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QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

about the

CALIFORNIA DESERT PLAN

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Department of the Interior - Bureau of Land Management

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Dear Friend of the California Desert:

We recently completed the public review of the Draft Alternatives for the California Desert Plan. Public interest and response were gratifying — nearly 9,000 people commented.

Many people said they thought the draft was too big and too complex. Others thought it was too simplistic and did not provide enough detailed information.

A recurring question was why we were preparing a plan in the first place. The purpose of this booklet is to answer the questions that we heard again and again in the 12 public meetings on the draft alternatives, as well as in letters, telephone calls, and other responses to the plan.

The question "Why a California Desert Plan?" was answered by the Congress of the United States in the preamble to Sec.601 of the Fed.Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) which said that the California Desert contains historical, scenic, archaeological, environmental, biological, cultural, scientific, educational, recreational, and economic resources that are uniquely located adjacent to an area of large population; and that the California Desert environment and its resources are threatened by air pollution, inadequate management authority, and increased use.

With that as preamble, Congress directed the Secretary of the Interior, through the Bureau of Land Management, to prepare and implement "a comprehensive, long-range plan for the management, use, development and protection of the public lands within the California Desert Conservation Area" guided by the principles of multiple-use, sustained yield, and the maintenance of environmental quality.

We have striven to meet this mandate — not simply because it is the law, but because it is sound management of your public land and resources. We appreciate the thoughtful comments in response to the draft alternatives. We are using them as we prepare the proposed plan for release on September 30, 1980.

In the meantime, I hope the answers to questions in this booklet will provide background information that will help interested people in their review of the proposed plan. We realize that not everyone's questions will be answered in this booklet. If this is true in your case, please feel free to contact us at your convenience.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

James B. Ruch
State Director

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q Will the BLM really be able to implement or enforce a plan of this magnitude?

A Implementation of the Desert Plan is going to cost money — more money than we are now receiving to manage the desert; so we will seek creative, innovative, cost-efficient ways to manage the lands and resources of the California Desert.

Historically, the management of natural resources has not been a high national priority as reflected in the Federal budget. Realistically, in view of the current economic situation, we expect this trend to continue.

In the meantime, we will do our best with what we have. Implementation of some parts of the plan has already begun — the wilderness process, and the environmental awareness program, for example.

Since recreation is such a dominant use of the desert, it is our intention to expand our Visitor Services Program significantly. A major function of this program is to distribute information on the desert itself, and its uses.

We're also exploring the use of volunteer helpers. Many organized groups and individuals, recognizing the limits of what the government is financially able to accomplish, have expressed interest in volunteering to do some of the chores which our budget does not cover. Legislation has been proposed that would allow the BLM to accept volunteer services on a formal basis. Volunteer labor could make the difference in whether a sensitive site, like a petroglyph area, is protected or not. Volunteers could also help with the environmental awareness program.

Q How was public input used in the decision-making process for the proposed plan?

A All public comments, whether in writing or in oral testimony at public hearings, have been analyzed and evaluated issue by issue, area by area, and alternative by alternative. We received some 9,000 comments, the bulk of them in the last few days of the public review period, on the draft alternatives. BLM, working with its Desert Advisory Committee, used this input to prepare the proposed plan. An analysis of all the public comments and the evaluation process will be issued as an appendix to the proposed plan. Comments on the proposed plan also will be recorded, analyzed and evaluated; and the public input will be made available to the Secretary of the Interior for his use in making decisions on the final plan.

Q How will BLM provide for motorized vehicle use, including recreation vehicle use in traditional areas?

A This really is two separate issues: access to the desert for either commercial or recreational ends; and the use of the desert by vehicles just for play — frequently off the road. Almost everyone who goes to the desert uses a motor vehicle. Access to the desert won't change, but the patterns of vehicle play will change in some instances. We must stop the proliferation of play areas in the desert, where almost any vehicle can go "off road." Desert soils and vegetation retain the marks of cross-country travel for many years, except in a few places where occasional rains, windstorms, and flash floods erase them. Thus, one vehicle traveling cross-country can create a new route of travel.

It is this proliferation which has caused the most serious problem. The California Desert will be managed to assure continued access on approved routes, open areas for vehicle play, and cross-country courses for competitive events. The designations will be made to minimize impacts on the natural cultural and aesthetic values of the desert, provide reasonable access, and reduce conflicts among uses.

BLM has an obligation to provide for vehicle recreation where appropriate, and the designation process will identify areas that meet that criterion. These issues will be addressed in detail in the motorized vehicle element of the proposed plan.

Q Will energy corridors be open to vehicle use? What about the possibility of sharing/using military areas for ORV use?

A The answer to the first question is yes — some energy corridors will be used for some kinds of recreational vehicle use. We have had extensive discussions with representatives from different utility companies on this topic. They are understandably concerned with possible damage to their facilities, and with possible liability, but are willing to allow some recreational use:

Right now, we cannot answer the second question. The law calls for cooperation among the Secretaries of Interior, Agriculture, and Defense in the development of the Desert Plan, and the question may be discussed. However, the mission of the military is national defense, and they have not viewed recreation as a compatible activity except in limited special cases.

Q Does BLM accept or support the rest-rotation concept of off-road vehicle [ORV] use?

A No. At this time, we do not support the concept of rest-rotation for ORV use areas in the California Desert because the data available now indicate it will not work.

The concept of rest-rotation is a proven method of managing livestock grazing on public lands, and has also been proposed for managing recreation. The basic idea is that when a heavily-used area starts to show signs of overuse (loss of vegetation, reduced wildlife, erosion, soil compaction), the area would be closed and given the necessary time to recover. In the meantime, a new area would be opened to accommodate the displaced users. When the new area started to show signs of overuse, the visitors could be shifted back to the now-recovered first area, or to another area. In some regions, management agencies have four or five alternative sites among which to rotate. The concept seems to work in some areas that receive ample rainfall.

Many ORV organizations, primarily those concerned with competitive events, have recognized the fact that their chosen activity has a very high potential to damage the desert environment, and have asked for a rest-rotation system for the competitive event areas. The reasoning behind this request is two-fold: first, it would spread the damage out over a wide area, perhaps at a level light enough to be acceptable, rather than concentrate it in one area; and secondly, the quality of the race courses would be improved by allowing several years of exposure to the elements to soften obvious damage such as ruts.

The problem is that the desert's ability to heal itself is rather poor. Scientists have estimated that, on the average, a disturbed desert area may take 100 years or more to recover to pre-disturbance conditions. For example, a recent investigation of a World War II Army camp near Needles revealed that there is still a one-third reduction in the number of perennial plants in the camp area as compared to an undisturbed area close by.

Although we do not support the rest-rotation concept at this time, we do not want to completely dismiss it, either. It is quite possible that we could find a way to make the concept work.

Scientific investigations of the desert are not going to end when the Desert Plan is completed; we may find specific areas out there that are capable of a reasonably speedy recovery. Or some researcher may discover a technique to artificially hasten rehabilitation.

Q It seems the BLM is biased towards consumptive use of the public lands. Why isn't the BLM doing more to protect the desert, as mandated by FLPMA?

A The law states that we are to provide for the use of the public lands by people for a wide variety of purposes. More precisely, FLPMA mandated that the public lands in the California Desert be managed under a program of multiple-use and sustained yield and the maintenance of environmental quality. The California Desert Plan is to provide for "the management, use, development and protection" of the public lands.

Although the law provides for a wide variety of uses on public lands, it is *not* a license to ignore or casually disregard environmental values. For any land use, anywhere in the desert, there will be an environmental price to be paid. In many cases, the use will be worth the environmental damage it creates; in other cases, it won't. This can be determined only by an accurate assessment of the benefits that would be gained by a proposed land use, and of the resource values that would be compromised. The key is to provide a balanced program of multiple-use, including such nonconsumptive uses as wilderness.

Q Why does BLM favor locking up the public lands of the desert in wilderness at the expense of active recreation and important economic use?

A This is the reverse side of the previous question. Multiple-use does not mean to extract all the resources for a fast profit today, but to assure the long-term productivity of the public lands and resources. Nor does it mean barring all consumptive uses. Open-pit mines and open areas for off-road vehicles are part of the multiple-use mix, but must be determined through the environmental analysis and decision making processes provided by law. That is what is being done in the California Desert Plan. Congress directed that the public lands of the California Desert be managed under programs of multiple-use and sustained yield and the maintenance of environmental quality. FLPMA defines multiple-use as the management of the public lands and resources "so that they are utilized in the combination that will best meet the present and future needs of the American people . . . a combination of balanced and diverse resource uses . . . and harmonious and coordinated management of the various resources without permanent impairment of the productivity of the land and the quality of the environment . . ." There's more to it, but that is it in a nutshell.

Q What was the basis for determining burro populations in the various plan alternatives? What will be done to control burros in areas where they compete with other wildlife such as the Desert bighorn sheep?

A All three action alternatives set forth positive programs to manage burros on the California Desert, and the proposed plan will take the same positive approach — recognizing there is a place for the feral burro on the desert, but also that uncontrolled burro populations can damage the long-term productivity of the land. The basis for determining population levels included available forage, water, competition with native plants and wildlife, and management goals. There is only so much vegetation and water available on the desert, and it must be shared among burros, wildlife, and livestock. Specific management prescriptions differ with the various multiple-use classes, but the basic approach is to establish “Herd Management Areas” to protect and manage burros and wild horses. We will study these areas closely to determine the extent of burro-related impacts. In those areas where the impacts are unacceptable, we may remove burros to keep the herds healthy and in balance with available forage. To the greatest extent possible, we will capture the burros and make them available to the public under the Adopt-a-Burro program. If capturing does not work, it may be necessary to destroy excess burros. This would be done in a humane manner only after all alternatives have been considered in a public process.

Q How does BLM make trade-offs when rare, threatened, and endangered animal or plant species are involved?

A A rare, threatened, or endangered species is one listed by the Federal Government or the State of California as being threatened to a large degree with the possibility of extinction. We are mandated by Federal law and Bureau policy to manage the public lands in a manner that will protect and enhance the status of these species and their Critical Habitats. Special management actions are necessary to prevent these species from becoming extinct.

In many cases, inventories have revealed where the rare, threatened, and endangered species occur, and what their habitat requirements are. Whenever an action is proposed that could impact one of these species, an environmental analysis must be prepared and the impacts on endangered species will be evaluated. Special site-specific plans and programs, including Habitat Management Plans, are designed to ensure the future of rare, threatened, and endangered species in the California Desert Conservation Area.

Q How does BLM propose to protect cultural sites when it is not even known where they all are?

A Many archaeologists think the California Desert may be one of the most significant regions in the world for pre-historic sites, and it is true we don't know where all the sites are. During our inventory of desert resources, we conducted a random sampling of selected desert areas to discover how widespread and numerous cultural sites really are. Using that information as a base, we estimated that there could be as many as 100,000 distinct sites within the CDCA. Roughly 12,000 sites are actually recorded.

Cultural sites need protection from several hazards until such time as we can afford a proper study. Natural erosion, along with decay, is a major problem. Human activity, including vandalism, pot-hunting, and just plain carelessness, is another.

We will use several approaches to protect cultural sites. The first isn't really protection — it is an authorized excavation by a qualified archaeologist. We will do as much as we can, and encourage others to do the same under our direction.

The second approach is through special land use designations. Some areas will be designated as Areas of Critical Environmental Concern. Others will become Archaeological-Historical Preservation Areas. There will be specific regulations designed to protect the cultural resources in these areas.

A third approach is the actual physical protection of significant sites with a fence, or barrier. Several ground figures, and some rock art sites, have been protected this way.

Environmental education and an awareness program are key elements in protecting cultural resources. When a person understands the importance of these sites, and can recognize them, he generally takes care of them.

The final approach is tough law enforcement. Our Rangers will work to catch vandals or pothunters on public lands, and we will prosecute those we catch.

Q What has BLM done to plan for special protection of springs, wells, and other waters from livestock, burros, and humans?

A We have done quite a lot, and intend to do much more. The importance of water in the desert cannot be overstated. Without it, of course, life is not possible; what little water there is must be available for all.

We are using several approaches to protect water sources. In the Desert Plan, the "Area of Critical Environmental Concern" (or "ACEC") classification will be used to protect riparian habitats and other water sources. Habitat management plans in important wildlife areas will focus on water sources. Grazing leases specify that water sources will be maintained. In addition, we are cooperating with the California Department of Fish and Game's program of installing water-storing devices called "guzzlers" to enhance water for wildlife.

Desert water sources will be covered in our education programs. We want recreation visitors to receive this message: "Feel free to visit a water source, but please do not camp by it. For if you do, you may have condemned some wildlife to death by dehydration."

Q What has the BLM done to protect desert soils?

A We have placed restrictions on the cross-country use of off-road vehicles in sensitive soil areas. As more information on soil characteristics becomes available, we will adjust the regulations on vehicle use accordingly. We will take into account the fact that some soils, because of their specific characteristics, are more subject to erosion or compaction than others.

The biggest single threat to desert soils is the indiscriminate use of vehicles driving cross-country over natural terrain. Soil is compacted by the weight of vehicles, changing groundwater movement and restricting root growth. In addition to compaction, the soil surface can be severely disturbed by the shearing action of spinning drive wheels; this tends to accelerate the process of erosion.

Loss of soil in the desert is critical. There has been no significant formation of topsoil in the desert since the end of the Pleistocene Era thousands of years ago. If soil erodes away, we may have to wait for another Ice Age for it to be replaced naturally.

Q What happened to all the original ACEC proposals, and how did BLM deal with the wilderness areas (WSAs) in the plan?

A Both the "ACECs," or areas of critical environmental concern, and the wilderness study areas underwent comprehensive analytical studies; but this process was not documented fully in the draft plan alternatives. In order to remedy this shortcoming, the processes were described in detail and the analysis for each area was presented in an information document entitled "Wilderness and Areas of Critical Environmental Concern in the California Desert Conservation Area." The booklet was published May 21, 1980, and was sent to more than 14,000 individuals, groups, and agencies which have had a continuing role in the planning process for the CDCA.

Briefly, resource specialists on the Desert Plan Staff submitted ACEC nominations based primarily on resource inventories. These were analyzed using the BLM's draft ACEC guidelines to determine if they met the criteria of relevance, importance, criticality, and protectability; then reviewed by geographic area to see which ones overlapped and could be consolidated or modified.

In the initial or inventory phase of the wilderness review, areas which met the criteria of the Wilderness Act of 1964 were identified as WSAs. In the study phase, these were analyzed with other resources in a comprehensive planning process leading to a recommendation of suitability or non-suitability to be forwarded to the Secretary of the Interior. This involved assigning a quality rating to each WSA, followed by multiple-use analysis and resource analysis. The results were presented for public review and comments in the draft plan alternatives.

Because of the intense public interest, all ACEC proposals were re-evaluated for the proposed plan. Some will be designated ACECs, and others will receive other designations or management prescriptions.

In addition, a complete re-evaluation was conducted of the WSAs based on public comment on the draft alternatives.

Q Why does the BLM have to designate areas as wilderness when the areas are so remote that people can't get to them to ruin them anyway?

A BLM cannot designate areas as wilderness; only Congress can do that. What we did, as required by Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), was to identify all the areas in the desert that met the wilderness criteria enacted by Congress. The Act specifically directed BLM to apply these criteria, embodied in Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act of 1964, to all public lands under our jurisdiction. We did just that in the California Desert.

The Wilderness Study Areas identified in the desert through the inventory process were studied to determine if they are suitable or unsuitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. The next step is to report our recommendation to the Secretary of the Interior and the President, who will report to the Congress. The actual wilderness designations will be made by the Congress.

Q How can BLM prevent harmful use in wilderness areas? Or, for that matter, how can BLM possibly protect any wilderness areas?

A The major threats to wilderness are related to actual changes in the character of the natural environment — changes created by road construction, mining, powerlines, and similar activities. These we can and will control through the environmental analysis and permit processes.

The protection of wilderness areas from inappropriate recreation use is more difficult, but not impossible. Our major effort will be through education provided by the environmental awareness program with the help of the volunteers and organized user groups.

BLM believes an informed visitor to the public lands will be a thoughtful visitor, and information and education will be key elements of the wilderness program.

Q Will BLM expand the analysis of power plants and utility corridors to include water requirements, future needs of on-going projects, communication site needs, and the need for access across wilderness areas?

A Yes, we will; but much of this analysis will be done in the future on a case-by-case basis in environmental impact statements as proposals come to us. The proposed plan will contain several utility corridors, based on the needs of the companies and service areas involved, as well as the impact on desert lands and resources. Other potential corridors will be discussed in an appendix to the plan.

At this time, it is difficult to analyze utility needs definitively, particularly as they relate to siting of projects. We think it is reasonable to assume that new technologies will bring new land use proposals in the future. Sites that are unacceptable today may be suitable for use with more sophisticated technologies. The multiple-use class guidelines in the plan have been designed with flexibility to meet future needs.

Q Portions of the desert are heavily used for research and education. Will the BLM consider this continuing need for use of the desert for research in the proposed plan?

A Yes. Not to do so would be to deny one of the most important human uses of the desert — a use that has enormous potential for future dividends.

Many scientists tend to think of the desert as a huge, open laboratory. There are plants and animals that have made unusual adaptations to an arid environment, some of which are unique — found nowhere else in the world. The sparseness of vegetation exposes geological structures to full view for study — an advantage to geologists not available in many other climates. The California Desert is thought by some to contain one of the most significant collections of prehistoric cultural sites in the world, many of which have yet to reveal their secrets.

Through the Desert Plan process, we learned more about the California Desert than was known previously. However, we also learned that there is much more we do not know — knowledge that could be quite important in managing the desert. Therefore, it is our intention to do all we can to stimulate research. We will conduct our own studies to the extent our budgets allow, but will also encourage academic institutions to independently pursue research on the desert's resources.

Q Does the BLM contemplate trying to provide a wide variety of recreational opportunities, or will they be limited to vehicle recreation and campgrounds?

A Indeed we do, but this point needs clarification. Actually, we do not have to provide anything; the desert itself does that. There is an incredible variety of recreational opportunities available in the desert. Our job is to make sure all these opportunities remain available — not only for present visitors, but also for future generations.

The primary reason people go to the desert for recreation is to experience something different from daily living. Desirable desert attributes include beauty, nature, solitude, and freedom. In order to provide a wide variety of recreation opportunities on a sustained-yield basis, these characteristics must be maintained.

A key point is that everyone uses a motor vehicle to get to the desert, but vehicles have a potential to damage the environment and disturb visitors pursuing quieter activities. This potential for damage and disturbance has led us to address the need for access to the desert separately from the use of vehicle play for recreation. Separating these issues will help us to maintain a wide variety of recreational opportunities.

Q What activities, recreational and otherwise, are allowed in Wilderness Study Areas?

A In very general terms, BLM's policy is to continue resource uses on lands under wilderness review in a manner that maintains the area's suitability for preservation as wilderness. This includes vehicle access, recreation, grazing and other uses. Activities that are not allowed are those that actually change the landscape. Some WSAs will be recommended as suitable for wilderness; others will be recommended as unsuitable and returned to full multiple-use management. It is critical that anyone who wants to fully understand this issue obtain a copy of BLM's "Interim Management Policy and Guidelines for Lands Under Wilderness Review," as it is a complicated issue with many legal aspects.

Q Why didn't BLM present a preferred alternative for management of the desert in its draft plan?

A We did not present a preferred alternative because we wanted full public involvement in formulating the proposed plan. We presented three action alternatives — protection, use, and balanced — and a “no action” alternative which would continue the present level of management and which serves primarily as a baseline against which to measure the effects of the action alternatives. We have used the extensive public input — from individuals, organizations, and agencies — on the draft alternatives to build a proposed plan from the best features of the draft alternatives. Everyone will have a chance to review and comment on the proposed plan.

Q Why did the BLM not extend the 90-day public review period for the draft plan?

A We did not do it because we could not. Congress set a deadline of September 30, 1980, for completion of the plan. If we had extended the public review period for the draft plan, we would not have been able to meet the deadline. Secretary of the Interior Cecil D. Andrus has a deep personal interest in this project, and has been following it closely. He has made it clear that BLM must complete the Plan on time, and that it will be presented for final approval before the end of the calendar year.

Q Why did the BLM propose a new National park in the East Mojave region of the desert?

A We didn't — the proposal came from a citizens group that believes it's a good idea. We discussed it in the Draft Plan Alternatives because a bill to create such a park was introduced in Congress, and we thought people should be aware of it as one of the management options for that region.

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