



Field Office, Fire and Fuel Reports DESERT ADVISORY COUNCIL

APRIL 2024



Barstow Field Office (BAFO)



*Photo: Rescuing a desert tortoise from a mine shaft in the Newberry Mountains Wilderness.
By Chris Otahal, BLM.*

Archaeology and Cultural Resources

Old Spanish National Historic Trail

(no change to this entry since the December 2023 DAC Report)

BLM Action: The BLM completed and submitted a nomination for the National Register of Historic Places of a segment of the Old Spanish National Historic Trail (OSNHT) known as Emigrant Pass.

Partners: Old Spanish Trail Association

Status: The nomination has been reviewed. In FY2023, BLM completed 193 acres of Class III surveys along the OSNHT. Quarterly consultation with the Old Spanish Trail Association is ongoing and a collaborative mapping project was completed in FY2023.

BLM Contacts: Alexis Francois, Archaeologist and Marc Stamer, Field Manager

Recreation

Special Recreation Permits

(no change to this entry since the December 2023 DAC Report)

BLM Action: The BAFO issued special recreation permits (SRPs) for recreation activities and vending.

Status: In FY2023, 161 SRPs were administered, including vendor permits for King of the Hammers. The SRPs included a variety of recreation events, mostly motorized race events (e.g., European scramble, vehicle testing, UTV races, car/truck race, speed timing trials, hare and hound,

sand drags, dual sport ride), and several multi-event permits. The BAFO issued letters of agreement for various events (e.g., LA Police Baker to Las Vegas Race).

BLM Contacts: Marc Stamer, Field Manager

Wildlife

Amargosa Vole Demographic and Disease Study, Habitat Enhancement and Population Augmentation Program

BLM Action: Since 2011, BAFO has been engaging with several partners to conduct studies and develop management strategies to prevent the extinction of the Amargosa vole and ultimately move the species towards recovery. In 2011, the world-wide population of the Amargosa vole hovered around 40-50 individuals. With the implementation of the management efforts, the population has grown to several 100s of individuals and a new population has been established in the historic range of the species in Shoshone. The BLM continues to work with partners to achieve a down-listing of the species from endangered to threatened status.

Partners: California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), Inyo County Road Department, Purdue University, U.S. Geological Service, University of California (UC) Davis, University of California Berkeley and United States Fish and Wildlife Service

Status: UC Davis/CDFW completed a range-wide survey of the Amargosa vole in the spring/summer of 2023. The initial study results indicated there was no need for immediate emergency actions. The report emphasized long-term water management is a key factor to address the recovery of the Amargosa vole.

The BAFO received funding to initiate a “mega-marsh” project with UC Davis to create a large marsh complex near “Borehole Marsh” to serve as a refugia/breeding site. Planning efforts are continuing for this multi-year project. A marsh has been restored on adjacent private lands and was successfully repopulated with Amargosa voles making the first-time voles have been present in this marsh for more than 120 years. Monitoring is continuing and potential additional supplementations are being conducted. Recent monitoring efforts have confirmed translocated voles have successfully reproduced in the new habitat.

In March 2023, BAFO installed 100 feet of post-and-cable fencing near Borehole Marsh to address incursion issues in the area. This builds upon past projects which have led to the installation of over 1,500 feet of fencing. BAFO has also been engaged in signing efforts in the area to help address incursion issues. The BAFO continues to work with partners to resolve issues including illegal fires, trash accumulation, and human waste.

BLM Contact: Chris Otahal, Wildlife Biologist

Amargosa River Monitoring Studies / Management Actions

BLM Action: The BAFO is involved in various monitoring studies / management actions associated with the Amargosa River including: Amargosa niterwort population monitoring, sensitive bird species spot mapping/Cowbird Management Program, tamarisk control efforts, SCAN monitoring, fish monitoring, hydrology studies including U.S. Geological Survey stream gauges, habitat restoration, endangered plant studies and spring studies.

Partners: Amargosa Conservancy, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, California Department of Transportation, The Nature Conservancy, Point Blue Conservation Science, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, Living Desert Zoo and Gardens, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Geological Survey.

Status: The BAFO continues to implement tamarisk management on the Amargosa River. The BAFO is developing a burn plan to address a large stand of tamarisk not suitable for treatment through other means.

Field work for the 18th year of long-term bird monitoring efforts was concluded by our partner, Point Blue Conservation Science. The 2023 season effort covered the same areas as in previous years and was expanded to cover some areas not previously sampled. The BAFO did not receive funding to continue this study for the 2024 season and are working to be able to fund this project in the future.

The BAFO established eight Assessment, Inventory and Monitoring (AIM) study sites on the Amargosa River in 2021. In 2023, several of these sites were re-sampled and some additional sites that could not be surveyed in 2022 were added. These sites will be resampled in 2024, to help document changes in the system resulting from our restoration and management efforts. Volunteers from Adventure Scientists continued collecting water samples for analysis as part of their national Wild and Scenic Rivers Program in 2023.

The BAFO is continuing to work with CalTrans to implement additional plantings in the Shoshone vicinity to add to restoration efforts in the area. In 2023, more than 100 willows and honey mesquite were planted through this effort. In January 2023, the Nature Conservancy planted approximately 11,000 coyote willow and 880 screwbean mesquites on a 2.74-acre portion of the Shoshone site and planted 8,000 coyote willows on a 0.75-acre site at the confluence of the Amargosa River and Willow Creek. The BAFO received additional funding to expand the Shoshone project. The BAFO will work with the Living Desert Zoo and Gardens over the next three years to install and maintain more than 1,000 additional honey mesquites.

The BAFO has received California State OHV funds to move forward with signing open/closed routes within the Amargosa North and Amargosa South Areas of Critical Concern which will allow BAFO to address unauthorized route usage in the vicinity of the Amargosa River.

The BAFO initiated a partnership with researchers to study the massive Screwbean Mesquite die-off observed on the Amargosa River. This project will feed into a larger project looking at this issue on a regional scale. The BAFO is working with the Mojave Native Plant Program to obtain seed collections from the Shoshone area to ensure the populations' genetics are preserved— and to serve as a seed source for future re-planting of screwbeans in the area. Two new screwbean mesquite research projects are scheduled to be initiated in FY2024.

The BAFO is working with University of Las Vegas researchers on a study to measure plant response to ongoing drought, potential native plant recovery, and develop tools for land managers to use in response to drought from climate change. The BAFO is working with another group of researchers who will conduct a study of using biocrusts (soil crusts created by fungi and mosses) in route restoration efforts. Both studies are in the Chicago Valley area near the Amargosa Wild and Scenic River. The BAFO is also working with a researcher to investigate the microbiology of springs, including those associated with the Amargosa River.

BLM Contact: Chris Otahal, Wildlife Biologist

Afton Canyon Wildlife Habitat Enhancement Efforts

BLM Action: The BAFO is continuing a focused wildlife habitat enhancement program on the Afton Canyon portion of the Mojave Trails National Monument. The section of the Mojave River flowing through the Afton Canyon Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) is currently considered “eligible” under the National Wild and Scenic River Act and is managed to maintain the scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, and cultural outstanding and remarkable values on which this determination was based. The BAFO is collecting data to help develop the management plan for the Mojave Trails National Monument.

Partners: 3M Corporation, Amargosa Conservancy Point Blue, California Alliance for Tamarisk Biocontrol, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, California Institute of Technology, Living Desert Zoo and Gardens, Mojave Desert Land Trust, Oregon State University, Princeton University, Townson University, University of California, Santa Barbara, and USGS

Status: The BAFO has been working with the Mojave Desert Land Trust to implement the Women in Science Discovering Our Mojave (WISDOM) program. Through WISDOM, minority female interns collect resource data from Afton Canyon to enhance their training in science, technology, engineering, and math. In 2023, the BAFO received funding to continue tamarisk beetle studies associated with this program. The Mojave Desert Land Trust recently had a celebration to highlight work over the last five years and follow some of the 33 interns' career paths after graduating from the WISDOM program. In 2023, nine additional interns graduated from this program, and BAFO is working with our partner to continue this program into 2024.

The BAFO, through the Fire and Fuels Program, has continued tamarisk treatments within

Afton Canyon and approximately 200 acres of tamarisk were treated / re-treated in 2023.

The BAFO continues to work with partners at USGS and The Living Desert Zoo and Gardens to develop a captive breeding / re-introduction program for the Southwestern Pond Turtle in Afton Canyon. With funding from BAFO, The Living Desert will upgrade their head start facility and develop an implementation plan for this species in 2024.

The BAFO continues to work with Southern California Edison and Brightline on restoration projects in Afton Canyon and to integrate with other on-going restoration efforts.

The BAFO is working with California Institute of Technology researchers on a research project looking at natural methane emissions as it relates to climate change. Afton Canyon will be one of the study sites. The BAFO is also working with NASA on an Autonomous Vehicle research project using Afton Canyon as their testing grounds.

BLM Contact: Chris Otahal, Wildlife Biologist

Lands and Realty - Major Rights-of-Ways

Southern California Edison – Eldorado Pisgah Lugo Transmission Line

BLM Action: The BAFO received an application to upgrade two existing 220-kilovolt transmission lines across 176 miles of the Eldorado Pisgah Lugo line to meet transmission line safety and reliability requirements.

Partners: Southern California Edison

Status: A draft environmental assessment is expected to be published in Fall 2024. Key issues include cultural and wildlife impacts with a proposed action to replace existing infrastructure on towers and insert several new steel monopoles. The BLM is awaiting seasonal survey data for a proposed action. A major cooperator is the National Park Service Mojave National Preserve.

BLM Contacts: Joan Patrovsky, Project Manager; Portia Samples, Realty Specialist

Minerals

Ongoing Mining Projects:

St. Cloud Exploratory Drilling Proposal

BLM Action: The BLM is working to complete an environmental assessment for a modification to an existing plan of operations held by St. Cloud Mining to drill 43 exploratory boreholes adjacent to their active open pit mine. This plan allows St. Cloud Mining to update and verify historic data and expand upon known areas of mineralization. The proposed action would disturb less than one acre of public land.

Status: In April 2024, the document was posted on ePlanning for 30-days and a public notice was distributed.

Pisgah Crater Right-of-Way

BLM Action: The BLM is working with San Bernardino County, to bring the Pisgah Crater right-of-way and unauthorized mine operator into compliance. A gate from the mine operator is blocking public access to the Pisgah Crater Lava Tube Trailhead.

Partners: County of San Bernardino, Department of Water Resources, and USMC

BLM Status: San Bernardino County informed the unauthorized mine operator of the non-compliance issue and the BAFO sent them a non-compliance letter.

Abandoned Mining Projects:

BLM Action: The BAFO, working with San Bernardino County, inspected an abandoned mining operation located in the Johnson Valley Off-highway Vehicle Area. The BLM is working with the County to release the mining operation's bond and begin site reclamation. The site has an open water well in contact with groundwater.

BLM Status: Plugging this well by California well abandonment regulations is the highest priority for the site. Work is anticipated to begin in the next few months.

Abandoned Mine Lands & Hazmat

BLM Action: The BAFO periodically closes abandoned mine lands (AML) features and inspects previously closed AML sites to protect the public.

BLM Status: The BLM is working to close the current Pinto Mountain III project and repair gates and cupolas damaged by the public or by natural erosion.

The BAFO is working on its third AML project in the Pinto Mountains, just north of Joshua Tree National Park. In fall 2023, 53 features (shafts and adits) were identified to be closed via bat gates or cupolas. Most of the features are a risk to the public because they are near open routes and off-highway vehicle recreation areas. An additional eight features were recognized in the Calico Mountains (just north of Barstow). Following the AML closure protocol, any active claims that overlapped with the AML features were identified. In January, 27 claimants were informed via letter about the public hazard and the BAFO's plan to close these features. Work is anticipated to start in early 2025.

In 2024, the BAFO inspected six closed features in the Oro Grande Mountains, west of Barstow. From September to December 2023, the BAFO inspected five sites with multiple closures per site in the Rand Mountains, Music Valley near Joshua Tree, and the Newberry Mountains Wilderness.

In March 2024, the BAFO assisted with the coordination of a desert tortoise rescue from an open mine shaft in the Newberry Mountains Wilderness. The BAFO remediated the mine to ensure it would not be a future hazard to wildlife or the public. The opening was encircled with chicken wire and large rocks, and groundwork was completed to secure the mineshaft.

BLM Contact: Jamie Livingood, Geologist

Other / Misc.

Recovery and Sustainment Partnership (RASP) Initiative

BLM Action: The BAFO continues working with the Marine Corps, Army, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop and implement the RASP Mojave Desert Tortoise Recovery Implementation Plan completed in 2022. To date, six projects have been approved and include restoration and off-highway vehicle education outreach efforts within the Fremont-Kramer, Superior-Cronese, and Ord-Rodman Areas of Critical Environmental Concern.

Partners: National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, U.S. Army, Marine Corps, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Status: The BAFO provided input on the scope and priorities for the first two years of this program. The BAFO is currently working with partners on project selection and RFP development for FY2024 funds.

Rangeland Management

Round Mountain Virtual Fencing Project

BLM Action: The BAFO received funding to initiate a virtual fencing project for the Round Mountain allotment in the Juniper Flats area. Cattle wear collars that connect to base stations signaling their boundaries instead of a traditional fence. This technology will help reduce the conflict between off-highway vehicle riders and ranchers, wildlife and fences.

Status: Installation is planned for 2024.

BLM Contact: Kelly Sandersfeld, Natural Resource Specialist

El Centro Field Office (ECFO)



Photo: Matthew (Matt) Lohr, new ECFO Field Manager

Archaeology and Cultural Resources

New Archaeology Contractor

BLM Action: The ECFO hired an American Conservation Experience contractor to assist with special cultural resource projects from December 2023 to June 2024. Taylor Liddane is responsible for updating the cultural resources Geographic Information System database, coordinating Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act compliance with the Imperial Valley Desert Museum, and conducting field work to monitor important archaeological sites across the ECFO.

Partners: Imperial Valley Desert Museum, California State Parks.

Status: Taylor is midway through her contract period and making excellent progress.

BLM Contact: Carrie Sahagun, Associate Field Manager

Lands and Realty

Apiary Land Use Permits

BLM Action: The ECFO is in the process of renewing seven land use permits authorizing the placement of apiaries on public lands in Imperial and eastern San Diego counties. The BLM will permit up to 60 specific sites where the seven applicants can store apiaries. The BLM has been permitting the placement of apiaries on public lands since the 1980s. Beekeepers use the apiary sites to keep bees on public lands during winter months to protect hives from direct applications of pesticides on local crops. In Imperial County, beekeeping and the storage of apiaries date back to the start of irrigated agriculture development in the early 1900s and is critical to the agricultural community.

Status: The BLM is in the process of creating maps and finalizing NEPA documentation.

BLM Contact: Katherine Johnston, Realty Specialist

Minerals and Mining

SMP Gold Corp. Exploration Plan of Operations Update

BLM Action: SMP Gold Corporation plans to conduct exploratory drilling activities at the Oro Cruz historic mining area in the Cargo Muchacho Mountains in eastern Imperial County.

Partners: Imperial County Planning and Development Services

Status: An appeal and petition for a stay were submitted to the Interior Board of Land Appeals and the petition for a stay was denied on February 2, 2024. The reclamation plan is pending approval by Imperial County.

BLM Contact: Mayra Martinez, Geologist

Western Mesquite Mines, Inc. Rainbow East Exploration Plan of Operations

(no changes to this entry since the December 2023 DAC Report)

BLM Action: The BLM received a plan of operations from Western Mesquite Mines, Inc. to conduct exploratory drilling activities at the Rainbow East project site in eastern Imperial County. The project proposes new access roads, road improvements, and 22 drill pads. Activities at the project area will disturb approximately two acres of public lands.

Partners: Imperial County Planning and Development Services

Status: The BLM reviewed the plan of operations, and it meets all surface management requirements. Next steps will be pre-NEPA information gathering.

BLM Contacts: Mayra Martinez, Geologist

Salton Sea Geophysical Exploration

BLM Action: A professor from Oregon State University submitted a project proposal to conduct a magnetotelluric survey of the Salton Trough fault systems. The data collected will image electric properties of the subsurface at 24 data collection points in Imperial County and will help map crustal anomalies, partial melt, crustal strain, and the evolution of fault to rifting zones.

Status: The BLM has reviewed the project description and determined it to be casual use.

BLM Contacts: Mayra Martinez, Geologist

Falcon Ridge Lithium Exploration and Development

BLM Action: In December 2022 and October 2023, the BLM met with Falcon Ridge Lithium Group to discuss a proposed lithium project near Bombay Beach. The project would be completed in three phases with each phase requiring a written proposal for BLM review and NEPA as necessary. Lithium is regulated under the BLM's surface management regulations.

Status: The BLM expects to receive project proposals for the seismic survey and drilling exploration before the close of FY24.

BLM Contacts: Mayra Martinez, Geologist

Recreation

Visitor Services Unit/ Emergency Medical Services

BLM Action: As of March 2024, Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area visitation reached 814,174. Since October 2023, staff responded to 265 emergency medical and rescue calls. The ECFO is applying for California OHV Division grant funds to fund emergency medical services (EMS) staff labor and purchase medical supplies and equipment.

Partners: Imperial County Emergency Medical Services, American Medical Response ambulance, Reach Air, Mercy, El Centro Regional Medical Center, Pioneer Memorial Hospital, BLM Alaska Fire Service, BLM Law Enforcement Operational Medical Unit, El Centro and Yuma Sector Border Patrol, Homeland Security Investigators.

Status: The ECFO Ranger Stations were scheduled to close on April 14, 2024. Visitor Services/EMS Staff will evaluate field staffing after the ranger stations close based on visitor use and weather conditions.

BLM Contact: Alex Schlumpberger, Park Ranger

Outreach

BLM Action: The ECFO participated in and held various outreach events in Imperial County: Arizona Western College Career Fair, Magnolia Elementary School class visit, Tierra Del Sol racing event and El Centro Naval Air Facility (NAF) Air Show.

Partners: Central Union High School, Imperial Valley Desert Museum, California Federation of Mineralogical Societies, Patten Energy (Ocotillo Wind Energy Facility), Imperial Valley Regional Occupation Program.

Status: The ECFO is planning to attend various STEM and Career Days at local schools such as Imperial Valley College, Ben Hulse Elementary, and Holtville High School. Two outreach events are planned, an interpretive hike at Sacaton Overlook in McCain Valley and a site visit to the Hauser geode beds.

BLM Contact: Michael Mujica, Park Ranger; Ismael Ramirez, Natural Resource Specialist; Esteban Ramos, Law Enforcement Ranger; Rogelio Rubio, Park Ranger

Renewable Energy and Transmission

Perkins Renewable Energy Project (East Mesa Renewable Energy Project)

BLM Action: Intersect Power, LLC (IP) filed for a solar energy development right-of-way for a proposed 1,150-megawatt solar energy facility on public lands in southern Imperial County. The project includes arrays of solar photovoltaic panels and facilities and a battery energy storage system. In December 2024 IP submitted an amended application to include an additional 830 acres of withdrawn lands managed by the Bureau of Reclamation and 520 acres of private lands. The project totals 7,325 acres of which 6,050 are proposed to be developed.

Partners: California Energy Commission (CEC)

Status: The BLM is coordinating with IP on cultural resource surveys and other pre-NEPA related data gathering. IP filed its application with the CEC in February 2024.

BLM Contact: Tristan Riddell, Realty Specialist

Salton Sea Solar Renewable Energy Project

BLM Action: The BLM received an application from Indio Solar Partners II, LLC to construct, operate, maintain, and decommission an approximately 500-megawatt alternating current solar photovoltaic facility and battery energy storage system project on 3,861 acres in western Imperial County. The proposed project would also include a gen-tie, inverters, substation, perimeter fencing, roads, and a supervisory control and data acquisition system.

Partners: Imperial County Planning and Development Services

Status: After several reviews and resubmittals of the plan of development, the BLM held its initial preliminary application meeting in January 2024. The lands proposed for development under the solar energy application are also being considered as part of a future geothermal lease sale initiated by the BLM. The BLM is currently processing both the solar project and the geothermal lease sale.

BLM Contact: Tristan Riddell, Realty Specialist

Truckhaven Geothermal Update

BLM Action: Geothermal wells have been approved in the Truckhaven area. For additional project details, see previous DAC reports. To date, Ormat has completed grading of the access road and pad for two drill sites, drilling of both wells, and flow tests for both wells. Last year, Ormat submitted a utilization plan proposing the construction of two energy facilities, a solar field, a transmission line, additional injection and production wells, and pipelines on a combination of BLM, state, and private lands.

Partners: Imperial County Planning and Development Services, California State Parks, California State Lands Commission

Status: The BLM received a revised utilization plan, and it is currently undergoing staff review.

BLM Contact: Mayra Martinez, Geologist; Matthew Wokosin, Petroleum Engineering Tech

Wildlife and Biological Resources

BLM Action: The ECFO received approximately \$192,000 from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) round three fund to continue restoration and wildland fire management work in the San Sebastian Marsh/San Felipe Creek Watershed, a National Natural Landmark and Area of Critical Environmental Concern. The ECFO is coordinating a desert pupfish working group with California Dept of Fish and Wildlife, California State Parks, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, non-profits and Tribes to plan population surveys and restoration work in the Salton Sea Basin.

Partners: California State Parks, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Tribes.

Status: The BLM is working on a schedule to utilize the funds and develop an environmental assessment for restoration work.

BLM Contact: Ismael Ramirez, Natural Resource Specialist

Other

Facilities/Maintenance Updates

BLM Action: The ECFO is repairing storm damage to access roads and road shoulders in the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area and other areas. Staff is preparing for four major maintenance projects and several future trash clean-ups including Osborne Overlook and the Grays Well Road shoulder stabilization projects, road fill and grading of Painted Gorge Road, and trail repairs to a portion of the Back Country Discovery Trail.

Partners: Tread Lightly! and several OHV clubs

Status: Ongoing

BLM Contact: Asdrubal Estrada, Acting Assistant Field Manager Support Services

Needles Field Office (NFO)



Photo: Amboy Crater Trail by BLM

Lands and Realty

NextEra/Boulevard Associates Equinox Solar Project Amended (Frontera Solar Project)

BLM Action: The BLM received an application from NextEra to construct a 500-megawatt solar facility on public lands in Inyo and San Bernardino counties. NextEra (Applicant) applied to amend the previous right-of-way application for the Frontera Solar Energy Project. The amended application includes a name change from Frontera to Equinox Solar Project. The project would include construction, operation, maintenance, and decommissioning of an approximately 500-megawatt solar photovoltaic facility on about 600 acres of public lands. The Applicant withdrew other public land parcels identified for solar facility development in Frontera. The project's point of interconnection to the electrical grid would be the Trout Canyon Substation in Clark County, Nevada. Several 230-kV gen-tie route options are being considered.

Status: The project amendment moved the proposed solar facility to Development Focus Area lands to conform with the land use plan.

BLM Contacts: John Russell Hansen, Realty Specialist; Mitch Owens, Assistant Field Manager

Agricultural Inspection Station

BLM Action: The BLM received an application from the California Department of General Services to construct a new agricultural inspection station near Goffs to replace the existing station east of Needles. The inspection station would be in an existing Federal Highway Administration right-of-way adjacent to Interstate 40 and west of Goffs road. The current on-ramp from Goffs road to westbound Interstate 40 would be replaced with a new on-ramp through the inspection station. The inspection station east of Needles would be removed and restored.

Status: The BLM reviewed the jurisdictional status of the lands and determined the lands

associated with the project are managed by the NFO. The proposed footprint for the station is in a Title 23 right-of-way near Fenner rest area. Cost recovery has been established and the environmental review is underway.

BLM Contacts: John Russell Hansen, Realty Specialist; Ron Nuckles, Field Manager

Minerals & Mining

Castle Mountain Mine Modification to Plan of Operations

BLM Action: The NFO received and reviewed a plan modification from Castle Mountain Mine to expand the mine operation. Castle Mountain Mine is an open pit gold mine in the Hart Mining District of San Bernardino County. The expansion of mining will occur on private and public lands in the previous Castle Mountain Mine planning area.

Partners: NPS and San Bernardino County

Status: The plan has been reviewed and is complete. The BLM is working to publish a Notice of Intent in the *Federal Register*.

BLM Contacts: Mitch Owens, Assistant Field Manager; Rose Pettiette, Geologist

Recreation

Amboy Crater Trails

BLM Action: The Amboy Crater trails project has five main components: motorized intrusion protection, trail development, signing, identification of future vault toilet at overflow parking, and granting a right-of-way. The project provides the public with a non-motorized/non-mechanized network of hiking trails, directional signing, emergency gate, and bouldering to prevent vehicle intrusion off the parking area.

Partners: Sierra Club, Fort Mojave Indian Tribe

Status: The decision record and finding of no significant impact were signed and the project will start when weather is appropriate.

BLM Contacts: Mitch Owens, Assistant Field Manager

National Monuments

Mojave Trails National Monument Planning process

BLM Action: The NFO is in the pre-planning stage of the Mojave Trails National Monument Plan.

Status: The Notice of Intent for the MTNM-Monument Management planning process has been

published and public scoping is complete. The BLM is working on drafting alternatives.

BLM Contacts: Mitch Owens, Assistant Field Manager

Fire Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation

York Fire

BLM Action: In 2023, the York Fire burned about 80,000 acres of federal lands, 663 of which were in the NFO.

Status: The NFO is completing law enforcement patrols and beginning the environmental review process for signage installation and invasive plant control as part of the post-fire emergency stabilization and rehabilitation effort.

BLM Contacts: Nicole Keefner, Natural Resource Specialist; Ron Nuckles, Field Manager

Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office (PSSCFO)



Photo: Alligator Rock Area of Critical Environmental Concern by Bob Wick

Renewable Energy and Transmission

The PSSCFO manages more than three dozen individual operational and proposed renewable energy development projects.

Crimson Solar Project

(no change to this entry since the December 2023 DAC report)

BLM Action: The BLM issued rights-of-way grant to Sonoran West Holding, LLC for the solar facility, battery energy storage system, substation, access roads, and an operations and maintenance building. The applicant applied to add a second gen-tie to the project west of the Colorado River Substation.

Partners: Sonoran West Holdings, LLC and Recurrent Energy, LLC

Status: The BLM is reviewing the application of a second gen-tie to the project. The right-of-way holder completed construction of the battery energy storage system in October 2022. The BLM is reviewing pre-construction plans prior to issuing approval for construction.

BLM Contacts: Dan Kasang, Assistant Field Manager; Tamara Faust, Project Manager

Arica Solar Project and Victory Pass Solar Projects

(no change to this entry since the December 2023 DAC report)

BLM Action: The Department of the Interior recently announced the two projects are now fully operational. The combined projects will generate up to 465 megawatts of electricity and provide up to 400 megawatts of battery storage.

Partner: Clearway Solar
Status: Fully energized

BLM Contacts: Dan Kasang, Assistant Field Manager, Caroline Woods, Project Manager

Desert Sunlight Storage

BLM Action: A right-of-way grant was issued in December 2021, to Sunlight Solar LLC (a subsidiary of NextEra Energy) for construction of a 230-MW battery energy storage system on approximately 94 acres in the Desert Sunlight project right of way authorization; additionally, it would tie into the existing Desert Sunlight 230-kVgen-tie line and connect to the Red Bluff Substation. The BLM authorized a second battery energy storage system within the Desert Sunlight project in May 2023. The battery energy storage system is now fully operational.

Partner: Sunlight Solar LLC
Status: Fully operational

BLM Contacts: Dan Kasang, Assistant Field Manager, Regan Watt, Project Manager

Desert Quartzite Solar

(no change to this entry since the December 2023 DAC report)

BLM Action: An amended right-of-way for reduced footprint was issued March 2022 and a phased notice to proceed was issued January 2023. Construction began February 2023 and is ongoing.

Partner: EDF Renewables
Status: Authorization granted

BLM Contacts: Dan Kasang, Assistant Field Manager, Joan Patrovsky, Project Manager

Easley Solar

BLM Action: The BLM initiated public scoping for the proposed Easley project and is working on drafting the environmental assessment for the solar project.

Partner: Intersect Power
Status: Review and environmental compliance

Sapphire Solar

BLM Action: The BLM held public meetings for the proposed Sapphire Solar project. The BLM is working on drafting the environmental assessment for the project.

Partner: EDF Renewables
Status: Review

Lands and Realty

Santa Ana Wash Congressional Land Exchange

(no change to this entry since the December 2023 DAC report)

BLM Action: The John D. Dingell Jr. Conservation, Management and Recreation Act directs the Secretary of the Interior to convey approximately 417 acres of public land in San Bernardino County currently managed by the BLM to the San Bernardino Valley Water Conservation District (Conservation District). In exchange, the Conservation District would convey up to 369 acres of land to the BLM. The land to be exchanged lies within the Upper Santa Ana Wash Land Management and Habitat Conservation Plan (Plan) area and hosts nearby cities, county, mining companies, wildlife agencies, and water organizations. The area is regionally important for mineral aggregates, flood control, groundwater recharge, recreation, and habitat for threatened and endangered species. Section 1003 of the Dingell Act requires the Conservation District to pay all related exchanges costs. Upon completion of the exchange, and pursuant to the Dingell Act, the Conservation District could continue maintenance, operation, construction, or relocation of, or expansion of, groundwater recharge facilities on the lands conveyed to the BLM to accommodate groundwater recharge of the Bunker Hill Basin if the activities do not in conflict with the Plan. The non-federal lands within portions of the area are encumbered with easements, leases, and agreements to which the exchange will be subject.

Partner: San Bernardino Valley Water Conservation District

Status: The environmental site assessment was submitted in June 2022. Resolution of trespass issues and cleanup of the BLM and Conservation District lands have been completed. The BLM is reviewing title documentation prior to exchanging the lands.

BLM Contact: Dara J. Glass, Associate Field Manager

Customs and Border Patrol Make Safe Project and Relocatable Towers

(no change to this entry since the December 2023 DAC report)

BLM Action: U.S. Customs and Border patrol applied for two right-of-way grants, one to complete construction activities along the international border and remediate disturbed areas that were previously waived from NEPA requirements, and the other to temporarily place autonomous surveillance towers, integrated surveillance towers, and emergency beacons at various locations along the border.

Partners: U.S. Customs and Border Patrol

Status: The BLM entered an interagency agreement with U.S. Customs and Border Patrol and will schedule meetings to discuss the projects.

BLM Contact: Dan Kasang, Assistant Field Manager

National Monuments

Sand to Snow National Monument Planning

(no change to this entry since the December 2023 DAC report)

BLM Action: Develop a land use management plan. The Sand to Snow National Monument (SSNM) is jointly managed by the BLM and U.S. Forest Service through a Service-First Agreement. Both agencies are initiating actions to meet the new responsibilities in managing this national monument. A joint BLM-USFS interdisciplinary team was assembled in 2022 and developed an early draft Analysis of the Management Situation (AMS). The draft AMS identifies the current and existing baseline management for the SSNM, as it applies to items in the monument proclamation. The draft AMS is the first step in the planning process for the Monument Plan. The Monument Plan will provide for the proper care and management of the objects of historical and scientific interest for which the monument was designated, and conserve and protect the cultural, ecological, and scientific resources found in the monument.

Partners: U.S. Forest Service San Bernadino National Forest

Status: The BLM and Forest Service hosted three public information meetings and are preparing to begin the activity planning process.

BLM Contact: Jihadda Govan, Sand to Snow National Monument Manager

Ridgecrest Field Office (RFO)



*Photo: The RFO hosted AmeriCorps Gold 2 crew Jan 22, 2023 - Feb 4, 2024.
The AmeriCorps crew in Panamint Valley surrounded by blooming desert gold flowers.*

Grazing

Sheep Grazing

BLM Action: The RFO has received multiple requests for ephemeral sheep grazing for spring 2024 with additional requests anticipated due to forage availability.

Status: A few permittees have already received their signed authorization for turn out in Cantil Common, Hansen, Bissell and Boron allotments. The range specialist will continue to measure forage availability throughout the season.

BLM Contact: Priscilla Watson-Wynn, Grazing Natural Resource Specialist

Kelso Valley Grazing Permits Renewal Process

BLM Action: The RFO renewed grazing permits, in conjunction with Bakersfield Field Office, for the reconfigured Kelso Valley allotment in 2023, in response to the Rudnick Common Relinquishment in 2020. The Final Grazing Decision was appealed with a petition for stay by Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, and Wilderness Watch.

Partners: BLM Grazing permittees for new Kelso Peak and Rocky Point Allotments

Status: The permittees have signed renewed grazing permits for the reconfigured allotments in Kelso Valley and are permitted to graze these allotments. Appellants petition to stay was denied in July 2023. Western Watersheds Project appealed the decision to deny the stay in August 2023. All parties agreed the case was suitable for summary judgment motion. The BLM is working through the scheduling order, analyzing and responding to appellants motions for summary judgement.

BLM Contacts: Priscilla Watson-Wynn, Natural Resource Specialist

Deep Springs Valley, South Oasis, Eureka Valley, and Last Chance Allotment Grazing Permit Renewals *(no update to this entry since the December 2023 DAC Report)*

BLM Action: The RFO is preparing two environmental assessments to renew the grazing permits for four allotments in our northern field office: Deep Springs Valley, South Oasis, Eureka Valley and Last Chance. Field work to assess rangeland health began in 2022.

Partners: Permittees - Deep Springs Trustees and Denver Square BLM Grazing Lease, LLC.

Status: The RFO completed external scoping and rangeland health assessments. Development of the environmental assessment and coordination with permittees is on-going.

BLM Contacts: Priscilla Watson-Wynn, Natural Resource Specialist

White Wolf and Oasis Ranch Allotment Rangeland Health Assessments

BLM Action: The RFO will conduct rangeland health assessments on two allotments: White Wolf and Oasis Ranch. These assessments will be used in conjunction with an environmental assessment to process the renewal of these grazing permits.

Partners: Permittees: Triple D Ranches and White Mountain Ranch, LLC.

Status: The RFO will conduct the assessments in spring and summer of 2024.

BLM Contacts: Priscilla Watson-Wynn, Natural Resource Specialist

Lands and Realty - Major Rights-of-Ways

Indian Well Valley Ground Water Authority

BLM Action: The RFO received applications for 98 geotechnical boring locations for a future 24-inch buried water conveyance pipeline from California City to Ridgecrest. The pipeline would be 50.6 miles in length with 20.6 miles on public lands and 30 miles on private and state lands.

Partners: Indian Wells Valley Groundwater Authority employing contractor Provost & Prichard Engineering Group.

Status: The RFO is processing the two applications, one for the geotechnical boring locations and one for the buried conveyance pipe

BLM Contacts: Paul Rodriquez, Realty Specialist; Dana Stephenson, Assistant Field Manager

Southern California Edison – Ivanpah to Control Transmission Line

(no updates to this entry since the December 2023 DAC Report)

BLM Action: The RFO received an application to upgrade seven existing 115-kilovolt transmission lines across 360 miles of the Ivanpah-Control line to meet transmission line safety and reliability requirements.

Partners: Southern California Edison

Status: A draft environmental impact assessment is expected to publish in summer 2024. Key issues include cultural and visual impacts with a proposed action to demolish existing lattice towers and replace with steel monopoles. The BLM is awaiting survey data for an alternative to reroute the line around three Areas of Critical Environmental Concern in Owens Valley.

BLM Contacts: Joan Patrovsky, Project Manager; Paul Rodriquez, Realty Specialist

Southern California Edison – Control to Silver Peak Transmission Line

BLM Action: The RFO received an application to upgrade two existing 115-kilovolt transmission lines across 62 miles of the Control-Silver Peak line to meet transmission line safety and reliability requirements.

Partners: Southern California Edison

Status: A draft environmental impact assessment is expected to publish in early 2025. Key issues include cultural and wildlife impacts with a proposed action to demolish existing wooden poles and replace with steel monopoles. The BLM is awaiting survey data for an alternative to reroute the line around bi-state sage-grouse habitat and an Area of Critical Environmental Concern in the White Mountains. A major cooperator is the USFS Inyo National Forest-White Mountain District.

BLM Contacts: Joan Patrovsky, Project Manager; Paul Rodriquez, Realty Specialist

Minerals and Mining

Exploratory Drilling by Gold Discovery Group LLC

BLM Action: The BLM approved a plan of operation for Gold Discovery Group, LLC to explore for placer gold in the area surrounding Johannesburg, Red Mountain, and Atolia. The approved activity includes allowing the operator to enter and gather samples of material from 32 unpatented placer mining claims, drive a drill rig along routes to those claims, drill 293 sample holes, refill and plug the same holes with the excess material, and rake tire tracks upon completion. The exploration holes are in an area designated as critical tortoise habitat.

Partners: Gold Discovery Group, LLC

Status: The environmental assessment is complete and a finding of no significant impact and decisions record were signed in August 2023. To date, 17 holes have been drilled. Reclamation of drill sites and vehicle tracks are progressing.

BLM Contacts: Dana Stephenson, Assistant Field Manager

Recreation

Americorps Crew

BLM Action: Americorps crewmembers spent two weeks in the RFO cleaning, completing maintenance, weeding, fixing trails, and participating in career training.

Partners: Americorps, Pacific Crest Trail Association, Leave No Trace

BLM Contacts: Aly Heare, Outdoor Recreation Planner

Special Recreation Permits

Since Dec. 2023, the RFO had 15 special recreation permits ranging from small running clubs hosting a 5K, 80-mile competitive dirt bike races, endurance horse races, and commercial group camping retreats.

BLM Contact: Aly Heare, Outdoor Recreation Planner

American Conservation Experience Restoration Crew

BLM Action: The American Conservation Experience (ACE) restoration crew completed six months of restoration work in March 2024. The crew of 12 completed most of the restoration work in the Fremont-Kramer Area of Critical Environmental Concern and monitored and documented new off-highway vehicle incursions in nine wilderness areas. Data is still being compiled, but more than 150 sites were restored, and even more sites monitored for the effectiveness of previous restoration efforts.

Partners: American Conservation Experience

BLM Contacts: Katy Meyer, Outdoor Recreation Planner

American Conservation Experience EPIC Members

BLM Action: Three American Conservation Experience Emerging Professionals in Conservation (EPIC) members are continuing to work in the RFO to assist with off-highway vehicle recreation and restoration. The members will monitor sensitive plant species and wildlife habitats adjacent to or in OHV recreation sites and perform effectiveness monitoring on previous restoration sites and help plan work for future restoration crews.

Partners: American Conservation Experience

BLM Contacts: Katy Meyer, Outdoor Recreation Planner

Great Basin Institute Restoration Technicians

BLM Action: Two Great Basin Institute Restoration Technicians were onboarded in January 2024 to perform off-highway vehicle (OHV) trail maintenance, OHV trail monitoring, OHV sign installation, kiosk maintenance, and a variety of other OHV recreation management work. Their work will be throughout the RFO to maintain OHV recreation opportunities.

Partners: Great Basin Institute

BLM Contacts: Katy Meyer, Outdoor Recreation Planner

Wild Horses and Burros

Ridgecrest Regional Wild Horse and Burro Corral

BLM Action: The Ridgecrest Regional Wild Horse and Burro Corral remains open to the public with adoptions on the first and third Fridays of most months.

Status: The corrals are at 1,000-animal capacity due to gathers in late 2023. Adoptions for FY23 include 58 horses and 65 burros adopted to appropriate homes. Sales for FY23 include combined total of 178 horses and burros. FY24 adoptions include six horses and six burros. Direct sales total 32 horses and eight burros.

BLM Contacts: Louis Andreas, Wild Horse and Burro Specialist; Dana Stephenson, Assistant Field Manager

Wildlife

South Oasis Windmill Russian Thistle Project

BLM Action: The RFO is working on a multi-year project to treat noxious weeds and restore rangelands to improve wildlife habitat quality and forage production for cattle in the South Oasis allotment. About 130 acres of Russian thistle dominate the landscape, outcompeting native vegetation. The goal of the project is to reduce the Russian thistle seed bank and restore native vegetation.

Partners: Lake Mead Inter-Regional Invasive Plant Management Team, NPS; Deep Springs College-Permittee of South Oasis allotment; Sierra Club

Status: The BLM will continue to treat the project area in spring of 2024. A service trip with Sierra Club is organized in July 2024.

BLM Contacts: Priscilla Watson-Wynn, Natural Resource Specialist

California Desert Interagency Fire Program (CDIFP)



Photo: Riverside Job Fair, December 2023

Fire Incidents

Fires as of March 20, 2024

BLM Action: There were six fires on lands protected by the California Desert Interagency Fire Program (CDIFP) as of March 20, 2024. These fires burned about 107 acres of BLM-managed lands. The unit responded to five additional fires that threatened but were stopped short of burning CDIFP protected lands.

Partners: The CDIFP has cooperative fire agreements with several counties and cities and other federal and state partners including Riverside County Fire, San Bernardino County Fire, Kern County Fire, Redlands City Fire Department, Apple Valley City Fire Department, Victorville City Fire Department, Palm Springs City Fire Department, Canyon Lake City Fire Department, the City of Highland, CAL FIRE, U.S. Forest Service, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Status: All the fires mentioned are out.

BLM Contacts: Paul Gibbs, District Fire Management Officer

Fuels Projects

BLM Action: Fuels treatments are planned and implemented to meet a variety of objectives ranging from community and infrastructure protection to habitat restoration and invasive plant management. Using methods such as hand, mechanical, chemical, and prescribed burning, the unit completes these treatments to protect lives, property, and natural/cultural resources. Fuels management also provides fire suppression personnel opportunities to control wildfires and protect infrastructure and private property.

Partners: Partners on the BLM and National Park Service (NPS) fuels treatments for 2024 include the California Conservation Corps, the Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency (RCHCA), and the Ramona Band of Cahuilla Indians. The NPS is using the Ancestral Lands and

California Conservation Corps as well as contractors to implement treatments to protect Joshua trees in areas modeled to be refugia in the face of a warming and drying climate. Other BLM partners include the San Bernardino Valley Water Conservation District (SBVWCD), California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), The Wildlands Conservancy, the Center for Natural Lands Management, the Cleveland National Forest, the Resource Conservation District of Greater San Diego County, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, and Customs and Border Protection.

Status: The CDIFP received funding to treat 10,444 acres in FY24. The unit has completed 5,321 acres of fuels treatments to date in FY24. In addition to community protection in wildland-urban interface (WUI) areas, Joshua tree refugia areas were treated to provide clearance for individual trees during potential fires. Prescribed fires were managed to restore habitat for Stephens' kangaroo rat in western Riverside County and to restore marsh habitat for Yuma Ridgway's rail at the Dos Palmas Preserve. These projects were completed in coordination with partners such as the RCHCA, SBVWCD, and others. There were 51 treatments planned for FY24 but only 26 were funded. If fully funded, approximately 47,858 acres would be treated in the California Desert District, Joshua Tree National Park, and Mojave National Preserve.

BLM Contacts: James Gannon, Unit Fuels Program Manager

Mitigation and Education Projects

BLM Action: The BLM has 53 community assistance activities planned in FY24. Assistance activities help communities withstand the effects of wildfires and build resilience into the communities if a fire were to occur. BLM staff worked with cooperators and communities to plan and implement local fuels treatments such as the Sunrise Community Fuel Break in Julian and the North Mountain Fuel Break near Poppet Flats south of Banning. Both treatments protected communities from wildfires including the 2003 Cedar Fire and the 2006 Esperanza Fire. Ongoing maintenance occurs to ensure effectiveness.

Partners: California Fire Safe Council (FSC), San Diego County FSC, Border Agencies Fire Council, and 28 of the community fire safe councils throughout the unit, U.S. Forest Service, CAL FIRE, and various local government agencies.

Status: The BLM conducted educational events and activities such as the Bart Hall Outdoor Show and the Last Chance Survival Simulation Workshop. Planned activities include the Los Angeles County Fair, Temecula Balloon and Wine Festival, and the California State Fair. Two additional WUI workshops are planned for San Diego County along with Community Wildfire Protection Plan updates. Planning is underway for mitigation-education in Inyo and Mono counties and the Morongo Basin with Joshua Tree National Park. BLM staff trained Fire Safe Councils and community members at the Home-Hardening training and WUI for Fire Safe Councils workshop.

BLM Contacts: Garth Crow and Jason Winbigler, Mitigation-Education Specialists

Hiring Updates

Workforce Transformation

BLM Action: The California Desert District hosted a job fair December 1-3 in Riverside and interviewed more than 100 applicants. The BLM advertised firefighter positions on engines, the helicopter, and the dispatch center and are in the process filling permanent and temporary positions starting in April or May 2024.

Status: The BLM and NPS received additional funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. These funds have been used to temporarily increase the salary of firefighters by 50% or \$20,000 (whichever is less) since early 2022 to recruit and retain federal wildland firefighters. These funds have been extended through October 2024. A bipartisan effort is underway in Congress to make long-term increases to federal wildland firefighters' pay. Approximately 80% of firefighter positions in the CDIFP program are currently filled.

BLM Contacts: Paul Gibbs, District Fire Management Officer