



U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Central California (CenCal) Resource Advisory Council (RAC) Virtual Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, September 11, 2024, 8:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

ATTENDEES

RAC: Joe Ashley, Mary Boblet, Laurie Collom, Chris Friedel, Matt Kingsley, Michael Lueders, Reb Monaco, Nancy Muleady-Mecham, and Bob Schneider.

BLM: Chris Heppe, District Manager; Philip Oviatt, District Public Affairs Officer; David Brinsfield, District Fire Management Officer; Gabe Garcia, Bakersfield Field Manager; Jeff Horn, Mother Lode Field Manager; Nick Lavrov, Ukiah Field Manager; Sherri Lisius, Bishop Field Manager; Zachary Ormsby, Central Coast Field Manager; Ben Hoke, Central Coast Assistant Field Manager; Heather Stone, Bishop Assistant Field Manager; Neal Craig, Bishop Assistant Field Manager; Philip Gross, Bishop Assistant Field Manager; Shane Garside, Ukiah Assistant Field Manager; Jeff Starosta, Bishop Project Manager; Sarah Denos, CASO Communications; Gabe Gamino, Bishop Park Ranger; Jason Titus, Bishop Geologist; Lance Rosen, Assistant District Fire Management Officer; Martin Oliver, Bishop Botanist; Tracy Misiewicz; Bishop Bi-State Sage Grouse Coordinator

Public and Registered Attendees: Amy Granat, Ashley Anderson, David Kirk, Elyane Stefanick, Janelle Ghiorso, Linda Hubbs, Lynn Boulton, Renna Hickey, Theresa Barbour, Allison Weber

OPENING

Welcome and Introductions:

Chris Heppe opened the meeting at 8:30 a.m. with a welcome to all the RAC members in attendance. Chris explained to the group why the meeting was being held virtually rather than in person as scheduled. He explained that the District was in the midst of a busy fire season and that due to the agenda items, this was to be an informational meeting not requiring RAC approval on any BLM items. Finally, without a quorum for this meeting, it was determined to move the meeting to a virtual setting. He then proceeded with remarks. He thanked the RAC for attending and talked about the new BLM State Director Joe Stout. He stated that Joe has a history with BLM California as the previous Associate State Director. His current post has been as the Forest Supervisor with the El Dorado National Forest. Chris stated that Joe plans on attending the next RAC meeting in Feb 2025. Chris then outlined some statewide priorities for BLM that include ecological cleanups, cleanup of orphaned wells, forest treatment projects, and continued BIL and IRA funded projects. Chris then turned things over to Matt Kingsley to conduct the meeting going forward.

GENERAL BUSINESS

Philip Oviatt stated to the group that because there was not a quorum for this meeting, the RAC would not be voting to approve meeting minutes on the May 2024 RAC meeting. Philip asked if anyone had questions about the RAC Meeting Notes from the May 2024 RAC meeting. No one had questions or input. Philip stated that the RAC would vote on both the May 2024 and Sept. 2024 meeting notes at the Feb. 2025 meeting.

RAC BRIEFINGS

Bishop Field Office Overview:

Bishop FM Sherri Lisius began with comments on the makeup of the Bishop FO. She highlighted that the FO is made up of 25 permanent staff that manages 750,000 acres and over 2 million subsurface acres. She spoke of the many partnerships and Tribal engagements that all come together to be stewards of the public lands. Sherri outlined some key programs that the FO was actively involved with. Those included: 16 sheep and 37 cattle allotments with 23 different permittees; the Casa Diablo geothermal plant; 2 fire stations; significant archaeological resources; unique plants and animals which involves collaboration with universities and researchers to study the unique biological and botanical life; the many rights-of-ways that are important for moving water and power; and the unique geological landscape and environment that have been a draw for films being shot in the Bishop area.

Sherri then led a discussion on the ongoing collaborative efforts with BLM and the Inyo NF regarding the Montgomery Pass wild horses. Bishop and the Inyo are nearing the signing of a decision record for the environmental assessment for a horse gather to collect horses that are outside of the designated Montgomery Horse territory. Once the joint decision is signed by the two agencies it is anticipated that the gather will commence in the fall.

Bishop Assistant Field Manager Philip Gross concluded the overview with a discussion of ongoing recreation activities occurring within the FO. He highlighted Bishop's hot springs, Granite Mountain and Inyo Mountain Wilderness as great locations for backpacking. He stated that Bishop has 14 Wilderness Study Areas, more than 10 Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, over 2,000 miles of roads, 5 developed campgrounds, and world renown rock climbing locations.

Alabama Hills Management Plan Implementation:

Bishop FM Sherri Lisius began with an overview and historical perspective of the Alabama Hills. She stated that the Hills are designated as a National Scenic Area comprised of more than 18,000 acres. She highlighted the history and evolution of the Alabama Hills beginning in 1969: Area designated as Alabama Hills Recreation Lands; 1980s: Alabama Hills Special Recreational Management Area (SRMA): ~30,000 acres; 1993 – Bishop Resource Management Plan completed; 2006 – Alabama Hills Stewardship Groups were formed; 2016 – Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP); 2019 – National Scenic Area (Only NSA managed by BLM); 2021 – Alabama Hills Management Plan completed. In addition, Sherri explained that the Indigenous People of the Owens Valley area have a history in the area, and they have been included in the development and implementation of the Alabama Hills Management Plan.

Sherri explained that the decision was made to do the Management Plan due to an increase visitation, direction in the RMP, DRECP and the Dingell Act. She outlined the steps taken to

develop the plan through outreach and consultation with the public, partners, and stakeholders. She also stated that the focus of the Management Plan is on scenic, cultural, geological, biological, historical, recreational, cinematographic, and scientific resources and values for future generations.

Sherri highlighted that the focus of the Management Plan implementation includes enhancements to camping in developed and dispersed camping sites; management of special recreation permits and filming permits; interpretation and education outreach and programming; continue with fuels projects in the area; increased development of geological and mineral/ mining programs; management of livestock grazing; updating the energy corridor and other right-of-ways; and managing cultural and historical resources.

Sherri talked about the next steps for the implementation of the plan. Those include implementing the use of a free Alabama Hills camping permit, the installations of vault toilets, the installation of permanent interpretive signage, continuing with ongoing fuels treatment projects and wildlife habitat projects, as well as enhanced messaging and outreach with the public.

Sherri concluded her presentation with challenges facing the Alabama Hills. Human waste, increased visitation, climate change, and staffing shortages are all challenges that are a priority of the FO to address through the ongoing implementation of the Alabama Hills Management Plan.

RAC DISCUSSION and ACTION:

Matt Kingsley led a Q and A on the presentation with RAC members.

Nancy Muleady-Mecham asked for an estimate for opening Whitney Portal Road. Sherri Lisius stated that there is no date for the reopening of the road, but they are doing what they can. The road closure has led to some issues getting signage set up in the areas the road leads to.

Nancy Muleady-Mecham asked if folks can get the AH Dispersed Camping permit online prior to arrival. Sherri stated yes, and that BLM will be doing a press release once they are handing them out. She explained that these permits, however, do not guarantee a campsite, all it does is educate permittees on where to camp, have fires, etc.

Mary Boblet stated that there is an ArcGIS story map that shows the damage to the roads over time. Additionally, she spoke of the story on how Joshua Tree National Forest is handling specific issues is interesting for Search and Rescue (preventative search and rescue). She asked if staff had any thoughts on implementing something similar. Philip Gross said that we do some of this and have a member that approaches climbing gyms to try and get them interested in learning from us so they are properly prepared beforehand.

Bob Schneider thanked staff for the great work and stated that he loves the improvements. He said that not having camping on one side of the road helps, and that the current campgrounds he finds to be exceptional right now. He asked about how the appeal affected the Management Plan. Sherri explained that the appeal was about the camping, and it is not resolved yet and still pending. She further explained that it is not, however, stayed. She said BLM could go forth and implement the plan. She said that BLM does not have a resolution, but it was primarily focused on the camping.

Bob Schneider suggested that staff craft a form asking current campers on how they feel about the camping now may be beneficial.

Chris Friedel asked about the campground designation and enforcement. He asked if staff could provide some details on the number of staff that will be there to hopefully enforce the rules.

Sherri stated that our primary goal was to educate and not enforce unless they were doing something particularly wrong. She said they have worked with online groups and given talks to educate the public. She explained that they try to have seven days a week coverage with at least one person on site to try and educate the public. She explained that on some days they will have multiple people. She stated that it is somewhat dependent on funding, and they only have two law enforcement officers. Sherri explained that they try to have one focused on the Alabama Hills area during the busy season, and they have handed out tickets, but the major focus should be that people are informed and prepared beforehand.

Bob Schneider stated that in the management plan, there is an action and implementation plan provided that addresses how things will be done.

Matt Kingsley opened the discussion to any members of the public.

A. Granat stated that BLM needs to point out differences when they say 2000 miles of roads and what type of vehicles can and cannot go on those roads, with a focus on OHV and off-road vehicles (non-street legal). Sherri stated that the 2000 miles is across the entire field office. She explained that for the Alabama Hills area, they probably have around 100 miles, and they try to have designated signage. She further explained that they also don't have too much OHV usage in the area. According to Sherri, there are likely a few small areas that have some OHV use, but there doesn't seem to be much outside these locations.

Anonymous stated that many locals have an issue with the mining permitting in BLM land, affecting neighborhood environmental health. They asked how much public comment is needed to urge BLM to deny permits. Sherri stated that we don't have too many mining project proposals for Bishop, and the focus should be on commenting on the EAs that are posted for those projects that are on BLM lands. She also said that there are some mining operations just outside of Bishop's area, but those are likely Ridgecrest.

Bi-State Sage Grouse Action Plan Update:

Bishop Assistant Field Manager Heather Stone led a discussion on the Bi-State Sage Grouse program. She highlighted the broad collaborative effort that has gone into this plan that will serve as guidance and serve as a road map for other agencies to follow. She gave an introduction of what a Bi-State Sage Grouse is and where it primarily lives. She stated that it is currently being reviewed for listing as a threatened species both federally and by the state of California. She stated that the Sage Grouse is an indicator species for a number of ecosystems and biological life. For Bishop, the main habitat for the Bi-State Sage Grouse is located in the Bodie Hills and Long Valley.

Heather gave an overview of the 2012 Action Plan which updated the 2004 Action Plan. She explained that the plan serves as a roadmap to conserve the Bi-State Sage Grouse. She explained that the Action Plan is written in collaboration with a local area working group, the Bi-State Tribal Natural Resource Committee, a technical advisory committee, and an executive oversight committee.

Heather highlighted accomplishments achieved under the 2012 Plan with a 37% increase in the Bi-State Sage Grouse population success which indicates a stabilization in populations. She then explained why the Action Plan was being updated and that over 90% of the actions in the 2012 Plan had been completed. She stated that there is a need to update threats to the species, include additional stakeholders, and update the species listing status.

Heather outlined the timeline for the Action Plan Update. 2023 - Gathering Initial Input; 2024 -

Public Review of the Draft; Total Meeting attendance to date: 223; Goal - Completion by December 2024.

Heather discussed the 2024 Risk and Relative Threat Level indicators. She listed those threats to include wildfire, motorized recreation, wild horse overpopulation and herd territory expansion, and raven predation. She said that the plan update calls for small population action focus as well as continued successful habitat management work and ongoing monitoring and research.

RAC DISCUSSION and ACTION:

Matt Kingsley led a Q and A on the presentation with RAC members.

Mary Boblet was concerned about the roads in the area. She asked for staff to expand on fencing and what was a letdown fence. Heather Stone stated a number of ways to improve fencing and the use of letdown fencing, which is a type of fence that can be easily laid down on the ground during seasons when it is not needed. Heather said fencing is traditionally for grazing and can be along the ROWs. She also said that Bi-state Sage Grouse are not commonly impacted by road traffic and injured by cars; however, roadkill can invite ravens.

Bob Schneider asked if BLM could expand on the fuels reduction programs. Heather stated that the strategies focus on improving areas for firefighters to access. She gave examples like mowing along roads and laydown areas for firefighters. She further explained that with the introduction of certain invasive annual grasses, they need to be aware of the impact those can have on firefighting strategies.

Chris Friedel stated concerns on treatment methods for conifer removal in treatment areas, and asked for staff to expand more on how it looks, in-practice, on including species like pinyon jay. Heather stated that the BLM create piles and try to burn those piles during the winter to help reduce the fuels in the area (focus on younger trees). She explained that data shows very low impact on invasive annual grass species. Heather stated that in the Bishop Field Office, they have specifications to minimize impacts to other ecosystems, including no chaining, identifying old trees and feathering the edges of treatments. She also explained that the pinyon jay like to cache food in sagebrush on the edges of the treatment areas, so they are leaving sparse, dispersed spaces around the treatment areas.

Michael Lueders discussed OHV for the Long Valley area as a component, and asked if BLM can expand on that as a threat and mixed-use area, as there is a lot of vehicle traffic in the area. Heather stated that they are concerned about both OHV and normal vehicles on roads. She explained that because they can't parse it out right now, their current focus is to get the data so that they can identify where the problems are and develop a recreation management plan that is focused on those issues and places.

Nancy Muleady-Mecham stated that her only concern was that if they are going to close down specific areas specifically for Sage Grouse concerns, it might make certain members of the public have some issues with the plan. Sherri Lisius agreed, and stated that when they develop the plan, they will try, like is done with other plans, to have as much buy-in from all the users for the area.

Chris Friedel asked if BLM had any experience with post-fire restoration expansion. Heather stated yes, they do have experience, and it is very difficult to do, but they do have some plans and things in the works.

Matt Kingsley thanked Heather Stone for the fantastic presentation, and stated that he feels this should be how these types of things should be done, before the listing updates.

Matt Kingsley opened the discussion to any members of the public.
No public comment was brought forth.

BLM Central California District and Field Office Updates Presentation:

District Manager Chris Heppe provided an overview of BLM Central California District and thanked all the field offices for their dedication and resilient work they do each day. He mentioned fuels reduction work, Tribal consultation and co-stewardship efforts, and National Conservation Lands. He highlighted the employee engagement happening within the District aimed at creating a better work environment. He went over the current table of organization with ~15% vacancies currently for the District, which is about the target maximum vacancy rate for the State and BLM. Hoping to be closer to 5%/10% by the end of the calendar year. Chris also explained ongoing coordination with the Water Quality Control Board and their recent requirements for the federal agencies. The intent is good, and we are dealing with the orders as we feel we have been following the laws already. He concluded his update highlighting National Public Lands Day events happening around the District as well as recent collaboration with the Foundation for Public Lands to help support our work in the field offices.

Bakersfield Field Manager Gabe Garcia briefed participants on the fire season in the Bakersfield FO. He gave updates on the Hurricane Fire, the Long Fire, the Borel Fire, and the Coffee Pot Fire. He also gave an update on the Keysville Management plan and the current Oil and Gas workload.

Central Coast Field Manager Zachary Ormsby detailed some of his field office efforts including thanking the RAC for their letter of support for the Cotoni-Coast Dairies EA as well as other updates on the Monument. He also highlighted work being completed at the Fort Ord National Monument and Clear Creek Recreation Area. He also updated the status of the Boone fire currently burning within the FO boundaries. He explained that staff is working on fire suppression and post-fire repair for the ongoing and previous fires that have taken place in the area.

Mother Lode Field Manager Jeff Horn highlighted the ongoing work occurring as part of the Cosumnes River Preserve Focal Landscape project. He touched on the FERC funded Slab Creek Take-Out facility project being completed. He highlighted the ongoing collaboration with GNAs and NGOs. He talked about ongoing acquisition work with El Dorado County to gain additional access to vital areas.

Ukiah Field Manager Nichola Lavrov detailed the status on projects, including Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument Planning, South Cow Mountain OHV Implementation Plan, Tribal co-stewardship implementation, Clyde Mine clean up, and collaboration with Cal Fish and Wildlife to build a bridge over a critical environment over Scotts Creek.

District Fire Management Officer David Brinsfield gave an update on current status of the FIRE program within the District. Fire staff is currently at 96 with only 6 positions vacant. District Fire have had 136 initial fire attack incidents this year. There are ongoing fire suppression repair work occurring throughout the District. He highlighted the Kern Valley Hotshots deployments as well as the staff from each field office that covered the majority of the fire incidents thus far.

RAC DISCUSSION ITEMS:

Matt Kingsley thanked staff for the presentation and all the updates. Matt then asked if members had comments on the staff updates or topics that they would like addressed by BLM staff at future RAC meetings.

Michael Lueders asked Nick if there was going to be improvements to the OHV staging area, beyond just the current gravel bars at Scotts Creek. **Nick Lavrov** stated that would be part of it, but the bridge is key. Nick explained that their focus is around what they can do. He explained that OHV use is going up and down the river/creek all the time, and they need to put a stop to that, in particular for the critical environmental habitat. Nick stated that with enforcement, outreach, and education they have gotten a lot of the public onboard with not doing OHV travel up and down the river and creek. He said he hopes to provide trailer parking.

Reb Monaco made comments on current fire situation. He stated that BLM kind of dodged the fire bullet for a while, but he said we are seeing more fire activity. Reb wanted to commend David Brinsfield and all the partnerships BLM has for fighting the fires, and the essential Field Office staff that are assisting fight these fires. He stated that the impact that these fires can have devastating consequences for species in these areas.

Bob Schneider stated that he appreciated the focus on the fire and wanted to point out new laws that will promote the POD concept. He wants to encourage the BLM to be early adopters of the POD policies that are being adopted by the State and to know that the public is interested in helping and PODs provide unique knowledge on the resources in the area. He stated that this lack of knowledge can lead to errors during fire suppression, such as a dozer rolling over a plant species that was eradicated. (SB1101 California Bill) **David Brinsfield** said he was aware of the bill, and BLM is aware of what is going on. He stated that he has seen the tactical strategies, and that BLM is looking at what they can do. **Chris Hepe** stated that the more advanced pre-planning and adopting some of the strategies that are used by the PODs are useful; however, BLM is stretched pretty thin, and trying to fully adopt certain strategies can be problematic. He stated that communication is key, and BLM has been trying to be fully engaged as much as possible for the areas they work in to minimize the impacts. Additionally, Chris stated that BLM is trying to work on the repair processes.

Bob Schneider stated he feels the initial communication between the various agencies aren't at the right level currently. He would like to see better initial communication and focus on preserving resources as well as fire suppression.

Matt Kingsley stated that this is a good topic for future meeting, especially since there is legislation on the governor's desk.

Reb Monaco agreed that we need to discuss this further in the future and asked to have it added to a future meeting agenda.

Zachary Ormsby stated that one of the things from his perspective on the formation of PODs is the difficulty of staffing levels. He explained that they are fortunate to have almost a full staff in the Central Coast FO, so when they go down fully staffed, they are able to get everything set up (maps, botanical, biological, archaeological, etc.) resources are known in advance. He further explained that some of the issues are that BLM has staffing issues where critical roles are missing. He concluded by saying that what really helps is making sure that each Field Office is fully staffed helps the process.

Nick Lavrov stated that it is important that the focus is on staying fully staffed for resources. He explained that it is difficult to try and keep up to date without the necessary resource specialists.

Bob Schneider said it is important to address this, and that he realizes that it would not happen quickly, but over time hopefully, we will see improvements.

Philip Oviatt committed to adding this topic to a future meeting agenda.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Although no action can be taken on public comment. RAC members welcome input from the public for future consideration. No public comment was brought forward.

NEXT MEETING

Philip Oviatt thanked everyone for taking the time to be here. He stated that the next meeting would be on Feb 5, 2025, and the meeting would be a virtual meeting. The focus of the meeting would be on Mother Lode and the Forest Service would be joining as well. He also let the RAC know that they had two applicants for the two vacant RAC positions and the hope would be to have them on board for the next RAC meeting, if possible. He will send out details for the Mother Lode meeting as the meeting date grows near.

MEETING ADJOURNED

Chris Heppe gave closing remarks, thanked everyone who presented and for attending, and to Matt for chairing the RAC. Matt thanked everyone for the hard work and dedication and complimented all on a great meeting. Reb Monaco made a motion to adjourn the meeting, Bob Schneider seconded the motion and Matt Kingsley adjourned the meeting.