# **United States**

# **Department of the Interior**

# **Bureau of Land Management**

# **Ridgecrest Field Office**

## **Short Note Transmittal**

6-29-99

Date

**To:** Tim Salt

**Thru:** Chris Roholt

**From:**  Hector Villalobos

**Subject:** WILDERNESS RESTORATION PROGRAMMATIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Attached is Environmental Assessment CA-065-99-73 to authorize restoration of routes within the sixteen Wildernesses managed by the Ridgecrest Field Office. This proposal will deter unauthorized vehicle use and promote natural revegetation of these routes. The proposed project involves the occasional use of motorized/mechanized vehicles and equipment and the placement of barriers within wilderness on those routes where determined to be the minimum requirement for the successful restoration of the route. The work is planned to be performed in fiscal years 1999 and 2000 with the assistance of volunteers and field office staff. If there are any questions, please contact Dave Wash at 760-384-5441 or Katie Wash at 760-384-5443.

Attached: EA CA065-99-73

Notice of Proposed Action

Public comment letters (in response to NOPA)

**EA NUMBER:** CA065-99-73

**BLM OFFICE:** Ridgecrest Field Office

**PROPOSED ACTION TITLE/TYPE:** Wilderness Route Restoration

**LOCATION OF PROPOSED ACTION:** Owens Peak, Kiavah, Bright Star, Argus, Coso Range, Darwin Falls, El Paso Mountains, Golden Valley, Grass Valley, Inyo Mountains, Malpais Mesa, Manly Peak, Piper Mountain, Sacatar Trail, Surprise Canyon, and Sylvania Mountains Wildernesses

**NEPA COMPLIANCE WORKSHEET**

**Critical Element Affected Date----Initials**

*Air Resources NO*

***ACECsYES\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_***

*Cultural Resources NO*

*Farmlands, Prime/Unique NO*

*Floodplain management NO*

*Nat. Amer Rel Concerns NO*

*T&E Wildlife NO*

*T&E Vegetation,*

*Special Status Plants NO*

*Water Resources NO*

*Wastes, Hazardous/solid NO*

*Wetlands/Riparian Zone NO*

*Wild and Scenic Rivers NO*

***Wilderness Management YES*** *\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_*

***Wildlife Habitat/Species******YES*** *\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_*

*Fire management NO*

*Land Use NO*

*Mineral resources NO*

*Paleontology NO*

*Recreation NO*

*Livestock Management NO*

***Soils******YES*** *\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_*

*Socioeconomic resources NO*

***VegetationYES****\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_*

*Visual resources NO*

*Wild horse & Burro Mgmt NO*

*Special Status Plants NO*

***Vegetation******Yes*** *\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_*

Project Lead Date

Dave Wash

Branch Chief Date

Steve Smith

NEPA Compliance Date

Ahmed Mohse

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT** **EA NUMBER: CA065-99-73**

**BLM OFFICE:** Ridgecrest Field Office

**PROPOSED ACTION TITLE/TYPE:**  Wilderness Route Restoration

**LOCATION OF PROPOSED ACTION:**

Routes that have been identified for restoration activities and/or barricading are those extending into the Owens Peak, Kiavah, Bright Star, Argus, Coso Range, Darwin Falls, El Paso Mountains, Golden Valley, Grass Valley, Inyo Mountains, Malpais Mesa, Manly Peak, Piper Mountain, Sacatar Trail, Surprise Canyon, and Sylvania Mountains Wildernesses.

These are all routes that are closed to motorized vehicle travel, with some exceptions as provided for in Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act and Section 103 of the California Desert Protection Act.

**APPLICANT/PROPONENT:** Bureau of Land Management

**CONFORMANCE WITH APPLICABLE LAND USE PLANS:** The proposed restoration activities have been analyzed within the scope of the following land use plans and have been found to be in compliance with the goals and objectives of these documents (as required by 43 CFR 1610.5): California Desert Conservation Area Plan (1980) as amended

### **PURPOSE AND NEED FOR PROPOSED ACTION**

The BLM proposes to reclaim and/or barricade routes leading into the Owens Peak, Kiavah, Bright Star, Argus, Coso Range, Darwin Falls, El Paso Mountains, Golden Valley, Grass Valley, Inyo Mountains, Malpais Mesa, Manly Peak, Piper Mountain, Sacatar Trail, Surprise Canyon, and Sylvania Mountains Wildernesses.. The purpose of this proposed action is to deter continued unauthorized use of these routes by motorized vehicles and to initiate actions to promote the natural rehabilitation of these routes within wilderness. Use of these routes has been a traditional practice for desert recreationists over many years and may likely continue to be a complex problem in managing these areas as wilderness. By Federal Statute, BLM is required to prevent unauthorized use of motorized vehicles and motorized equipment within designated wilderness. Under BLM regulations 43 CFR 8560.0-6, wilderness areas shall be managed to promote, perpetuate and, where necessary, restore the wilderness character of the land. Restoration activities will reduce the visibility and accessibility of these routes to motorized vehicles, which will enhance the naturalness, solitude and primitive recreation values of the wilderness areas.

### **DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES**

**PROPOSED ACTION**

A range of activities are proposed for the restoration of closed routes within wilderness. Not all actions will be completed on every route. The application of specific restoration actions will be determined for each route individually. In some areas, portions of closed routes outside of wilderness will be reclaimed so as to reduce intrusions into wilderness; many of these routes eventually do intrude into wilderness. Also, in some instances only the most visible portions and/or the first hundred yards of the entrances of these closed routes will be reclaimed. All actions will be confined to the width of the existing route surface disturbance. Some activities require use of motorized/mechanized vehicles or equipment within wilderness. Such use will be limited to those routes where it is the minimum necessary for the successful restoration of the route and will not cause any additional degradation of wilderness resources. Any use of motorized/mechanized vehicles or equipment would be restricted to currently impacted route surfaces and any traces of such use will be removed as part of the restoration activities. This action will not affect motorized access agreements for the California Department of Fish and Game, certain nonconforming but accepted uses or valid existing rights.

**A. Restoration Activities - Standard Operating Procedures**

Routes in wilderness areas can be classified generally into the following categories. Category types are based on the probable origin of the route. Restoration needs will be assessed for each route.

I. Graded/constructed routes - obviously built with the use of motorized/mechanized vehicles or equipment. These are characterized by the presence of a berm and the lack of any vegetation on the route surface. Generally, these types of routes will require mechanical ripping.

II. Continual and heavy motorized vehicle use routes - established by repeated frequent motor vehicle use-- either by a 4WD or motorcycle. These are characterized by heavy to medium compaction and lack of vegetation on the route surface. These routes may or may not require mechanical ripping, depending on the degree of compaction.

III. Cross-country routes - either two-track jeep trail or single track motorcycle trail, established by infrequent motor vehicle use. Two-track jeep trails have a vegetated strip between the parallel tire tracks. Single-track motorcycle trails are very narrow. This category would also include routes through sandy washes. Mechanical ripping will not occur on these routes. All work will be completed by hand.

IV. Hill climbs - generally steep and illegally created by motorcycles. Depending on the degree of steepness, these routes may require erosion control efforts, with the use of motorized vehicles and motorized/mechanized equipment.

Work will be completed by BLM staff with the assistance of volunteer hand crews. All restoration activities will be subject to the Operational Parameters in Part B. Actions will include and generally be conducted in the following order AS NEEDED:

(1) Decompaction: working the top few inches of the route surface to relieve soil compaction. In general, this action will be completed with the use of hand tools (soil spades, spading forks, McCloud rakes, pulaskis, shovels, etc.). Routes that are too heavily compacted to be practically or effectively worked with hand tools will be mechanically ripped (to a depth of approximately 6-10 inches) by a trail bulldozer with a ripper attachment. In some settings where the use of a trail bulldozer would not be practical, safe or the minimum necessary and hand tools would not be effective, compacted surfaces would be worked with other motorized/mechanized tools such as a power auger, power shovel. Such motorized/mechanized vehicles and equipment may be needed on steep slopes and heavily used hill climbs. Mechanical ripping will occur on the compacted route surface only. The site will be naturalized, using hand tools, to remove linear lines and any signs of motorized/mechanized equipment or vehicle use. NOTE: Category III routes will NOT be mechanically ripped.

(2) Scarifying/pitting: loosening and texturizing the impacted route surface to better capture water, organic debris and wind-blown seeds, thereby stimulating natural revegetation. This will be done with hand tools.

(3) Recontouring: reconfiguring/shaping the route to blend it with the adjacent relatively undisturbed desert. This will involve the creation of small hummocks and banks, where appropriate, to mimic the surrounding desert landscape. Berms will be pulled in and the soil distributed across the route surface. Vehicle tracks in sandy washes will be raked. This will lessen visual contrasts and provide a surface for natural revegetation. This action will be completed with hand tools.

(4) Permion (desert varnish colorant): spraying reclaimed surfaces to simulate the coloration of the surrounding desert varnish. Permion is a chemical compound comprised of manganese, salts and other ingredients used to simulate the natural desert varnish that occurs on rock surfaces in arid environments. Permion would be applied sparingly, with the use of a backpack sprayer, and only on disturbed rock surfaces that contrast sharply with the surrounding landscape. The Ridgecrest Field Office has successfully used Permion on restoration projects in the Rademacher Hills.

(5) Erosion control: placing sterile rice grass hay bales or creating light terracing/berms to reduce erosion and create barriers to vehicles on steep slopes. This is especially effective on hill climbs. The hay bales break down over time and provide additional organic debris to the restoration site. Transport of hay bales, each weighing 135 pounds, may require use of motorized vehicle (such as an ATV or pickup) inside wilderness, especially on steep slopes.

(6) Vertical mulching: dead and down vegetation is "planted" to obscure the entrance to the route. Additional dead vegetation, rock material and other organic matter may be distributed over the worked route surface to decrease visual contrasts, create sheltered sites to aid in natural revegetation and add organic debris. This will be done by hand.

(7) Barricading: placing large boulders, gates, blockades, fencing, posts, or any other sort of physical barrier at strategic locations on or across the route to help eliminate continued unauthorized motor vehicle access. Use of mechanized/motorized equipment or vehicles will be needed for the placement of most barriers, due to the weight and size of the barriers; however some barriers can and will be installed by hand tools. Most barriers will be located at the wilderness boundary and, therefore, outside of wilderness. In certain locations, barriers may need to be placed inside wilderness. Due to the nature of the desert terrain (open, flat land or driveable washes and canyons) and the unmanageable configuration of many of the Congressional wilderness boundaries, some of these routes cannot be closed directly at the wilderness boundary. In extreme cases, placement of a barrier within wilderness, generally only a few feet inside the boundary but in some cases up to a few hundred yards, will effectively eliminate this problem. Installation of barriers within wilderness will only be done as the minimum requirement for barrier effectiveness. In general, any barriers placed within wilderness will be limited to large rocks, dead and down vegetation or other natural objects that can be found in the area. In those locations where suitable natural objects are not available, barriers will be constructed of natural materials, such as wood.

(8) Vegetative Restoration: This will involve planting, transplanting and/or seeding necessary to help stabilize soil, speed overall vegetative recovery and camouflage evidence of vehicle routes. Locally collected seeds may be broadcast on reclaimed surfaces to accelerate natural revegetation. This action will be completed by hand tools.

(9) Removal of trash, materials, and/or structures of nonhistorical value: A one-time vehicle access into wilderness will be authorized, in conjunction with and prior to final completion of restoration activities, in order to remove any items too large to be carried out by hand. The proposed removal of any materials or structures that may be of questionable age, (50 years or older) will be assessed for proper archeological clearances. Structures for rangeland and wildlife management purposes will not be disturbed.

(10) Maintenance: Restoration activities and barriers will need to be maintained. Natural or human-caused destruction of restoration efforts and movement or damage of barriers may occur. Continued motorized vehicle use of routes may also occur, with violators willfully driving around or vandalizing barriers. This will cause new and renewed surface disturbance. Restoration efforts and/or barriers will be re-implemented as necessary on a case-by-case basis, using the standard operating procedures and operational parameters established in this EA.

**B. Operational Parameters - Additional Environmental Protection Measures:**

This proposed action is further defined by the following Environmental Protection Measures that will serve as Operational Parameters. All restoration activities covered by this environmental assessment will be performed in full compliance with these Operational Parameters. If the proposed restoration involves actions beyond the scope of the described activities or issues outside these operational parameters, a separate site-specific NEPA compliance document will be prepared.

All routes will be subject to pre-work site-specific reviews by BLM personnel to evaluate restoration needs of each route, ensure compliance with the operational parameters, and identify any sensitive resources (cultural, wildlife, plant) to be avoided. ***These pre-work site-specific reviews will be documented with a separate NEPA document tiered from this initial programmatic assessment or through an administrative determination.***

(1) Routes identified as necessary for motorized vehicle access for private existing rights (such as private inholdings, valid mining claims) and authorized nonconforming uses (such as grazing, California State Fish and Game activities) will not be reclaimed. Any barricading of these routes will be by a locked gate, which will be placed outside wilderness unless the only effective and defensible location is within wilderness. Restoration actions will be completed on routes where access for private existing rights and authorized nonconforming uses is limited to nonmotorized means.

(2) Motorized vehicles and motorized/mechanized equipment will only be used in those areas where determined to be absolutely necessary and the minimum requirement for the successful and effective completion of proposed restoration activities. See Minimum Tool/Action Evaluation.

(3) Restoration activities will only be conducted on lands administered by the Ridgecrest Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management, unless prior approval is received from the non-public land owners or other administering agencies or BLM offices.

(4) Restoration activities in riparian areas and known raptor nesting areas will be conducted outside of the spring breeding season, specifically mid-March through mid-June.

(5) Category III routes and any other routes where prior disturbances were only minor in nature will not be mechanically ripped, no matter how compacted the surface, unless such has been analyzed in a previous plan or EA. The will minimize impacts to possible cultural resources lying under the surface of cross-country routes.

(6) Before ground disturbing activities occur, a cultural inventory of the project surface will be conducted as required by the protocol agreement between the Bureau of Land Management and the State Historic Preservation Office. Any identified cultural resources will be avoided. In the event that cultural or paleontological resources are discovered during restoration activities, operations in the vicinity of the discovered resources shall cease immediately and the operator will notify the Field Office Archaeologist. The Field Office Archaeologist will, as appropriate, evaluate the significance of the find and determine the need for mitigation. The operator shall not proceed with potentially disturbing activities until authorized.

(7) The proposed removal of any materials or structures that may be of questionable age, 45 years or older, will be assessed for proper archaeological clearances.

(8) Trail crews, volunteers and any agency personnel assisting in restoration activities will be oriented to any special wildlife, plant, cultural and wilderness resources and will be informed of the locations of wilderness boundaries. A cultural resources information sheet (see attachment) will be distributed to volunteers to ensure that participants do not inadvertently clean up an archaeological site (e.g. can dumps).

(9) BLM personnel will be present during all restoration activities involving use of motorized/mechanized vehicles or equipment.

(10) Mechanical ripping will not occur when wind speeds exceed 30 mph.

(11) All crew will be briefed before commencement of restoration activities on the following measures to protect the tortoise. In the unlikely event a tortoise does wander into the project area, the restoration crew will be responsible for complying with the following stipulations:

a) Only biologists authorized by the USFWS and the BLM shall handle desert tortoises.

b) Should a tortoise wander into the work area, work must stop around the animal until the tortoise is safely out of harm's way. Any dead tortoises encountered must be left in place and the BLM notified. Relocation of live or dead tortoises around the project site is NOT permitted under Federal and state law.

c) Workers are required to inspect underneath parked vehicles prior to moving them. If a tortoise is present, the worker shall carefully move the vehicle only if the tortoise will not be harmed or movement of the parked vehicle will allow the tortoise to move off on its own.

d) All trash and food items shall be promptly contained within closed, raven-proof containers. These should be regularly removed from the project site to reduce the attractiveness of the area to ravens and other tortoise predators.

(12) Prior to commencement of any restoration activities in the affected areas, the following will be completed:

a) The falcon nesting site near route SE-164 will be checked. This will not be necessary if work is done after mid-June or before mid-March.

b) Any routes within Sage Canyon will be walked to check for tortoises and legless lizards.

**NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE**

Active restoration of routes within the Owens Peak, Kiavah, Bright Star, Argus, Coso Range, Darwin Falls, El Paso Mountains, Golden Valley, Grass Valley, Inyo Mountains, Malpais Mesa, Manly Peak, Piper Mountain, Sacatar Trail, Surprise Canyon, and Sylvania Mountains Wildernesses would not occur. Signing of routes would continue, as would law enforcement and public education. These efforts are a weak strategy in the defense of wilderness boundaries against continued motorized vehicle intrusions. Placement of barricades would be permitted outside of wilderness; however, in some cases, this may not be the most effective or defensible location. See Purpose and Need for Proposed Action.

**ALTERNATIVES REJECTED FROM FURTHER ANALYSIS**

A range of alternatives was initially considered by BLM for analysis in this document. Within this range, a reasonable number, determined not to conflict with applicable laws and regulations, were selected. These reasonable alternatives were limited to dealing with the issue of **how** restoration activities can be permitted rather than whether or not they **should** be permitted in BLM wilderness areas. The authorization of restoration of impacts within wilderness is addressed in wilderness management law, regulation and policy.

Within these constraints, only the **No Action Alternative** and the **Proposed Action**  will be fully analyzed in this document. A non-mechanized/non-motorized alternative combining the use of horse-drawn implements and hand tools was dropped from further review. Breaking up heavily compacted routes would require use of heavy farm implements or a primitive plow and a well-trained large horse to pull it. The labor and time required in the use of such on heavily compacted routes would not be a feasible alternative to motorized/mechanized vehicle/equipment use. Use of hand tools also is not feasible on heavily compacted routes.

**AFFECT ON CRITICAL ELEMENTS** (BLM Manual H-1790-1, Appendix 5)

After an interdisciplinary review of the proposed action the following resource elements were determined to be affected by the proposed action. Those elements indicated as "not affected" are not significantly affected by the proposed action or are not present in the affected area. They will not be addressed further. Only those elements marked as "affected" will be addressed further in this Environmental Assessment.

CRITICAL ELEMENT AFFECTED

Yes No

Air Quality -\*- ---

ACECs -\*- ---

Cultural Resources --- -\*-

Farmlands, Prime/Unique --- -\*-

Floodplains --- -\*-

Native American Religious Concerns --- -\*-

T & E Species - wildlife --- -\*-

T & E Species - plant --- -\*-

Wastes, Hazardous/Solid --- -\*-

Water Quality --- -\*-

Wetlands/Riparian Zones --- -\*-

Wild & Scenic Rivers --- -\*-

Wilderness -\*- ---

Paleontological Resources --- -\*-

Wildlife -\*- ---

Soils -\*- ---

Vegetation -\*- ---

Wild Horse & Burros --- -\*-

Livestock --- -\*-

Minerals --- -\*-

Realty --- -\*-

### **DESCRIPTION OF AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT**

**WILDERNESS**

The proposed action would affect existing closed routes within the Ridgecrest Field Office portions of the Owens Peak, Kiavah, Bright Star, Argus, Coso Range, Darwin Falls, El Paso Mountains, Golden Valley, Grass Valley, Inyo Mountains, Malpais Mesa, Manly Peak, Piper Mountain, Sacatar Trail, Surprise Canyon, and Sylvania Mountains Wildernesses. A description of the wildernesses can be found in the California Desert Conservation Area Final Environmental Impact Statement and Proposed Plan Appendix III (Vol. B) Wilderness, BLM, 1980 and the California Statewide Wilderness Study Area Report, Part 4, Vol. 4, BLM, 1990, which are incorporated by reference. These wilderness areas generally encompass the same lands formerly managed as the Owens Peak, Kiavah, Bright Star, Argus, Coso Range, Darwin Falls, El Paso Mountains, Golden Valley, Grass Valley, Inyo Mountains, Malpais Mesa, Manly Peak, Piper Mountain, Sacatar Trail, Surprise Canyon, and Sylvania Mountains Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs). Recreational use includes day hiking, backpacking, guided tours, photography, equestrian use, painting, rockhounding, rock climbing, wildflower viewing, bird watching, sightseeing and other activities. Private property, potentially valid mining claims, various authorized private and public projects (such as range improvement projects and exclosures), California Department of Fish and Game wildlife facilities and other projects are located within these wilderness areas.

Routes within these wildernesses, now closed as a result of wilderness designation, are generally 4WD access roads created by repeated cross-country travel for hunting and camping purposes. Others were designed/constructed for mining and grazing activities or wildlife and general land management purposes. Several, especially those off of Bird Springs Pass and Cow, Horse and Sage Canyon roads, are a result of unauthorized route proliferation, mainly by motorcyclists.

**WILDLIFE**

**Desert tortoise and Mohave ground squirrel:** Portions of the project area are classified as habitat for the Federally Threatened desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*), and for the State Threatened Mohave ground squirrel (*Spermophilus mohavensis*). The nature of the proposed action significantly reduces the potential for a tortoise or Mohave ground squirrel to be affected.

Impacts: The project will have beneficial affects for wildlife species. The use of vehicles

and heavy equipment (at times) could affect tortoises walking onto the work site. This may

result in stress on the animal or physical injury if the animal is not observed. The operating

procedures listed under Environmental Protection Measures will greatly reduce the likelihood

of injury. Mitigation: No mitigation is proposed because the Recommended Mitigation has

been incorporated into the operating procedures. To meet our obligations under Section 7 of

the Endangered Species Act, we need to Consult with the USFWS. Since the disturbance to

tortoise habitat is under 2 acres (the end result will be an incre ase of tortoise habitat), we can

consult under the Small Disturbance Biological Opinion. This would require us to notify

USFWS of the action and wait 30 days for a response. An option is to request a Letter of

Concurrence from USFWS, saying that the project would have impacts, but they would

primarily be beneficial. This has no deadline so might be a longer process with no real

difference in the end result.

**SOILS**

Soils in the area are shallow and rocky and most of them have been developed from weathered granite rock. Soils on the routes have been disturbed and compacted to varying degrees as a result of frequent motorized vehicle travel. The soils are generally susceptible to accelerated erosion from wind and water, especially when the surface has been disturbed.

**AIR QUALITY**

Most of the time, air quality throughout the project area is generally good. There are, however, times that the area does not meet air quality standards due to locally generated and/or transported in pollutants. Currently the area has been classified as non-attainment areas for ozone, PM10, under the state and/or national standards. Much of the project area is within the Searles Valley PM10 Planning Area. This area is a federal non-attainment area for PM10. A state implementation plan (SIP) has been prepared for the Searles Valley planning area which identifies sources of PM10 emissions and control measures to reduce emissions. As a minimum, EPA requires the application of reasonable available control measures (RACM) to mobile sources. Ozone pollutants in the area are primarily transported in from the South Coast air Basin and the San Joaquin Valley air basin. An attainment demonstration for Ozone has been prepared which shows attainment based on reduced transport.

**VEGETATION**

The routes proposed for restoration pass through a variety of vegetation communities including creosote scrub, mixed desert scrub, blackbrush scrub, Joshua tree scrub/steppe, riparian scrub/woodland, and scattered pinyon/juniper woodland. The area is characterized by widely scattered creosote (Larrea tridentata), burrobush (Ambrosia dumosa), desert senna (Cassia armata), beavertail cactus (Opuntia basilaris), and wild buckwheat (Eriogonum spp.). Washes contain sporadic populations of cheesebush (Hymenoclea salsola) and brittlebush (Encelia fainosa) and riparian areas contain willow (Salix spp.) and cottonwood (Populus spp.).

Vegetation on Category I, II and IV routes is nonexistent due to a high level of historic motorized vehicle use. Vegetation on Category III routes is typical of the surrounding terrain and does not contain any specialized endemic plants. The NDDB (National Diversity Database) was checked for special status plants. A number of special status plants are found within the Owens Peak, Kiavah, Bright Star, Argus, Coso Range, Darwin Falls, El Paso Mountains, Golden Valley, Grass Valley, Inyo Mountains, Malpais Mesa, Manly Peak, Piper Mountain, Sacatar Trail, Surprise Canyon, and Sylvania Mountains Wilderness areas, however, no special status plants were listed from the actual sites. In addition, no special status plants have been found on the project sites.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES**

**WILDERNESS**

Wilderness values of naturalness, solitude, primitive and unconfined recreation, scenic and ecological values would be affected by the proposed restoration activities. Restoration activities (mechanical ripping and vehicle transport of hay bales, barricades and large items of trash) involve the use of motorized/mechanized vehicles and equipment within wilderness, which is specifically prohibited. Placement of barriers within wilderness, even those of natural objects, can be considered a physical structure or facility within wilderness, which is also prohibited. The naturalness of the immediate area will be affected by the presence of the barrier-- natural or not. Barriers of natural objects will reduce this affect; however, the purposeful placement of natural objects by human or motorized/mechanized means to serve as vehicle barriers could be viewed as a facility, albeit a natural one. During the completion of restoration activities, wilderness values would be temporarily affected by the presence of a work crew, volunteers and BLM personnel and the sight and sound of motorized vehicles and motorized/mechanized equipment.

Exceptions for motorized/mechanized vehicle and equipment use and installation of facilities (i.e. barriers) are allowed under Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act where determined to be the minimum necessary for the administration of the area. See Minimum Tool/Action Evaluation. Use of motorized/mechanized equipment and vehicle use and installation of barriers will be used only where restoration actions cannot be feasibly (successfully, safely and economically) completed by the use of hand tools. The exception to these two prohibited actions is being invoked for the completion of actions for the enhancement of wilderness values. Any effects of the use of motorized/mechanized vehicles or equipment will be removed by the restoration activities. Only barriers of natural objects or materials will placed in wilderness. In certain locations, placement of barriers inside wilderness will be crucial for protection of restoration efforts and wilderness values from vehicle intrusions.

Overall, impacts to wilderness values will be positive. Over the long term, naturalness, solitude, primitive recreation, scenic, and ecological values of these areas will be enhanced. Restoration/barricading of existing routes would promote the natural revegetation of these routes, deter unauthorized vehicle use, and contribute to the enhancement and preservation of wilderness values. Restoration activities will facilitate the motorized vehicle use limitations imposed by the Wilderness Act of 1964 and the California Desert Protection Act of 1994. Wilderness law enforcement actions would also decline and less regulation and contact with wilderness users would improve the wilderness experience.

An additional item: As stated in the Proposed Action, portions of routes and routes determined necessary for motorized access for private rights or nonconforming but accepted uses will not be reclaimed. The existence and authorized use of these routes will continue to impact wilderness values. Effective gating of these routes will eliminate unauthorized motor vehicle use, which will decrease the frequency of vehicle impacts to wilderness.

**WILDLIFE**

In general, surface restoration would occur on pre-existing disturbance and would create no new disturbance. The intent of restoration activities is to promote the restoration of the natural habitat and protect the habitat in the wilderness from unauthorized motorized vehicle intrusions. Most potential impacts would be caused by the use of heavy equipment and the frequency and timing of restoration work. Some restoration activities, such as decompaction, recontouring and barricading may affect individual animals and/or their burrows. If work is done during the animals' active period, animals could wander into the work area and be injured or killed, especially where motorized/mechanized vehicles or equipment are being used. It is not likely that burrows would be found in the road beds; however animals may burrow into berms along the sides of roads. Restoration of these berms could impact the burrows of tortoises and other animals. Noise from the human participants and motorized/mechanized equipment and vehicles will temporarily disturb animals while work is being completed.

**Desert tortoise and Mohave ground squirrel:** There would be no impact on desert tortoise habitat or the Mohave ground squirrel. The Operational Parameters of the proposed action minimize the potential for either species to be affected. Very few tortoises occur in the proposed project area and during the scheduled time for the proposed project, late June through early July, tortoises are generally inactive and the Mohave ground squirrel will be underground aestivating. Restoration activities would disturb dirt roads that tortoises may use; however this would reduce the opportunities for tortoises to be run over or picked up on these routes. Possibly only one or two tortoises would receive protection over the next 10 years (surviving instead of being killed or captured). Any tortoises wandering into the work area could be negatively impacted if the stipulations under the operational parameters are not followed. No burrows would be lost. Any additional restoration work after the proposed project would need to be scheduled before March 15 and after June 15 to avoid possible impacts.

**Other species:** There would be no impacts to prairie falcons or the legless lizard, due to the time of year of work. Following stipulations under the operational parameters would ensure no impact. Any additional work would need to be scheduled to avoid the period of mid-March through mid-June in order to avoid impacts to nesting bird species, especially raptors. Human, vehicle and/or equipment activity too close to nest sites may cause nesting birds to vacate their nests or create situations where predators could take the eggs while the adults are away.

**Wildlife habitat:** There would be significant benefits to those desert washes that have routes eliminated from them; vegetation would develop further and wildlife use of them would increase. Closing routes through riparian areas, specifically the portion of route SC431 in T.28S. R.35E. S.7, will benefit riparian species. The reduced vehicle travel and associated human activity through these wilderness areas, and especially riparian zones, would result in higher nesting success by birds and less disturbance to other wildlife. In this riparian area, the stream banks will become more stable, possibly resulting in better salamander habitat.

**SOILS**

All sites are currently disturbed due to present and past vehicle use. Restoration activities involving use of Permion and removal of trash would cause only minor soil disturbance. Vegetative restoration, placement of certain barricades (such as gates, fences and posts) and vertical mulching would involve some soil disturbance. Decompaction activities, scarifying/pitting, recontouring and erosion control would significantly disturb the route surface, with some soil loss from wind blown erosion. However, this is the intent of the proposed action-- to relieve compaction, texturize the surface, recontour the route and reduce erosion. Generally these actions will improve soil conditions by increasing infiltration, percolation and available supply of water; breaking up soil compaction; increasing ground surface texture for improved collection of organic debris; facilitating the reestablishment of plant growth; and reducing existing and potential erosion problems.

**AIR QUALITY**

Emissions from the proposed action will be minimal. No significant off-site impacts are anticipated. An increase in fugitive dust during wind storms could occur due to the soil disturbance as a result of the proposed action. Vehicle use on dirt roads will generate PM-10 emissions throughout the project. The operation of engines will generate unknown levels of particulate and other emissions. The project as proposed does not exceed the deminimus emission levels (threshold level for analysis as set under regulations, 40 CFR part 51) and conforms to the State Implementation Plan (SIP). No further conformity determination is necessary.

**VEGETATION**

There would be minimal impact to vegetation during most restoration activities. Route surfaces are already partially or entirely devegetated. Care would be taken to avoid vegetation during the project, especially on Category III routes. Mechanical ripping would not occur on Category III routes. Careless equipment operation could damage adjacent vegetation. Some adjacent vegetation would also be crushed by workers' feet and turn-around of vehicles. Dust may settle on nearby vegetation stands. Placement of barriers other than on the disturbed route surface will involve loss of vegetation. All other restoration actions would assist in the natural revegetation of the area.

**ACECs**

The proposed action would reclaim routes in portions of the Jawbone/Butterbredt ACEC. This will decrease impacts to the ACEC from unauthorized use of these closed wilderness routes. Some impacts would occur to vegetation and soil from restoration activities; however, the intent of the proposed action is to relieve impacts from vehicle use, deter future vehicle intrusions and improve conditions for the restoration of natural plant growth on these impacted routes.

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**IRREVERSIBLE AND IRRETRIEVABLE COMMITMENT OF RESOURCES**

In general, resources that would be disturbed are renewable and negative impacts are temporary. The intent of the proposed action is to reduce the impacts to wilderness values from the existing historic vehicle routes and promote the natural revegetation of these routes. There may be a small number of wildlife killed or injured during work activities and some soil loss from erosional or man-caused actions.

**RESIDUAL IMPACTS**

Residual impacts from restoration activities would include: loosened, textured, recontoured and decompacted route surfaces; barriers at or near route entrances; darkened route surfaces (from the application of Permion); hay bales on steep slopes; scattered organic debris and rocks; "planted" dead vegetation; and broadcast seed and/or transplanted vegetation. These residual impacts would only occur on reclaimed route surfaces. They are all intentional. Not all these effects would be left on every reclaimed route. Some trampled vegetation and buried human waste from the work crew would also remain. Routes that cannot effectively be reclaimed will probably continue to receive vehicle intrusions. With this continued vehicle access, disturbance to wildlife, wilderness, soil and vegetation would continue. Vehicle turn-around locations at barricaded routes will be created-- causing new surface disturbance to soil and vegetation. Some motor vehicle operators will circumvent barriers, which will also result in new surface disturbance. Some barriers will be moved or removed. Motorcyclists will be able to circumvent nearly every barrier. Vehicle use on routes that are effectively barricaded essentially will be eliminated. Wilderness values will be enhanced. Long-term air quality within wilderness and surrounding areas would be expected to improve from decreased use and natural revegetation of reclaimed and/or barricaded routes. Routes that are not reclaimed or effectively barricaded may receive displaced use due to the unavailability of the effectively barricaded routes. Wilderness, wildlife, soil and vegetation resources of these routes would continue to suffer impacts from unauthorized motor vehicle use. New routes may be created, creating entirely new impacts and the need for additional restoration actions.

**CUMULATIVE IMPACTS**

Cumulative impacts from historic vehicle use (prior to wilderness designation) and continued unauthorized use of these routes has led to the current impacts to wilderness, wildlife, vegetation, soil, etc. Restoration activities will reverse the cumulative effects of this use, resulting in overall positive effects to wilderness characteristics, wildlife, vegetation, soil. The purpose of the operational parameters outlined in this Proposed Action is to minimize any negative cumulative and/or residual effects of the proposed restoration activities.

**RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MEASURES**

Mitigation measures proposed by specialists have been incorporated in the Operational Parameters.

**NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE**

No restoration activities would occur within wilderness. Wilderness areas would not be affected by the proposed action; however they would continue to be affected by the existence and unauthorized use of the historic vehicle routes. Wildlife, ACECs, soil, vegetation and wilderness would continue to be subject to disturbance and degradation from unauthorized motor vehicle use. The opportunity for a quality wilderness experience would be disrupted. Soil compaction would continue and would interfere with natural rehabilitation. Routes would be left to rehabilitate naturally; however vegetation in these sites may only recover partially or not at all, depending on the compaction of route surface and the frequency of unauthorized motor vehicle use. Small, short-term increases in air-borne dust would not be generated, but long-term air quality within wilderness would continue to be affected by motor vehicle use. Potential and existing erosion would continue. Soil compaction caused by motor vehicle use would continue and would interfere with natural rehabilitation. Wilderness, wildlife, vegetation and soil would continue to be subject to disturbance and degradation from unauthorized motor vehicle use. Existing boundary markers would continue to be removed by natural forces and unauthorized persons. Motorized limitations imposed by the Wilderness Act of 1964 and the CDPA of 1994 would be more difficult to achieve. Law enforcement, public education, barriers, gates and signing would continue at or outside wilderness boundaries; however these methods are only partially effective.

Leaving routes through riparian areas unreclaimed/unbarricaded, such as the riparian portion of route SC431 (T.28S. R.35E. S.7), would allow motorized vehicle travel and associated impacts from vehicles to the stream channel. Currently, there is little use of this route; however the restoration of other routes in the area and lack of any restoration or barricading of this route may displace use to this route. Noise from vehicles will reduce nesting success of birds. People camping along the creek will significantly impact the riparian community. Besides increasing soil compaction from camping, etc., people will gather firewood, which will remove the understory critical to a number of bird, lizard and snake species.

**IRREVERSIBLE AND IRRETRIEVABLE COMMITMENT OF RESOURCES**

Wilderness values are already significantly affected by the presence and unauthorized use of these historic vehicle routes.

**RESIDUAL IMPACTS**

Impacts from the existence of and continued use of these vehicle routes within wilderness would continue.

Residual effects of use of the route through the riparian zone (SC431) would include: increased traffic and associated impacts from vehicles to the stream channel; reduction of the nesting success of birds as a consequence of vehicle noise; increased soil compaction from camping and picnicking along the creek; removal of the understory, which is critical to a number of bird, lizard and snake species, from the gathering of firewood (legal or illegal); the increased possibility of shooting non-target birds.

**CUMULATIVE IMPACTS**

A cumulative negative impact to the affected environment is already evident from the historic vehicle use of these routes.

**RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MEASURES**

Monitor routes for any increase of unauthorized vehicle use and associated impacts.

### **MINIMUM TOOL/ACTION EVALUATION**

**Minimum Action**

Before even addressing the issue of minimum tool, consideration needs to be given to the minimum action, i.e. is restoration of the proposed routes within wilderness the minimum action necessary for the administration of the area? Road, improvements and vehicle use are specifically prohibited within wilderness under Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act. Placement of barriers within wilderness, even natural ones, also could be considered an improvement or facility within wilderness as these objects are being purposefully moved by human or motorized/mechanized means to serve as vehicle barriers.

Every wilderness area in the Ridgecrest Field Office contains vehicle routes which were statutorily closed with the passage of the California Desert Protection Act 1994. Vehicle routes are an improvement within wilderness and facilitate vehicle intrusions into wilderness. Many of these routes continue to receive use by motorists, despite intensive closure signing, education and law enforcement action. These routes are visually obvious to the public and tend to attract individuals who see and ride them despite wilderness closure signs. Frequently signs are removed. By Federal Statute (Wilderness Act of 1964 and California Desert Protection Act of 1994), BLM is required to prevent unauthorized use of motorized vehicles and motorized equipment within designated wilderness. Under BLM regulations 43 CFR 8560.0-6, wilderness areas shall be managed to promote, perpetuate and, where necessary, restore the wilderness character of the land. Restoration activities will reduce the visibility and accessibility of these routes to motorized vehicles, which will enhance the naturalness, solitude, primitive recreation and scenic values of the wilderness areas. Two years plus of law enforcement, extensive signing and re-signing, education and visitor contact have only proven to be incidentally effective in controlling unauthorized vehicle use. Restoration of these routes is the next step in the protection of wilderness values and would now be considered the minimum action for the administration of these areas.

**Minimum Tool**

In an evaluation of minimum tool, consideration must be given to the feasibility of completing an action while minimizing the impacts to wilderness values. Criteria for determining feasibility include: can the action be physically completed-- successfully, safely and economically-- without the use of motorized or mechanized equipment? (BLM Manual 8560.13) The proposed action involves the use of motorized/mechanized equipment and vehicles and barriers, but only on those routes identified as specifically requiring such for the successful completion of restoration actions.

The use of only horse-drawn implements and hand tools was considered. Breaking up heavily compacted routes would require use of heavy farm implements or a primitive plow and a well-trained large horse to pull it. The labor and time required in the use of such on heavily compacted routes would not be a feasible alternative to motorized/mechanized vehicle/equipment use. Use of just hand tools is not feasible for breaking up heavily compacted routes either.

Use of motorized/mechanized equipment and vehicles and barriers is essential in the successful completion of proposed restoration activities. Such use will be limited to those routes where it is the minimum necessary for the successful restoration of the route and will not cause any additional degradation of wilderness resources. In Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act, an exception for motorized/mechanized equipment and vehicle use and improvements within wilderness is provided for the agencies responsible for managing wilderness. In certain circumstances "necessary to meet the minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of this Act", BLM has the discretion and authority to use a Section 4(c) prohibited act (motorized equipment, mechanical transport, structures, installations, etc.) in order to preserve the wilderness character of an area as mandated by the Wilderness Act. "Minimum tool" is a phrase commonly used in place of the more collective term "minimum requirements" actually used in the Wilderness Act (cited above).

**Conclusion**

Restoration of impacts within wilderness is an action entirely compatible and consistent with wilderness management laws, regulations, policies, goals and objectives. The routes and vehicle intrusion along these routes detract from the naturalness of the area. The proposed action will reduce these impacts and facilitate natural revegetation-- contributing to the enhancement of wilderness values. Use of motorized and mechanized equipment and barriers will only be used where absolutely necessary and they do not degrade wilderness values. They would be the minimum action/tool for those routes requiring such.

It is the determination of the Ridgecrest Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management that at certain locations inside wilderness, the actions outlined in the proposed action, as applied in each unique case, are the minimum necessary actions to deter illegal vehicle use from wilderness and promote natural revegetation of these routes. For heavily compacted vehicle routes, a bulldozer with a ripper attachment is determined to be the minimum tool. For the placement of barriers and hay bales and removal of large items of trash, motorized vehicle use is determined to be the minimum tool. Any use of motorized/mechanized equipment or vehicles would be restricted to the currently impacted route surface and any traces of such use would be removed as part of the restoration activities.

**INDIVIDUALS/REFERENCES CONSULTED:**

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A Beginner's Guide to Desert Restoration, Desert Restoration Task Force: David Bainbridge, Ray Franson, A. Christina Williams, Laurie Lippitt, December 1996

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**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT/DECISION RECORD**

I have reviewed this environmental assessment including the explanation and resolution of any potentially significant environmental impacts. I have determined that the proposed action will not have any significant impacts on the human environment and that an EIS is not required. I have determined that the proposed project is in conformance with the approved land use plan for the area.

The proposed restoration activities and associated use of motorized/mechanized vehicles and equipment and installation of barriers have been determined to be the minimum necessary for the administration of the area. Restoration activities will assist in the prevention of unauthorized motorized/mechanized vehicle and equipment use in wilderness and rehabilitate impacts to wilderness from the existence and unauthorized use of these historic (prior to wilderness designation) vehicle routes. Restoration activities are being implemented under authority of 1964 Wilderness Act, 1994 California Desert Protection Act and 43 CFR 8560 Management of Designated Wilderness Areas. 43 CFR 8560.0-6 specifically states "Wilderness areas shall be managed to promote, perpetuate and, where necessary, restore the wilderness character of the land...."

It is my decision to approve the Proposed Action as described in CA065-97-68.

Approving Official: Date:

Field Manager

Authorized Officer: Date:

District Manager

Appeal Rights: Within 30 days of receipt of this decision, you have the right of appeal to the Board of Land Appeals, Office of the Secretary, in accordance with the regulations at Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations 4.400. If an appeal is taken, you must follow the procedures outlined in Form 1842-1, Information on Taking Appeals to the Board of Land Appeals. Within 30 days after you appeal, you are required to provide a Statement of Reasons to the Board of Land Appeals listed in Item 3 on the form. In addition, please provide our office with a copy of your Statement of Reasons. The appellant has the burden of showing that the decision appealed from is in error.