PARTIAL RECORD OF DECISION

FOR THE

APPROVAL OF THE

SAFFORD DISTRICT

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

II

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

LESTER K. ROSENKRANCE

ARIZONA STATE DIRECTOR

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PARTIAL RECORD OF DECISION
FOR THE SAFFORD DISTRICT

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN
AND
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

INTRODUCTION

This Partial Record of Decision documents approval of the protested portions of the Safford District Resource Management Plan. Together, with the partial Record of Decision issued in September 1992, it will constitute the approved Resource Management Plan for the Safford District. The combined documents will replace four Management Framework Plans (Geronimo, 1973; Black Hills, 1975; Winkelman, 1981; and San Simon, 1973) for the District and provide the basis for managing public lands over the next 15 years.

The Record of decision describes the selected alternative, other alternatives considered and rationale for adopting the selected alternative. The environmentally preferred alternative is also identified. Seven protests were received on the Proposed Resource Management Plan during the 30-day protest period. The protests centered on very specific issues. All protests have either been resolved by the Director of the Bureau of Land Management or addressed in "Administrative Decisions" by the State Director. The selected plan is nearly identical to the one set forth in the proposed plan and associated environmental impact statement released in September 1991. All practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm have been incorporated into the plan.

DECISION

It is my decision to adopt the following management prescriptions defined in the Safford District Proposed Resource Management Plan under the section entitled Alternative A (Preferred Alternative) and the Appendices and maps referenced in that section relating to the specific decisions.

1. The Gila Box Area of Critical Environmental Concern will not be designated. The Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area was designated by Congress in 1990 under Title II, of the Arizona Desert Wilderness Act. The majority of the proposed ACEC was included in the conservation area and those areas outside no longer meet the importance criterion for Area of Critical Environmental Concern designation.

2. The Coronado Mountain Area of Critical Environmental Concern will not be designated. It is not feasible to protect this area from expanding mining operations that are currently within 700 yards of its boundary. The proposed Area of Critical Environmental Concern lies within a valid mining claim and the mine operator has notified the BLM of intentions to mine the area. BLM now feels that seeking mineral withdrawal and Area of Critical Environmental Concern designation would not be appropriate.

3. The Eagle Creek Bat Cave will be designated as proposed.

4. The Hot Springs Watershed Area of Critical Environmental Concern will be designated. However, the management prescription for the area will be determined through the process presented later in this document under section "ISSUE 2 AREA OF CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN AND OTHER TYPES OF SPECIAL MANAGEMENT AREAS."

5. The language concerning grazing in the Desert Grassland RNA ACEC will be modified and presented in this document under section "ISSUE 2 AREA OF CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN AND OTHER TYPES OF SPECIAL MANAGEMENT AREAS."

6. The grazing prescription for the South Rim Allotment will be determined through the process presented in this document under section "ISSUE 2 AREA OF CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN AND OTHER TYPES OF SPECIAL MANAGEMENT AREAS."

7. The acquisition of land on the San Pedro watershed other than wilderness in-holdings, lands within the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area and the 12 parcels already in the acquisition process, will be guided by the following process agreed to during the Coordinated Resource Managment Process for the San Pedro basin.

A. Prior to considering a specific tract of land for acquisition the BLM will contact the owner to complete a landowner survey form. Completion of the form will assess the level of interest the owner has in riparian conservation and working with the Bureau or other groups to manage the resources of the area.

B. Prior to acquiring land in the San Pedro River Watershed, the BLM will complete a four step review process before deciding to acquire fee simple title to the land. The goal of this process is to determine if long-term conservation of resources can be accomplished without acquiring title to the land. The steps in the process are as follows:

1. Awareness and Education of the landowner.
2. Coordinated Management Planning.
3. Partial Interest Acquisition (conservation easement, etc.)
4. Fee Simple Title Acquisition.

8. Changes in areas to be withdrawn from mineral entry, areas where no minerals will be sold and areas leased with no "Surface Occupancy" stipulation are identified in this document under "MANAGEMENT CONCERN 2 LANDS AND REALTY" and "MANAGEMENT CONCERN 4 ENERGY AND MINERALS."

9. The Land Tenure Adjustments identified on Map 27 have several inaccuracies that are corrected in this document under "MANAGEMENT CONCERN 2 LANDS AND REALTY."

The following describes in greater detail, the decisions not included in the September 1992 Record of Decision.

Issue 2 AREAS OF CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN AND OTHER TYPES OF SPECIAL MANAGEMENT AREAS

1. ARAVAIPA CREEK WATERSHED

The prescription for management of the Aravaipa Creek Watershed has been revised and will replace that found on pages 30 and 31 of the Proposed Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement.

a. In order to increase management flexibility and to provide for accelerated rehabilitation of uplands and riparian areas, initiate an immediate 50 percent suspension (2898 Animal Unit Months) of the total preference (5,796 Animal Unit Months) on South Rim Allotment #4529. Collect utilization data annually for that portion of the allotment used by allottee until BLM completes carrying capacity determination and first five-year evaluation of the management prescription for the area.

b. Develop range suitability criteria and determine range suitability. Livestock carrying capacity of the South Rim Allotment will be determined using accepted inventory and monitoring methods. Evaluate and revise, if appropriate, resource management objectives in existing South Rim Allotment Management Plan (dated 1989) to ensure that these objectives are measurable.

c. Initiate a Coordinated Resource/Interdisciplinary Ecosystem Management Plan for the 70,000 acres of public land in the Aravaipa watershed area. As part of this process, reevaluate existing Allotment Management Plans, and develop a monitoring plan to measure progress toward resource management objectives for the planning area. The plan will emphasize integration of full spectrum of multiple uses, and include management guidelines for the expanded Aravaipa Wilderness as designated in the Arizona Wilderness Act of 1990.

d. Begin implementing the Coordinated Resource Management Plan.

e. Monitor planning objectives.

f. Improvement of watershed conditions on the upland areas by vegetation manipulation through a fire management plan and by stabilization of active erosion areas.

2. HOT SPRINGS WATERSHED AREA OF CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN

Hot Springs Watershed will be designated as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern. The management prescriptions for livestock grazing will be developed using the procedures described below. This language replaces the section on page 31 of the Proposed Resource Management Plan that addresses livestock grazing. Other prescriptions described in the Resource Management Plan will remain intact.

a. Muleshoe Ranch livestock grazing was previously suspended for a five-year period by the Eastern Arizona Grazing Environmental Impact Statement. This decision was implemented by the signing of a Cooperative Management Agreement between BLM, the Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Forest Service on December 12, 1988. The purpose of this suspension was to improve riparian conditions and wildlife habitat on the Muleshoe Cooperative Management Area. In order to continue progress toward the management goals for the Muleshoe, BLM will:

(1) Continue the suspension of grazing use on the Hot Springs Watershed Area of Critical Environmental Concern with the following management actions to be used to determine the final management prescription for the area.

... Determine range suitability through a range evaluation process. Suitability will not be used to establish carrying capacity.

... Initiate development of a Coordinated Resource Management Plan for the Muleshoe Cooperative Management Area that includes the Hot Springs Watershed Area of Critical Environmental Concern using a team of BLM resource specialists, landowners, permittees, academia and representatives of other state and federal agencies with management responsibilities in the area.

... Present the resource goals and objectives of the Coordinated Resource Management Plan to The Arizona Nature Conservancy.

... The interdisciplinary team will complete the Coordinated Resource Management Plan for the Muleshoe Cooperative Management Area including the Area of Critical Environmental Concern and propose specific resource allocations and prescriptions for multiple uses to achieve the identified resource objectives.

... Begin implementation of the coordinated plan in FY 1995 including any activation of suspended grazing preference at an appropriate level, and in a prescription consistent with achieving the resource objectives.

(2) Authorize livestock use on the new Soza Mesa allotment at an initial stocking rate of 44 cattle year long. Utilization levels will not be permitted to exceed those prescribed in the Eastern Arizona Grazing Environmental Impact Statement (40% average over the full grazing cycle). Allottee will be expected to participate in construction and maintenance of range improvements necessary to facilitate livestock use of allotment. Specific livestock management actions will be identified during the development of an Allotment Management Plan for the area. Adjustments in carrying capacity will be made as part of the Allotment Management Plan evaluation process.

(3) Improve watershed conditions on the upland areas by vegetation manipulation and sound range management practices. Details of these management prescriptions will be incorporated into the Coordinated Resource Management Plan for the Area of Critical Environmental Concern which will include the use of prescribed natural fire to achieve the stated resource objectives. This plan will include provisions for monitoring necessary to evaluate progress of the proposed management in achieving the resource goals and objectives.

3. DESERT GRASSLANDS AREA OF CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN

The management prescription for the exclusion of livestock from the Desert Grasslands Area of Critical Environmental Concern affects only lands not currently accessible to livestock or are not presently being used for grazing. The other prescriptions will be as stated in the Proposed Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement.

4. GILA AND SAN FRANCISCO RIVERS WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS

The study of the Gila (Gila Box section) and Lower San Francisco Rivers to determine suitability for inclusion into the National Wild and Scenic River System will proceed.

MANAGEMENT CONCERN 2 LANDS AND REALTY

Subsequent to the issuance of the September 1992 Partial Record of Decision, some errors were noted on Map 27 delineating those lands identified for retention and those identified for disposal.

Lands located in sections 29, 30, 31 and 32 of T. 6 S., R. 26 E. were incorrectly identified for retention. These lands are now available for disposal. Lands located in section 33 of T. 6 S., R. 26 E. and in section 24 of T. 6 S., R. 25 E. are incorrectly identified for disposal. These lands are now identified for acquisition.

Withdrawals from the mineral entry laws will not be sought for the following areas for one of two reasons: The Area of Critical Environmental Concern was not designated or the site is no longer needed as a building site. 1. Gila Box Area of Critical Environmental Concern (2,411 acres), 2. Coronado Mountain Area of Critical Environmental Concern (120 acres),

3. Proposed District office site (12 acres).

Decisions relating to withdrawal from the mineral entry laws were deferred in the September 1992 Partial Record of Decision for Desert Grasslands and Eagle Creek Bat Cave Areas of Critical Environmental Concern. Withdrawal actions for these two areas will proceed.

MANAGEMENT CONCERN 4 ENERGY AND MINERALS

Sale of mineral materials within the Eagle Creek Bat Cave Area of Critical Environmental Concern will be prohibited, but will not be prohibited within the proposed Gila Box Area of Critical Environmental Concern since it will not be designated.

Issuance of mineral and energy leases with "No Surface Occupancy" will be prohibited within the Eagle Creek Bat Cave Area of Critical Environmental Concern, but will not be prohibited within the proposed Gila Box Area of Critical Environmental Concern since it will not be designated.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Four alternatives for managing the resources of the Safford District were considered in the development of the plan: Alternative A (Preferred Alternative), Alternative B Protection Oriented, Alternative C (Production Oriented) and Alternative D (No Action). These alternatives were described and analyzed in the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statements.

The Preferred Alternative (called the Proposed Plan in the Final Environmental Impact Statement) was designed to respond to the issues and management concerns in a manner that provides a balanced approach to multiple use management. It provided protection to sensitive resources that cannot tolerate disturbance from other activities. It also provided for the consumptive use and development of other resources.

Alternative B (Protection Oriented) emphasized management and protection of natural and cultural resources while still providing for use and development of the public lands. This altenative designated the greatest number and largest Areas of Critical Environmental Concern with more protective management prescriptions. The protection of cultural resources was emphasized before any area was used.

Alternative C (Production Oriented) provided more emphasis than Alternative A or B for use and development of public lands. Fewer areas were managed to protect natural and cultural resources and specific prescriptions are less restrictive to use and development activities. Protection and enhancement of riparian areas and Threatened and Endangered wildlife species were emphasized as were scientific use and recreational/interpretive development of cultural resources. Most of the planning area was open to off-highway vehicles.

Alternative D (No Action or Current Management) emphasized a level of management similar to the current level. This alternative is required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED, BUT NOT ANALYZED

No other specific alternatives were considered for analysis in this Environmental Impact Statement. Variations of the four basic themes were considered, but none were carried forward. The four alternatives present a full and reasonable range of alternatives for management of the public lands and comply with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act and BLM regulations and policies.

ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

Alternative B is the environmentally preferred alternative, providing the greatest protection from surface disturbing activities. Lands administered as Areas of Critical Environmental Concern are larger in this alternative with more protective management prescriptions. Priority wildlife species include Threatened and Endangered species and their habitat but no game species. Actions are proposed to protect water quality by using best management practices to reduce non-point pollution from rangeland management activities and uses. Additional management emphasis is given to protection and enhancement of riparian areas. The protection of cultural resource values (scientific, public and conservation) will be emphasized before the use of these values.

MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

BLM considers the Preferred Alternative of the Resource Management Plan to be the best option among the alternatives analyzed in the Environmental Impact Statement. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 requires BLM to 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 for the public land user.

Implicit in this mandate is the potential for conflicts or trade-offs between environmental and socio-economic values.

Accomodating transmission lines, commercial facilities, off-highway vehicle use, recreational developments and use and mining activities will cause environmental damage. The following factors were considered in selecting the approved portions of the plan:

> Conformance with National policy as established in laws, regulations, executive orders and Bureau directives.

Conformance with plannning criteria established early in the process to guide solutions to the planning issues.

Public comments, suggestions and concerns about the alternatives and solutions to individual issues.

Consistency with the officially approved plans, programs and policies of other Federal agencies, State and local governments and Indian tribes.

ISSUE RESOLUTION

Protests:

Seven protests were received on the Plan during the 30-day protest period in September/October 1991. There was a great deal of overlap in the protest letters with the issues centering around the following areas:

Designation of the Gila Box Area of Critical Environmental Concern.

Study of the Gila (Gila Box Section) and San Francisco Rivers for Wild and Scenic Rivers suitability determination.

Designation of the Coronado Mountain Area of Critical Environmental Concern.

Further withdrawal of any lands in Greenlee County to mineral entry.

Land ownership and boundary issues with the San Carlos Apache Tribe.

Several management prescriptions in specific Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (Hot Springs Watershed, Desert Grassland).

Several grazing issues on the South Rim Allotment (Aravaipa Canyon).

Access across specific private lands.

One protest concerning clarification of the language used to describe grazing lands that are within the boundary of the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area was resolved and the protest was withdrawn.

Administrative decisions on the protests involving Indian Reservation boundaries and the acquisition of access across private land have been rendered by the Director of the Bureau of Land Management. These decisions upheld the decisions proposed in the Resource Management Plan and the procedures used to reach them.

After lengthy negotiations, the issues raised in the protests from Phelps Dodge Corporation, the Arizona Cattlegrowers Association, Greenlee County Board of Supervisors and Slash Hook Cattle Company have been addressed in administrative decisions issued by the Director. These decisions specify certain modifications to be included in the Approved Resource Management Plan and which are identified in this document.

The land ownership and boundary questions raised by the San Carlos Apache Tribe involved boundary issues not included in the scope of the Resource Management Plan. (See Draft comment letters 123, 14, 152, 47.) While the Director's decision affirmed the State Director's procedures, the Bureau of Land Management acknowledges the concern on the part of the San Carlos Apache Tribe over the land ownership in the Bonita Creek and mineral strip areas. The Safford District and all of BLM will continue to work cooperatively with other agencies to assure that the present condition of the lands in question are maintained or enhanced until the legal questions regarding boundaries are resolved.

PUBLIC COMMENT

On September 22, 1987, the Bureau of Land Management published a Notice of Intent in the Federal Register, to prepare a Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement. The Draft Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement was available for public comment from January 5, 1990, to June 12, 1990. The Proposed Resource Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement reflects several changes from the draft version. During the preparation of the proposed plan, the Arizona Desert Wilderness Act was passed by Congress and on November 28, 1990, was signed into law by President George Bush. The proposed plan has been modified to relect the changes created by the passage of the Wilderness Act. In addition, the Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area was also designated by Congress. The public was provided opportunities to comment on the Draft and Proposed Plans and associated Environmental Impact Statements. Over 170 people commented on the Draft. In addition, numerous people attended open houses or other meetings to express opinions or ask question. Local newspapers also published articles about the plan.

MITIGATION

No specific mitigation measures have been identified in this Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement that would reduce the anticipated impacts of implementing the decisions. Mitigation will be incorporated when BLM begins implementing the specific action of the Plan. At that time an environmental compliance document will be prepared to analyze the expected impacts of each project and identify needed mitigation measures to deal with those impacts.

IMPLEMENTATION

An Approved Resource Management Plan and Implementation Plan will be prepared following the issuance of this Partial Record of Decision to establish schedules and budget proposals for administering the plan. The implementation schedule describes actions to be accomplished in the next five-year period. The schedule will be reviewed and updated annually to maintain a five-year perspective. Continued public participation will be encouraged during implementation. Additional opportunities for public participation will be provided through National Environmental Policy Act compliance procedures.

The effects of implementing the approved portions of the plan will be monitored and evaluated on a periodic basis to ensure that the goals and objectives of the plan are being realized, and to determine how effectively management decisions and guidelines are being applied.

Monitoring will continue throughout the life of the plan. The initial monitoring review will be conducted five years after the adoption of the Approved Plan. Following the first monitoring cycle, evaluations will be completed annually.