RECORD OF DECISION

August 1989

SAN PEDRO RIVER RIPARIAN MANAGEMENT PLAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Safford District
Safford, Arizona

RECORD OF DECISION

for the

San Pedro River Riparian Management Plan/EIS

INTRODUCTION

This document registers the decisions of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for managing 47,668 acres of public lands within the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area (NCA), a portion of the Safford District. During the preparation of this plan additional lands were added to the San Pedro planning area and the entire tract (56,431 acres) was designated the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area in the Arizona-Idaho Conservation Act, Public Law 100-696 (102 Stat. 4571). Since these additional lands were not analyzed, management decisions for these lands are not included in this ROD. Management alternatives for these additional lands are currently being developed in the Safford District Resource Management Plan (RMP); approval of which is anticipated in 1990. The management decisions in this ROD will be incorporated into the Safford District RMP, and upon completion of the Safford District RMP, the total decisions related to the NCA will constitute the management plan required by Section 103 of the legislation designating the NCA.

DECISION

The decision is to select the Preferred Alternative described in the San Pedro River Riparian Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), with the changes described below, as the management plan for the 47,668 acre portion of the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area. All practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm from the Preferred Alternative have been adopted. The management direction in this decision is contained in the following parts of Chapter 2 of the Final EIS:

- Management Practices Common to All Alternatives
- Preferred Alternative
- Appendices and maps referenced in these sections of Chapter 2.

The recommendation to designate the entire planning area as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern is retracted. The designation of the San Pedro Riparian NCA in the Arizona-Idaho Conservation Act, enacted on November 18, 1988, provides adequate recognition and protection for the special values. The St. David Cienega, San Pedro River and San Rafael Research Natural Areas (2,060 total acres) are recommended for designation. Actual designation, however, will occur through the Safford District RMP.

Specific management guidance for the 47,668 acre portion of the San Pedro Riparian NCA will be developed in activity plans and other site-specific plans. Approval of the activity plans and other site specific plans will follow completion of appropriate NEPA environmental considerations. The activity plans will contain detailed monitoring plans.

The major decisions in this plan are:

Recreation: Vehicle use is "Limited to Designated Roads". Four moderate-sized developed recreation sites and seven small sites are permitted. The establishment of recreational developments along the Lewis Springs Road is deferred pending further studies. Dispersed recreation is allowed but overnight use is by permit only. Equestrian use is permitted. The use of archery equipment is allowed in the planning area for the purpose of regulated hunting during established seasons.

Firearms discharge, as delineated in the Final EIS, is adopted. All public lands in the area between Charleston Road and Highway 92 and all public lands within 1/4 mile of developed facilities are closed to the discharge of firearms at any time during the year. The discharge of firearms in the remainder of the area will be allowed only for the purpose of regulated hunting as authorized by the laws of the State of Arizona, but only during the period of September 1 through March 31.

Lands: The acquisition of additional lands for the San Pedro NCA, by mutual agreement via exchanges or purchases, is authorized. A right-of--way corridor for major utilities is authorized at the Charleston crossing. Other land use authorizations are to be evaluated on a case by case basis. The recommendation for a right-of-way corridor at Hereford is retracted.

Water Resources: Water resources use is authorized only to the extent necessary to achieve management objectives and to protect water rights.

Wildlife Habitat: The preparation of a Habitat Management Plan (HMP), in cooperation with the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD), is authorized. Specific wildlife habitat improvement needs will be identified in the HMP. Inventories of terrestrial and aquatic vertebrates and habitats will continue. An evaluation will be made on the impacts of visitor use on wildlife and the riparian ecosystem. Trapping is prohibited in the NCA, except for control purposes in consultation with APHIS and AGFD. Interpretation and environmental education programs on wildlife, their habitat, and the riparian ecosystem will be established. BLM will coordinate with AGFD on the establishment of hunting regulations for the NCA.

Vegetation: Major vegetation improvement will be through natural processes. Abandoned farm fields may be used for experimental plantings or reseedings of native species. Some non-native species presently found within the area may also be utilized. Prescribed fires on a limited basis using prescriptions defined in the Fire Management Plan are authorized to improve vegetation resource or eliminate hazardous situations.

Soils/Watershed: Portions of existing berms and dikes along the east and west sides of the abandoned farm fields will be removed to allow natural drainages to reestablish themselves. Side channel erosion control structures and watershed improvements will be provided, only if necessary, after approval of site specific watershed project plans.

Fire: A fire management plan will be prepared for the NCA. Wildfire suppression, as defined in the Safford District Fire Management Plan, has a high priority. The Safford District Plan will be followed until completion of the San Pedro Fire Management Plan. Prescribed fires may be used if consistent with the prescriptions in either Fire Management Plan.

Cultural: Selected cultural properties are allocated to scientific use, public use and conservation for future use. Preparation of a Cultural Resource Management Plan is authorized to allocate other cultural properties to either scientific use, management use, public use, socio-cultural use or conservation for future use. Most sites are to be managed for their information potential through scientific studies. A small number of sites will be managed for public values and a few for conservation.

Paleontological: The excavation and collection of the Diack, Horsethief Draw Mammoth and Horsethief No. 2 sites for paleontological research and interpretation is encouraged. Protection of significant paleontological resources will be ensured by controlling other resources and land uses.

Mineral: New mineral activities are prohibited in the NCA by legislation. Existing gravel operations outside the riparian area will cease at the expiration of the current lease (December 31, 1989).

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern: The recommended designation of three Research Natural Area ACECs (St. David Cienega, San Pedro River and San Rafael, totalling 2,060 acres) will be made through the Safford District RMP.

Administrative Facilities: Construction of an administrative facility at the Highway 90 location as part of the visitor contact and interpretive facility, and of a small facility at Fairbank to administer the northern end of the NCA, is authorized. The housing at Fairbank, Boquillas Ranch and Hereford can be used for employees or by cooperating agencies.

Research: A facility at either Fairbank or the Highway 90 area will be provided for research in the natural and cultural sciences.

ALTERNATIVES, INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

Four alternative plans were analyzed in the selection of the San Pedro River Management Plan. These were the No Action, Preservation, Utilization, and Preferred Alternatives.

No Action Alternative

This alternative limits human activity to a minimal level. Only monitoring and enforcement activities are allowed. No public or BLM activities could occur. This provides protection to cultural and paleontological resources and improves the wildlife, vegetation and water resources by allowing natural processes to occur without intervention.

Preservation Alternative

The Preservation Alternative provides protection to the resources of the San Pedro River by allowing management actions to enhance wildlife habitat, water quality and quantity, and vegetation. It protects the cultural and paleontological resources. Limited public use is permitted, but no facilities would be developed.

Utilization Alternative

The Utilization Alternative emphasizes the use of the resources of the EIS area. The kinds and levels of use, however, are restricted so that the riparian ecosystem would not be damaged. Increased levels of recreation, including development of campgrounds and other recreational areas outside the riparian corridor, are permitted.

Preferred Alternative

The Preferred Alternative balances the resource protection and public use activities in the San Pedro EIS area. Protection and/or enhancement of wildlife, cultural, paleontological, vegetation and water resources is emphasized. Public use is allowed where natural resources are not significantly impacted.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

The No Action Alternative is the environmentally preferred alternative. It protects the resources of the riparian area to the greatest degree. No activities would be implemented that would impact cultural or paleontological resources. This alternative does not, however, allow any remedial activities to control excessive vegetation growth and the resulting excessive buildup of fuels, that, if ignited could be devastating to the existing ecosystems.

The other alternatives analyzed in the EIS are considered environmentally acceptable on the basis of their incorporation of management constraints defined in the legislation designating the San Pedro River EIS area a National Conservation Area.

MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

BLM considers the Preferred Alternative to be the best option among the alternatives analyzed in the EIS. Its implementation is consistent with the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) requirement that BLM manage public lands under the principles of multiple use, maintaining environmental quality and important environmental values while at the same time providing resources and land use opportunities that will help meet society's needs.

When the San Pedro lands were considered by Congress for designation as a National Conservation Area, certain restrictions in uses were identified. The intent of the legislation is that management will focus on the riparian ecosystem. Activities excluded by legislation include minerals development and off-road use by vehicles. An administrative decision, made

prior to development of the EIS, excludes livestock grazing from the acquired lands for a 15 year period and provides an opportunity to monitor and evaluate natural changes in a riparian ecosystem.

Providing limited recreational use and developments and establishing a utility corridor will result in negative environmental impacts on some resources. These effects are trade-offs to accomodate public demand or need for recreation and opportunities for public education and interpretation.

The selection of the plan was preceded by a public review of the DEIS and FEIS and a consistency review by state and local governments. As a result of public review, specific areas of the 47,668 acres of public lands within the planning area are designated as closed to the discharge of firearms (see the description under Recreation).

MITIGATIONS

Mitigating measures incorporated in the Preferred Alternative eliminate or reduce adverse impacts.

MONITORING

The implementation of the plan will be monitored and evaluated on a periodic basis to ensure that the desired results are being achieved. Monitoring will be carried out to determine the accuracy of impacts projected in the EIS, to discover any unanticipated impacts, and to determine whether mitigation measures are working as prescribed.

BLM will prepare a detailed plan establishing standards, intervals and methods of evaluation for monitoring the management plan and its impacts. Monitoring requirements will also be addressed in all activity plans prepared after implementation.

Monitoring activities and needs will be programmed into annual budgets for the various resource management programs. Monitoring results will be available for public and other governmental agency review. The monitoring plan will be consistent with the Safford District Resource Management Plan.

The decision is hereby made to approve the Preferred Alternative, as described in the Final EIS and with the minor modifications described above, as the Management Plan for the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area.

Arizona State Director
Bureau of Land Management

Aug 15, 1989
Date