

RECLAMATION

Managing Water in the West

Finding of No Significant Impact La Quinta Peninsular Bighorn Sheep Barrier Project

Lower Colorado Region - Riverside County, California



**U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Reclamation
Yuma Area Office
Yuma, Arizona**

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Mission Statements

The U.S. Department of the Interior protects America's natural resources and heritage, honors our cultural and tribal communities, and supplies the energy to power our future.

The mission of the Bureau of Reclamation is to manage, develop, and protect water and related resources in an environmentally and economically sound manner in the interest of the American public.

Background

Pursuant to the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (CVMSHCP), construction of the Project is required to mitigate for urban-related impacts to Peninsular bighorn sheep (PBS), a federally endangered species under the Endangered Species Act and threatened species under the California Endangered Species Act. The subject ewe group uses artificial sources of food and water in urbanized lands, including golf course and residential lands, in the Project area. PBS have been exposed to a variety of urban-related hazards, including poisoning from non-native plant materials, auto collisions, and drownings. The Project is designed to prevent PBS from accessing urbanized lands, while also minimizing impacts to PBS and other wildlife and their habitats, and minimizing impacts to public and private lands in the vicinity.

The project area is located in the City of La Quinta in the Coachella Valley of Riverside County, California. It's proposed barrier extends approximately 9.5 linear miles along the ridges and toe of slope of the Santa Rosa Mountains. The project planning area is located within portions of Sections 6, 7, 8, 17, 19, 20 and 29, Township 6 South, Range 7 East, and portions of Sections 13 and 24, Township 6 South, Range 6 East, San Bernardino Baseline and Meridian (SBB&M). The project area includes Reclamation land in the vicinity of the Coachella Canal and Lake Cahuilla. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands in the vicinity of Lake Cahuilla County Park, mountainous portions of the planning area, and adjacent to the Quarry residential community are also included.

Reclamation has ownership and management authority over the Coachella Canal, Lake Cahuilla, and surrounding land. The 123-mile Coachella Canal is part of the All-American Canal system and transports Colorado River water from the All-American Canal to its terminal reservoir, Lake Cahuilla. Water is regularly removed from Lake Cahuilla and delivered via subsurface pipelines to agricultural lands in the eastern Coachella Valley. Lake Cahuilla and the westernmost 2.5± mile extension of the canal are in the immediate project area. Responsibility for the care, operation, maintenance, and replacement of the Coachella Canal in the project area (including protective works, water delivery systems, and Lake Cahuilla) has been transferred by Reclamation to the Coachella Valley Water District. Reclamation also has a contract with Riverside County under which the County Parks and Open Space District is responsible for operation of a public park (Lake Cahuilla Recreation Area) surrounding Lake Cahuilla.

Alternatives Considered

The EA evaluated the potential effects of four "build" alternatives and a "No Action Alternative"; the A2 Alternative is the Proposed Action. Under the No Action Alternative, the subject sheep barrier would not be approved on federal lands and non-Federal parties would have to seek other methods to comply with the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan and associated take permit, and the federal ESA for the currently impacted population of PBS.

Proposed Action

The project proponent's Proposed Action is represented as Alternative A2 in the Draft EA and is largely consistent with Alternative A excepting one segment west of the USBR Coachella Canal, which is moved farther west of and over an intervening ridge from the canal. Alternative A is primarily a

toe-of-slope alignment that extends 11.5± miles generally along the toe of the Santa Rosa Mountains slope, from the southwesterly boundary of Tradition Golf Club to the southeasterly boundary of Quarry Golf Club.

The proposed barrier connects to the existing 2,807± linear foot Coachella Valley Water District (CVWD) PBS exclusion fence west of the Coachella Canal. It also connects to the existing 6,321± linear foot fence along the toe of slope at the City of La Quinta's SilverRock golf course. Some segments are upslope to avoid conflicts with adjoining land uses. Under Alternative A, 0.59± miles would be built on Reclamation lands and 2.27± miles on BLM lands. Alternative A would isolate approximately 130.35± acres of habitat that is currently accessible to bighorn sheep.

To address concerns from PGA West, a modification to Alternative A was identified to avoid the immediate toe of slope adjacent to their golf course. This modification, referred to as Alternative A2, routes the fence over a ridge between the canal and CVWD reservoirs on the west. A2 eliminates approximately 5,391 linear feet of fencing immediately west of the Coachella Canal in the vicinity of PGA West, and replaces it with approximately 5,728 linear feet of fencing on the west slope of the intervening ridgeline to the west. Under Alternative A2, 0.48± miles of fencing would be built on Reclamation lands. Alternative A2 would isolate approximately 111.60 acres of PBS habitat, in addition to the 130.35± acres of habitat isolated elsewhere in the project area by Alternative A, for a total of 241.95± acres that would be made inaccessible to sheep.

The potential loss of PBS access to habitat that could occur under Alternative A may require offset or compensation. This may be accomplished by a Transfer of Conservation Objectives, which requires a Minor Amendment with Wildlife Agency Concurrence consistent with Section 11.7 of the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan Implementing Agreement (see Section III, Biological Resources).

Environmental Impacts and Findings

Section 3 of the Environmental Assessment (EA) analyzed the impacts of implementing the project alternatives on all of the resource areas evaluated in the EA which are: Land Use; Air Quality and Climate Change; Biological Resources; Cultural Resources; Environmental Justice and Socio-Economic; Hazards Materials; Hydrology and Water Quality; Indian Trust Assets; Geology and Soils; Noise; and Recreation. Section 3 also evaluates cumulative impacts on a categorical basis.

The environmental consequences analysis focused on the potential impacts of implementing the No-Action Alternative, and the "build" alternatives, including the Proposed Action, to determine if there would be any significant and unmitigable impacts associated with their implementation. Based on the Draft EA, it was determined that there would be no significant and unmitigated impacts to any of the resources.

With regard to Biological Resources, the project intent is to implement a "mitigation measure" required under the CVMSHCP and the Peninsular Bighorn Sheep Recovery Plan. Implementation of the Proposed Action could result in the isolation of up to 241.95± acres of essential bighorn sheep habitat; no designated critical habitat for this species would be impacted. The EA provides a variety of mitigation measures that will avoid and minimize impacts to sheep and other sensitive species. Mitigation for the loss of accessible habitat includes the application of *Transfer of Conservation Objectives* provisions of the CVMSHCP and

associated take permit. Reclamation initiated a formal consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) pursuant to Section 7 of the ESA and a biological opinion was prepared, which concluded that although the project could affect PBS, with proposed mitigation measures the project will not jeopardize the continued existence of PBS.

Potential impacts to other biological resources, including burrowing owls and other sensitive species that were not detected but that could occur in the project area, are expected to be less than significant. Nonetheless, the EA sets forth mitigation measures that serve to avoid and minimize impacts to these species.

Summary of Impacts

Reclamation's analysis indicates that the proposed PBS barrier will result in no unmitigated long-term effects.

1. Land Use

The project is consistent with and supports the intent of applicable land use policy documents, including habitat conservation plans and resource management plans requiring construction of a PBS exclusion fence where PBS have been documented using artificial sources of food or water in unfenced areas of existing urban development within or near a conservation area. The Coachella Canal Area Resource Management Plan identifies fencing as an acceptable land management policy to protect high-value wildlife habitat and PBS. Portions of the fence could occur along the boundaries of the Santa Rosa Wilderness Area and within the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument, both of which are managed by BLM. Those portions proposed for construction on Reclamation and/or BLM lands will not result in changes to or conflicts with applicable land management policies or land use patterns. No change in land use or status would occur.

2. Air Quality and Climate Change

Project construction and operational activities on Reclamation and/or BLM lands or on CVWD, County Parks or private lands would potentially to release limited quantities of air pollutants. No established emission thresholds would be exceeded. The project would be constructed in phases, which would further minimize air quality impacts in the project area. Project construction will have a very limited and less than significant impact on area and regional air quality. Emissions associated with fence maintenance are negligible.

Project greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions will not substantially affect climate or interfere with a GHG reduction plan. Operational activities are limited to mobile sources associated with routine fence maintenance.

3. Biological Resources

The intent of the project is to protect the endangered PBS by preventing their access to urban land in the project in the area of Reclamation and/or BLM lands, as well as CVWD, County Parks, City of La Quinta, and private lands. Additionally, PBS would not be able to access approximately 241.95± acres of non-urban bighorn sheep habitat, none of which is designated as critical habitat for PBS. Specific to federal lands, approximately 8.75 acres of PBS habitat on Reclamation lands would be isolated from PBS use; none of these lands is designated as critical habitat. No BLM lands with PBS habitat, including those designated as critical, would be isolated from PBS use. In summary, no designated critical habitat on federal or other lands would be removed from PBS access.

The project could interfere with the movement of other larger resident wildlife, but their access to adjacent urban land is not essential to their survival, and the potential occurrence of other large, sensitive species in the project area is considered low to moderate. Potential impacts to smaller species are expected to be limited, given the permeability of the fence. The project will have no impact on riparian habitat, vernal pools, marshes, wetlands, or special-status natural communities. It is responsive to the management requirements of the CVMSHCP and PBS Recovery Plan, and is expected to reduce take of PBS.

4. Cultural Resources

Five historic resource sites have been identified along, within, or in proximity to the project Area of Potential Effect (APE). Three of the sites are outside the APE and will not be impacted by the proposed action. The other two sites do not qualify as historic properties under Section 106; however, due to the overall sensitivity of the sites to harbor sensitive cultural resources, construction monitoring in those areas where historic resources have been identified along the APE is recommended.

Five archaeological resource sites have been identified along, within, or in proximity to the project APE. Construction of the project has the potential to physically impact four of the resources, all of which appear eligible or potentially eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, and thus meet the definition of “historic properties” under Section 106. The fifth site does not qualify as an historic property under Section 106; however, due to the overall sensitivity of the site to harbor sensitive cultural resources, construction monitoring in those areas where historic resources have been identified along the APE is recommended. Mitigation measures set forth in the EA ensure that no significant adverse effects on historic or archaeological resources will occur.

5. Indian Trust Assets (ITAs)

The project site, including associated federal lands, does not contain ITAs, and there are no tribal reservations, rancherias, or allotments in the project area. This area and much of the Coachella Valley is considered by local Tribes, including the Torres-Martinez, Augustine, Cabazon, Twenty-nine Palms, and Agua Caliente (among others), to be a part of their traditional use area. The nearest tribal lands are the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians Reservation, approximately 2.5 miles southeast of the project area. No ITAs have been identified in the project area and, therefore, no impacts to ITAs will occur.

6. Environmental Justice and Socio-Economic Conditions

Based on the air quality, water resources, and hazardous materials analyses in the EA, implementation of the project would not disproportionately affect the environment or health of minority or impoverished populations in the area. Neither are there such populations either within or in proximity to project-related federal lands.

7. Hazardous Materials or Solid Waste

The PBS barrier project will involve the delivery and use of fencing materials a variety of tools, trucks, carts, and helicopters. Two equipment and materials staging areas have been identified for this project on a CVWD well site on highly disturbed lands north of Lake Cahuilla. Limited helicopter and motor vehicle service and maintenance could occur at pre-approved staging areas. Most equipment maintenance would occur off-site. Only small quantities of fuels and lubricants would be brought to the project site, and their use can be well controlled. The project would generate very little solid waste, primarily consisting of excess fence materials.

8. Noise

Construction noise would include hand tools, rock drills and similar equipment, as well as motor vehicle and occasional helicopter use in the project area. At 800 feet, helicopter flyover noise levels would range from 56.2 to 69.4 effective perceived noise decibels. Helicopter take offs and landings in the project area will occur on the CVWD well site located approximately 0.3 miles from the nearest sensitive receptor. In the vicinity of Lake Cahuilla, helicopter take offs and landings may also be conducted on the staging area north of Lake Cahuilla and in the vicinity of the Riverside County Sheriff's firing range and approximately 1,500 feet from the nearest use area associated with the Lake Cahuilla Park.

By adherence to mitigation measures below, all sensitive receptors will be well beyond this distance during helicopter flyovers. Project-related noise will be intermittent, temporary, and physically removed from sensitive receptors to the extent practicable. Over the long term, routine inspections and occasional repairs could generate similar noise levels, but they would be limited to isolated locations where repairs are needed and less likely to involve the use of helicopters. No permanent noise increases would occur as a result of the project.

9. Water Resources

Project impacts on water resources will be minimal. During construction, the project will use limited quantities of water for mixing concrete for the purpose of securing fence posts, as well as for dust mitigation at staging areas. During long-term operation of the barrier project no water will be required. The project will have no impact on water delivery operations in the project area, water quality, or surface water contained within Reclamation's Coachella Canal or Lake Cahuilla. Neither surface nor groundwater associated with BLM or Reclamation lands will be affected by the project. It will not result in the discharge or placement of dredged or fill material into jurisdictional waters.

10. Geology and Soils

During construction, ground surface disturbances would be limited to digging holes for fence posts, occasional relocation and/or drilling of rocks that are within the immediate path of the fence and impede its installation, incidental disturbance from construction crew foot travel, and generation of blowing sand associated with helicopter operations. During long-term operation of the project, similar soil disturbances would be expected only when occasional repairs are required.

11. Visual Resources

The project will result in the construction of 2,530± linear feet of fencing on or contiguous to Reclamation lands; no fencing will be built on BLM lands. The alignment will consist of 5,728± feet of fencing on the ridgeline to the west of the Coachella Canal. The fence will not be noticeable or obtrusive to observers in on federal lands or other surrounding locations, except for the very limited area where it breaks the ridgeline. Construction would occur during permissible daytime hours, and no new lighting sources would be installed.

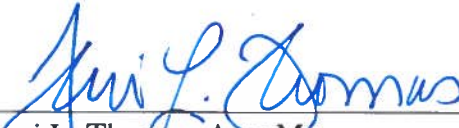
12. Floodplain

The project will not impact the integrity of stormwater improvements in the project area. Flapper gates will be installed in the lower portions of fence segments where determined necessary to facilitate the movement of stormwater and debris flows during larger storm events. These include BLM lands located between the Lake Cahuilla Recreation Area and the Quarry development where storm flows are focused.

In summary, Reclamation prepared the EA on the issuance of a license by Reclamation to allow the construction of an eight-foot barrier to prevent PBS from accessing the Coachella Branch Canal of the All-American Canal system, adjoining golf courses, and other urban lands, PBS use of which has resulted in numerous sheep deaths.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Endangered Species Act (ESA) Findings

Based on the analysis of the environmental impacts as described in the final EA, thorough review of public comments received, and consultation with the USFWS pursuant to Section 7 of the ESA, Reclamation has determined that implementing the Proposed Action will not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment or the natural resources of the area. A Finding of No Significant Impact is justified for the Proposed Action. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not necessary to further analyze the environmental effects of the Proposed Action. The BLM is a Cooperating Agency pursuant to NEPA and will also use this EA to complete processing of those portions of the project that occur on BLM lands.



Terri L. Thomas, Area Manager
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5/1/19

Date