

# Palo Verde Regional Park Pinal County, Arizona

## DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

DOI-BLM-AZ-P020-2021-0001-EA

U.S. Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management  
Lower Sonoran Field Office  
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It is the mission of the Bureau of Land Management to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

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# **1.0 INTRODUCTION/PURPOSE AND NEED**

## **1.1 Introduction**

Pinal County submitted an application to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Lower Sonoran Field Office (LSFO), to lease three parcels through the Recreation and Public Purposes (R&PP) Act, as amended (43 U.S.C. 869 et seq.) for the Palo Verde Park that consists of approximately 493 acres of public land currently managed by the BLM. Pinal County also submitted to the BLM an application for a right-of-way (ROW) for a 26.5-mile trail system that would connect the three R&PP parcels (Project) (Maps 1 and 2 – Project Vicinity and Project Area maps). The R&PP Act allows for State and local governments and non-profits to apply for the leasing of public lands for the construction and maintenance of facilities such as schools, fire stations, and parks. Title V of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976 allows the BLM to authorize ROWs for various purposes including roads, utilities, and trails.

The *Pinal County Open Space and Trails Master Plan* was approved in 2007 (Pinal County 2007) and incorporated into the “Open Space and Places” section of the Pinal County Comprehensive Plan (Pinal County 2009, last amended in 2015). From June to November 2006, public meetings were held throughout Pinal County to identify the needs and interests of the public to prepare the master plan. The proposed Palo Verde Regional Park (PVRP) land currently managed by the BLM was identified as Regional Park #4 in that master plan. Additional meetings with the public and stakeholders were conducted in 2015 and 2016 to determine local and regional interest in County park facilities at the Palo Verde Mountains and Vekol Valley as part of a master plan effort for this area. Participants from online and in-person meetings voiced their interest in passive recreation activities such as hiking, camping, and picnicking as well as active recreation such as off-highway vehicle (OHV) use and archery.

## **1.2 Purpose and Need**

The BLM’s responsibility under Section 501 of the FLPMA and Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 2800 is to respond to Pinal County’s request to lease three parcels (approximately 493 acres) of BLM-administered land and issue a ROW under Title V of the FLPMA for an approximately 26.5-mile, non-motorized trail system. The R&PP Act states that any jurisdiction can apply to manage lands identified as available for R&PP lease. The facilities are intended to be authorized under a 25-year R&PP lease, and the trail system is intended to be authorized under a 30-year ROW grant. Authorizing the R&PP lease and ROW would also meet Pinal County’s need for additional lands for development in order to meet the recreation demands of a growing population.

## **1.3 Scoping and Issue Identification**

Between March and October 2020, the BLM coordinated with Pinal County and their contractors on the development of the Project design and baseline studies. Appendix B (Resource and Issue Identification Checklist) identifies supplemental authorities that are subject to requirements specified by statute or executive order and must be considered in all BLM environmental

documents. Supplemental authorities that *may be affected* by the Proposed Action or No Action Alternative and *warrant detailed analysis* are further described in this Environmental Assessment (EA) (BLM Handbook H-1790-1).

A final review of the Plan of Development (POD) occurred with the BLM's interdisciplinary team on October 29, 2020. Based on those discussions, the BLM identified the following issues to be considered in this Project:

- How can the proposed Project be designed to limit impacts to Sonoran desert tortoise (*Gopherus morafkai*) Category II habitats?
- What opportunities would there be as part of the Project to educate the public on the Sonoran desert tortoise?
- How would the BLM's recreational opportunities be improved or enhanced?

Given the outreach with the public during Pinal County's development of their master plan (Section 1.1), the BLM determined that public scoping for this Project was not warranted.

## 1.4 Land Use Plan Conformance Statement

The BLM developed the Lower Sonoran Resource Management Plan (RMP) which was approved in September of 2012, to guide long-term management of public lands that it administers in the Lower Sonoran Resource Area (BLM 2012). The Lower Sonoran RMP contains no constraints that conflict with this proposed Project. This proposal is specifically addressed in the following sections:

- LR-1: Manage lands and realty actions to effectively support public needs and resource management objectives.
- LR-2: Manage land tenure to meet natural resource management objectives and community needs and to promote agency efficiency.

Additionally, the following section applies to the Project, under the Lower Sonoran RMP:

- WL-6.1.3: No net loss will occur in the quality or quantity of Category I and II desert tortoise habitat.

## 1.5 Relationships to Statutes, Regulations, Manuals, and Other Plans

FLPMA and its implementing regulations provide the BLM with a legal framework to manage public lands and assess the effects of those management actions. A list of relevant statutes, acts, and authorities that this Project conform to includes:

- Executive Order 13186, Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds (January 10, 2001).
- National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 (NEPA) (42 United States Code [U.S.C.] § 4321).
- National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

- Pinal County Open Space and Trails Master Plan.
- BLM IM-AZ-2012-031

## **1.6 Decision to Be Made**

The BLM's Authorized Officer would decide whether to issue the R&PP lease and ROW grant, issue the R&PP lease and ROW grant with modifications, or to reject the R&PP lease and ROW grant. The BLM may include any terms, conditions, and stipulations it determines to be in the public interest.

## 2.0 PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

Alternatives evaluated in this EA include a Proposed Action and a No Action Alternative.

### 2.1 Location

The proposed 493-acre PVRP is located in Pinal County within Gila and Salt River Meridian, Arizona, Township 4 South, Range 2 East, Sections 20, 29, 33 and Township 5 South, Range 2 East, Sections 4, 7 as follows. all located on the federal land administered by the BLM. The PVRP would be accessed by McDavid Road in the northern portion, Farrell Road in the eastern central portion, and Table Top Road in the southwest portion (Map 2 – Project Area Map).

#### **Gila and Salt River Meridian, Arizona**

T. 4S., R. 2E,

sec. 20, Lot 4

sec. 29, NE1/4NW1/4

sec. 33, Lot 3, Lot 4

T. 5S., R. 4E,

sec. 4, Lot 3, Lot 4, NW1/4SW1/4, SE1/4NW1/4, SW1/4NW1/4

sec.7, NE1/4NE1/4, NE1/4SE1/4, NW1/4NE1/4, NW1/4SE1/4, SE1/4NE1/4, SE1/4SE1/4, SW1/4NE1/4, SW1/4SE1/4.

### 2.2 Proposed Action

Under the provisions set forth in the R&PP Act, “[a]pproval of leases or conveyances under the act shall not be made unless the public lands shall be used for an established or definitely proposed project. A commitment by lessee(s) or conveyee(s) to a plan of physical development, management and use of the lands shall be required before a lease or conveyance is approved” (43 CFR §2740.0-6). A POD was developed by Pinal County (Appendix A) that includes details on the proposed PVRP project (Proposed Action), including the management, maintenance, and construction of new facilities and trails.

#### 2.2.1 Recreation and Public Purposes Developments

Development of Phase I for the proposed PVRP would start within a 1 to 2- year timeframe upon issuance of the R&PP lease and ROW grant. Phase I would eventually include the facilities identified on Map 2 – Project Area Map. The regional park plan would include three main recreation areas: McDavid Road, Farrell Road, and Table Top Road. Proposed facilities would include entry stations, internal park roadways, non-motorized multi-use trails, equestrian staging, OHV staging, an archery range, group and individual campsites, trailheads, restrooms, host sites, water stations, and a County maintenance yard with administrative office space. The total surface disturbance from this Project would be approximately 54.4 acres. For a detailed description of recreation areas and proposed park facilities, refer to Appendix A.



### **2.2.1.1 McDavid Road Trailhead and Staging Area**

The McDavid Road Trailhead and Staging Area is intended to serve passive recreational users with day-use trailhead and equestrian staging facilities, including shaded picnic areas, restrooms, mounting blocks, hitching posts, and parking for both cars and trailers (Map 2 – Project Area Map). Two host sites are proposed for this area to allow onsite County volunteer hosts to oversee the daily operations and maintenance of the facilities. Fees would be determined by the County Board of Supervisors. Additionally, fee stations may be available for “self-pay” depending on phasing of development.

#### **Access: McDavid Road**

The hierarchy of proposed roads includes the public roadway of McDavid Road leading to the site entrance, the loop drive at the entry station, the internal drive, and the vehicular parking areas serving the facilities at this trailhead. The roadways would require dip crossings to maintain existing drainage flow patterns on the site. The proposed entrance occurs along the McDavid Road alignment, and the current paved portion terminates at Sage Street and continues father west as a dirt road. The construction of this trailhead would require improving the existing two-track along the McDavid Road alignment to the site entrance. The County would need to obtain a ROW for McDavid Road up to the park entry, and the roadway extension would become an improved County road (Appendix A, Figure 2). The ROW would be between the County and the private landowner.

#### **Utilities**

Currently, no utilities are available at this site. Potable water and electric service would be delivered to this site either with initial construction or with future site improvements for use at restrooms, individual and group campsites, the maintenance yard, host sites, and entry station from existing services along Farrell Road and/or an on-site well and water storage tank. Sewer and communication lines are not intended to be developed at this site at this time; restrooms and host sites would be designed with septic systems and leach fields. Sewer lines may be extended to this site in the future to potentially serve an RV dump station as the site develops and funding becomes available.

### **2.2.1.2 Farrell Road Trailhead and Campground**

The Farrell Road Trailhead and Campground is intended to serve active recreation users with an archery range as well as passive recreational users with overnight camping and day-use trailhead facilities. The archery range accommodates targets at a distance up to 295 feet, and shaded shooting stations would be provided. Four host sites are proposed for this area to allow County volunteer hosts to oversee the daily operations and maintenance of the facilities. A County maintenance yard is also proposed to oversee the maintenance and operations of all three recreation sites as well as the Palo Verde Mountains trail network. Access to this site would be controlled and access fees would be collected by a pay attendant. Depending on the phase of development, iron ranger fee stations may be available for self-pay (Environmental Planning Group [EPG] 2020).

### **Access: Farrell Road**

The hierarchy of roads includes the public roadway of Farrell Road leading to the trailhead and campground entrance, the entry point to the site, the internal roads, the vehicular parking areas serving the facilities, and the secondary/emergency exit at the Pima Road alignment. The roadways would require both culverted and dip crossings to maintain existing drainage flow patterns on the site. The primary entrance to this site would align with Farrell Road, serve as an extension of the offsite roadway improvements, and follow the alignment of the current road leading to the County borrow pit (Appendix A, Figure 8).

### **Utilities**

Currently, no utilities are available at this site. Potable water and electric service would be delivered to this site either with initial construction or with future site improvements for use at restrooms, individual and group campsites, the maintenance yard, host sites, and entry station from existing services along Farrell Road and/or an on-site well and water storage tank. Sewer and communication lines are not intended to be developed at this site at this time; restrooms and host sites would be designed with septic systems and leach fields. Sewer lines may be extended to this site in the future to potentially serve an RV dump station as the site develops and funding become available.

#### **2.2.1.3 Table Top Road Off-Highway Vehicle Area**

The Table Top Road OHV Area is intended to serve active recreation users with an area for OHV use. Two host sites are proposed for this area. Access to this site would be controlled and access fees may be collected at a self-pay iron ranger.

### **Access: Table Top Road**

The hierarchy of roads includes Table Top Road leading to the OHV area entrance, the loop drive at the entrance, and the internal drive connecting the facilities at this site. The roadways would require dip crossings to maintain existing drainage flow patterns on the site.

The proposed entrance would be along an unimproved portion of Table Top Road approximately 435 feet north of the Amigos Road alignment. Construction of this OHV area may require improving the existing two-track trail along the Table Top Road alignment to the site entrance. The County would need to establish a ROW for Table Top Road up to the park entry, and the roadway extension would become an improved County road (Appendix A, Figure 14).

A portion of Table Top Road has a ROW that is authorized by Crystal Clear Financial to access private land to the east of the Project area. The lease improvements could be consistent with the existing ROW authorized use, but the design could be impacted by the current ROW holder and the ROW could be shifted outside of the current alignment.

### **Utilities**

Currently, no utilities are available nor intended at this site. The restrooms would be waterless vault toilets, and the host sites would have electricity powered by solar shade canopies.

## **2.2.2 Trail System Right-of-Way**

The Applicant has filed a ROW application to create a 26.5-mile interconnected, non-motorized trail system. The trail system is accessible through all three R&PP developments described in Chapter 2 and is open for public, multi-use, non-motorized traffic, including hiking, biking, and equestrian riding.

The trail system is intended to be made up of single-track trails that follow the existing grade with minimal impact beyond the trail width proposed. Most of the trails are 2 feet in width, but wider trails are proposed near the two trailhead sites to anticipate increased foot traffic at these locations. Wider trails are also proposed for two trails intended for equestrian access. Specific trail dimensions can be found in the POD (See Appendix A).

### **2.2.2.1 Access**

Each area may have access to points of the non-motorized trail system, including the McDavid Road Trailhead and Staging Area, Farrell Road Trailhead and Campground, and Table Top Road OHV Area. Parking areas at each recreation area are intended to provide day-use access to the trail network. The Pinal County Open Space and Trails Department signage would feature the park and trailhead name prominently at each trailhead (Appendix A, Figure 18).

## **2.2.3 Operation and Maintenance**

Upon issuance of the R&PP development lease and trails system ROW grant, the Applicant would begin the process of developing the park. The development of the proposed PVRP could occur in several stages as funding is obtained.

Construction would occur in the following overlapping phases: site survey, clearing and grubbing, grading and drainage, utility installation, surface construction (including roadways, hardscapes, and buildings), and project closeout. Equipment used during construction would include road graders, dump trucks, track hoes, concrete trucks, and lift trucks. All staging and material stockpiles would be contained and secured within a construction area designated within the main parking areas. Construction would occur during normal weekday hours. Safety measures would be strictly followed during construction to ensure safe access for patrons to use areas of the park where construction may be completed and opened for use.

Operations and maintenance activities would occur regularly throughout the life of the proposed project. Operations and maintenance activities would include general road and facilities maintenance, vault toilet and septic pumping, trash collection, and security patrols. Typical equipment used during operations and maintenance would include front and back loading trash compacting trucks, ¾ to 1-ton maintenance trucks, trailered or bed mounted vault pumps, road graders, and track hoes. Regular maintenance would occur during normal weekday hours.

The Pinal County Open Space and Trails Department would be responsible for operating and maintaining gated access points into and within the park and communication of park closures to users. The County would be required to regularly monitor the OHV area to prevent social trails

from dismantling the area. If necessary, the County would place barrier controls in strategic locations to restore undesignated trails as well as enforce the rules and regulations for park users.

The Pinal County Open Space and Trails Department would be responsible for maintaining the trail system regularly and communicating closures to users. Overtime trails may become overused, damaged, or eroded; when this occurs signage and barriers would be posted to inform visitors that the trail is closed, until proper repairs can be made. If a trail is temporarily closed, simple measures such as signage and temporary fencing may be placed to redirect park users.

## 2.3 No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, the BLM would retain management of the three parcels and area where a trail system was proposed. No new recreational facilities would be developed. Dispersed recreational activities would continue.

## 2.4 Environmental Commitments

Pinal County would include Standard Operating Procedures and Best Management Practices as design features to minimize environmental impacts. These design features include:

- During construction and operations of the park facilities, *Guidelines for Handling Sonoran Desert Tortoises Encountered on Development Projects* (Arizona Game and Fish Department 2014) would be followed.
- The following measures from the *Recommended Standard Mitigation Measures for Projects In Sonoran Desert Tortoise Habitat* (Arizona Interagency Desert Tortoise Team 2008) would also be implemented as part of the Proposed Action to minimize potential impacts to BLM sensitive species:
  - To the extent possible, project activities would be scheduled when tortoises are less active (typically November 1 to March 1).
  - A desert tortoise protection education program would be presented to all employees, inspectors, supervisors, contractors, and subcontractors who carry out proposed activities at the project site.
  - Area of new construction or disturbance would be flagged or marked on the ground prior to construction. All construction workers would strictly limit their activities and vehicles to areas that have been marked. Construction personnel would be trained to recognize markers and understand the equipment movement restrictions involved.
  - Project features that might trap or entangle desert tortoises, such as open trenches, pits, open pipes, etc., would be covered or modified to prevent entrapment.
  - Clearance surveys by qualified biologists would be conducted prior to construction. If a tortoise is found within the Project area, activities would be modified to avoid injuring or harming it. If activities cannot be modified, tortoises in harm's way should be moved in accordance with Arizona Game and Fish Department's "Guidelines for Handling Sonoran Desert Tortoises Encountered on Development Projects" (Arizona Game and

Fish Department 2007). Flagging would be placed in areas that have been previously surveyed.

- Kiosks will feature information about the site and include interpretive signage about the Sonoran Desert Tortoise habitat in the area. This interpretive signage will educate visitors about the importance of leaving Sonoran Desert Tortoise alone and serve to mitigate impacts that the trails and site development might have on their range and movements. To the extent possible, all vegetation clearing activities would be conducted outside of the primary migratory bird nesting season (March 1–July 15) to avoid potential destruction of active migratory bird nests or disturbance to nesting birds. If vegetation clearing activities are required for construction during the bird-nesting season, Pinal County would perform a clearance survey to check the area for active nests encountered would be avoided until the birds have fledged.
- Animal-proof trash receptacles would be utilized throughout the park to discourage opportunistic wildlife feeding.
- Pinal County would follow the BLM Phoenix District Office’s Integrated Weed Management Plan (BLM 2015), which would be utilized on site disturbance during and after the construction of the development.
- Where previously disturbed two-track roads cannot be utilized for access due to environmental or engineering concerns, natural boulders would be placed in an arrangement to restrict vehicular access and slash or downed tree limbs would be used to demonstrate that access to a trail is no longer desired.
- All motorized vehicle uses would be limited to existing graded roads, and designated areas. No motor vehicle off-road travel (cross country or trails) would be permitted outside of designated areas.
- The following measures would reduce visual impacts within the characteristic landscape:
  - Materials and surface treatments should repeat and/or blend with the existing form, line, color, and texture of the landscape.
  - Grouped structures would all be painted the same color or use materials that complement the surrounding landscape to reduce visual complexity and color contrast.
  - Exterior finish, color, and texture of buildings and other structures would be selected to blend with the characteristic landscape. Paint colors would be specified to blend in with the existing landscape colors as closely as possible.
  - Nighttime lighting at facilities would be controlled by using shielded and down-casting fixtures and motion detection switches using full-shielded, full-cutoff, and down-casting fixtures.
  - Installation of non-native gravel or asphalt pavement would be avoided where possible to reduce color and texture contrasts with the existing landscape.
  - Existing rocks, vegetation, and drainage patterns would be preserved to the maximum extent possible.

- Signage and markers would be minimized whenever possible. Reverse sides of signs and mounts would be painted or coated to reduce color contrasts with the existing landscape. Markers would be only as tall as necessary to be seen by the intended viewer and those along roads would be installed parallel to travel on the road.
- The County shall submit a Surface Treatment Plan to the BLM describing the application of colors and textures and utilizing BLM standard environmental color chart CC-001: June 2008, for all new facility structures, buildings, walls, fences, and components comprising all ancillary facilities.

## **2.5 Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis**

Initially, the Palo Verde Regional Park study area of approximately 5,900 acres included various preliminary alternatives within a larger overall park area that could include an array of recreation facilities and trails. Concept designs were included in the POD for three separate park facility parcels that would comprise the proposed R&PP lease, a total of approximately 493 acres. The multi-use trails that would connect to the park facility areas would be permitted as separate rights-of-way outside of the R&PP lease parcels.

The POD was subsequently modified to include various adjustments to the R&PP lease parcel boundaries to allow for management continuity and to avoid the creation of remnant parcels.

No additional alternatives were considered for detailed analysis in this EA.

## 3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

This chapter identifies and describes the current condition and trend of elements or resources in the human and natural environment which may be affected by the Proposed Action or No Action Alternative. The Affected Environment is the same for all alternatives.

### 3.1 Analysis Area

The Analysis Area for Recreation and BLM Sensitive Species (Sections 3.4 and 4.3) is approximately 1,440 acres in total. The portion of the Analysis Area for the three R&PP parcels, and a 500-foot radius surrounding these parcels, is approximately 1,032 acres. The Analysis Area for the 26.5-mile non-motorized trail system that would connect these parcels including the area within a 100-foot radius, is approximately 408 acres. The predominant vegetation community in the Analysis Area is the Sonoran desert scrub. Approximately 48 percent of the Analysis Area is within Sonoran desert tortoise Category II habitat. The proposed park facilities would introduce approximately 41 acres of ground disturbance to an existing dispersed recreation and natural area, and approximately 14 acres of new trails.

### 3.2 Resources Considered for Analysis

The resources in the following sections (Sections 3.4 and 4.3) are present in the Analysis Area, may be affected by the Proposed Action or No Action Alternative, and warrant detailed analysis (see Appendix B for rationale for those resources present, but not analyzed in detail).

### 3.3 Types of Effects

In this document, the terms “effect” and “impact” are used synonymously.

Effects are defined in 40 CFR, Part 1508.1 (g) (July 2020) as follows: “Effects or impacts means changes to the human environment from the proposed action or alternatives that are reasonably foreseeable and have a reasonably close causal relationship to the proposed action or alternatives, including those effects that occur at the same time and place as the proposed action or alternatives and may include effects that are later in time or farther removed in distance from the proposed action or alternatives.”

For the purpose of this analysis, the duration of the impact is defined as follows:

- **Short-term:** impacts that would be during construction of trails and proposed facilities for up to 2 years.
- **Long-term:** impacts that would occur after the construction of proposed facilities for approximately 10 years or more.

For the purpose of this analysis, intensity or severity of the impact is defined as follows:

- **Negligible:** changes would not be detectable and/or measurable. The resource would be essentially unchanged or unaltered.
- **Minor:** changes would be detectable, localized, and/or measurable. The resource would be slightly changed or altered.
- **Moderate:** changes would be clearly detectable, measurable, and/or have an appreciable effect on the resource. The resource would be notably changed or altered.

For the purpose of this analysis, the type of impact is defined as follows:

- **Adverse:** impacts that would have a detrimental effect to a resource.
- **Beneficial:** impacts that would have a positive effect to a resource.

## 3.4 Recreation

### 3.4.1 Affected Environment

The BLM manages lands within the LSFO for outcome-focused recreation experiences by allocating lands as either Special Management Recreation Areas, Extensive Recreation Management Areas, or Undesignated Land (UL). The BLM-administered lands that comprise the proposed PVRP Analysis Area are managed as UL for recreation. ULs are managed to meet basic recreation and visitor services and resource stewardship needs. Recreation is not emphasized; however, recreation activities may occur. The recreation and visitor services are managed to allow recreation uses that are not in conflict with the primary uses of these lands.

Specifically, ULs within the LSFO allow for casual recreation uses. Casual recreation uses include Off-highway vehicle touring, hiking, dispersed camping, horseback riding, mountain biking, hunting, and target shooting. In addition to the casual recreational use, BLM may issue special recreation permits on a case-by-case basis for a variety of commercial and organized group activities to manage visitor use, and special stipulations can be attached to protect natural and cultural resources, prevent environmental impacts, and avoid conflicts with other uses (BLM 2012).

The BLM utilizes a planning tool known as the Recreational Opportunity Spectrum to inventory, classify, and map public lands according to physical and social settings, which combine to offer specific types of recreational opportunities. Recreational settings range across a spectrum of opportunities from natural, low-use areas to highly developed, intensive use areas (BLM 2012).

The Approved RMP was approved and implemented by Pinal County and the BLM. The Approved RMP provides guidance for the management of the selected parcels within the Lower Sonoran Decision Area. Pinal County's PVRP Master Plan also outlines recreation needs and conceptual design for the proposed PVRP. A Conservation Management Plan was established between the Applicant and the BLM to construct a framework for plan implementation (Pinal County 2016). In partnership with the BLM, the Recreation Area Master Plan was prepared for the Palo Verde Park Cooperative Recreation Management Area, which serves as a blueprint for the future of the proposed park (Pinal County 2016).



The Pinal County Open Space and Trails Master Plan (Pinal County 2007) is the foundation of the Open Space Recreation Element of the Pinal County Comprehensive Plan (Pinal County 2015). The plan reflects the vision of county residents and identifies goals and objectives for the attainments of open space, trails, and regional parks (Pinal County 2007). With a high degree of value placed on the preservation of open spaces by residents, the proposed park is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan (Pinal County 2015).

The Comprehensive Plan (Pinal County 2015) outlines desired conditions for newly implemented regional parks, which includes at least 200-acres and a 30-minute drive time within the County. The San Tan Mountains Regional Park comprises approximately 10,215 acres within portions of Pinal and Maricopa counties. There are several State and local parks that comprise a total of 42,572-acres for use by the public (Pinal County 2015). This open space can benefit Pinal County by providing wildlife and native plant habitat, sensitive lands and natural resource preservation, water quality protection and flood preservation, recreation, and education (Pinal County 2016).

There are four primary regional trail corridors currently planned for development within Pinal County. The Arizona Trail, the Central Arizona Project, Juan Batista De Anza National Historic Trail, and the Great Western Trail (Pinal County 2015). The proposed trail network would link to the Palo Verde Mountains trail network, including six named trails that occur within the proposed park boundary. This network is intended to be multi-use and non-motorized, providing access to hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians (Pinal County 2020).

The proposed PVRP Analysis Area is a vast acreage of mountain ranges, alluvial plains, and riparian areas owned and managed by the BLM. The area currently experiences unregulated, unauthorized, and illegal use as visible by the growing number of shooting areas that are scattered with trash dumping and vandalism (Pinal County 2016). This demonstrated misuse of public lands would be controlled by the approved Recreational Shooting Sports Project that is currently under construction that plans to include a designated shooting platform at the Box Canyon Recreation Area located approximately 0.1 miles west of North Hidden Valley Road (BLM 2020). The Analysis Area is partially modified by primitive two-track roads, trails, and scattered areas of surface disturbance associated with ranching and OHV activities. Most recreational users would travel into the park from either Farrell Road, Table Top Road, or McDavid Road that would provide access to the proposed trailhead parking and recreation facilities.

## **3.4.2 Environmental Consequences**

### **3.4.2.1 Proposed Action**

Construction of the proposed PVRP would occur in phases (Section 2.2.1) and would temporarily limit access to the area under construction and could interrupt casual recreational activities within the proposed facility boundaries. During all phases of construction, temporary staging areas for construction would be set-up. For example, the staging area for the McDavid Road Trailhead would likely be set-up in the equestrian staging area. Development of the proposed facilities would be largely driven by public demand. Regarding trailheads, the entry drive and parking facilities would be developed as an initial phase, and the trail would be developed in a rustic condition. Over time, as funding becomes available and user demand increases, enhancements would be implemented (Pinal County 2020). Areas under construction would be temporarily closed to public

access, limiting access to localized recreational activities within the proposed PVRP boundary. Construction of the proposed park entry could temporarily limit access to motorists traveling west along McDavid or Farrell Road into the Project area.

Operations and maintenance of the proposed PVRP could adversely affect users who currently utilize the Project area for casual recreation activities. Specifically, dispersed camping would no longer be allowed, and users would be required to camp in designated areas. OHV touring would be permitted in the OHV Open-Ride Area at a site that is currently being utilized by OVH users. This area would not require site disturbance beyond what has previously occurred. OHV users may also utilize nearby motorized trails. These areas would only be accessible from the OHV Staging Area and the County would regularly monitor the area to prevent social trails from demarcating the area (Pinal County 2020).

Additionally, user fees would be introduced, which could cause some casual recreation users to adjust their activities based on proposed park amenities where no formal amenities previously existed. Current casual users of the Project area who do not want to pay the user fees would likely utilize other public lands nearby within the BLM LSFO, namely the Sonoran Desert National Monument (BLM 2012). The fees would be established through Pinal County governmental protocol and would be similar to fees charged at other comparable regional recreational facilities. The entrance fees would also have to meet the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act requirements, which requires profit fees being charged for certain areas such as where no facilities exist. Due to the relatively low volume of users utilizing lands within the Analysis Area for casual recreational use, the effects resulting from the displacement of some casual recreation users would be adverse but negligible.

Construction and operations of the proposed PVRP would increase visitation to the Analysis Area due to improved access conditions and the development of recreation facilities. Proposed improvements to access would allow passenger vehicles and vehicles with 18- to 20-foot equestrian trailers to access the lands within the proposed park boundary. Developed campsites would provide for extended stay opportunities for visitors and is anticipated to increase the total number of visitors at any one time recreating within the proposed park boundaries. Developed multi-use trails would improve recreational experiences for hiking, mountain biking, and equestrian use. At the Farrell Road Trailhead and Campground, an accessible ramp and walkway system would lead from the parking area down into the shady canopy area at the Archery Range and would provide recreational activities to a wider range of skill levels than current conditions allow. Potential increased visitation would likely occur from future population growth in Maricopa and Pinal counties, specifically from the Phoenix metropolitan area. As the population in the vicinity steadily increases, increased visitation to the area is likely to occur.

The recreation experience with the implementation of the Proposed Action would be more closely associated with a roaded-natural experience given the number and variety of developed recreation facilities, accommodations for larger groups of users, and the presence of management controls such as camp host, fencing, and the required entrance fee.

The PVRP is projected to include access to 493 acres of recreational opportunities to be used by the public. A total of approximately 40.7 acres of new permanent disturbance would occur as a result of the proposed park facilities. Currently, there are no existing facilities on any regional

parks within the County, but the County has a goal of 7,236 acres by the year 2025. Implementation of the proposed PVRP would assist in working toward this goal (Pinal County 2015).

The Proposed Action would have minimal short-term effects from the construction, operation, and maintenance of the recreation facilities by temporarily limiting access to the area. The proposed park would enhance residents' quality of life "by providing areas of passive and active recreational opportunities, while conserving existing resources, such as natural scenic beauty, viewsheds, wildlife habitat, agricultural resources, and cultural heritage for the benefit of present and future generations" (Pinal County 2020). Overall, the Proposed Action would have beneficial impacts to recreation use in the area by providing new recreational facilities and access to visual and recreational resources

### **3.4.2.2 No Action Alternative**

The No Action Alternative would have no direct impacts to recreation use within the PVRP Analysis Area because the area would continue to be used by the public for recreational purposes. However, long-term impacts to recreation use could occur due to potential long-term increased recreation use of the area associated with existing popular recreation areas in the vicinity and the associated potential increased use of the proposed PVRP Analysis Area.

## **3.5 Special-Status Species**

### **3.5.1 Affected Environment**

The Analysis Area supports wildlife typical of Sonoran desertscrub, including migratory birds and BLM Sensitive species that may be present. BLM Sensitive species that may be present are the Sonoran desert tortoise (*Gopherus morafkai*), which are now also listed under the ESA as a Candidate Species. The Analysis Area is within Category II BLM mapped habitat for Sonoran desert tortoise.

Biological resources were analyzed in the Analysis Area that encompasses all Project features (i.e., roads, parking lots, facilities) (See Map 3 – Analysis Area/Sonoran Desert Tortoise Habitat). A review of existing information for special-status species addressed those listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), species proposed or candidates for ESA listing, bald eagles and golden eagles, and species listed as Sensitive by the BLM in Arizona. Special-status species were evaluated for potential presence in the Analysis Area, based on the habitat preferences and natural history of each species. However, a species may potentially be present in the Analysis Area without being affected by the Project (e.g., some migratory birds). Appendix B provides a list of all species that were evaluated for potential presence.

Portions of the R&PP parcels and trail system occur in Sonoran desert tortoise Category II habitat (Map 3 – Analysis Area/Sonoran Desert Tortoise Habitat). Pinal County has included the following measures to mitigate the impacts to the Category II habitat: (1) limit surface disturbances in Category II habitat; (2) include an educational component on the Sonoran desert tortoise; and (3) conduct preconstruction surveys for the Sonoran desert tortoise to minimize potential direct impacts to tortoise. While "no net loss" of habitat would not be met and residual impacts would

occur, these measures are consistent with BLM policy for R&PP projects that occur in Sonoran desert tortoise habitat.

### 3.5.2 Environmental Consequences

#### 3.5.2.1 Proposed Action

##### R&PP Park Facilities

Ground-disturbing activities, traffic, and human presence associated with construction would create a short-term impact to wildlife in general, specifically the Sonoran desert tortoise. The Applicant-proposed measures described in Chapter 2 would address concerns for the Sonoran desert tortoise by minimizing any potential impacts that might occur. Map 2 – Project Area shows the proposed facility boundaries as well as the trail system. Table 3-1 below shows the acreage of disturbance by each project facility.

The noise and presence of equipment could result in the short-term displacement of wildlife species during construction but is not anticipated to result in population decreases within the Analysis Area for any species. Operation of the Project would result in the long-term presence of humans for recreational purposes; although in the context of existing recreational activity, this would occur in a location with existing sources of disturbance. Impacts of the Proposed Action would be limited to species already exposed to human activity and associated disturbance. Continued maintenance would occur as funds allow and would be high in intensity at the time of construction. Access for the proposed park facilities is expected to be frequent and moderate intensity. Therefore, the impacts to special-status species by the Project would be long-term, direct, and minor.

| <b>TABLE 3-1<br/>PARK AND FACILITY DISTURBANCE</b> |                         |                              |                                |  |
|--|-------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| <b>Proposed R&amp;PP Site</b>                      | <b>Site Disturbance</b> | <b>Facility Area (green)</b> | <b>R&amp;PP Boundary (red)</b> | <b>Sonoran Desert Tortoise Habitat</b> |
| McDavid Road Trailhead and Staging Area            | 9.5                     | 18.5                         | 60.6                           | 2.4                                    |
| Farrell Road Trailhead and Campground              | 24.7                    | 114.0                        | 298.4                          | 13.7                                   |
| Table Top Road OHV Area                            | 6.5                     | 61.9                         | 134.0                          | 0                                      |
| Total Acres  | 40.7                    | 194.45                       | 493.0                          | 16.1                                   |

##### Trail System Right-of-Way

The multi-use trail system is proposed to be single-track, which would vary from 2 to 5 feet wide. The trail width would be determined by the difficulty of terrain to ensure user safety. The sections intended to connect the trail to the parking lot would have low difficulty. These unnamed connector paths would range from 4 to 8 feet in width for easier access due to high traffic in these areas. Of the 26.5-mile trail network that is proposed, 23.5 of these miles would occur within Category II Sonoran desert tortoise habitat. The total length of trails proposed is approximately 26.4 miles, of which 23.4 miles of within Category II Sonoran Desert Tortoise habitat and 3.7 miles occur within the R&PP sites. A total of 13.8 acres of disturbance is proposed by the trail system with

approximately 12.1 of those acres within Sonoran desert tortoise Category II habitat (Pinal County 2020).

The proposed site facilities and trail system would result in a total of approximately 54.5 acres of permanent ground disturbance and loss of vegetation and habitat functions within those areas. This effect would result in a long-term impact to special-status species by displacing individuals to adjacent habitat and by removing habitat from 54.5 acres (approximately 4 percent) of the 1,440 acres in the Analysis Area. The proposed recreational facilities and associated roadways would create approximately 28.2 acres of new disturbance and would impact Sonoran desert tortoise habitat if the Project is implemented.

### **3.5.2.2 No Action Alternative**

Under the No Action Alternative, no new facilities would be developed, and no new roads would be constructed. No new ground disturbance and no affects to wildlife or biological resources would occur in response to the proposed Project. Current conditions would continue with the potential for continued impacts associated with public access and recreational use.

## **3.6 Residual Effects**

Residual effects are those effects that remain after mitigation measures have been applied to the Proposed Action or alternatives and had not been previously incorporated into the Proposed Action or alternatives (BLM Handbook 1709-1). Mitigation for the loss of Sonoran desert tortoise habitat has been incorporated into the Project to the extent needed to satisfy BLM policy for R&PP projects. Approximately 28.2 acres of Sonoran desert tortoise habitat of new, permanent disturbance would occur by the development of proposed facilities and trails.

## 4.0 CUMULATIVE EFFECTS

A cumulative effect is defined under NEPA as “the change in the environment which results from the incremental impact of the action, decision, or project when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions (RFFA), regardless of what agency (federal or non-federal) or person undertakes such other action”. “Cumulative impacts can result from individually minor but collectively significant actions taking place over a period of time” (40 CFR Part 1508.7).

### 4.1 Geographic Scope

A Cumulative Effects Study Area (CESA) is defined for the Proposed Action and the No Action Alternative. The CESA for all resources is approximately 1,408 acres in total. The portion of the Analysis Area for the three R&PP parcels, and a 500-foot radius surrounding these parcels, is approximately 1,032 acres. The Analysis Area for the 26.5-mile non-motorized trail system that would connect these parcels, including the area within a 100-foot radius, is approximately 408 acres.

### 4.2 Past, Present, and Reasonably Foreseeable Future Actions

RFFAs are analyzed to the extent that they are relevant and useful in analyzing whether the reasonably foreseeable effects of the Proposed Action and/or Alternatives may have an additive and relationship to those effects. Past actions are those whose impacts to one or more of the affected resources that have persisted to present day. Present actions are those occurring at the time of this evaluation and during implementation of the Proposed Action. RFFAs constitute those actions that are known or could reasonably be anticipated to occur within the assessment area for each resource within a time frame appropriate to the expected impacts from the Proposed Action. The past, present, and RFFAs applicable to the CESA are identified in Table 4-1.

| <b>Grantee Name or Action</b> | <b>Type of Activity</b>  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Roads                         | Various maintained roads, including other arterials and local roads. |
| Dispersed Recreation          | Dispersed recreation (i.e., camping, hiking, hunting)                |
| OHV Use                       | General OHV activity   |
| Hidden Valley Watershed Plan  | Watershed management and restoration                                 |

### 4.3 Analysis by Resource

Only those resources directly or indirectly affected by the Proposed Action or No Action Alternative are considered for cumulative effects.

## **4.3.1 Recreation**

### **4.3.1.1 Proposed Action**

Impacts from the Proposed Action could result in a cumulative effect on recreation with other past, present, or RFFAs. Cumulative effects would occur during construction and maintenance activities as a result of access impediment, increased noise levels, and aesthetic impacts and by temporarily limiting access to the area under construction. This action could result in the interruption of casual recreational activities and a potential, temporary decrease in visitation to the area due to the introduction of user fees within the proposed facility boundaries. However, implementation of the Project, in consideration with surrounding projects would result in an overall beneficial effect due to the introduction of recreational opportunities.

Implementation of the proposed Hidden Valley Watershed Project, which with the Palo Verde Regional Park, could potentially limit visitation frequency during the time of construction; however, the floodplain management techniques would ideally benefit the landscape and habitat for wildlife, providing wildlife viewing opportunities for recreational users of the PVRP.

### **4.3.1.2 No Action Alternative**

Under the No Action Alternative, the BLM would retain management of the three parcels and area where a trail system was proposed. No new recreational facilities would be developed. Dispersed recreational activities would continue.

## **4.3.2 Special-Status Species**

### **4.3.2.1 Proposed Action**

Impacts from the Proposed Action could result in a cumulative effect on wildlife with other past, present, or RFFAs. Any ground-disturbing developments would contribute to the cumulative loss or alteration of habitat used by special-status species. The Proposed Action includes several environmental commitments to avoid or minimize impacts to special-status species in the Project area. The Project would result in approximately 28.2 acres of disturbance to Sonoran desert tortoise habitat (less than 1percent) of the 1,408-acre CESA.

### **4.3.2.2 No Action Alternative**

Under the No Action Alternative, the BLM would retain management of the three parcels and area where a trail system was proposed. No new recreational facilities would be developed. Dispersed recreational activities would continue.

## 5.0 PERSONS, GROUPS, AND AGENCIES CONSULTED

### 5.1 List of Preparers

The following individuals were involved in the preparation of this EA (Table 5-1).

| TABLE 5-1<br>LIST OF PREPARERS      |  |                                |
|-------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Name                                | Title                                    | Project Expertise              |
| <b>Bureau of Land Management</b>    |  |                                |
| Brian Buttazoni                     | POD Planning & Environmental Specialist  | NEPA Compliance                |
| Ed Kender                           | Lower Sonoran Field Manager              | Management Review              |
| Ryan Randell                        | Land Law Examiner                        | Land Use Review                |
| Anthony Daly-Crews                  | Assistant Field Manager                  | Biology                        |
| Katie White Bull                    | Sonoran Desert National Monument Manager | NEPA Compliance                |
| <b>Environmental Planning Group</b> |  |                                |
| Mickey Siegel                       | Project Manager                          | Environmental Planning         |
| David Kahrs                         | Senior Biologist                         | Biology                        |
| Emily Curci                         | Project Coordinator                      | Biology/Environmental Planning |
| Louise Brown                        | Technical Editor                         | Editing/Document Production    |
| Karen Snodgrass                     | Mapping/GIS Coordinator                  | Plan of Development            |
| Kate Wilson                         | Senior GIS Analyst                       | GIS                            |

### 5.2 Public Review

This EA has been made available to the public for review and comment for 30-days. Comments must be received by the close of business on December 17, 2021. The BLM sent notification of this document's availability to approximately 400 individuals, organizations, or agencies by postcard or email. All comments will be reviewed and categorized by the BLM. Although not required for an EA by regulation, an agency may respond to and summarize substantive and timely comments received as a part of the Final EA in an appendix (BLM Handbook 1709-1).

Substantive comments would:

- Question, with reasonable basis, the accuracy of the information in the EA;
- Question, with reasonable basis, the adequacy of, methodology for, or assumptions used for the environmental analysis;
- Present new information relevant to the analysis;
- Present reasonable alternatives other than those analyzed in the EA; and/or
- Cause changes or revisions in one or more of the alternatives.”



## **5.3 Tribes, Individuals, Organizations, or Agencies Consulted**

### **5.3.1 Tribes**

The following tribes were consulted on the proposed Project:

- Hopi Tribe
- Ak-Chin Indian Community
- Gila River Indian Community
- Pascua Yaqui Tribe
- Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community
- Tohono O'odham Nation
- White Mountain Apache Tribe
- Yavapai-Apache Nation
- Pueblo of Zuni
- Tonto-Apache Tribe

### **5.3.2 Individuals**

A total of 45 individuals were contacted via mail and 15 were contacted via email during scoping of the Project.

### **5.3.3 Organizations**

The East Valley Back Country Horsemen Organization was contacted during scoping of the Project.

### **5.3.4 Agencies**

The Pinal County Parks Department and Arizona Game and Fish Department participated as a cooperating agency

## 6.0 REFERENCES

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