



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION IX
75 Hawthorne Street
San Francisco, CA 94105

June 22, 2010

Erin Dreyfuss
Environmental Protection Specialist
Bureau of Land Management
El Centro Field Office
1661 South 4th Street
El Centro, CA 92243

Subject: Imperial Sand Dunes Draft Recreation Area Management Plan and Draft
Environmental Impact Statement, Imperial County, California (CEQ
#20100096)

Dear Ms. Dreyfuss:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has reviewed the Imperial Sand Dunes Draft Recreation Area Management Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DRAMP/DEIS) pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations (40 CFR Parts 1500-1508), and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act.

We commend the BLM for developing a broad range of alternatives for sustainably managing the Planning Area, and are pleased to see that so many protective measures have been incorporated into the preferred alternative, Alternative 8. These measures, including closing Peirson's milk-vetch (PMV) critical habitat to motorized use and solar and wind energy development, closing Close Dunebuggy Flats campground to camping (if the rainfall threshold for PMV is met), and classifying microphyll woodlands as avoidance areas, should serve as crucial safeguards for sensitive Planning Area resources.

EPA recognizes the inherent challenges of managing an area, as described in the DEIS, for the "recovery and delisting of the PMV and Mojave desert tortoise...while providing a world-class recreation experience to visitors," and believes that BLM, by implementing the preferred alternative, will have largely succeeded in this charge. However, based on our review of the document, we have rated the DRAMP/DEIS as Environmental Concerns - Insufficient Information (EC-2) (see enclosed "*Summary of Rating Definitions*"). We are concerned about the number of acres open to off-highway-vehicles (OHV) in the preferred alternative and the potential impacts to air quality and sensitive resources if this proposal were to be implemented. We also ask that BLM provide additional information regarding how climate change may affect the Planning

Area. Our enclosed detailed comments provide additional information regarding these concerns.

We appreciate the opportunity to review this DRAMP/DEIS, and are available to discuss our comments. When the final RAMP/EIS is released for public review, please send one hard copy and one CD-ROM to the address above (Mail Code: CED-2). If you have any questions, please contact me at (415) 972-3521, or contact Jason Gerdes, the lead reviewer for this project. Jason can be reached at (415) 947-4221 or gerdes.jason@epa.gov.

Sincerely,

/s/

Kathleen M. Goforth, Manager
Environmental Review Office

Enclosures: Summary of Rating Definitions
EPA Detailed Comments

EPA DETAILED COMMENTS ON THE IMPERIAL SAND DUNES DRAFT RECREATION AREA MANAGEMENT PLAN AND DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT, IMPERIAL COUNTY, CALIFORNIA, JUNE 22, 2010

Impacts on Air Quality

EPA is cognizant of the tension that BLM faces in managing the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area, which the draft EIS (DEIS) describes as the “most intensively used OHV recreation area within the BLM California Desert District, with over 1.4 million OHV visitors per year.” In attempting to strike a balance between protection and recreation, BLM risks upsetting both conservationists and off-road enthusiasts. We are concerned, however, about the impacts to air quality and sensitive species if the BLM implements the preferred alternative, a proposal that would designate 127,416 acres as open OHV management, more than any of the other alternatives. Additionally, implementing Alternative 8, according to the “Alternative Comparison Tables” in Appendix F, would result in just 4% of the Riding Area being closed to OHVs, the lowest percentage of any of the proposed alternatives.

OHV activity is described in the DEIS as the Planning Area’s “predominant source of air pollutants.” According to Table 4-3 of the DEIS (“Estimated Annual Air Quality Emissions due to OHV Activity (Tons/Year)”), adopting the preferred alternative would result in the second highest level of air quality emissions. EPA is concerned about these potential air quality impacts, and whether, if implemented, Alternative 8 will conform to the Imperial County Air Pollution Control District (ICAPCD)’s State Implementation Plan (SIP) for ozone and PM₁₀ (which is of particular concern, as Imperial County was reclassified as serious PM₁₀ nonattainment in 2004).

Page 4-4 of the DEIS states that ICAPCD Rule 800 exempts recreational use of BLM land that is covered by a BLM dust control plan. On June 15, 2010, however, EPA’s Region 9 Administrator signed an action that provided simultaneous limited approved and limited disapproved of ICAPCD’s Regulation VIII, in part because it had not demonstrated that this exemption fulfilled Clean Air Act requirements regarding enforceability and best available control measures. EPA asks that BLM discuss this action in the FEIS.

Recommendations:

Given that OHV activity is recognized as the “predominant source of air pollutants,” EPA recommends that the BLM explain in the FEIS why the alternative that designates the greatest amount of land in the Planning Area as open OHV management was selected as the preferred alternative. We also ask for more information on the preferred alternative’s potential air quality impacts, and whether it will conform to the ICAPCD’s SIP for ozone and PM₁₀.

Impacts on Species

EPA is also concerned about the effects of OHV activity on sensitive species in the Planning Area. According to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) report cited in the DEIS, “OHV recreation and associated recreational development have been described as the primary threats to PMV through destruction of individual plants and habitat.” Similarly, habitat for the other federally listed species identified by the FWS as occurring within the Planning Area, the Mojave Desert tortoise, has also been “degraded and fragmented by OHV and camping recreation.” These listed species, however, are not the only ones affected by OHV activity—the DEIS states that plant life is impacted through compaction and proliferation of dust particles, and “significantly more migratory and breeding birds were found in areas closed to OHV recreation.”

Recommendation:

Considering the impacts to sensitive species, including PMV, the Mojave Desert Tortoise, and migratory birds, EPA recommends that the BLM explain in the FEIS why the alternative that designates the greatest amount of land in the Planning Area as open OHV management was selected as the preferred alternative.

Climate Change

The DEIS provides only limited information about the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that would be generated in the Planning Area once the Recreation Area Management Plan (RAMP) is implemented. Table 4-4 provides a partial list of anticipated GHG emissions, representing an estimate of the incremental change in CO₂ emissions due to OHV activity; this list, however, shows that implementing the preferred alternative would result in the second-highest change at 31,597 tons per year. The adoption of such an alternative is a concern because both Executive Order 13514 and Secretarial Order No. 3289, among other directives, have charged BLM with accounting for, and reducing, emissions resulting from Federal land management practices, and considering and analyzing potential climate change impacts when developing multi-year management plans. Considering that the RAMP, once implemented, will guide resource management decisions in the Planning Area for years to come, BLM should choose an alternative that minimizes and mitigates GHG emissions to the greatest reasonable extent.

The DEIS also provides little detail about how climate change may affect the Planning Area. BLM states that the Planning Area resources that are “anticipated to be affected by climate change” are water, vegetation, and wildlife; with water impacts expected to include “extended drought cycles” that “could potentially decrease the availability of surface and groundwater” for plants and wildlife. There are no detailed descriptions, however, of how potential climate change effects, including the expected decreases in surface and groundwater, and warming of the Planning Area, may affect sensitive landscapes such as the microphyll woodlands and species, especially the PMV and desert tortoise.

Recommendations:

EPA recommends that BLM provide additional information about anticipated GHG emissions for each of the proposed alternatives (not just those related to OHV activity), and select an alternative that fulfills BLM and Administration directives by reducing GHG emissions in the Planning Area. Also, EPA asks that BLM describe how climate change may affect specific Planning Area sensitive species, particularly the PMV and the desert tortoise.