amended), encompassing portions of Kern, Inyo, San Bernardino, Riverside and Imperial Counties.

#### 4.17.1 Activities Prior to 1970

For many decades the California Desert served as a place to pass through, via highways, railroad, and utilities to and from the coastal urban cities, and episodes of mining and grazing occurred in several localities, often at intense use scales. Scattered towns, facilities, and access infrastructure were established to support the trans-desert uses and mining. Most minerals operations were boom-bust phenomena over 100 years duration. Sheep and cattle grazing occurred across the desert, mostly in northern areas and higher elevations.

In the 1930s, Death Valley and Joshua Tree National Monuments (now parks) were designated. In the 1940s, the value of desert lands for military training, testing, and staging was realized for the World War II/Cold War efforts and several large military reservations were created. By this time monuments and military lands totaled about six million acres, about 25% of the CDCA. Until the 1950s relatively little of the desert had been visited with any intensity by humans for economic or social purposes, except perhaps for cattle and sheep grazing. Only a small amount of the desert had been temporarily or permanently disturbed.

During the 1960s the southern California population boom continued and along with that, a boom in affordable vehicles and motorcycles. The western desert became a very popular place to escape the urban routine, driving desert roads and cross country, camping, hunting, and sightseeing and motorized vehicle racing. Along with the social benefits provided by these land uses came increases in access routes, surface disturbances, and impacts to natural and cultural values. But with visitation also came an increased public awareness and concern for the desert environment.

#### 4.17.2 Activities from 1970 to 2002.

Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. The boom of activity in the desert, and the concurrent increase in public awareness and concern for environmental issues, helped spur Congress to pass in 1976 the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). FLPMA serves as the Bureau's organic act, establishing the Bureau's multiple use and sustained yield mandate, and giving BLM the authority to authorize uses and to manage casual uses of the public lands. The Bureau's multiple-use /sustained yield mandate provides opportunities for economic and social uses as well as protection and conservation of natural and cultural resources. Inherent with the multiple-use/sustained yield is the mandate to resolve conflicts in values and uses in any given place. These issues are sorted out through land use planning, relying on the best available science and public participation to achieve to arrive at informed and balanced decisions. FLPMA established the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA), and directed BLM to inventory lands possessing wilderness characteristics and to develop a land use plan for the CDCA.

In response to these emerging conflicts, the *California Desert Conservation Area Plan* (1980, as amended) established a desert-wide land management program which included multiple-use classification guidelines and decisions for managing a variety of activities in the California Desert. Among the most significant was the decision that unrestricted motorized vehicle access on public lands was no longer allowed throughout most of the California desert. Instead vehicles were restricted, at a minimum, to existing routes of travel, except in designated open areas. Along with these access restrictions came limitations on where one could park and stop their vehicle, as well as where one could camp.

The Endangered Species Act. In 1973, Congress enacted the Endangered Species Act in an effort to stem the tide of native flora and fauna extinctions. Throughout the 1990s, approximately 20 species of plants, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals were listed or proposed for listing under federal and state endangered species acts. Habitats for many of these listed, or proposed for listing, species are localized. A few, such as the desert tortoise, Mojave ground squirrel and Peninsular bighorn sheep, cover millions of acres of habitat. For many of the listed species such as the desert tortoise and Peninsular Ranges bighorn sheep, the USFWS has designated "critical habitat." The need for listing is often the result of various factors, including:

- Cumulative habitat losses from various land uses such as urban/industrial development, military exercises, or uses of public and private lands;
- Decline in habitat quality from human activities such as water diversions, casual use and wildland fire suppression;
- Disease;
- Changes in predator/prey relationships and changes to natural habitat as a result of invasions by non-native species;
- Natural rarity combined with the above.

The listing of various species has resulted in several restrictions on the public lands. Most effects relate to the listing of the desert tortoise as a threatened species in 1990

and the designation of critical habitat in 1994. Due to the desert tortoise listing, opportunities for off-highway vehicle racing have become increasingly constrained. Permits for such events as the Barstow-to-Vegas motorcycle race and the Parker 400 event have not been issued in California for more than 10 years. Following are additional prominent effects from the listing of the desert tortoise: (1) acquisitions of private lands in critical habitat and discouragement of federal disposals in critical habitat, (2) no competitive vehicle events in critical habitat, and (3) a programmatic consultation for cattle and sheep grazing that is still current in which there is no sheep grazing in critical habitat (which reduced sheep grazing in CDCA by 56%). Many proposed uses have been re-proposed outside critical habitat. Casual use recreation activities, including use of existing routes and washes, have not been affected except in some special management areas.

California Desert Protection Act. FLPMA mandated wilderness inventories be conducted and a recommendation report submitted to Congress by 1990. Until Congress acted on wilderness recommendations wilderness study areas (WSA) were to be managed so as not to compromise wilderness quality and narrow the opportunity for Congressional designation. Between 1978 and 1994 nearly half of the public lands were in WSA status which highly restricted new disturbing uses. In 1994 Congress passed the California Desert Protection Act in which 3.5 of the 13 million acres that BLM managed were transferred to the national parks system (Death Valley National Park, Joshua Tree National Park, and the new Mojave National Preserve) and nearly 40% of the remaining 9.5 million acres were designated into 69 wilderness areas. As required by statute, casual use of motorized vehicles in wilderness is prohibited. Through passage of the California Desert Protection Act, access to 50% of the CDCA was limited, including military reservations, national park system, and BLM wilderness areas. Of the 50% that is not restricted, almost half is private lands to which public uses do not apply.

Recreational activities based on motorized-vehicle use have become increasingly limited in the California desert over the past quarter century. As a result of the California Desert Protection Act of 1994, hundreds of miles of motorized-vehicle access routes on public lands in the entire California Desert Conservation Area were included in new BLM wilderness areas and new national parks and effectively closed. Among the most notable closures were segments of the East Mojave Heritage Trail, identified for vehicle touring by Friends of the Mojave Road. This has created considerable changes in recreational activities, especially in desert mountains. The most challenging mountainous 4-wheel drive routes are now closed due to wilderness designation. Rock-hounding opportunities, a popular activity among retirees and seniors, have been effectively reduced by 50% throughout the CDCA. Twenty-five percent of rock-hounding sites are in national parks where rock collecting is not allowed; the other 25% are in wilderness, where collecting may be allowed but the sites are not accessible by motor vehicles.

While landowners have the right to reasonable access to their lands, the designation of wilderness has added considerable regulatory burden in order to achieve that access.

Approximately 600,000 acres of State and private land are affected. Many landowners have opted to dispose of their lands within wilderness to the appropriate managing federal agency. Both the Catellus Development Corporation (formerly the Southern Pacific Land Company) and State Lands Commission, the two largest landowners, have been engaged in such actions. These large and complex exchanges and purchases are changing the pattern of land ownership which had existed for more than a hundred years. Several millions of acres are involved. Effects of this change include loss of the opportunity to develop private lands and loss of tax base to counties. While land exchanges are encouraged, most acquisitions to date have involved fee purchase with loss of private land tax base in most desert counties, particularly San Bernardino County. Payments in lieu of taxes (PILT) to counties does not totally compensate for such monetary loss and San Bernardino County has reached the PILT maximum limit. However, the effects of this change are not all negative: State Lands Commission has acquired former federal properties elsewhere in the State which generate considerably greater economic values. Likewise, private landowners obtain cash or lands which have greater development and tax base potential. There may be a benefit to counties in so far as county services do not have to be so extended, but this benefit is unknown.

Opportunities for new rights-of-way, such as utilities and communication sites, are restricted in wilderness. However, corridors and sites for utilities have been established, especially in the more-populated areas. While grazing is a compatible use in wilderness, grazing activities on public lands have recently been limited primarily due to Endangered Species Act issues. Public lands transferred to the National Park Service are more restricted in terms of opportunities for new rights-of-way and grazing. Ten allotments formerly managed by BLM are now included in National Park Service lands. In the new or revised general management plans developed by NPS these allotments are deleted.

The number of Wild Horse and Burro Management Areas has been progressively dropping over the past twenty years as wild herds die out or public lands are transferred to the California Department of Parks of Recreation and the National Park Service.

#### **4.17.3 From 2002 into the Future**

Human migrations continue into the Southwest, spurring burgeoning urban populations and the supporting development that is occurring throughout southern California and southwestern Arizona. BLM managed public lands are becoming increasingly important to the public as a source of recreational opportunities, open space, community infrastructure support, and habitat for threatened and endangered species.

In seeking to implement its multiple use/sustained yield mandate for healthy public landscapes, the Bureau in cooperation with many agencies, jurisdictions and interests, has initiated a series of bio-regional planning efforts for the California desert. While the California Desert Conservation Area Plan (1980, as amended) has undergone numerous minor amendments over the past 20 years, these bio-regional planning efforts are designed as major amendments to the California Desert Conservation Area

Plan, and cover the following planning areas: (1) the Northern and Eastern Colorado Desert (NECO), (2) the Northern and Eastern Mojave Desert (NEMO), (3) the West Mojave Desert, (4) the Imperial Sand Dunes, (5) the Western Colorado Desert, and (6) the Coachella Valley. Military reservations are addressed in both the NECO and West Mojave Plans. The National Park Service has revised its general plans for Joshua Tree National Park, Death Valley National Park, and the Mojave National Preserve. Proposed Plans and Final Environmental Impact Statements for the Imperial Sand Dunes, NECO and NEMO Plans were released in 2002.

The CDCA Plan Amendment for the Coachella Valley would take deliberate steps for the management of threatened and endangered species, air quality and open spaces while also addressing other important quality-of-life issues such as recreation opportunities and necessary infrastructure support for communities within the planning area. The planned integration of these natural, social, economic and cultural needs is at a particularly significant crossroads in the history of the American West. As more and more private land is dedicated to support housing and urban development, decisions must be made concerning habitats to conserve in order to avoid more species listings under the Endangered Species Act. Decisions are also necessary concerning management of native habitats and open spaces to ensure they are delivering the natural, social, economic and cultural values intended.

The public and private land decisions, in a growing area like the Coachella Valley with complex land ownerships and jurisdictions, are inherently interdependent. The development of this plan amendment in coordination with those local jurisdictions and agencies, using common scientific information and linked planning processes, should help ensure well-considered public decisions designed to deliver the natural, social, economic and cultural values intended. Delivering coordinated decisions at the landscape level is consistent with addressing (1) community development and quality of life concerns, and (2) a long-term framework for species and habitat conservation. Further benefits would also accrue, including the scenic vistas provided by undeveloped landscapes and the environmental health provided by protecting air and water quality.

These land use planning processes address many of these issues while options and choices still remain. With the passage of time, resources are committed by individual public and private land use decisions. The cumulative effect of these decisions may limit options to deliver quality of life amenities or conservation outcomes. Establishing a coordinated framework to support local communities and provide for long-term conservation increases opportunities to deliver the intended public benefits. Stakeholder involvement and use of best available science would continue to be the keys to successful completion of these plans and their implementation.

Upon completion, approximately 50 percent of the Federal lands in the California Desert Conservation Area will be under conservation status (BLM, National Park lands and Military reservations) in order to provide for open space, the recovery of special status species and improvements in air quality. The percentages of conserved land in the Coachella Valley would be much higher (75 percent or greater). Uses and values which

will be most affected by conservation measures include off-highway vehicle use and access routes, livestock grazing, wild horse and burros, and a net reduction of tax base among some counties. However, the alternatives are deliberately designed to account for community infrastructure needs for transportation, sand and gravel sources, communication sites and energy production.