

Rationale Statement

Proposed Vehicle Access Network for El Paso Mountains Subregion (#4)

A. SETTING. The El Paso subregion, located approximately 10 miles southwest of Ridgecrest, is defined by the El Paso Mountains Wilderness area and "old" U. S. 395 to Inyokern on the north, U.S. Highway 395 on the east, the Garlock Road and Red Rock Canyon State Park on the south, and Highway 14 on the west. **** acres in size, the subregion is **% Federal land (**** acres) managed by the BLM and **% private and State land (**** acres). The private lands are owned by numerous landowners. The El Paso Mountains Wilderness is surrounded by this subregion on three sides. See Map 1X for the location of this subregion within the planning area and Map 4-1 for a specific map of this subregion.

The general region consists of prominent volcanic peaks (El Paso Mountains), broad valleys, rolling foothills, badlands, sloping bajadas, braided washes, and narrow canyons. Elevations range from 2,000 feet on the southern boundary to 5,244 feet above sea level on top of Black Mountain. Creosote Bush and Mojave Saltbush are the predominant plant communities in the lowlands, with cheesebush-dominated plant communities found in the washes, remnant stands of native perennial bunchgrasses on the mountain tops, scattered Joshua tree woodland, and small riparian plant communities at a few of the widely spaced desert springs.

Access to this subregion is from Highway 395, Garlock Road, and Highway 14.

B. CURRENT RESOURCE USES. Primary resource uses occurring in this subregion are: domestic sheep grazing, mineral exploration, utility corridor maintenance, communication site maintenance, recreational vehicle touring/sightseeing, dispersed hiking and camping, upland gamebird hunting, rock hounding, mountain biking, and equestrian recreation. The subregion is also used for commercial 4-wheel drive and dual sport motorcycle tours and competitive equestrian endurance rides.

The Cantil Common Allotment, an ephemeral grazing allotment, is located within this Subregion. Sheep grazing occurs in the area in the spring when the annual vegetation meets the minimum requirements.

A major utility corridor (Utility Corridor A) runs along Highway 14 along the western boundary of the subregion. Contingency Corridor P bisects the eastern portion of the subregion, and generally runs parallel to Highway 395. Corridor P contains existing facilities. The anticipated additional use of this corridor is predicated upon new energy sources being located north of or in the northerly sector of the California Desert Conservation Area.

The El Paso Subregion is within an area of known very high cultural resource significance. The area contains a very high diversity and density of cultural resource sites, including Native American sites and historical mining. The area also contains excellent opportunities for hunting (chukar and Gambel's quail), and rock and mineral collecting.

In regards to mineral values, bentonite clay is being produced from the El Paso Mountains (is this still the case, or is this mine closed?) and gold, copper, wollastonite, pumice, and coal have been produced. Exploration and development of gold and clay deposits is continuing. Fluorite, manganese, uranium, perlite, silica, gemstones, and zeolite also occur here. Sand and gravel mining has also occurred in the area. There are approximately 150 unpatented claims and 6 patented claims recorded in this area. There are ___ currently active mine sites within the subregion (are there any?)(CHECK WITH ROB WAIWOOD REGARDING UPDATING INFORMATION. What current plans of operations exist? What activating mining operations exist?)

C. BIOLOGICAL VALUES OF SPECIAL CONCERN. Biological values of special concern include habitat for desert tortoises, bats, Mohave ground squirrels, raptors (both nesting and foraging areas), and three special status plants. The subregion has a number of special habitats including riparian corridors, desert washes and springs, and artificial waters (small game guzzlers).

Approximately 3 square miles in the southwest section of the subregion is within the proposed Fremont-Kramer Tortoise DWMA. Other portions of the subregion may function as a Biological Transition Area where BLM lands would be managed under existing Category III standards and development on private lands would also have certain take avoidance measures in place. Approximately ___% of the area, located primarily in the eastern and southern portions of the subregion, is characterized by the BLM as a Moderate Desert Tortoise Emphasis Zone (DTEZ), while the western areas of the subregion, approximately ___%, are characterized as Low DTEZ. The remainder of the subregion, primarily those areas above 4,000 feet in elevation, is considered a non-Desert Tortoise Emphasis Zone (NDTEZ). Tortoises are expected to occur throughout the subregion, particularly in alluvial areas on moderate terrain (Bob Parker, pers. comm., July 2000).

The entire subregion is within the area proposed in the Evaluation Report for the West Mojave Plan, for conservation for the Mohave ground squirrel (MGS Conservation Area), a State listed species. Although the relatively rocky, mountainous portions of the area are probably not often used by the Mohave Ground Squirrel, all other areas are likely to constitute MGS habitat. The subregion is included within and surrounded on all sides by the proposed MGS Conservation Area and provides for essential habitats and connectivity between adjacent habitats identified for MGS conservation. Given the elevations of much of the subregion, it is expected that Mohave woody scrub may be common.(Larry/Bob:This was from Ed. Can you verify if Mwoody scrub is common? Can we identify where it is within the subregion?) Mohave woody scrub is under-represented in many portions of the proposed MGS Conservation Area, which is predominantly vegetated by creosote bush and salt bush scrub communities. Thus the resource

agencies, particularly California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG), felt that this subregion and surrounding areas was important to MGS conservation.

The El Paso Subregion has 7 species of raptors. This includes cliff nesting (golden eagles and prairie falcons) as well as ground nesting (burrowing owls) species. 5 golden eagle nests and 3 prairie falcon nest sites were documented in the area during the 1970's. The subregion lies within an area recognized as having a relatively high number of historical golden eagle territories. Although the habitat has remained relatively intact since 1979, when the original census was completed, the exact number of nesting eagles now present is unknown.

Two of the rare plants found in this subregion (Red Rock tarplant and Red Rock poppy) are endemic to the El Paso Mountains. The Red Rock tarplant, listed by the State of California as rare, had previously been thought to occur only on State lands within Red Rock Canyon, however, it is now known to occur in adjacent Last Chance Canyon as well. Approximately 75% of the known population of Red Rock poppy occurs in Red Rock Canyon State Park. Mesquite Canyon, within the El Paso Subregion, is one of only two other known locations for the Red Rock poppy. The third special status plant, Charlotte's phacelia, is found almost entirely within the West Mojave Plan area with half of the locations in the El Paso Mountains and the other half in the Sierra foothills.

Red Rock Canyon State Park, immediately adjacent to the subregion on the west and south, is the only documented location for the spotted bat in the West Mojave. Rock cliff faces in the El Pasos likely provide roosting habitat for the spotted bat within the subregion. (Joyce Schlachter, pers.comm. 2000) A significant number of artificial habitats (adits, shafts, structures, etc.) and natural habitats exist within the area which provide suitable habitat for various bat species. However, no significant roosts (maternity or hibernation colonies with 325 bats or greater) have been located within the subregion. .

D. AREA MANAGEMENT GOALS. The California Desert Conservation Area Plan (1980) directs that this subregion be managed as Multiple-Use Class L (limited) in order to protect wildlife, cultural, and Native American values, while allowing limited vehicle access for management of ephemeral grazing, mineral exploration and development, and recreation. A portion of this subregion, Last Chance Canyon, was identified in the Plan as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC #21) based on its prehistoric and historic values. Objectives identified by the ACEC plan include protecting and studying cultural resources and interpreting archeologic sites.

The Red Mountain/El Paso Mountains were identified in the Desert Plan as a Planned Management Area (W-20) for raptors (Golden Eagle). This area is also identified as a National Key Raptor Area. The Evaluation Report for the West Mojave Plan recommends that all nesting sites for the golden eagle and prairie falcon be preserved and that the baseline number of territories be maintained. It also recommends maintaining a 1/4 mile buffer around nest sites, and performing an updated census of eagle nest sites.

The northern and eastern portions of the subregion are within an area identified by the Desert Plan as a Planned Management Area (W21) for Western Mojave Crucial Habitat. The management objective defined is to protect and enhance crucial habitats located in the western portion of the Mojave Desert; especially those for the desert tortoise, and the Mohave ground squirrel. Management activities suggested by the Desert Plan for these areas include land acquisition and changes in livestock grazing practices.

The Evaluation Report recommends that this subregion be committed to the long-term conservation of the Mohave ground squirrel. As currently proposed by the Evaluation Report, only 1% of the of the surface area within the MGS Conservation Area would be available for future new land disturbance. The Evaluation Report also recommends that sheep grazing not be permitted in the conservation area, and that Contingency Utility Corridor P not be activated.

The Desert Plan calls for managing sensitive plant species and their habitats so that the continued existence of rare or endangered plants is not jeopardized and so that potential listing of sensitive species is avoided. The Evaluation Report calls for the conservation of the Red Rock tarplant and Red Rock poppy within this subregion, with the goal being conservation of all existing populations. Charlotte's phacelia has significant populations within the subregion. The goal of the Evaluation Report for Charlotte's phacelia is conservation of all populations on public lands.

For bat roosts in artificial and natural habitats, and for springs, seeps, and wildlife guzzlers, the Evaluation Report proposes limiting access to a distance of 1/4 mile. In the El Pasos, however, guzzlers are inspected and maintained by local volunteers who need to be able to work unencumbered. CDFG has stated that routes to guzzlers should remain open within this area and that vandalism of guzzlers in this area has not been a problem (Bob Parker, pers. comm. July 2000). These concerns were taken into consideration during the designation process and weighed against need for resource protection on a case by case basis.

E. STAFF PROPOSED VEHICLE ACCESS NETWORK. The inventory of vehicle access routes (see Map 4-2) shows approximately ** miles of routes within the subregion. Approximately ** miles are located on BLM -managed land and ** miles on private and State land. This represents an average route density of ** miles per section (640 acres), with the highest density at ** miles per section and the lowest at 0 miles per section.

The recommended route network (see Map 4-3) includes designating ** miles (*%) of routes on BLM-managed lands as "open" to vehicle use and ** miles (**%) as "limited" to authorized uses such as access to private property. In addition, the recommended route network proposes that easements be acquired on ** miles of routes located on non-BLM managed lands to function as connectors between non-contiguous BLM open routes. The recommended network ("open" routes plus "limited" routes plus easements) would result in a total of ** miles of vehicle access routes available for use within this subregion, representing an average density of ** miles of routes per section (640 acres).

The remaining ** miles (*%) of routes on BLM-managed lands would be designated as "closed"

to vehicle use.

Nanette: Need figures for all of the above under (D).

F. CONSIDERATION OF RECREATIONAL ACCESS NEEDS.

1. Recreational Vehicle Touring/Sightseeing. The staff-proposed route network provides for vehicle access to the following features: El Paso Mountains Wilderness, Last Chance Canyon (within Red Rock Canyon State Park), Burro Schmidt Tunnel, historic Depression-Era mining camps, and several scenic desert canyons. The network includes dual sport and 4-wheel drive touring routes as well as the proposed California Statewide Discovery Trail.

2. Dispersed Hiking/Camping. The staff proposed route network provides for vehicle access to dispersed camping throughout the El Paso Mountains. The network provides access to hiking trailhead opportunities along the boundary of the El Paso Mountains Wilderness and the eastern section of Red Rock Canyon State Park. The route network provides access to staging areas for mountain bike and equestrian recreation throughout the subregion.

3. Upland Gamebird Hunting. The staff-proposed route network provides for vehicle access to and through the sub-region's prime chukar and Gambel's quail hunting areas. Game guzzlers placed in the subregion are maintained by volunteers. The route network provides access to these guzzlers for maintenance purposes.

4. Rock Hounding. The staff proposed route network provides for vehicle access to popular rock hounding sites including Last Chance Canyon, Sheep Spring and other popular sites.

5. Mountain Biking. The road and trail system provides motorized access to facilitate mountain bike recreation throughout the El Paso Mountains Subregion.

6. Equestrian Recreation. The road and trail system provides an access network to support the current casual use and competitive equestrian uses in the subregion. The West Mojave Plan does not propose any direct limitations to equestrian recreation in the El Paso Mountains.

G. CONSIDERATION OF OTHER ACCESS NEEDS.

1. Domestic sheep grazing. The proposed route network provides for vehicle access for livestock operations (trucking sheep to appropriate drop-off points and watering). In addition, the decrease in useable routes will assist in reducing vandalism and disruption of livestock. At present, pending further public input, the CDFG has recommended that sheep grazing be eliminated from all MGS Conservation Areas, which, if adopted, would affect this subregion. Sheep grazing is also a potential impact to the rare plants within this subregion in specific locations. *(Statements in this section are contradictory - needs work)*

2. Mineral Exploration and Mining. The proposed route network provides for vehicle access to every known active mineral exploration area and provides access no further than x miles to any location within the area. *(Dave: what consideration was given to mining claims when determining access needs?) (Nanette: Can you provide this information?)*

3. Utility Corridor Maintenance. The proposed route network provides for vehicle access along each authorized utility corridor within the area. The MGS conservation strategy proposes that Contingent Planning Corridor P within the MGS Conservation Area not be activated,

however access would be assured to facilities already located within this corridor.

4. Communication Site Maintenance. The proposed route network provides for vehicle access to all authorized communication sites.

H. CONSIDERATION OF BIOLOGICAL VALUES OF SPECIAL CONCERN.

1. Desert tortoise. Approximately __% of route reduction is proposed in areas of Medium DTEZ (Desert Tortoise Emphasis Zone) located primarily in the eastern and southern portions of the subregion; __% occurs in areas of low DTEZ, located primarily in the western half of the subregion; and __% occurs non-emphasis zones above 4,000 feet. Only about three square miles in the southwest portion of the subregion is within a proposed Tortoise DWMA. In areas where mountainous terrain dominates, recreational vehicles are mostly restricted to existing roads, thereby minimizing impacts to tortoises except for those occasionally crushed on roadways. (*Nanette: Need figures*)

2. Bats. The general reduction of routes within the subregion (xxx from D) would result in a lowered rate of visitation to natural habitats leading to an increased survival of bats.

3. Mohave ground squirrel. The entire subregion is within the area proposed by the Evaluation Report for conservation for the Mohave ground squirrel (MGS Preserve). It is suspected that the MGS is rarely killed on roadways, as it is a relatively quick animal. Road closures, however, will likely benefit MGS conservation in the subregion by protecting MGS habitat adjacent to roads, reducing incidence of wild fire, and minimizing the spread of exotic weed species.

4. Desert bighorn sheep. Almost all reduction in routes is in unoccupied desert bighorn sheep habitat.

5. Raptors. Since human disturbance can lead to abandonment of nest sites, the Evaluation Report recommends maintaining a 1/4 mile buffer around known locations. Because the subregion has been identified as a Key Raptor Area, and identified as Planned Management Area for Raptors by the California Desert Plan, particular consideration was given to routes in close proximity to known territories. In those portions of the subregion where (*Historic, documented?*) nest sites are concentrated (primarily between Mesquite and Iron Canyons, and the general south eastern portion of the subregion), a general reduction in the number of routes has been proposed. Specific routes are proposed to be closed to protect nest sites.

6. Riparian habitats. The primary riparian areas in the El Paso Subregion are in the Last Chance Canyon and a number of smaller areas. The bird species associated with riparian habitats would be modestly benefitted by the proposed reduction of routes in the smaller riparian areas.

7. Sensitive plant species. Mesquite Canyon is a significant botanical area within the West Mojave, containing large populations of Red Rock Poppy and Charlotte's phacelia. Red Rock Canyon and Last Chance Canyon are the primary sites for the Red Rock tarplant. It appears that the preferred habitat of the Red Rock tarplant is along the bottom of sandy to gravelly washes. An open access route has been designated within Mesquite Canyon, however due to the topography of the canyon, the sensitive plant populations located within this canyon will not be disturbed. In general, limiting roads within the habitat of these species will lessen the potential for ground disturbance, which will help prevent the spread of weeds and creation of conditions unsuitable for growth of the endemic plants.

8. Desert springs. The Evaluation Report for the West Mojave Plan recommends that access be limited within 1/4 mile of springs. Most of the desert springs in the El Pasos, however, have been developed by CDFG for wildlife. These developed springs have not been impacted by public access and local CDFG would like to see access to them maintained (Bob Parker, pers. comm. July 2000). The need to provide additional protection to desert springs by limiting access was evaluated against the need to provide access for maintenance purposes on a case by case basis during the route designation process, thus ensuring that adequate protection of this resource is provided.

9. Washes. Many washes have traditionally been used as routes, so as proportionally more of these are closed than routes on the uplands, the plants and animals associated with these should see a higher level of protection. Studies in the early 1990's by Bryan Jennings at the nearby Desert Tortoise Natural Area, have shown that tortoises travel along washes feeding on annual vegetation that responds to the relatively mesic conditions. Minimization of wash-use by vehicles is expected to be a major benefit to tortoises.

NOTE: INCLUDES: Ed LaRue's comments.

Larry LaPre's comments

Bob Parker's comments.

Ed LaRue's response to Bob Parker's comments.

Dave Wash comments. (8/17/00)

Larry LaPre's response to Bob Parker's comments.