

4.0 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

This chapter addresses the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts on elements of the human environment from actions proposed in the CDCA Plan Amendment. This chapter is organized by environmental element, followed by a description and comparison of impacts from the relevant plan element alternatives.

Land use plans, such as the CDCA Plan Amendment, developed in accordance with Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations, provide landscape level decisions for managing the BLM-administered public lands. As a result, the impact analysis for land use plans level actions tends to be cumulative by nature.

4.5 Motorized-Vehicle Access

Adverse impacts to motorized-vehicle access would occur in proportion to the amount of route closure, the location of closed routes, and the current public accessibility and use of routes proposed to be closed. Route designations in the NECO Plan overlap area will be addressed in the Record of Decision for that plan. Modifications of these designations are not proposed through the Coachella Valley CDCA Plan Amendment; impacts resulting from NECO Plan route designations are not herein addressed.

Alternative A. Under this Alternative, current motorized-vehicle access would be minimally changed from the current situation. Seventy-three (73) miles of routes on BLM-managed lands would be designated “open” (100% of the currently available mileage, see No Action Alternative, or 51% of all routes on public lands, excluding the NECO Plan overlap area)(see Table D-4, Appendix D). Seventy (70) miles of routes would be unavailable for general public use via motorized vehicles, primarily due to prior plan decisions or other existing restrictions (see Tables D-2 and D-3, Appendix D). No new routes would be closed to general public access. Lack of legal or physical access across private land parcels would continue to affect the available route network in parts of the planning areas due to the intermingled land ownership patterns.

Vehicle access on 15 miles of routes that cross public lands in the Dunn Road area would continue to be controlled by locked gates, and limited to permitted and administrative uses. Access to this area would also be affected by lack of legal access across private land parcels. Limitation of vehicle use on public land portions of Dunn Road, Dry Wash Road, and the access route from Royal Carrizo, except for administrative uses, would control the number and activities of visitors until bighorn sheep populations recover. Administrative and permitted uses would allow vehicular access with little or no impact to flood control, law enforcement, search and rescue, fire control, and research activities. Closure to casual recreational access by vehicle would continue. Legal access to landowners and agencies provided through a right-of-way grant with terms and conditions based upon a biological opinion would likely continue at very low use levels (fewer than 20 trips per year). Temporary access across public lands to accommodate private landowners in accessing their properties may be authorized.

Permitted commercial jeep tours on the upper (southern) reaches of Dunn Road accessed through Pinyon Flats could occur during the fall months (given the current lack of landowner permission to access the northern portion of Dunn Road), subject to permission of private landowners, where applicable, and in conformance with terms and conditions of a biological opinion. Based on distribution of permitted use from 1995 to 1999, about 3,000 visitors annually might be accommodated, though due to the increased highway distance that must be traveled before tours could begin, this figure would likely be substantially lower. At least 7,000 visitors annually would continue to be displaced by limiting commercial vehicle tours to the fall months in conjunction with denial of landowner permission to cross private lands on the lower reaches of Dunn Road.

Proposed Plan (Alternative B). Under the Proposed Plan, the route network would be reduced to 47 miles of open routes on BLM-managed lands (64% of the currently available route network, excluding the NECO Plan overlap area, or 33% of all routes) in order to meet air quality and habitat conservation objectives. The closed routes (totaling 96 miles, or 67% of all public land routes) include 26 miles of new closures relative to the current situation (see Table D-4, Appendix D). No additional areas would be unavailable for general public access, but access within areas that have multiple routes would be reduced; short spur routes would be closed. Many of these short spur routes have been used for illegal dumping and to access shooting areas. The remaining 70 miles of routes were closed to general public use through previous decisions, or have not been open for general public access (e.g., Dunn Road and the gated route to Desert Water Agency facilities in Snow Creek)(see Tables D-2 and D-3, Appendix D).

Vehicle access on 15 miles of routes that cross public lands in the Dunn Road area would continue to be controlled by locked gates, and limited to permitted and administrative uses. Access to this area would also be affected by lack of legal access across private land parcels. Limitation of vehicle use on public land portions of Dunn Road, Dry Wash Road, and the access route from Royal Carrizo, except for administrative uses, would control the number and activities of visitors until bighorn sheep populations recover. Administrative and permitted uses would allow vehicular access with little or no impact to flood control, law enforcement, search and rescue, fire control, and research activities. Closure to casual recreational access by vehicle would continue. Legal access to landowners and agencies provided through a right-of-way grant with terms and conditions based upon a biological opinion would likely continue at very low use levels (fewer than 20 trips per year). Temporary access across public lands to accommodate private landowners in accessing their properties may be authorized.

Permitted commercial jeep tours on the upper reaches of Dunn Road could occur during the fall months with access provided through Pinyon Flats, subject to permission of private landowners, where applicable, and in conformance with terms and conditions of a biological opinion. Based on distribution of permitted use from 1995 to 1999, about 3,000 visitors annually might be accommodated, though due to the increased highway

distance that must be traveled before tours could begin, this figure would likely be substantially lower. At least 7,000 visitors annually would be displaced by limiting commercial vehicle tours to the fall months in conjunction with denial of landowner permission to cross private lands on the lower reaches of Dunn Road.

Re-evaluation of the designation of routes in the Dunn Road area at the time of sheep population recovery may allow for some increased public recreation access by vehicle. Permitted use would allow continued access with little or no impact for flood control, law enforcement, search and rescue, and fire control. Research and commercial recreational access would continue, but at reduced levels, dependent on permitting requirements (compliance with the terms of a biological opinion) and acquisition of access across private lands. Legal access to landowners and agencies provided through a right-of-way grant with terms and conditions based upon a biological opinion would likely continue at very low use levels.

Alternative C. This Alternative represents the greatest reduction of access with 27 miles of open routes (37% of the currently available mileage on BLM lands, excluding the NECO Plan overlap area, or 19% of all routes on these public lands) and 116 miles of closed routes (81% of the total mileage on BLM lands) in order to meet habitat conservation objectives and further minimize air quality non-attainment in the Coachella Valley. The closed route network includes 46 miles of new closures relative to the current situation (see Table D-4, Appendix D). No additional areas would be unavailable for general public access, but access within areas that have multiple routes would be reduced; short spur routes would be closed. The remaining 70 miles of routes were closed to general public use through previous decisions, or have not been open for general public access (e.g., Dunn Road and the gated route to Desert Water Agency facilities in Snow Creek)(see Tables D-2 and D-3, Appendix D).

Vehicle access on 15 miles of routes that cross public lands in the Dunn Road area would continue to be controlled by locked gates, and limited to permitted and administrative uses. Access to this area would also be affected by lack of legal access across private land parcels and lack of road maintenance. Over time, portions of Dunn Road would become impassable to four-wheeled vehicles due to erosion. Continued access for flood control, law enforcement, and fire control would be limited by road condition except in the case of an ongoing fire or emergency (in which case the road surface may be re-established). Research access by four-wheeled vehicles would eventually be discontinued as the road becomes impassable. Legal access to landowners and agencies provided through a right-of-way grant with terms and conditions based upon a biological opinion would be continued, but a through road is unlikely to persist. Commercial jeep tours would not be permitted. Based on permitted use from 1995 to 1999, about 10,000 visitors would be displaced on an annual basis, though denial of landowner permission to cross private lands on the lower reaches of Dunn Road currently displaces most of this use.

No Action Alternative (D). Under this Alternative, current motorized-vehicle access would not change. Seventy-three (73) miles of existing routes on BLM-managed lands would continue to be available for use (51% of the total mileage on BLM lands,

excluding the NECO Plan overlap area)(see Table D-4, Appendix D) and 70 miles would remain closed (49% of the total mileage)(see Tables D-2 and D-3, Appendix D). All closed routes, which include those in windfarm areas, at communications sites, and in certain special areas (e.g., Dos Palmas and Big Morongo Canyon ACECs, and Coachella Valley Preserve), coincide with routes that are currently unavailable for general public use via motorized vehicles. No new routes would be closed to general public access. Lack of legal or physical access across private land parcels would continue to affect the available route network in parts of the planning areas due to the intermingled land ownership patterns.

Impacts to uses of Dunn Road would be the same as under Alternative A, except that no limitations as to when commercial jeep tours may occur would be imposed through this Plan Amendment. Instead, applications for permits to use public land portions of Dunn Road would be addressed on a case-by-case basis. Commercial activities would be subject to permission of private landowners, where applicable, and must conform to terms and conditions of a biological opinion.