

Communications Plan – Clear Creek Management Area (CCMA) Draft Resource Management Plan/Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Issue:

The BLM-California is preparing to release the Draft CCMA Resource Management Plan (RMP) /Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Hollister Field Office, California. The document is scheduled for release in August 2008, with a 90-day public comment period to begin upon release. The Proposed Resource Management Plan/Final EIS is expected to be released in April 2009, and the Record of Decision (ROD) is expected to be released by mid-September 2009.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Hollister Field Office (HFO) manages approximately 63,000 acres of public lands in CCMA. The lands managed by the HFO are located in southern San Benito and western Fresno counties. The lands include a variety of settings and landforms, including the Southern Diablo Range, the Hernandez Valley, and three major watersheds, the Pajaro, which drains into the Pacific Ocean, and the Arroyo Pasajaro and Silver Creek, which drain into the San Joaquin Valley. BLM's mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of these public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

The CCMA has been used extensively for OHV recreation for many years as well as for other recreational uses such as hunting and rock hounding. In 1984, a large portion of the CCMA was designated as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), primarily due to the unique serpentine soils in the area and the related human health concerns over naturally occurring asbestos in those soils. Therefore, land use planning in the CCMA primarily focuses on multiple uses and the potential for human health risks from exposure to naturally occurring asbestos.

The CCMA RMP will provide an updated assessment of resources, uses, conditions, and trends; a forum for enhanced public collaboration and involvement; and a comprehensive impact analysis of reasonable management alternatives and resulting land-use decisions.

Key Audiences

County governments: Monterey, San Benito, Santa Clara, and Fresno counties. Interest varies by county. Many communities in these counties have an intense interest because the BLM public lands are an important factor in their local economies.

Elected Officials: Congressman Sam Farr has longstanding interest in the BLM's land use planning in the CCMA. BLM continues to involve the San Benito County Board of Supervisors in regional CCMA management, and Congressman Jim Costa has also expressed interest in management of BLM public lands in western Fresno County that are only accessible to the public from CCMA.

Cooperating Agencies under CEQ Guidelines: Pursuant to the President's Council of Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (40 CFR 1500-1508) implementing NEPA, the Environmental Protection Agency will sign a formal cooperating agency agreement for development of the CCMA RMP. No other agencies or tribes are expected to be formally recognized as "cooperating agencies" in the development of the CCMA RMP and the related EIS.

Other Federal and State agencies: The BLM is working with a number of Federal and State agencies, including the US Fish and Wildlife Service, California Departments of Toxic Substances Control and Fish and Game, Forestry and Fire Protection and others to develop the CCMA Draft RMP/EIS.

Resource Advisory Councils: The BLM's Central California RAC will be consulted throughout the planning process and is supportive of the BLM's effort to develop a "stand alone" CCMA RMP.

Outreach/Timing:

Availability of the CCMA Draft RMP/ EIS will be announced broadly through the news media and direct mail to the constituents included on the Hollister Field Office's CCMA mailing list. The project manager will conduct personal briefings with interested agencies and organizations, including the BLM Central California RAC.

The BLM is continuing to emphasize the importance of partnership in public land management, positioning the agency as one of many involved agencies working toward the common goal of protecting California's public health and safety, and natural, cultural, and historic resources.

Release of the document is targeted for September 2008, with the public comment period running through November 2008, if the current CCMA Draft RMP/EIS preparation schedule can be met.

Questions and Answers (Internal Use)

Why is this plan necessary?

Land use plans and planning decisions are the basis for every on-the-ground action the BLM undertakes. The Resource Management Plan (RMP) is the BLM's land use plan that ensures that the public lands are managed in accordance with the intent of Congress as stated in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976. FLPMA provides BLM with the basic principles and direction for the multiple use management of lands under its jurisdiction.

Is there a high level of public controversy?

Yes. The BLM received hundreds of letters, comment forms and e-mail messages during the land use planning process for the CCMA RMP Amendment and Route Designation (2006). Most of the comments were related to off-highway vehicle recreation opportunities and the need for protection of unique natural, cultural, and historic resources in CCMA. In addition to conflicts between motorized recreation and listed species protection, the results of the EPA asbestos exposure evaluation study are likely to generate significant controversy.

Are recreation and environmental interest groups participating in the planning process?

The Monterey County Chapter of the California Native Plant Society, an environmental interest group, has been participating in the planning process to emphasize the importance of special status species protection in CCMA. There will also be substantial participation from recreation interests, primarily from OHV enthusiasts, which have also traditionally participated in the land use planning process for CCMA to advocate their use of BLM public lands. BLM continues to keep major environmental groups, like the California Wilderness Coalition, The Nature Conservancy, and Sierra Club informed about the planning process.

What are the key planning elements?

Current management direction for Clear Creek Management Area is contained in the 1984 Hollister Resource Management Plan and subsequent amendments. This plan and its amendments, while providing a broad overview of goals, objectives, and needs associated with public lands, lack detailed direction and are generally outdated. Social, political, and environmental changes, coupled with significant population growth not anticipated in the plan and amendments, have presented some complex management issues, which will benefit from an updated "stand alone" RMP.

The current CCMA plan amendments do not address present program guidance, laws, regulations and policies developed since their conception. Development of a new CCMA RMP would enhance management by addressing planning needs discussed in the Hollister Field Office Land Use Plan Evaluation (2002) as well as concerns about the health risk from exposure to naturally occurring asbestos as agreed upon by BLM and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). A new stand alone RMP for CCMA will also provide the opportunity for public involvement in a new era of land use planning to address these complex and controversial issues.

This planning effort is intended to be comprehensive, evaluating existing management plans and resolving or addressing issues within the region identified through public, interagency, and within-agency scoping efforts. This effort also identifies the area's mission, long-range management goals, intermediate objectives, and actions and options for meeting those objectives.

Draft Text for News Release

BLM Seeks Public Input for Clear Creek Management Area Resource Management Plan

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Hollister Field Office is requesting public comments for the preparation of the Clear Creek Management Area (CCMA) Resource Management Plan (RMP). The CCMA encompasses approximately 63,000 acres of public lands in southern San Benito and western Fresno counties.

Since the 1984 Hollister Resource Management Plan was developed, many social, political, and environmental changes have occurred that affect resource conditions and influence public land uses. These changes, coupled with significant population growth not anticipated in the original plan, have presented some complex management issues, which will benefit from an updated land use plan.

Over the next two years, BLM will be preparing a Draft RMP and associated Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to guide the future management of public lands within the CCMA. The public is encouraged to help identify issues, questions, and concerns to be incorporated into the Draft RMP/EIS during the 90-day 'scoping' period that begins with the publication of a Notice of Intent (NOI) in the Federal Register on August 31, 2007.

BLM will announce public scoping meetings to identify relevant issues through local news media, newsletters, and the BLM web site (www.blm.gov/ca/hollister) at least 15 days prior to the first meeting. BLM will provide additional opportunities for public participation upon publication of the Draft RMP/EIS.

The BLM will work closely with interested parties to develop management actions that are best suited to the management of the resources and the needs of the public. Planning criteria will be developed during public scoping to help guide the planning effort. This collaborative process will take into account local, regional, and national concerns. Early participation by all interested parties is encouraged and will help guide the planning process and determine the future management of public lands.

Written comments should be sent to "CCMA RMP" BLM, Hollister Field Office, 20 Hamilton Court, Hollister, CA, 95023. Fax: 831-630-5055, or e-mail, cahormp@ca.blm.gov.

For further information contact Sky Murphy, Planning & Environmental Coordinator, 831-630-5039, or e-mail, Sky_Murphy@ca.blm.gov.