

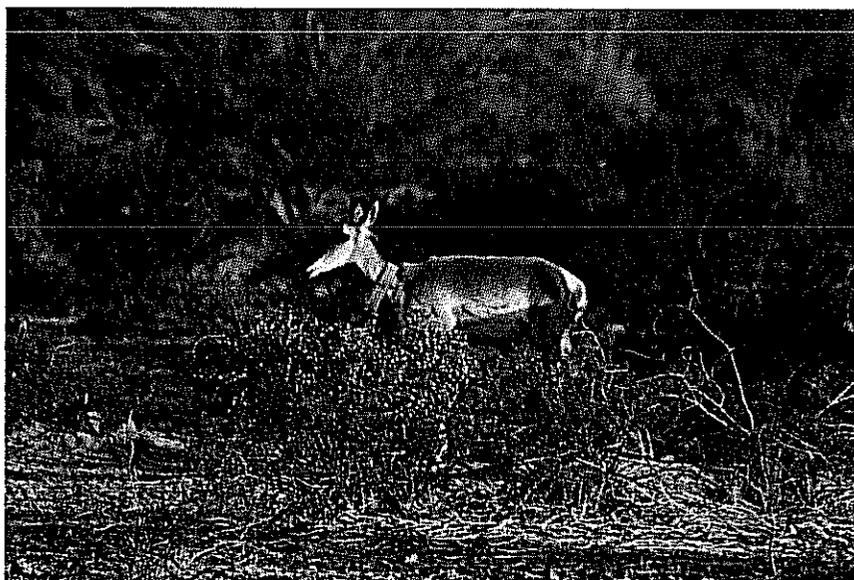
Record of Decision

for

Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan
and Wilderness Stewardship Plan

Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge Ajo, Arizona

June 2007



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
National Wildlife Refuge System, Southwest Region
Division of Planning
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INTRODUCTION

This Record of Decision (ROD) signifies the end of the planning process for the development of a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Wilderness Stewardship Plan to guide the management and administration of the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) for the next 15 years. This ROD documents the decision of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) based on information contained in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) released to the public on April 23, 2007. A notice of this decision will be published in the *Federal Register* and a news release will be sent to the media. This document will also be posted on the of Southwest Region's Planning Division website.

THE DECISION

The Service has decided to implement Alternative 4, the preferred alternative, as described in the Final EIS as the CCP for the Refuge.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

The Draft EIS that was released for public comment on March 16, 2005, for a 173-day comment period developed and analyzed five alternative approaches to Refuge management. The Service made the following revisions to Alternative 4 in response to public and agency comments on the Draft EIS.

- Restrictions on visitor party size and number of vehicles per party have been established.
- The prohibition of using dead and downed wood for campfires in the Refuge backcountry (i.e., away from access roads) was removed from Alternative 4; the requirement that visitors using the public access roads haul in all firewood or other fuels was retained.
- Provision was added to remove developed waters and close administrative trails to all management use if future conditions or future research warrant.
- While the Draft EIS proposed to eliminate activity-specific minimum requirements analyses for management activities in wilderness through development of programmatic minimum requirements analyses, the Final EIS specifies that site- and activity-specific minimum requirements analyses remain necessary.

Several elements were common to all alternatives. These include interagency coordination, implementation of the Sonoran pronghorn recovery plan (although the exact details of recovery plan implementation vary somewhat among the alternatives), cooperation with the Department of Homeland Security bureaus for border law enforcement, and continued provision of compatible, wildlife dependent public recreation opportunities.

A brief summary of the alternatives considered follows. A complete description of the management alternatives is provided in Chapter 2 of the Final EIS. The alternatives generally differ primarily in the intensity of wildlife management and level of public use allowed.

Alternative 1. No Action (Current Management)

This alternative would result in no change from the current level of wildlife management activity. Public use programs would remain unchanged. One hundred forty-five miles of existing Administrative Trails (old jeep roads closed to public access) would remain open to management use, subject to minimum requirements analysis in wilderness.

Alternative 2. Minimum Intervention

The emphasis of this alternative is limited intervention on natural systems on the Refuge. Developed waters in desert bighorn sheep habitat would be dismantled. The Refuge would be closed to hunting. A party size limit of eight individuals and a length of stay limit of seven (7) days would be imposed on Refuge visitors. Pack and saddle stock would be prohibited from the Refuge. Eighty-five miles of Administrative Trails would remain open to management use, subject to minimum requirements analysis in wilderness.

Alternative 3. Restrained Intervention

This alternative provides more active management of Refuge wildlife than Alternative 2, but emphasizes conducting management activity outside of Federally designated wilderness when at all feasible. Developed waters in desert bighorn sheep habitat would remain, but would only be supplied with water during periods of drought, as defined in the alternative. Desert bighorn sheep hunting would be allowed, but hunts would be prohibited during any year in which water was hauled due to drought. Party size and length stay limits for Refuge visitors would be the same as those of Alternative 2, but pack and saddle stock would be allowed by special use permit. One hundred twenty-five miles of Administrative Trails would remain open to management use, subject to minimum requirements analysis in wilderness.

Alternative 4. Active Management (Preferred Alternative)

The emphasis of this alternative is use of management interventions to maintain the Refuge's numerical goal of 500 to 700 desert bighorn sheep. No new developed waters in desert bighorn sheep habitat are proposed, but existing waters would be maintained, supplied with water as necessary and improved to increase their water collection and storage capacity. A remote-sensing change detection analysis using a random sample of the Refuge land area would be implemented. Visitor party size limits would remain the same as those proposed in Alternatives 2 and 3, but length of stay limits would be expanded to fourteen (14) days. Backcountry visitors would be allowed to have campfires using dead and downed wood. Campers along the public access roads would be allowed to have campfires, but only using fuel that was hauled in from off-Refuge. Desert bighorn sheep hunting would continue with the number of permits allowed based on sheep population estimates. Other hunts (deer, small game or predators) would be allowed when the Sonoran pronghorn population has stabilized, subject to compatibility determinations at that time. Pack and saddle stock would be allowed by special use permit. One hundred twenty-five miles of Administrative Trails would remain open to management use, subject to minimum requirements analysis in wilderness.

Alternative 5. Maximum Effort

The emphasis of this alternative is increasing the number of desert bighorn sheep on the Refuge through aggressive management and increasing the types of activities available to Refuge visitors. The Refuge would develop additional waters and forage enhancements in desert bighorn sheep habitat. A remote-sensing change detection analysis would be implemented. No visitor party size limit would be imposed and the length of stay limitation would be the same as Alternative 4. Pack and saddle stock would be allowed with general Refuge access and all visitors would be allowed to gather firewood for campfires on the Refuge. Desert bighorn sheep hunting would be allowed and other hunts (deer, small game or predators) would be allowed when the Sonoran pronghorn population stabilized, subject to compatibility determinations at that time. One hundred forty-five miles of Administrative Trails would remain open to management use, subject to minimum requirements analysis in wilderness.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

Based on a review of the environmental consequences of each alternative, (Chapter 4, Final EIS), Alternative 4 is judged to be the environmentally preferable alternative. While all five alternatives implement the Sonoran pronghorn recovery plan, Alternatives 2 and 3 place spatial restrictions on monitoring and recovery actions to avoid Federally designated wilderness. These restrictions could result in a skewed sample of animals, in the case of monitoring or development of waters and forage enhancements in areas of less than optimum Sonoran pronghorn habitat, in the case of forage enhancements or developed waters. Alternative 5, while not spatially restricting recovery actions, includes high levels of public use which could adversely affect pronghorn populations through increased disturbance. Scientific uncertainty exists regarding the overall efficacy of providing developed waters in support of desert bighorn sheep populations in desert environments, but it is the best biological opinion of Refuge biologists and Arizona Game and Fish Department biologists that removing or dewatering Refuge developed waters in desert bighorn sheep habitat, as proposed in Alternatives 2 and 3, would be likely to adversely affect their populations on the Refuge. Many of these water developments have been in place and maintained for several decades, during this time period the Refuge populations have become habituated to using these water sources.

While the impact of the Refuge on the local and regional economies is so small that differences among Refuge public use and management among the five alternatives is immaterial, the wilderness recreation provided at the Refuge is important to many interests, both locally and nationally. Alternatives 2 and 3, which would eliminate or greatly restrict desert bighorn sheep hunting, would be considered unacceptable to groups and individuals dedicated to traditional Refuge uses, but preferable to the other alternatives to groups and individuals opposed to hunting. Similarly, groups and individuals who value untrammelled wilderness would find Alternative 2 the most preferable alternative and Alternative 5 the least preferable. The Service believes that Alternative 4 provides the best balance of wilderness protection, provision of wildlife dependent public use and habitat management of the five alternatives evaluated.

BASIS FOR DECISION

Alternative 4 is most consistent with the Refuge purposes and National Wildlife Refuge System needs.

Chapter 1 of the Final EIS identified four broad needs, based on the Refuge purposes and missions of the National Wildlife Refuge System and Fish and Wildlife Service: a. recover the United States population of Sonoran pronghorn, b. maintain a sustainable Refuge population of desert bighorn sheep, c. protect the Refuge wilderness resource, and d. provide opportunities for wildlife dependent public recreational use on the Refuge. Alternative 4 meets these needs through the most balanced and integrated approach compared to the other alternatives.

Alternative 4 has the broadest level of public and agency support.

While comments received on the Draft EIS showed a wide variety of positions and opinions, Alternative 4 best represents the cross section of comments received. It is not possible for management of the Refuge to satisfy all individual, non-governmental organization and agency concerns; Alternative 4 best addresses the wide range of comments received.

Alternative 4 has long-term benefits to the natural and human environment.

Alternative 4 identifies measures to control invasive species, wildlife monitoring, wilderness monitoring, adaptive management of wildlife populations and wilderness stewardship that will ensure the Refuge's biological and physical resources are protected during and beyond the 15-year timeframe of the CCP.

Alternative 4 is based on the best available science.

Alternative 4 reflects a large body of scientific and management knowledge and experience on Sonoran Desert ecosystems, habitats and wildlife. It reflects the lessons learned through over 65 years of Service management of the Refuge, and includes recommendations of independent researchers and the Arizona Game and Fish Department. This Alternative also encourages continued research by both independent and government scientists.

Alternative 4 will enhance partnerships and coordination.

Although differences of opinion will remain, Alternative 4 is the strongest alternative in terms of fostering cooperative cooperation conservation with the Refuge's neighbors and stakeholders.

PUBLIC COMMENTS ON THE FINAL EIS

The Final EIS was released on April 13, 2007. The Environmental Protection Agency published its notice of receipt on May 18, 2007, and established June 18, 2007, as the end of the 30-day waiting period.

Although the draft EIS received more than 6,700 comments, the level of comment on the final EIS was quite low. During the waiting period, three written comments were received. These comments were from two individuals and one conservation organization. One comment from an individual and the comment from a conservation organization expressed preference for Alternative 4. The other comment from an individual was generally opposed to any hunting on the Refuge and expressed no support for any proposed management alternative.

MEASURES TO MINIMIZE ENVIRONMENTAL HARM

Public concerns, potential impacts, and measures and stipulations to mitigate impacts are addressed in various sections of the Final EIS. Alternative 4 contains many changes from other and/or earlier alternatives to address public concerns or avoid potential environmental impacts. Examples include the provision to close all Administrative Trails to Refuge management use, should future conditions or additional research demonstrate that hauling supplemental water to developed waters is no longer necessary and allowing backcountry visitors to gather down and dead firewood on the Refuge.

As the focus of the CCP is improvement of the Refuge environment, there is little mitigation for physical environmental impacts. Also, many objectives in the CCP are programmatic in nature and local impacts are unknown. Specific mitigation measures for any project-specific impacts will thus be determined during detailed project planning and design. The Intra-Service Biological Opinion for the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Arizona (Appendix N of the Final EIS), concluded that implementation of Alternative 4 is not likely to appreciably reduce the survival and recovery of any listed species; and, on the contrary, the intent is to perpetuate viable populations of such species.

Compatibility determinations were prepared for all uses identified in Alternative 4, and these are determinations (Appendix G of the Final EIS) that contain stipulations to avoid, minimize or mitigate any environmental impacts associated with the uses.

The Refuge manager will be responsible for ensuring that monitoring and stipulations identified in the CCP are completed or followed.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Final EIS can be viewed on the world wide web or downloaded from the world wide web at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/Refuges/Plan/completeplans.html>. Copies can also be obtained from the Refuge office at 1611 North Second Street, Ajo, Arizona 85321, by contacting the Refuge at 520-387-6483, by calling John Slown at 505-248-7458 or emailing john_slown@fws.gov.



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7/19/07

Date