U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

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DRAFT

TAOS RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN AMENDMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR THE RÍO GRANDE DEL NORTE NATIONAL MONUMENT MANAGEMENT PLAN

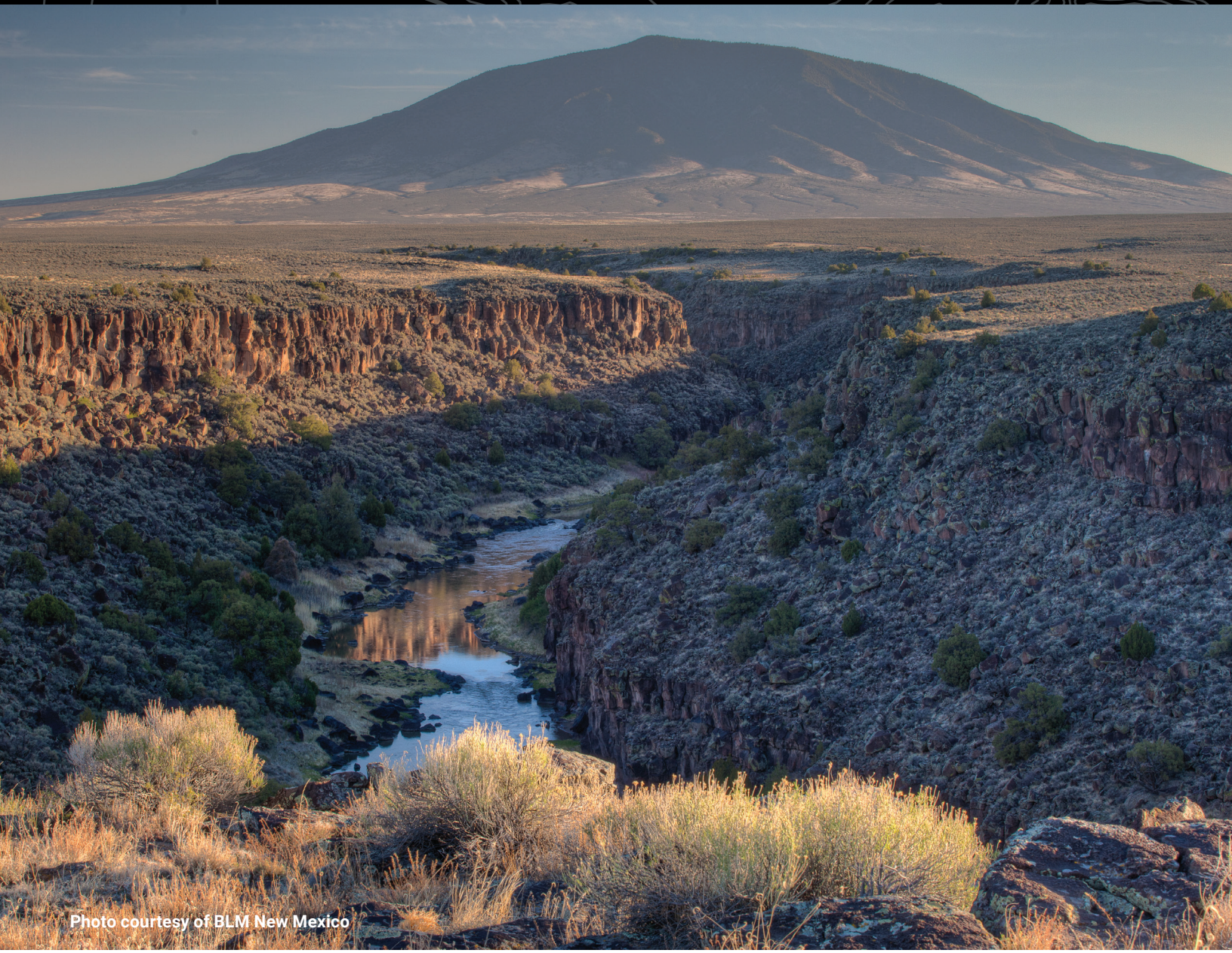

Photo courtesy of BLM New Mexico

BLM Mission
The Bureau of Land Management's mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Mission
Conserve, protect, and restore nationally significant landscapes that have outstanding cultural, ecological, and scientific values for the benefit of current and future generations.

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Photo by: BLM New Mexico

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

Term	Definition
ACEC	Area of Critical Environmental Concern
AUM	Animal Unit Month
BA	Biological Assessment
BLM	United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management
BMP	Best Management Practice
CDP	Census-Designated Place
CEQ	Council on Environmental Quality
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
CWA	Clean Water Act
Dingell Jr. Act	John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act
EA	Environmental Assessment
e-bikes	electric bicycles
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
EO	Executive Order
ERMA	Extensive Recreation Management Area
ESA	Endangered Species Act
FLPMA	Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976
FMP	Fire Management Plan
FONSI	Finding of No Significant Impact
FR	Federal Register
GIS	geographic information system
HCPI	Historic Cultural Property Inventory
HMA	Habitat Management Area
HUC	Hydrologic Unit Code
IDT	Interdisciplinary Team
IM	Instruction Memorandum
LANDFIRE	Landscape Fire and Resource Management Planning Tools
LWD	large woody debris
NCLS	National Landscape Conservation System
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NHPA	National Historic Preservation Act
NISIMS	National Invasive Species Information Management System
NLCS	National Landscape Conservation System
NMDA	New Mexico Department of Agriculture
NMDGF	New Mexico Department of Game and Fish
NMED	New Mexico Environment Department
NOI	Notice of Intent
NRCS	Natural Resource Conservation Service
NWI	National Wetlands Inventory

Term	Definition
OHV	off-highway vehicle
ONRW	Outstanding National Resource Water
ORV	outstandingly remarkable value
OSNHT	Old Spanish National Historic Trail
PRMP/FEIS	Proposed Resource Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Report
R&I	relevant and important
RFFA	reasonably foreseeable future action
RMA	Recreation Management Area
RMP	Resource Management Plan
RMPA	Resource Management Plan amendment
RMZ	Recreation Management Zone
ROW	right of way
SHPO	State Historic Preservation Office
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
SRMA	Special Recreation Management Area
SRP	Special Recreation Permit
State Trust Land	39,125 acres are under jurisdiction of the New Mexico State Land Office
TMA	Travel Management Area
TMP	Travel Management Plan
US	United States
U.S.C.	US Code
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
USFS	US Forest Service
USFWS	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
VCC	vegetation condition class
VRI	Visual Resource Inventory
VRM	Visual Resource Management
WSA	Wilderness Study Area
WSR	wild and scenic river

1 Introduction

The United States (US) Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Taos Field Office and BLM New Mexico State Director are proposing to prepare a Resource Management Plan (RMP) Amendment and associated Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Río Grande del Norte National Monument (Monument) Management Plan. Current management for the Monument would be updated by amending the 2012 Taos RMP. The proposed RMP amendment (RMPA) would change goals, objectives, and management decisions, as described in Chapter 2, *Alternatives*, to provide for the protection and restoration of the Monument objects identified in Presidential Proclamation 8946 (see Appendix A, *Presidential Proclamation 8946*), which established the Monument. This EA describes and analyzes the proposed RMPA.

1.1 Background and Planning Area

On March 25, 2013, President Obama signed Proclamation 8946, which established the Monument and identified cultural and historic resources, ecological diversity, geological features, and wildlife resources and their associated landscapes as objects that the Monument was designated to protect, preserve, and restore. The Taos Field Office originally initiated preparation of a management plan for the Monument in January 2014.

In April 2017, the effort to prepare the Monument management plan was put on hold with the issuance of Executive Order (EO) 13792, *Review of Designations Under the Antiquities Act*, which included Río Grande del Norte National Monument among those designations placed under review. Because expending resources on the Monument planning effort would have been contradictory to this review, the Monument planning process was suspended.

In March 2021, EO 13792 was rescinded, and the Taos Field Office was directed to proceed with its Monument planning effort. Because the 2012 Taos RMP was completed at the time Proclamation 8946 established the Monument, and the BLM does not anticipate needing substantial changes to how the Monument is currently being managed under the 2012 Taos RMP, an EA-level plan amendment has been determined to be the appropriate means of streamlining the process now that planning for the Monument is once again proceeding. The BLM believes that the purposes for which the Monument was designated—the protection, preservation, and restoration of important resource values—can be achieved without substantial changes to its current management. Under the 2012 Taos RMP, the Monument lands are being managed as two Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs), which provide management largely consistent with the purposes of the Monument's designation.

BLM's *Land Use Planning Handbook* (H-1601-1) (BLM 2005) differentiates between geographic areas associated with planning. These areas include the planning area, decision area, and analysis area.

- The ***planning area*** is the geographic area within which the BLM would propose management decisions during a planning effort. The planning area encompasses lands

within the Monument boundary, regardless of surface ownership or jurisdiction (see Appendix B, *Maps*, Map B.1). The planning area totals approximately 310,793 acres, 242,668 acres of which are BLM-administered lands; 39,125 acres are under jurisdiction of the New Mexico State Land Office (State Trust Land), and 29,000 acres are privately held.

- The ***decision area*** includes all public land in the planning area for which the BLM has authority to make land-use decisions (Appendix B, Map B.1). Generally, the BLM has jurisdiction over all BLM-administered lands (surface and subsurface) and over subsurface minerals in areas of split estate (i.e., the surface is owned by a non-federal entity, such as the State Trust Land or private land). The decision area is limited to the 242,668 acres of BLM-administered lands in the Monument.
- The ***analysis area*** includes any lands, regardless of jurisdiction, for which the BLM synthesizes, analyzes, and interprets information that relates to planning for BLM-administered land. For the RMPA/EA, this may include all lands within Rio Arriba County and Taos County, regardless of jurisdiction or ownership, depending on the resource or resource use. The analysis area can be any size, can vary according to the resource, and can be located anywhere within, around, partially outside, or completely outside the planning or decision areas. The cumulative effects analysis areas in the RMPA/EA may expand beyond these general planning boundaries, depending on the resource or resource use.

1.2 Purpose and Need

The need for the Taos RMPA was established by Presidential Proclamation 8946, which designated the Monument. The Proclamation states, “For purposes of protecting and restoring the objects…the Secretary, through the BLM, would prepare and maintain a management plan.…” An amendment to the Taos RMP is necessary—as mandated by the Proclamation—for providing the management guidance critical for ensuring the Monument objects are preserved (Appendix A).

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, as amended (FLPMA), which established public land policy, also requires the BLM to “develop, maintain, and, when appropriate, revise land use plans” for the management of public lands. Furthermore, it is BLM policy that each Monument has an independent decision document that specifies the management guidance for that Monument.

In addition to these mandates, an amendment to the Taos RMP is necessary to address the new information that has been accrued and the changed circumstances the Monument has experienced since its designation in 2013. New surveys of seeps and springs, cultural resources, sagebrush distribution, sensitive species, and wildlife corridors, among other resources, have been conducted in recent years that add to the BLM’s catalogue of best-available information. This new information would enable the BLM to reevaluate and adjust its current management of the Monument under an amended Taos RMP. Changed circumstances include increased demand for recreational opportunities and increased pressure on recreational

facilities and infrastructure within the Monument. The public is seeking a wider array of trail-use opportunities, particularly around the communities of Taos and Questa, and increased pressure on existing trails and recreational facilities has been especially evident since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Trailhead parking is regularly at or exceeds capacity throughout much of the Monument. New types of recreation, such as electric bicycles (e-bikes), also need to be addressed.

Opportunities for new rights of way (ROWs) for electrical transmission in support of renewable energy development is an evolving circumstance that may require new authorizations consistent with the parameters specified in Proclamation 8946. Changed circumstances regarding climatic conditions also require careful management considerations for a broad spectrum of resources in an updated plan, including those contributing to the objects for which the Monument was established to protect.

A RMPA is also necessary for providing protective management of Cerro del Yuta Wilderness and Rio San Antonio Wilderness, designated by Congress in 2019. Wilderness areas are required to be managed according to the provisions of the Wilderness Act of 1964, and this management plan would provide the framework for the implementation-level wilderness plans that would be completed once a management plan is approved. This Draft RMPA/EA would also consider designating lands with wilderness characteristics and a new wilderness study area as options to further protect Monument objects. As specified in Presidential Proclamation 8946, the overarching purpose of this action—the Draft RMPA/EA—is to provide for the protection and restoration of the Monument objects presented below and allow for the enjoyment and use of the Monument lands and resources through recreation, traditional uses, and other means. The management plan would establish goals and objectives and identify allocations and allowable uses to achieve a balance of protection and use for the Monument. More specifically, the BLM seeks to achieve the objectives outlined below under the guidance of an approved management plan.

- Protect Monument objects listed under the Proclamation.
    - Provide protection and preservation of cultural resources and the integrity of cultural landscapes from conflicts that have emerged from resource uses. The BLM also has an opportunity to promote stewardship, interpretation, and an understanding of the area's ethnographic data, as well as provide opportunities for Tribal co-stewardship.
    - Provide for the protection and restoration of the Monument's ecological diversity. The BLM would foster resistance and resilience of diverse, native vegetative communities in the face of changing climate and water conditions and public use. The BLM would identify opportunities for sustaining the health of a broad range of species, their habitats, and conditions that contribute to the ecological diversity of the Monument, including, for example, various special status species, pollinators, and soils, in the face of the same challenges. The BLM would also update strategies and practices for enhancing wildlife corridors and restoring vegetative communities through treatments and management of fuels.

  - Provide for the protection and restoration of diverse terrestrial and aquatic wildlife populations and their habitats, including threatened and endangered species and other special status species and their habitats. The BLM would minimize fragmentation of seasonal habitats, strengthen habitat connectivity, and reduce the displacement of wildlife from those habitats, while allowing for recreational and traditional uses of the Monument.
  - Protect the geologic features, functions, and visual integrity of the Monument, while balancing the increased recreational use, demand for ROWs, and other uses that could affect Monument lands.

- Resolve conflicts between recreational and other uses and protect Monument objects.
  - Provide for a variety of recreational opportunities in diverse settings in an effort to meet the demand of the public and resolve conflicts between recreational use and the protection of Monument objects.
  - Provide for traditional uses of the public lands in a manner consistent with the protection, preservation, and restoration of Monument objects. Traditional uses are very important to sustaining cultural customs and traditions of local populations, such as those associated with food, shelter, and other basic human needs. Traditional uses include livestock grazing, fuelwood collection, piñon nut collection, herb collection, hunting, fishing, and other similar uses.
  - Allow for motorized and nonmotorized access to the Monument, as consistent with the Proclamation (which states "except for emergency or authorized administrative purposes, motorized vehicle use in the Monument shall be permitted only on designated roads and nonmotorized mechanized vehicle use shall be permitted only on designated roads and trails"), for traditional uses, livestock grazing, fuelwood collection, and recreational opportunities, while protecting Monument objects. A long-term, sustainable travel and transportation network must be defined by allocations necessary to provide access while preventing any degradation to Monument objects, wild and scenic river (WSR) corridors, and the two new wilderness areas. FLPMA requires that, among other uses, "the public lands be managed in a manner that will…provide for outdoor recreation" (43 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 1701).
  - Update the use of existing designated corridors, allowing for new, expanded, and upgraded utility ROWs that serve local communities in a manner consistent with the protection, preservation, and restoration of Monument objects. Proclamation 8946, which established the Monument, allows for limited opportunities to upgrade or modify utility ROWs. The linear layout of the Monument makes it difficult to avoid crossing the Monument with transmission lines and other utilities.
  - Protect newly designated wilderness areas within the Monument.
  - Preserve the wilderness character of the newly designated Cerro del Yuta Wilderness and Rio San Antonio Wilderness areas.

1.3 Decision to be Made

The BLM New Mexico State Director would approve the planning-level decisions for the RMPA, whereas the Taos Field Office Field Manager would decide on other aspects of the EA as implementation-level decisions, if applicable. Combined, they would decide whether to adopt an alternative or to modify the action based on environmental analysis and any other factors identified during public review of this EA and unsigned Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). The decision would be made based on analysis of the issues and how well the alternatives respond to the purpose and need.

1.4 Planning Process

The BLM planning process for an RMPA/EA is set forth in the Federal regulations at 43 CFR 1600, and the land use planning guidance is found in the BLM's *Land Use Planning Handbook* (H-1601-1) (BLM 2005).

The planning process for the RMPA/EA consists of the following steps.

1. Publish Notice of Intent (NOI), and initiate scoping.
2. Conduct scoping.
3. Formulate alternatives.
4. Analyze effects of alternatives.
5. Prepare a draft RMPA/EA and FONSI.
6. Provide a minimum 30-day public comment period.
7. Prepare a proposed RMPA/EA and FONSI.
8. Provide a 30-day protest period, and resolve protests.
9. Conduct a 60-day governor's consistency review period with a 30-day appeal period.
10. Prepare a decision record and RMPA.
11. Implement, monitor, and evaluate plan decisions.

1.4.1 Cooperating Agencies and Consulting Parties

Federal, State, and local agencies, along with Tribal nations and other parties that may be interested in or affected by the proposed Draft RMPA/EA that the BLM is evaluating were invited to participate in the scoping process and, if eligible, were invited by the BLM to participate in the development of the environmental analysis as cooperating agencies. Chapter 4, *Consultation and Coordination*, identifies agencies and entities that the BLM has invited to participate as cooperating agencies and those who have accepted.

1.4.2 Tribal Consultation

As part of the planning process, the BLM initiated government-to-government consultation for this planning effort in March 2023 and extended invitations on May 26, 2023, to the 21 Native American Tribes, Pueblos, and Tribal organizations to participate as cooperating agencies listed below.

1. All Pueblo Council of Governors
2. Cochiti Pueblo
3. Comanche Nation of Oklahoma
4. Hopi Tribe
5. Pueblo of Isleta
6. Jicarilla Apache Nation
7. Kiowa Indian Tribe of Oklahoma
8. Navajo Nation
9. Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo
10. Pueblo of Nambe
11. Pueblo of Picuris
12. Pueblo of Pojoaque
13. Pueblo of San Ildefonso
14. Pueblo of Sandia
15. Pueblo of Santa Clara
16. Pueblo of Santo Domingo
17. Pueblo of Taos
18. Pueblo of Tesuque
19. Southern Ute Tribe
20. Zia Pueblo
21. Zuni Pueblo

Two Tribes and Pueblos are in the process of signing a Memoranda of Understanding to be a cooperating agency for the RMPA: the Jicarilla Apache Nation and the Pueblo of Santa Clara.

In the planning process, the BLM recognizes that it carries the responsibility of complying with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). Therefore, the BLM, in accordance with the State Protocol between BLM New Mexico and the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Officer, has invited the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to participate in the development of this draft RMPA/EA. In addition to having a seat at the table as a cooperating agency, the BLM invited Tribal Nations, Pueblos, and Tribal organizations to

participate under the provisions of Section 106 of the NHPA and as co-stewards, per Secretarial Order 3403. Additional information is available in Section 4.2.1, *Consultation with Tribes*.

1.4.3 Results of Scoping

Preliminary Proposed Action and planning criteria for the RMPA/EA was posted on the BLM's National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Register website (https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2024165/570), and public scoping was conducted from August 11 to September 20, 2023. The BLM received 67 unique submissions during the public scoping period, comprising 361 substantive comments. Submissions were received via email and through the project website. Additional information regarding the scoping process can be found in Section 4.1.1, *Scoping*, of this RMPA/EA.

Overarching concerns and comments presented by the public and organizations are summarized below; additional details for all concerns and issues identified during the scoping process can be found in the *Scoping Report for the Taos Resource Management Plan Amendment and Environmental Assessment for the Río Grande del Norte National Monument Plan* (BLM 2023a), which is available at the project website (https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2024165/570).

- Recommendations encouraging the BLM to actively engage with local partners throughout the planning process
- Comments expressing support for the preliminary proposed management updates and the need to provide reliable protection for Monument objects
- Recommendations for the development of a reasonable range of alternatives that meet the project's purpose and need
- Concerns regarding the importance of protecting cultural resources within the Monument and the importance of consultation with the sovereign Pueblos and Tribes of the area
- Concerns emphasizing the importance of the BLM's consideration of traditional land uses of the Monument in the planning process, including traditional uses of firewood, herb, and piñon nut collection, hunting, fishing, and sustainable grazing for Hispanic, Native American, and other traditional communities in the area
- Requests that BLM protect the Monument's diversity of wildlife and overall ecological diversity through clear management guidelines and requests that management include provisions designed to enhance habitat connectivity, wildlife corridors, big-game winter range, habitat improvement and restoration projects, invasive species control, including aquatic invasives, and fence removal and/or modification
- Requests that the BLM prioritize fisheries management that support native species and species conservation on the mainstem of the Rio Grande its tributaries
- Recommendations for protective management guidelines for eligible WSR segments within the Monument

- Recommendations for livestock-grazing management and requests to minimize conflicts between grazing and other uses
- Concerns regarding how the BLM would manage recreational uses and ensure that sustainable uses were consistent with the protection of Monument objects
- Recommendations for how the BLM should manage recreational uses for increased visitation, as well as recommendations for infrastructure improvements and management to address climbing, e-bikes, mountain biking, river use, and recreation within the Monument

1.4.4 Planning Issues

Preliminary issues for the planning area were identified by BLM personnel and through early engagement conducted for this planning effort with Federal, State, and local agencies, Tribes, and other interested and/or cooperating parties. The BLM sought input on preliminary issues in the NOI. The planning criteria associated with the preliminary issues are described in Section 1.5, *Planning Criteria*.

Issues identified during scoping brought forward for analysis are listed in the Environmental Consequences section for each resource program evaluated in Chapter 3, *Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences*.

1.4.5 Issues Considered, but Not Analyzed Further

The following issue was considered, but is not being analyzed further for the reasons outlined.

- How would proposed management affect land tenure and opportunities for land acquisitions for the protection, preservation, and enhancement of Monument objects and other resource values? Presidential Proclamation 8946 withdraws all BLM-administered land within the Monument from selection, sale, or other disposition under the public land laws, other than by exchange that furthers the protective purposes of the Monument. As such, BLM would acquire land only from willing sellers as opportunities arise. Therefore, the alternatives would not measurably affect land tenure in the Monument.

1.4.6 Issues Addressed Through Policy, Regulation, or Administrative Actions

Policy or administrative actions do not require a planning decision to implement. These include those actions that are implemented by the BLM as a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), because they are required by law, or because they are the established BLM policy.

The following issues can be addressed by administrative actions.

- Complying with existing laws and policies (e.g., FLPMA, NEPA, Endangered Species Act [ESA], American Antiquities Act, Clean Air Act, NHPA)
- Conducting education, enforcement/prosecution, and volunteer coordination

- Managing petroglyphs and other cultural resources, including archeological inventories, and nondisclosure of spatial data
- Administering existing leases, permits, or other authorized uses and valid existing rights
- Implementing standard law enforcement–operating procedures, which would be followed in accordance with existing Taos Field Office and BLM New Mexico law enforcement plans and procedures
- Issuing citations for illegal activities in accordance with all provisions provided for in 43 CFR, Subpart 8365.1-1(b) for dumping and littering, 43 CFR, Subparts 8365.1-5(a)(1) for vandalism and damage to resources, and 43 CFR, Subparts 8365.1-4(a)(2) for creating a hazard or nuisance (recreational target shooting on BLM-administered land is an allowed activity, except where restricted, and must be conducted in a safe manner)
- Conducting monitoring and assessment processes, including rangeland health, watershed, soils, vegetation, wildlife, and air quality
- Applying mitigation measures for site-specific projects
- Conducting emergency stabilization and rehabilitation planning and implementation

1.4.7 Issues Beyond the Scope of the Resource Management Plan Amendment/Environmental Assessment

Issues beyond the scope of the RMPA/EA include all items not related to decisions that would occur as a result of this planning process. They include decisions that are not under the jurisdiction of the BLM or are beyond the capability of the BLM to resolve as part of this RMPA/EA. Additionally, an issue is not germane to the planning process if it is beyond the scope of this particular planning effort, or if it involves a matter normally addressed in plan implementation. Examples of issues beyond the scope of this draft RMPA/EA include the following.

- Construction of new visitor service facilities, such as a learning center at Wild Rivers
- Removal of concrete barriers within the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge area ROW
- Changes to the number of BLM staff dedicated to law enforcement or for processing special-use recreation permittee applications
- Installation of educational, interpretive signs, or kiosks to promote stewardship, and installation of multi-lingual signage
- Development of information materials to be available online or at visitor centers

1.5 Planning Criteria

Planning criteria guide the development of BLM planning documents by defining the decision space. 43 CFR 1610.4-2(b) states, “Planning criteria would generally be based upon applicable law, Director and State Director guidance, the results of public participation, and coordination

with any cooperating agencies and other Federal agencies, State, and local governments, and federally recognized Indian Tribes." Planning criteria represent the overarching factors used to resolve issues and to develop alternatives. The preliminary issues for the planning area and issues identified during the scoping period were described in Section 1.4.4, *Planning Issues*.

The planning criteria that define the scope of the RMPA/EA consist of the following.

- To the extent reasonable, the RMPA/EA would tier to and incorporate relevant portions of the 2012 Taos RMP.
- The RMPA/EA would encompass public lands administered by the BLM within the Monument boundary. All decisions formulated within the Draft RMPA/EA would pertain solely to BLM-administered public lands.
- The RMPA/EA would provide management to safeguard and restore the Monument's designated objects and values, aligned with the guidelines set forth in Presidential Proclamation 8946, the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, NHPA, and FLPMA.
- The BLM would aim to ensure that land use plan decisions are aligned with the existing plans and policies of Federal, State, local, and Tribal entities. The RMPA/EA would promote stewardship, conservation, and appreciation of cultural resources.
- The BLM would assess the impact of its Proposed Actions on ecological and cultural values, as well as the current land uses. Additionally, the RMPA/EA would ensure compliance with the legal obligations outlined in the designating proclamation and other relevant laws.
- The RMPA/EA would establish the protection and preservation of geological resources as a Monument object.
- Within the decision area, the RMPA/EA would delineate lands and realty actions, including ROWs, land use permits, and leases, alongside surface-management patterns.
- Management for livestock grazing allotments within the Monument boundary, and allotments partially within the Monument, would be guided by decisions in the RMPA/EA.
- The RMPA/EA would establish appropriate management for the newly designated Cerro del Yuta Wilderness and Rio San Antonio Wilderness areas in accordance with the Wilderness Act of 1964.
- The BLM would consult with Native American Tribes to identify any cultural values or religious beliefs that may be affected by the BLM's authorizations or actions. Provisions would be made for Native American use of traditional cultural properties.
- The RMPA/EA would evaluate existing recreational designations and determine whether updates would be necessary to address changed circumstances in recreational demand since the Monument was established.

- The BLM would consider areas of habitat connectivity in planning efforts to inform land use decisions in the RMPA/EA.

1.6 Land-Use Conformance

The designation of the Monument is not in conformance with the 2012 Taos RMP, which currently manages nearly the entirety of the Monument as two ACECs. Although current management of the ACECs provides administration largely consistent with the purposes of the Monument's designation, Presidential Proclamation 8946 mandates development of a management plan to ensure that Monument objectives are preserved. Furthermore, the Monument is a component of the National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS), which was established "to conserve, protect, and restore nationally significant landscapes that have outstanding cultural, ecological, and scientific values for the benefit of current and future generations" and, therefore, the BLM is required to manage the Monument "in a manner that protects the values for which the components of the system were designated" (16 US Code [U.S.C.] 7202). Therefore, any discretionary uses in the Monument that are not consistent with the protection of its objects and values cannot be permitted. The BLM's decisions regarding discretionary uses in the Monument must conform to the BLM's approved land use plan. Other changed circumstances and opportunities detailed above in Section 1.2, *Purpose and Need*, necessitate preparation of an RMPA for the management and care of objects and resources within the Monument.

1.7 Relationship to Statutes, Regulations, and Other Plans

1.7.1 Taos Field Office Resource Management Plan and Existing Management

The Monument is currently managed under the guidance set forth in the 2012 Taos RMP. Two ACECs, the Taos Plateau ACEC (222,500 acres) and the Lower Gorge ACEC (21,190 acres), overlap the Monument nearly in its entirety. The Taos Plateau ACEC contains relevant and important values associated with wildlife habitat, special status species, water quality and quantity, wetlands, and scenic quality. The Lower Gorge ACEC was established to provide direct management of relevant and important riparian vegetation, special status species and wildlife habitat, and cultural values. Management of the Lower Gorge ACEC also includes emphasis on recreation and contains the Orilla Verde Recreation Area. The remainder of the Monument not managed as an ACEC is included with the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River, which includes a segment of the Red River, and is managed pursuant to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, as amended.

The National WSR System includes two river segments in the Monument: (1) the lower 4 miles of the Red River; and (2) approximately 62 miles of the Rio Grande from the Colorado–New Mexico State Line, south to Pilar, New Mexico. The outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs) protected under the designation are scenic, recreational, geological, fish habitat, wildlife, cultural, and riparian. The BLM has identified four other river segments in the Monument as

eligible: (1) another segment of the Red River; (2) Arroyo Hondo; (3) Rio San Antonio; and (4) the Rio Pueblo de Taos, the latter of which was also determined suitable for designation as a WSR. The Arroyo Hondo, Rio San Antonio, and Red River were determined to be eligible for designation as WSRs. The designated WSRs, as well as river segments that have been found eligible or suitable for designation, would be managed pursuant to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, as amended.

In March 2019, two wilderness areas were also designated within the Monument and are managed by the Taos Field Office: (1) the Rio San Antonio Wilderness (8,120 acres); and (2) the Cerro del Yuta Wilderness (13,420 acres).

1.7.2 Other Laws, Regulations, Policies, and Plans

In preparing this Draft RMPA/EA, the BLM evaluated the proposed management relative to the relevant laws, regulations, policies, and plans listed in Appendix A, as they apply to the proposed undertaking.

2 Alternatives

2.1 Introduction

Consistently with the purpose and need for this draft RMPA/EA, the alternatives focus primarily on the protection and restoration of the Monument objects, while providing for the enjoyment and use of the Monument lands and resources through recreation, traditional uses, and other means. Alternatives carried forward for detailed analysis must meet the purpose and need for the RMPA; the BLM considered alternatives that it determined did not warrant detailed analysis (see Section 2.6, *Alternatives Considered, but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis*).

2.2 Alternatives Development

The BLM used several sources of input to formulate alternatives.

- BLM Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) workshops were held in June 2023 to conduct an evaluation of the Taos 2012 RMP, consistently with 43 CFR 1610.4-9, to identify and create a matrix of which land use plan components require updates to ensure the mandates established under Proclamation 8946 are achieved.
- The BLM utilized the Taos 2012 RMP evaluation matrix from the June 2023 IDT workshops to develop the purpose and need, planning criteria, and a list of preliminary proposed management updates for the RMPA/EA. This information was provided in the NOI package, which was published in the *Federal Register* (FR) on August 11, 2023.
- On August 25, 2023, a workshop was held with cooperating agencies who accepted the May 26, 2023, invitation to participate as a cooperating agency for the RMPA/EA. The objectives of the workshop included providing an overview of the purpose and need,

preliminary planning issues, and preliminary proposed management updates and soliciting feedback from the cooperating agencies.

- Public scoping, which included opportunities for input from the public, Federal agencies, State and local governments, and Tribal Nations/Pueblos. Refer to the scoping report for a detailed description of the issues identified during the scoping period (https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2024165/570).
- To refine the alternatives in response to input received during public scoping, additional workshops between the BLM IDT, cooperating agencies, and Tribal Nations/Pueblos were held from October 2023 through January 2024.

Planning challenges identified through the BLM's preplanning and public scoping efforts helped the IDT identify key planning issues to be addressed in this draft RMPA/EA. Because the 2012 Taos RMP established two ACECs that coincide with the Monument boundary, one action alternative (the Proposed Action), in addition to the No-Action Alternative, was determined to be sufficient to meet the mandates of Presidential Proclamation 8946 and the changed circumstances since designation of the Monument in 2013. Alternatives considered, but eliminated from further study are described in Section 2.6.

The following sections include a summary of the alternatives carried forward for detailed analysis. For detailed descriptions of the alternatives, refer to Appendix C, *Detailed Description of Alternatives*.

2.3 Alternative A (No-Action – Current Management)

Under the No-Action Alternative, management of the Monument would continue to follow the decisions of the existing Taos RMP (BLM 2012a). Two ACECs, the Taos Plateau ACEC (222,500 acres) and the Lower Gorge ACEC (21,190 acres), overlap the Monument nearly in its entirety. The Taos Plateau ACEC contains relevant and important values associated with wildlife habitat, special status species, water quality and quantity, wetlands, and scenic quality. The Lower Gorge ACEC was established to provide direct management of relevant and important riparian vegetation, special status species and wildlife habitat, and cultural values. Management of the Lower Gorge ACEC also includes emphasis on recreation and contains the Orilla Verde Recreation Area. The Monument also includes the Rio Grande WSR, which includes a segment of the Red River, and is managed pursuant to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, as amended. Under the No-Action Alternative, existing management for BLM-administered lands within the Monument would be largely consistent with the purposes of the Monument's designation. Refer to Appendix C for a detailed description of the goals, objectives, management actions, allowable uses, and administrative designations under the No-Action Alternative.

2.4 Alternative B (Proposed Action) and Alternative B1 (Designate Cerro de la Olla Wilderness Study Area)

Alternative B, the Proposed Action, builds from existing management direction contained in the 2012 Taos RMP to ensure greater protection for Monument objects, while also accommodating an integrated approach that would provide for continual multiple uses, including those considered traditional. The management strategy would be accomplished by using a variety of proactive and prescriptive measures that would protect Monument objects and promote the continuation of multiple-use management. Details of the full alternative can be found in Appendix C. Representative examples of management direction are as follows.

- Seek opportunities for co-stewardship of public lands and waters with Tribal Nations. Ensure that access is available for Native American Tribal members and Hispanic communities to religious and cultural sites for noncommercial traditional cultural and customary uses.
- Protect cultural and aquatic resources associated with playas and work cooperatively with livestock-grazing permittees to assess impacts of grazing on playas.
- Identify, define, and delineate cultural landscapes within the Monument, recognizing them as a larger equivalent of cultural resources, and refine the definition and delineation of these cultural landscapes as additional information becomes available.
- Habitat would be considered on a landscape scale and when data becomes available, and BLM lands would be managed to consider the relationship between large wildlife populations and smaller isolated populations, whenever possible.
- Newly constructed fences would be built to the BLM's wildlife-friendly specifications and allow safe wildlife passage, except for fences built specifically to keep native ungulates out of an area (i.e., forage-monitoring plots). As funding allows, modify, replace, or remove existing fences identified as barriers to wildlife movement.
- To provide important fish habitat, protect and leave large woody debris (LWD) in the Rio Grande (when not a danger to rafters), Red River, Rio Hondo, Arroyo Hondo, Rio San Antonio, and Rio Pueblo de Taos.
- To protect geologic objects, apply existing constraints on development from the 2012 Taos RMP and Presidential Proclamation 8946 relating to mineral withdrawal, solar/wind ROW exclusions, and recreational area restrictions on surface-disturbing activities. Implement case-by-case evaluations and site-specific NEPA policies in the review of surface-disturbing activities to determine whether geologic objects would be affected. Prioritize the preservation and protection of geological objects from surface-disturbing activities, while allowing for recreation/visitation.
- Consistent with Proclamation 8946, allow for new, expanded, and upgraded utility ROWs that serve local communities, as follows.
    - Widen the existing Powerline Falls ROW corridor over the Rio Grande gorge from 190 feet to 600 feet.

  - Designate a new ROW corridor following an existing 115-kilovolt transmission line within the Horsethief Mesa and the Arroyo Hondo Land Grant.

- Allow livestock grazing as a vegetation management/maintenance tool in the Ute Mountain area (outside of the designated wilderness boundary) to promote seed propagation, reduce undesired grasses, and promote new growth that wildlife can utilize.
- Manage the Cerro del Yuta Wilderness (13,420 acres) and Rio San Antonio Wilderness (8,120 acres) consistently with the Wilderness Act of 1964, the properties' enabling legislation, and regulations for wilderness management at 43 CFR 6300, BLM Manuals 8560 and 8561, BLM Handbook H-8560-1. A Wilderness Management Plan would be prepared by BLM following completion of this RMPA/EA.
- Manage the Cerro de la Olla (5,120 acres) and San Antonio East (9,855 acres) units to minimize impacts on wilderness characteristics, while allowing compatible uses that are consistent with the protection of Monument objects.
- Where Outstanding National Resource Waters (ONRWs) have been designated, prohibit new or increased degradation and manage for the values for which the ONRW was designated (exceptional recreational and ecological attributes).
- Apply interim protective management guidelines for eligible WSR segments (i.e., Arroyo Hondo: 1.3 miles; Red River: 1.0 mile; Rio San Antonio: 4.5 miles).

2.4.1 Alternative B1

Alternative B1 would designate 5,120 acres of the Cerro de la Olla planning unit as a new Wilderness Study Area (WSA) under the authority of Section 202 of FLPMA. Like Alternative B, the Cerro de la Olla unit would be closed to new ROWs and motorized travel; however, Alternative B1 would also manage the area consistently with Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class I objectives and BLM Manual 6330, *Management of Wilderness Study Areas*. All other elements of Alternative B1 would be the same as Alternative B.

2.5 Monitoring and Mitigation Protocol

In compliance with 43 CFR 1610.4–9 and 36 CFR 219.12, land use plans must establish monitoring intervals and standards based on resource sensitivity. Additionally, BLM Manual 6220 mandates that plans for national monuments analyze and incorporate measures ensuring the conservation, protection, and restoration of objects and values. This involves the inclusion of a monitoring strategy specifying change indicators, methodologies, protocols, and time frames for evaluating outcome achievement.

Recognizing that conditions may evolve during the lifespan of a land use plan, the BLM may utilize adaptive management to ensure protection of resources and minimize potential resource conflicts. To address changing conditions and provide management flexibility incorporating Best Management Practices (BMPs) (refer to Appendix D, *Best Management Practices*), the BLM would evaluate the effectiveness of management actions, analyze current resource conditions, and, if necessary, adjust management approaches.

Monitoring would track the BLM's advancement in fully implementing the land use plan and attaining desired outcomes. Monitoring efforts would be prioritized in alignment with the *Río Grande del Norte National Monument Science Plan* (BLM 2019a), as well as the goals and objectives outline in the RMP. Monitoring would be done in collaboration with Federal, State, and local agencies, with consideration of staffing and funding constraints.

2.6 Alternatives Considered, but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis

The BLM evaluated all reasonable alternatives presented. The following alternatives were considered, but eliminated from detailed analysis based on the rationale provided below.

2.6.1 Adjustments to Areas Open to Recreational Target Shooting

The BLM eliminated from detailed analysis an alternative that would alter existing allowable uses related to recreational target shooting. Under the No-Action and Proposed Action Alternatives, the Monument would allow recreational target shooting throughout the Monument, except for at developed recreation areas, including Wild Rivers and Orilla Verde, as well as the Taos Valley Overlook Recreation Management Zone (RMZ), which is also closed to hunting due to the terrain and concentrated use in the area. By maintaining the existing management within the Monument, the BLM can meet the needs of the resources and values in this area under the BLM multiple use and sustained yield mandate. while preserving and protecting Monument objects and values. The BLM would continue to monitor shooting impacts and consider restrictions on recreational target shooting, if necessary, during area-specific implementation planning to avoid or correct public safety issues, conflicts between recreational uses, and adverse impacts on Monument objects or values.

2.6.2 Close Any or All of the Decision Area to Livestock Grazing

The BLM eliminated from detailed analysis an alternative that would close BLM-administered surface lands to livestock grazing. In accordance with Proclamation 8946, laws, regulations, and policies followed by the BLM in issuing and administering grazing permits or leases on BLM-administered lands within the Monument would continue to apply. Management for Monument objects can occur through implementation-level management, including avoidance and minimization, without the complete elimination of livestock grazing within any or all of the decision area. The Taos Field Office authorizes grazing to comply with the fundamentals of rangeland health (USDI-BLM Grazing Regulations, 43 CFR Part 4100 § 4180.1) and the New Mexico Statewide RMPA/Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), which adopted statewide standards for public land health and guidelines for livestock grazing management. The assessment and adjustment process for authorized livestock grazing occurs on an allotment basis and is conducted through a land health evaluation, followed by appropriate NEPA analysis, in compliance with the Grazing Regulations 43 CFR Part 4100, Subparts 4110, 4120, 4130, 4160 and 4180. Analyzing a "no grazing" alternative within this RMPA/EA would involve broad landscape considerations of effects across the entirety of the Monument, whereas a site-

specific analysis of "no grazing" during the permitting process would provide a more site-specific understanding of grazing effects on allotments, land health, and Monument objects.

When the NOI was published, the BLM initially identified 10 vacant allotments that would be made unavailable to grazing under the Proposed Action because the allotments have not been applied for since Monument designation. At that time, it was believed the allotments had not been applied for due to the lack of access and lack of range improvements, such as fencing and water developments. After further review and consideration of scoping comments, the BLM adjusted the Proposed Action to close two of the 10 vacant allotments initially identified. The directives included in the explanatory statement accompanying Public Law 117-103 (Fiscal Year 2022 Consolidated Appropriations Act, Explanatory Statement, Division G) related to Vacant Grazing Allotments, states: "The Bureau is directed, to the greatest extent practicable, to make vacant grazing allotments available to a holder of a grazing permit or lease when lands covered by the holder of the permit or lease are unusable because of drought or wildfire." This directive is also covered using the recently established Reserve Common Allotment within the Monument. An alternative to close all 10 vacant allotments has been dismissed from detailed analysis per the feedback gained during public scoping, the directives related to Public Law 117-103 (Fiscal Year 2022 Consolidated Appropriations Act, Explanatory Statement, Division G), and because the grazing-authorization process allows for compatibility of livestock grazing with the Monument designation.

2.6.3 Designate San Antonio East as a New Wilderness Study Area

The BLM eliminated from detailed analysis an alternative that would designate the San Antonio East unit as new WSA within the Monument. Although an alternative that would designate the Cerro de la Olla unit as a WSA has been brought forward for detailed analysis (see Section 2.4.1, *Alternative B1*), management of the San Antonio East unit as a WSA is not warranted. The San Antonio East planning unit is proposed to be managed as a Land with Wilderness Characteristics to avoid impacts or degrade wilderness characteristics. The BLM is not considering management actions or allocations that would preclude Congress from designating the Rio San Antonio East units as wilderness in the future. Therefore, this issue was eliminated from detailed analysis.

3 Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the environment in the planning area and the likely direct, indirect, and cumulative effects on the human and natural environment that could occur from implementing the alternatives described in Chapter 2, *Alternatives*. This chapter is organized by topic and includes an affected environment discussion, a methods of analysis section that identifies indicators, methods, and assumptions, an analysis of impacts for each of the alternatives, and a cumulative effects analysis section. Because Alternative B1 is the same as Alternative B, with the exception that Alternative B1 would designate the Cerro de la Olla unit (5,120 acres) as a new WSA, the effects analysis for Alternative B in this chapter also applies to Alternative B1. Differences between Alternatives B and B1 in comparison to Alternative A are only noted where necessary in this chapter. Additional context and background information for special status species, recreation, and socioeconomics and environmental justice is provided in Appendix E, *Special Status Species*, Appendix F, *Recreation Management*, and Appendix G, *Socioeconomic Context and Environmental Justice*. No program specifically addresses climate change; however, the effects of climate change on resources is analyzed throughout Section 3.2, *Resources and Resource Uses*, where applicable. Appendix H, *Climate Change*, provides information on current climate-change conditions, trends, and forecasts for the planning area, as well as an analysis of climate change for the alternatives.

Although the BLM is responsible for managing only BLM-administered lands in the planning area—that is, the decision area—proposed decisions could affect environmental components outside the decision area. Unless indicated otherwise, discussion and analysis in this section encompasses the planning area, and potential effects outside the planning area are discussed in the cumulative effects analysis section, if applicable. Area calculations are presented for the BLM-administered lands within the Monument.

Several resources and resource uses were not brought forward for consideration in this draft RMPA/EA, either because they are not present in the planning area, because they would not be affected at the level requiring detailed analysis, because they were analyzed in detail in the 2011 Taos Proposed RMP/Final EIS (PRMP/FEIS; BLM 2011) and are incorporated by reference, or because they were determined to be unaffected by implementation of the alternatives presented in Chapter 2, *Alternatives*. The resources and resource uses not analyzed in detail in this draft RMPA/EA are described in Table 3-1.

Table 3-1. Resources and Resource Uses Not Analyzed in Detail

Resources	Rationale
Air Quality	All alternatives analyzed in this draft RMPA/EA would result in either similar or reduced, negligible effects on air quality, as described for Alternative A, Proposed RMP, in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS. The 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS analysis for air quality indicated that, except for mineral leasing, implementation of any alternative and subsequent activities would result in very low emissions relative to total emissions within the planning area for the life of the plan (BLM 2011:373–374). Additionally, the 2011 Taos RMP/FEIS concluded that the proposed plan (Alternative A) would reduce emissions through use restrictions dealing with travel management, mineral development, and other surface-disturbing activities. Air quality in the Monument planning area is generally good, and management changes discussed in this draft RMPA/EA would not change the air quality analysis discussed in the 2011 Taos RMP/FEIS. Therefore, this resource was dismissed from detailed analysis.
Mineral Resources	The establishment of the Monument under Proclamation 8946 withdrew all Federal lands within the Monument from all forms of entry, location, selection, sale, leasing, or other disposition under the public land laws, including withdrawal from location, entry, and patent under the mining laws, and from disposition under all laws relating to mineral and geothermal leasing, other than by exchange that furthers the protective purposes of the Monument. Therefore, no mineral exploration or development would occur within the planning area, except pursuant to valid existing rights. Few mineral material authorizations (approximately 116 acres) occur within the Monument; however, 10 unpatented placer mining claims (all held by the same claimant) exist in the Monument. Six of the placer claims were filed in 1982, and four were filed in 1997. An operator must attain the stated level of protection or reclamation required by specific laws in BLM-administered National Monuments pursuant to regulations at 43 CFR 3809.415I. Because all Federal lands within the Monument were withdrawn from mineral entry, no significant effects from mineral entry are anticipated; therefore, this resource was dismissed from detailed analysis.

Resources	Rationale
Paleontological Resources	The Taos Field Office uses a paleontology sensitivity map during site-specific reviews for all proposed earth-disturbing projects. All land use actions with a potential to affect vertebrate fossils, or noteworthy occurrences of invertebrate or plant fossils, would be screened against this map. The majority (approximately 87 percent) of the Monument is classified as PFYC 1 (very low potential). Although approximately 34,876 acres of the monument are identified as PFYC Class IV (high potential), Class V (very high potential), or unknown potential, all alternatives in this draft RMPA/EA would result in either similar or reduced negligible effects on paleontological resources as described for Alternative A, Proposed RMP, in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS. Impacts on paleontological resources from surface-disturbing activities would be mitigated by surveys and potential monitoring by a qualified paleontologist. All PFYC III, IV, and V areas are considered critical areas, and impacts on paleontological resources would be avoided or minimized. Therefore, this resource was dismissed from detailed analysis.
Scenic Routes and BLM Backcountry Byways	Three National Scenic Byways cross public lands or have viewsheds that include BLM-administered lands in the planning area: Enchanted Circle, High Road to Taos, and Wild Rivers Back Country. All alternatives analyzed in this draft RMPA/EA would result in either similar or reduced, negligible effects on National Scenic Byways as described for Alternative A, Proposed RMP, in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS. Additionally, the BLM would collaborate with groups that have been established to manage these byways and would notify them of any actions within the byway viewshed that might affect the purposes for which the byway is managed. Therefore, this resource was dismissed from detailed analysis.
Forestry and Woodland Products	All alternatives analyzed in this draft RMPA/EA would result in either similar or reduced, negligible effects on forestry and woodland products as described for Alternative A, Proposed RMP, in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS. Therefore, this resource was dismissed from detailed analysis.

Source: BLM 2011.
BLM = Bureau of Land Management; CFR = Code of Federal Regulations; EA = Environmental Assessment; FEIS = Final Environmental Impact Statement; PFYC = potential fossil yield classification; PRMP = Proposed Resource Management Plan; RMP = Resource Management Plan.

3.1.1 Analytical Assumptions

Descriptions of the affected environment and analysis of the effects that program management could have on resources and resource uses can be found in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011). These previous descriptions and analyses have been considered in this draft RMPA/EA and incorporated into the applicable resource sections. New information since publication of the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS, if available, has been incorporated where applicable.

Assumptions specific to this RMPA/EA include the following.

- Geographic information system (GIS) data have been used in developing area calculations and generating maps. Calculations are dependent on the quality and availability of data, and calculations in this draft RMPA/EA are representative of the

most recent data. Given the scale of the analysis, the compatibility constraints between data sets, and the lack of data for some resources, all calculations are approximate and for comparison and analytic purposes only. Similarly, the maps (Appendix B) are provided for illustrative purposes and subject to the limitations discussed above. The BLM may receive additional GIS data; therefore, acreages may be recalculated and revised at a later date. Not all acreages reported may sum to the 242,668-acre decision area due to misalignment at more detailed scales and rounding.

- Implementation-level actions necessary to execute the land use plan-level decisions in this Draft RMPA/EA would be subject to further environmental review, including NEPA, as appropriate.
- The discussion of impacts is based on the best available data. Knowledge of the planning area and professional judgment, based on observation and analysis of conditions and responses in similar areas, are used to infer environmental impacts where data are limited.

Additional program- or resource-specific assumptions are included in respective sections below.

3.1.2 General Methodology for Analyzing Effects

Potential impacts or effects are described using the same definitions used in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS. Types of effects are changes to the environment from the alternatives that are reasonably foreseeable and include the following.

- **Direct effects** occur at the same time and place as the action responsible for the impact. For example, removal of vegetative cover caused by facility construction would be considered a direct effect on vegetation resources.
- **Indirect effects** are caused by the action, but occur later in time and farther removed in distance. For example, removal of vegetative cover caused by facility construction that consequently results in increased surface runoff and sedimentation of nearby streams would be considered an indirect effect on riparian resources. Indirect effects may include growth-inducing effects and other effects related to induced changes in the pattern of land use, population density or growth rate, and other related effects on natural systems.
- **Cumulative effects** are effects on the environment that result from the incremental impact of an action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions (RFFAs), regardless of which agency (Federal or non-federal) or person undertakes such other actions. Cumulative effects can result from individually minor, but collectively significant, actions that take place over time.

3.1.3 Cumulative Actions

The cumulative effects discussion considers the alternatives in the context of the broader human environment—specifically, it addresses the incremental effect of each alternative when added to other past, present, and RFFAs. The analysis assesses the magnitude of cumulative

effects by comparing the environment in its baseline condition with the expected effects of the alternatives and other actions in the same geographic area. The previous cumulative effects from relevant past, present, and RFFAs disclosed in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FIES have been considered and incorporated into the applicable resource sections. RFFAs considered in addition to those discussed in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS include the following.

- Ongoing permitted dead and down fuelwood gathering
- Hazardous fuelwood reduction in the next 10 to 15 years
- Integrated weed management
- Development and incorporation of the Rio Grande Trail connectors to the John Dunn Bridge at the southern portion of Horsethief Mesa and at the Carson National Forest boundary at the northern portion of Horsethief Mesa, as described in the 2018 *Rio Grande Trail Master Plan* (NM EMNRD 2018)
- Development of the Questa to Red River Trail Corridor on the Carson National Forest (a 14-mile, multi-use, sustainable recreation trail that would connect the communities of Questa and Red River)
- Future permitted recreational events
- Ongoing updates, replacement, or modifications to existing transmission and distribution lines within the Monument
- Ongoing land-use authorizations, including leases, permits, and ROW authorizations to support utilities, film permits, and other activities
- Increases in temperatures and variations in precipitation resulting from climate change, which could affect soil conditions, vegetative health, and water availability in the planning area
- Continuing increases in visitation trends and recreational demands, as indicated by visitor use

3.2 Resources and Resource Uses

3.2.1 Cultural Resources

3.2.1.1 Affected Environment

Cultural resources are past and present expressions of human culture and history in the physical environment. They represent physical locations of human activity, occupation, or use and can refer to historical or architectural objects, sites, structures, or places with potential public and scientific value, including locations of traditional cultural, ethnic, or religious significance to a specific social or cultural group.

As part of this planning effort, the BLM conducted a Class I records search for the Monument (Seltzer-Rogers 2024). Archaeological remains documented in the area associated with

prehistoric peoples include rock imagery (i.e., petroglyphs), rock shelters, shrines, small hunting blinds, chipping stations, ceramics, stone tools, projectile points, ground stone, and the remnants of ancient trails and structures. Archaeological remains associated with historic-period peoples include metal and glass artifacts, ceramics, and other refuse-related artifacts, petroglyphs, homestead features (e.g., root cellars, water-catchment devices), sheep corrals, campsites, roads, and mining features (Seltzer-Rogers 2024). The results of the Class I records search[1] indicate that there are 163 previous cultural resource inventories, 926 previously recorded archaeological sites, 23 Historic Cultural Property Inventories (HCPIs), and two properties listed on the State Register of Cultural Properties and the NRHP that intersect the decision area. Of the 926 previously recorded archaeological sites, 509 have been determined eligible for listing on the NRHP. Of the 509 previously recorded archaeological sites, 193 of these sites are recommended for listing on the NRHP or are unevaluated. Unevaluated sites are treated as eligible for listing on the NRHP until such time as further research can be conducted to determine their eligibility. Of the 23 HCPIs, only one has been determined eligible for listing on the NRHP. A review of historic records indicates that there are likely additional historical resources within the decision area that have not yet been documented.

3.2.1.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would proposed management actions and land use allocations affect cultural resources and archaeological sites in the Monument?

The 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:374–379) describes the types of impacts that could affect cultural resources from planning-level decisions. Direct and indirect adverse effects on cultural resources can be characterized as those that result in the loss, degradation, or destruction of NRHP-listed or eligible historic properties, traditional cultural properties, or cultural landscapes. All effects on cultural resources are permanent because, once disturbed, a cultural resource cannot be restored to its original context. The 2011 Taos RMP/FEIS (BLM 2011) indicates that potential direct and indirect adverse effects on cultural resources in the Monument could include impacts from land-tenure adjustments, land-use authorizations, livestock grazing, transportation, access, and recreation, including the unauthorized removal of cultural resources.

Land disposal and acquisition could lead to direct, indirect, and permanent adverse effects if lands with significant cultural resources were transferred to private ownership because there are no protective measures required for significant cultural resources on private lands. However, under all alternatives, the BLM would retain all lands in the decision area in Federal ownership.

In order for a cultural resource to be eligible for listing on the NRHP, it must retain enough integrity to convey its significance. Effects on cultural resources from land-use authorizations,

[1] Data sources for the Class I Report (Seltzer-Rogers 2024) include the Archaeological Records Management Section of the New Mexico Cultural Resources Information System, additional reports or other pertinent documents housed at the BLM Taos Field Office, BLM's Government Land Office database, U.S. Geological Survey historic topographic maps, and historic aerial photographs.

road construction, and other surface-disturbing activities are typically direct, permanent, and adverse because they can cause damage to or destruction of a site's ability to convey its significance. Continued use of parts of the Monument for grazing could cause direct, permanent, and adverse effects on cultural resources, including trampling and displacement of artifacts and destabilizing soils through the creation of livestock trails.

Increased visitation and recreation could also cause direct, permanent, and adverse effects on cultural resources. Since 2021, the Monument has seen a dramatic increase in visitors and recreation (BLM 2021a). Increased access to remote areas through recreational and commercial land use can result in direct, permanent, and adverse effects associated with the resulting increase in human activity, which can lead to a greater potential for illegal artifact collection, vandalism, and trampling. Additionally, activities not subject to a recreational permitting process, such as dispersed recreation, also have the potential to adversely affect cultural resources under all alternatives. Conversely, beneficial effects on cultural resources could result from management decisions that would restrict surface-disturbing activities, acquire lands with significant cultural resources, close or limit travel and access, or establish areas as special designations, which would limit potential commercial use.

All Federal undertakings including this Draft RMPA/EA must follow the *State Protocol Between the New Mexico Bureau of Land Management and the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Officer* (BLM 2014) in addition to Federal historic preservation laws, including NEPA, EO 13287, and Sections 106 and 110 of the NHPA. These laws and agreements require the BLM to perform inventories to identify and evaluate cultural resources in the area of potential effect and resolve any adverse effects on significant cultural resources through mitigation. Cultural resource inventories add to the discovery of new sites and knowledge regarding cultural resources within the planning area, which would be a beneficial effect on cultural resources. These laws also require consultation with federally recognized Native American Tribes and other interested parties. Adverse effects on significant cultural resource from any Federal undertaking would be mitigated through NHPA Section 106 process under all alternatives.

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, management of cultural resources would not change from the existing management prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a). Direct and indirect impacts would remain the same as those described in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a).

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Under Alternative B, management of cultural resources would change slightly to further protect the Monument and cultural resources. The BLM would protect all cultural resources, including those associated with playas, and would work cooperatively with livestock-grazing permittees to assess the effects of grazing on playas. Cultural landscapes would be defined by their periods of significance and how the cultural resources relate to each other and the natural environment, and then would be considered in implementation-level NEPA decisions, further protecting cultural resources.

Regarding land-use authorizations, Alternative B would manage 100 percent of the decision area as exclusion areas for wind- and solar-energy development. As described in Section 3.2.13, *Land Tenure and Land-use authorizations*, management under Alternative B would result in a 2.8 percent decrease of areas in ROW avoidance, but a 9 percent increase of ROW exclusion areas, compared to Alternative A. This increase in ROW exclusion represents 25.5 percent of the decision area. Surface disturbance associated with ROW development has the potential to damage or destroy cultural resources, causing direct, permanent, and adverse effects on cultural resources. However, because compliance with Section 106 of the NHPA is required prior to any Federal undertaking, Class III cultural resource inventories would be required as a part of the permitting process, thus mitigating any adverse effects on historic properties.

Regarding livestock grazing, under Alternative B, the BLM would make two vacant allotments unavailable for livestock grazing, as described in Section 3.2.14, *Livestock Grazing*. This would reduce the potential for adverse effects on cultural resources from livestock grazing within these allotments, compared to Alternative A.

Regarding transportation and access, under Alternative B, the BLM would close 2.26 miles of previously limited primitive road to motorized use in Cerro del la Olla and would also close this area above 8,200 feet in elevation, consisting of 5,120 acres, in order to protect its primitive character, as described in Section 3.2.16, *Transportation and Access*, which would reduce the potential for adverse effects from illegal artifact collection, vandalism, and trampling of cultural resources, compared to Alternative A.

Regarding recreation, under Alternative B, the BLM would adjust and remove the existing recreation-management allocations and designate three new Special Recreation Management Areas (SRMAs) to focus management on the high-use areas within the Monument, as described in Section 3.2.15, *Recreation*. This would reduce the use of unauthorized roads and trails, which would reduce the potential for adverse effects of destruction or vandalism of Monument objects, including cultural resources, compared to Alternative A.

3.2.1.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs with the potential to contribute adverse effects on cultural resources in the planning area include land-use authorizations (i.e., leases, permits, and ROW authorizations) and actions that could result in surface disturbance, recreational uses, transportation or trail improvements, and urban expansion. Section 3.1.3, *Cumulative Actions*, describes RFFAs considered in addition to those in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011). Future trail development would contribute to increased recreation and tourism in the Monument, which would increase access to more remote areas that contain cultural resources. These activities would also increase the amount of human presence in the region, thereby increasing the likelihood of illegal artifact collection, vandalism, displacement, and trampling. However, special designations and restrictions on surface disturbance have the potential to provide cumulative beneficial effects on cultural resources within the planning area and region because they would restrict the frequency and extent of surface-disturbing activities. The potential adverse cumulative effects on cultural resources from Alternative B are anticipated to be slightly less than Alternative A because Alternative B would increase the overall acreage of

ROW exclusion areas, making two livestock grazing units unavailable, and protecting 5,120 acres of the Cerro de la Olla unit. All past, present, and future Federal undertakings are subject to the NHPA Section 106 process, which would avoid or mitigate adverse effects on historic properties on Federal lands.

3.2.2 Traditional Uses

3.2.2.1 Affected Environment

The Monument has a long history of human use (Seltzer-Rogers 2024). The Monument and the Taos vicinity contain the remains of materials from various cultures, including Paleoindian, Archaic, Ancestral Puebloan, Comanche, Apache, Ute, Hispanic, and Anglo/Euro-Americans. Traditional values of living communities can be manifested at locations, called *traditional cultural properties*, Native American sacred sites, or cultural landscapes. *Traditional use* includes subsistence activities, traditional livestock grazing, and a variety of cultural uses. *Traditional resources* can include archaeological sites, structures, topographic features, habitats, plants, wildlife, and minerals that Native Americans, Hispanic, or other groups consider essential for the preservation of traditional culture and traditional values.

The abundance of resources—including wild plants, animals, and rocks and minerals—found along the Rio Grande corridor and surrounding region made the area favorable to hunters and gathers. Wild plants of known traditional importance include piñon, juniper, sagebrush, amaranth, various grasses, and various wildflowers. Wild animals of known traditional importance include bighorn sheep, elk, mule deer, bears, mountain lions, rabbits, coyotes, and various birds. Evidence associated with traditional hunting includes the construction of hunting blinds and the presence of projectile points and other processing tools (e.g., scrapers, knives, bifaces, utilized flakes). Rocks and minerals, including obsidian, dacite, basalt, perlite, limestone, mica, sandstone, and quartzite, were procured for a variety of uses, including flaked-stone and ground-stone tools. Clay for pottery was also procured, and mica was used traditionally as a temper additive to pottery. Often, these traditional uses include ceremonial significance, and some areas within the Monument are considered sacred sites. Representatives of the Jicarilla, Navajo, Ute, Picuris, and Hispano communities, among others, have all identified specific locations within the San Luis Valley that contain plants and animals that have been or are currently used as raw material for cultural items, as well as food, fuel, medicinal, and ceremonial purposes (Wescott et al. 2016). Natural bodies of water also have ritual importance for Puebloan people and are often associated with water shrines (Ellis 1974; Fowles 2009).

Traditional-use resources can be affected by natural and human effects, including erosion, livestock grazing, trail maintenance, plowing, mining activities, recreational activities, and other construction and development activities. Increased visitation and recreation have caused adverse effects on traditional lands within the Monument, and overcrowding has displaced Tribal, traditional Hispanic, and local communities from popular Monument resource areas, including John Dunn Bridge and Cascabel Trailhead. As a result, traditional use patterns have shifted to undeveloped areas within the Monument, expanding the overall effects on Monument resources, which, along with the population growth of Taos County, has caused shifts in big

game migration routes and increased soil erosion (BLM 2021a). Increased off-highway vehicle (OHV) use has also affected traditional resource use by allowing easier access to resources for traditional users and the general public.

3.2.2.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would proposed management meet the BLM's obligations under the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 and provide opportunities and access for traditional uses within the Monument while protecting other resources, including Monument objects and values?

Surface-disturbing activities, such as recreational uses, transportation or trail improvements, and livestock grazing, could directly and permanently adversely affect traditional-use resources and access to them. Land disposal can also lead to direct, indirect, and permanent adverse effects if lands with resources of traditional use were transferred to private ownership, which could limit access to traditional hunting, fishing, or resource-collection areas because no protective measures are required for these resources on private lands. However, under all alternatives, the BLM would retain in Federal ownership all lands in the decision area.

Increased public access to remote areas through recreational and commercial land use can also result in direct, permanent, and adverse effects on traditional-use resources because of the associated increase in human activity, which can lead to a greater potential for illegal artifact collection, vandalism, and trampling. However, increased public access to remote areas could also provide additional access to traditional-use resources for traditional-use communities, which would be a direct beneficial effect to traditional uses. Beneficial effects on traditional-use resources also could result from management decisions that would restrict surface-disturbing activities or acquire lands with these resources.

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, management of the traditional uses would not change from the existing management outlined in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a). In addition, the BLM would continue to provide for ongoing consultation with Native American Tribal governments and strategies for protecting recognized traditional uses.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Under Alternative B, specific management for traditional uses would be included that is not provided under Alternative A. The management under Alternative B would seek opportunities for co-stewardship of public lands and waters with Tribal Nations. The BLM would ensure that Native American Tribal members and Hispanic communities would retain access to religious and cultural sites for non-commercial traditional cultural and customary uses. In addition, under Alternative B, the management would identity, define, and delineate cultural landscapes within the Monument, recognizing them as a larger equivalent of cultural resources, and refine the definition and delineation of these cultural landscapes as additional information becomes available. The proposed management would ensure that access remained available to religious

or cultural sites in the BLM-administered lands in the Monument by Native American Tribal members to perform ceremonial and traditional rites.

Surface disturbance associated with renewable energy or ROW development would have the potential to damage or destroy traditional-use resources. As described in Section 3.2.13, *Land Tenure and Land-use authorizations*, under Alternative B, the BLM would manage 100 percent of the decision area as exclusion areas for wind- and solar-energy development. Under this alternative, ROW avoidance areas would decrease by 2.8 percent, and ROW exclusion areas would increase by 9 percent, compared to Alternative A.

The increase in ROW exclusion would represent 25.5 percent of the decision area. Under Alternative B, the BLM would make two vacant allotments unavailable for livestock grazing, as described in Section 3.2.14, *Livestock Grazing*, which would reduce the potential for adverse effects on traditional-use resources from livestock grazing within these allotments, compared to Alternative A.

Under Alternative B, the BLM would close 2.26 miles of previously limited primitive road to motorized use in Cerro del la Olla, as described in Section 3.2.16, *Transportation and Access*, which would reduce the potential for illegal artifact collection, vandalism, and trampling of traditional-use resources in this area, compared to Alternative A.

Under Alternative B, the BLM would adjust and remove the existing recreation-management allocations and designate three new SRMAs to focus management on the high-use areas, as described in Section 3.2.15, *Recreation*. This would reduce the use of unauthorized roads and trails and destruction or vandalism of Monument objects, including traditional-use resources, compared to Alternative A.

3.2.2.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs with the potential to contribute adverse effects on traditional-use resources in the planning area include any land-use authorizations (i.e., leases, permits, and ROW authorizations) and actions that could result in surface disturbance, recreational uses, transportation or trail improvements, and urban expansion.

Section 3.1.3, *Cumulative Actions*, describes RFFAs considered in addition to those in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011). Future trail development would contribute to increased recreation and tourism in the Monument, which would increase access to more remote areas that contain traditional-use resources. These activities would also increase the amount of human presence in the region, thereby increasing the likelihood of illegal artifact collection, vandalism, displacement, and trampling. However, increased public access to remote areas could also provide additional access to traditional-use resources for traditional-use communities, which would be a beneficial effect to traditional uses.

Special designations and restrictions on surface disturbance have the potential to provide cumulative beneficial effects on traditional-use resources within the planning area and region because they would restrict the frequency and extent of surface-disturbing activities. The potential adverse cumulative effects on traditional-use resources from Alternative B are anticipated to be slightly less than Alternative A because Alternative B increases the overall

acreage of ROW exclusion areas, making two livestock-grazing units unavailable, and protecting 5,120 acres of the Cerro de la Olla unit under Alternative B.

3.2.3 Fish and Wildlife

3.2.3.1 Affected Environment

The planning area supports a wide variety of aquatic and terrestrial wildlife, as described in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:205–220).

Fish and Amphibians

Annual fish population surveys are conducted by the BLM Taos Fisheries and Aquatics Program in conjunction with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDGF). The Taos Field Office has identified 16 fish species as occurring in the Rio Grande and its tributaries in the planning area, 10 of which are nonnative and introduced species of game fish. Native species include Rio Grande chub (*Gila pandora*), Rio Grande cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki virginalis*), longnose dace (*Rhinichthys cataractae*), red shiner (*Cyprinella lutrensis*), fathead minnow (*Pimephales promelas*), flathead chub (*Platygobio gracilis*), and Rio Grande sucker (*Catostomus plebeius*). Baseline amphibian surveys have recorded the spadefoot toad (*Scaphiopodidae*) and tiger salamander (*Ambystoma tigrinum*) in playas, and Woodhouse's toad (*Anaxyrus woodhousii*) and American bullfrog (*Rana catesbeiana*) in riparian habitats within the planning area.

Migratory Birds and Raptors

The Monument is part of the Central Migratory Flyway, which covers the central portion of the US, comprising mostly Great Plains states. A portion of the flyway is concentrated over the Rio Grande ecosystem in New Mexico, where perennial water and adjacent habitats provide resources for millions of migratory birds. Species that are known to migrate along this pathway include sandhill crane (*Antigone canadensis*) and American avocet (*Recurvirostra americana*), along with numerous species of geese, ducks, hummingbirds, raptors, passerines, and shorebirds. The planning area is in Bird Conservation Region 16: Southern Rockies/Colorado Plateau, and the BLM monitors breeding bird populations within the monument through Breeding Bird Surveys, which are conducted yearly.

The Rio Grande Gorge provides important raptor-nesting substrate. The BLM monitors nesting raptors in the Rio Grande Gorge and Rio San Antonio Gorge, located along the eastern boundary of the Monument and northwestern corner of the Monument, respectively. The golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), great-horned owl (*Bubo virginianus*), peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), prairie falcon (*Falco mexicanus*), American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), and turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*) nest within the planning area. Bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) are also known to winter along the Rio Grande and other perennial water resources in the Monument. The Rio Grande provides permanent surface water that attracts waterfowl and supports nesting habitat for several waterfowl species, including ducks, geese, and American coot (*Fulica americana*) (BLM 2011).

Big Game

The planning area supports seasonal habitats for big-game species. *Seasonal habitats* are those that provide important resources, such as food or cover, for big-game species during different portions of their yearly lifecycles. The planning area also contains wildlife water catchments and livestock watering systems that provide essential resources for big-game species. Although the Taos Plateau is part of the North-Central Priority Landscape for Winter Range and Big-Game Movement, the NMDGF does not identify the area as a Conservation Opportunity Area in their *New Mexico State Action Plan* (NMDGF 2024). The Monument is part of a greater landscape on the Taos Plateau that provides important winter range for resident and migratory big game, including mule deer (*Odocolileus hemionus*), elk (*Cervus canadensis nelson*), and pronghorn (*Antilocarpa americana*). Within the Taos Plateau, 61,330 acres have been identified as big-game migration corridors, 218,962 acres as winter range, and 100,191 acres as summer range for big-game species (USGS 2022). The area is considered one of the most significant winter habitats for migrating elk. A portion of the North-Central Elk Herd utilizes the Taos Plateau during different times of the year. The highest densities of elk on the Taos Plateau usually occur in winter, when a portion of the migratory segment of the population meets up with elk that are year-round residents of the area. The population estimate for this larger herd is 25,300 to 29,000. However, it is important to note that the range that this herd occupies is far larger than the Taos Plateau and encompasses adjacent mountain ranges to the west. The San Antonio/ Pot Mountain Habitat Management Area (HMA) is located on the Taos Plateau and provides critical winter habitat for resident and migratory elk. The San Antonio/Pot Mountain HMA also supports habitat for antelope and mule deer on the Taos Plateau.

Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*), a native species, were introduced to the Rio Grande corridor in 2006, with the introduction of 23 bighorn sheep on Pueblo land adjacent to the Rio Grande Gorge by the Taos Pueblo; the BLM augmented this herd in 2007 with an additional 25 sheep. Habitat within the Rio Grande Gorge north of Taos Junction bridge was identified by the NMDGF in a 1993 habitat suitability study as having the second-best suitable habitat of seven low-elevation areas studied in New Mexico. In 2023, bighorn sheep surveys were conducted, indicating that the estimated numbers of bighorn sheep in the Rio Grande Gorge were between 225 and 275, as compared to the 2021 numbers of 375 to 420, indicating that the Rio Grande Gorge herd could be stable to decreasing (BLM unpublished data 2021d).

Other Mammals

The Monument is home to many common other mammal species, including coyotes (*Canis latrans*), foxes (*Vulpes* sp.), black-tailed jackrabbits (*Lepus californicus*), desert cottontails (*Sylvilagus audubonii*), skunks (*Mephitis* sp.), beaver (*Castor canadensis),* and bobcats (*Lynx rufus*). A variety of rodents, such as mice, rats, squirrels, and chipmunks, inhabit the Monument. Extirpated from New Mexico in the 1950s, the NMDGF reintroduced the North American river otter (*Lontra canadensis*) to the upper Rio Grande basin between 2008 and 2010 (Cox and Murphy 2019). Additional otters were released into the upper Rio Grande in 2021 to boost the genetic diversity of the small established population.

Extensive columnar basalt cliff lines along the length of the Rio Grande Gorge provide important bat habitat. Sixteen bat species have been recorded in the Monument, including Mexican free-

tailed bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*), big brown bat (*Eptesicus fuscus*), fringed myotis (*Myotis thysanodes*), spotted bat (*Euderma maculatum*), and Townsend's big-eared bat (*Corynorhinus townsendii*) (North American Bat Monitoring Program 2023).

Pollinators

The Monument provides habitat for a variety of terrestrial pollinators. The most common grassland pollinators are solitary ground nesting bees, but flies, beetles, and butterflies are also found in grasslands. Between 2016 and 2020, biologists collected information in the planning area on bee species, recording approximately 187 species.

Habitat Trends

Habitat changes resulting from alteration of landcover types are occurring in the planning area. Primary causes of both terrestrial and aquatic habitat conversion are increasing recreational activities, invasive species, climate change, lower river flows, and less precipitation. Historical fire suppression and widespread livestock grazing in the planning area have also resulted in alterations or departures of habitat conditions, such as piñon–juniper encroachment in shrublands and shrubland encroachment into grassland ecosystems. Habitats in the planning area have been fragmented from construction of roads and recreational trails.

3.2.3.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would proposed management restore, maintain, or enhance priority avian, terrestrial, and aquatic species' populations and their habitat as Monument objects?

Issue 2: How would proposed management affect habitat connectivity for terrestrial wildlife, aquatic wildlife, and fish?

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, management of fish and wildlife would not change from the existing management prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a). Current management provides protection for aquatic and terrestrial wildlife and habitats, while allowing for other discretionary uses consistent with Proclamation 8946 and restrictions associated with the management of special designations and other resources, including ACECs, WSRs, designated wilderness, and lands with wilderness characteristics. Existing management under Alternative A and application of the BMPs outlined in Appendix D would minimize the potential and intensity of adverse effects from activities on fish and wildlife species and their habitats.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Under Alternative B, management of fish and wildlife and their habitats would continue as prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a), with additional management actions to further restore, maintain, or enhance priority species[2] and their habitats, as described below. Where

[2] *Priority species* are fish and wildlife species requiring protective measures and management guidelines to ensure their perpetuation.

feasible, adaptive management would be implemented following monitoring, thereby providing additional flexibility to adjust management as needed to reduce, minimize, or avoid adverse effects. Overall, management for fish and wildlife and their habitats under Alternative B would result in greater short- and long-term beneficial effects when compared to Alternative A, as detailed below.

When not a danger to rafters, important habitat for fish and other aquatic species would be enhanced by leaving and protecting LWD in Rio Grande, Red River, Rio Hondo, Arroyo Hondo, Rio San Antonio, and Rio Pueblo de Taos, providing additional direct and long-term beneficial effects on aquatic species when compared to Alternative A. Like Alternative A, the modification of playas and adjacent watersheds would be prohibited, except Alternative B would increase direct beneficial effects on wildlife and their habitat by prohibiting the modification of lentic areas and adjacent uplands, unless for small-scale scientific research activities. Alternative B would also facilitate the restoration of playas and other lentic habitats to proper functioning condition to benefit aquatic wildlife. Seeps and springs would be surveyed for aquatic and riparian habitat and community composition. To maintain aquatic habitat, modification of seeps and springs would be prohibited.

Buffer zones, seasonal restrictions, and BMPs for recreational use would be applied to maintain the integrity of wildlife habitat and known avian nest sites. These measures would directly and indirectly benefit wildlife by avoiding or minimizing noise, human presence, and related disruptions to wildlife associated with seasonal recreational activities. Under Alternative B, all roads and trails would be located to minimize harassment of wildlife or substantial disruption of wildlife habitats. To reduce potential conflicts between raptors and other resource uses, specific mitigation strategies applicable to the BLM and applicant-generated proposals (e.g., Special Recreation Permits [SRPs]) would be implemented. These activities would include, but not be limited to, restricting OHV use and rock-climbing activities and avoiding trail development in important raptor breeding, nesting, roosting, and foraging habitat, surveying habitat for raptor use before permit approval, and monitoring dispersed recreation to identify areas where raptor nesting success is affected.

Under Alternative B, the BLM would consider using livestock grazing as a vegetation management/maintenance tool in the Ute Mountain area to restore and maintain wildlife habitat. Existing livestock exclosures along streams, wetlands, and riparian areas would continue to be maintained per the terms and conditions of existing cooperative agreements; however, additional exclosures may be implemented, as necessary, for riparian, wetland, and watershed health and to protect critical wildlife habitat.

The BLM is directed by the Instruction Memorandum (IM) 2023-005, *Change 1 – Habitat Connectivity on Public Lands*, to ensure that habitat for wildlife, fish and plants is "sufficiently inter-connected." The policy further directs BLM offices to consult with State wildlife and fish agencies and Native American Tribes to provide insight into assessing and managing habitat connectivity.

Under Alternative B, wildlife habitat would be managed on a landscape scale, considering the relationship between large wildlife populations and smaller isolated populations, whenever

possible and when data become available. To allow for greater terrestrial wildlife movement, newly constructed fences would be built to BLM wildlife-friendly specifications to allow safe wildlife passage, except for fences built specifically to keep native ungulates out of an area (i.e., forage-monitoring plots). Increased habitat connectivity would result from modifying, replacing, or removing fences identified as barriers to wildlife movement. In collaboration with the NMDFG, unnecessary aquatic barriers that do not serve as barriers separating native and nonnative salmonids would be removed to promote aquatic connectivity. Effects from Alternative B on wildlife habitat connectivity would be direct and indirect, beneficial, and long term.

Proposed ROW corridors under Alternative B, particularly the Powerline Falls ROW corridor, would present a long-term collision hazard for birds if new transmission lines were developed. Direct adverse effects would include collision hazards during aerial pursuit of prey and electrocution hazard during perching. All authorizations would be subject to NEPA review, and site-specific mitigation measures would be identified through the environmental review process. Application of BMPs (Appendix D) would also require applicants to incorporate raptor and avian protection in project designs. Therefore, the adverse effects of ROW corridor designations on avian species would be minimized under Alternative B.

Management for other resource programs under Alternative B, specifically lands with wilderness characteristics and land-use authorizations (e.g., ROW exclusion), would also provide greater benefits to fish and wildlife, when compared to Alternative A, by managing more acreage of the decision area subject to surface-disturbing restrictions.

3.2.3.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs affecting fish and wildlife, and their habitats, in the planning area include disturbance from recreation and habitat alterations from increased recreational activities, invasive species introduction and spread, climate change, lower river flows, less precipitation, historical fire suppression, and livestock grazing. Habitat fragmentation occurs within the planning area as a result of the current road and trail network; however, mitigation measures through site-specific analysis for future travel-management planning would be applied to minimize fragmentation on the landscape in priority species' habitats. Future land-use authorizations and activities that would result in habitat disturbances (e.g., vegetation treatments, ROW authorizations) would continue to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis to avoid or minimize adverse effects on priority fish and wildlife species and their habitats in the decision area. The contribution of Alternative A and Alternative B to the effects on fish and wildlife and their habitats are anticipated to be similar, with Alternative B offering fewer adverse effects and greater beneficial effects than Alternative A due to additional management to protect fish and wildlife and additional restrictions on surface-disturbing activities over a larger acreage for the protection of other resources, such as lands with wilderness characteristics and land-use authorizations.

3.2.4 Special Status Species

Special status species include federally listed and proposed species, Federal Candidate species, and BLM sensitive species. Federally Endangered or Threatened species are those that the Secretary of the Interior has officially listed under the ESA and for which a final rule has been published in the FR. According to the ESA, as amended, an *Endangered species* is an animal or plant species in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. A *Threatened species* is likely to become Endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range. Species proposed for listing as Threatened or Endangered are managed with the same level of protection as those already listed. *Proposed species* are those that the Secretary of the Interior has officially proposed for listing as Endangered or Threatened and for which a proposed rule has been published in the FR. Species that have been removed (i.e., delisted) from the ESA receive the same management as an Endangered or Threatened species for 5 years following the delisting decision published in the FR.

Candidate species do not have ESA protection and are managed as BLM Sensitive Species; the BLM policy for candidate species is contained in BLM Manual 6840, *Special Status Species Management* (BLM 2008a). The BLM conducts special status species management consistently with the principles of multiple use for the conservation of candidate species and their habitat. The BLM has two objectives for special status species: (1) to conserve and/or recover ESA-listed species and their habitats; and (2) to initiate proactive conservation measures that reduce or eliminate threats to BLM Sensitive Species to minimize the likelihood of ESA listing. Manual 6840 also requires that BLM-authorized actions do not contribute to the need to list any special status species under the provision of the ESA or contribute to the designation of additional Critical Habitat.

Special status species require specific management action and attention resulting from population or habitat concerns. In addition to the management contained in Section C.2.4 of Appendix C, management guidance for Alternative B specific to special status species occurring within the Monument is provided in Appendix E.

3.2.4.1 Affected Environment

Federally listed species that are present or have the potential to be present in the planning area are listed in Table 3-2. The planning area contains designated Critical Habitat for the Endangered southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*); no other designated or proposed Critical Habitat occurs in the planning area.

Table 3-2. Federally Listed, Proposed, and Candidate Species and Critical Habitat Documented in or Potentially Occurring in the Planning Area

Common Name (*Scientific Name*)	Habitat	Federal Status	BLM Status
Southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*)	Occurs in dense riparian habitats along streams, rivers, and other wetlands. Habitat types for this species include native broadleaf riparian, monotypic exotic, and mixed exotic/native broadleaf. Habitat occurs at elevations below 8,500 feet. This species primarily prefers very dense mid-story (i.e., 6.6 to 9.8 feet tall) stands of riparian vegetation that are at least 33 feet wide (USFWS 2013).	Endangered with Critical Habitat	–
Yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*)	Breeds in riparian woodlands with developed canopies and dense understory vegetation greater than 12.3 acres in size (USFWS 2014; Halterman et al. 2016).	Threatened	–
Rio Grande cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii virginalis*)	Prefers clear mountain streams or lakes with large substrate. In New Mexico, populations are restricted to headwater systems (NMDGF 2022).	Candidate	–
Monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*)	Occurs throughout New Mexico during the warm season, but is most abundant in southeastern New Mexico. For reproduction, it exploits large milkweed populations during summer. Habitat is generally mesic or wet areas supporting milkweed or other nectar species (USFWS 2020).	Candidate	Sensitive
Silverspot (*Speryeria nokomis nokomis*)	Known to occur between 5,200 and 8,300 feet. Requires moist habitats in mostly open meadows with a variety of herbaceous and woody vegetation. (USFWS 2021).	Threatened	–

Source: USFWS 2024a.

Per the ESA and Manual 6840, lists of special status species are revised every 5 years; consequently, additional special status species may be found to occur within the Monument in future years based on the most recent listing status at that point in time. Since 2012, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has changed the listing status of two species; the yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) and Silverspot (*Speyeria nokomis nokomis*) have been listed as Threatened.

The Monument provides habitat for aquatic BLM Sensitive Species, including Rio Grande cutthroat trout, Rio Grande sucker, Rio Grande chub*,* northern leopard frog (*Lithobates pipiens*), and Yuma skipper (*Ochlodes yuma*). Terrestrial wildlife BLM Sensitive Species occurring or potentially occurring the planning area include Gunnison's prairie dog (*Cynomys gunnisoni*), Townsend's big-eared bat, Bendire's thrasher (*Toxostoma bendirei*), Chestnut-collared longspur (*Calcarius ornatus*), Mexican whip-poor-will (*Antrostomus arizonae*), pinyon jay (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*), Virginia's warbler (*Leiothlypis virginiae*), and western burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia ssp. Hypugaea*). BLM plant Sensitive Species in the planning area include Ripley's milkvetch *(Astragalus ripleyi*)*,* Taos milkvetch (*Astragalus puniceus var. gertrudis*), Taos (or

Spellenberg's) springparsley (*Cymopterus spellenbergii*), and clipped wild buckwheat (*Eriogonum lachnogynum* var. *colobum*) *(*BLM 2019b).

3.2.4.2 Environmental Consequences

The BLM protects federally listed species by requiring site-specific evaluations and clearances and by applying more stringent management prescriptions in areas that have been specially designated to protect these species. Under all alternatives, any action that may affect federally listed species would require consultation with the USFWS under Section 7 of the ESA. Commitments to avoid adverse effects on special status species would be met by applying appropriate stipulations (e.g., timing or seasonal restriction or site-specific limitations) or by not authorizing the action altogether. Although many resource programs have the potential to affect special status species and their habitats, the analysis in this Draft RMPA/EA focuses on planning issues identified for the RMPA: recreation and vegetation management. Potential effects on special status species from management of other resource programs would be as described in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:403–408).

Issue 1: How would proposed management for recreation, livestock grazing, and vegetation management (i.e., vegetation treatments) affect special status species populations and their habitat?

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, management for recreation and vegetation treatments would continue to be implemented as prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a), except where necessitated by additional species' listing determinations. For the species evaluated in the 2011 RMP, the types of adverse effects from recreation and vegetation-management decisions under Alternative A would be the same as described in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:403–408).

For those species listed since 2012, vegetative treatments would be designed to benefit most special status species. Ongoing and increasing recreational-boating access and fishing opportunities would increase the probability that recreational activities could adversely affect special status species' habitat for yellow-billed cuckoo. Short- and long-term direct and indirect effects on special status species would continue to be avoided or minimized by conducting site-specific evaluations and clearances and implementing protective measures.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Recreational activities and their intensity on the landscape would have varying degrees of effects on special status species habitat; however, Alternative B would not increase recreation activity, nor prioritize management of recreational objectives over special status species habitat when compared to Alternative A. Although the recreational activities themselves would have potential to result in short-term direct and indirect adverse effects on special status species by degrading habitat, increasing stress, or altering wildlife behavior, overall effects under Alternative B would be the same as Alternative A.

Under Alternative B, vegetation-management treatments would continue as prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a), with some minor changes intended to allow for more flexibility, as informed by best-available science. Adaptive management principles would be used to evaluate and identify the appropriate treatments to move community types toward proper ecological function. The effects from the Alternative B on special status species from vegetation management treatments would be direct and indirect, and long-term.

3.2.4.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs affecting special status species and their habitats in the planning area, including drought, aridification, wildfire frequency and severity, are expected to continue and increase in intensity in the planning area and cumulatively contribute to adverse effects on special status species. Changes to vegetation composition in the planning area are expected from approved vegetation-management and prescribed-fire activities, wildfire, livestock grazing, and other uses. Additionally, recreational and traditional uses are expected to increase and may affect future special status species distributions and habitat suitability. The contribution of Alternative A and Alternative B to the effects on special status species and their habitats are anticipated to be similar, with Alternative B having fewer adverse effects and greater beneficial effects than Alternative A due to additional flexibility for vegetation treatments and application of adaptive management principles.

3.2.5 Geology

3.2.5.1 Affected Environment

Proclamation 8946 identifies the need to maintain the natural and scientific resources of the Monument, which includes features that preserve the geologic history of the Monument. The Monument is located within the Taos Plateau Volcanic Field, which is part of the greater Rio Grande Rift, a north–south trending continental rift zone that separates the Colorado Plateau province to the west from the Great Plains of the interior North American craton to the east (Chapin and Cather 1994; Thompson et al. 2022). The Taos Plateau volcanic field covers an area of approximately 1,800 square miles, making it the largest volcanic field in the Rio Grande Rift. The eruptive volcanism in the region spans 24 million years (from 26 to 2 million years ago), resulting in a high diversity in rock composition and volcanic edifice morphology (Thompson et al. 2022). Thompson and McMillan (1992) identified three unique periods of volcanism within the Taos Plateau volcanic field: Early-rift (late Oligocene to early Miocene), Post-magmatic lull (Miocene), and Late-rift (Pliocene to Pleistocene). The Taos Plateau volcanic field is particularly unique because it provides a window into the only active continental rift in North America.

The dominant rock units preserved in the Taos Plateau volcanic field are basaltic to andesitic lava flows, and dacite lava flows and domes, including the prominent plateau-forming lavas of the Servilleta Basalt and locally preserved lava flows of the Hinsdale Formation on the western side of the Monument. The dominant Servilleta basalt flows are incised by the Rio Grande River, which formed the Rio Grande Gorge and provides exceptional cross sections of volcanic stratigraphy. The larger dacite volcanoes include San Antonio Mountain (located outside and

west of the Monument), Ute Mountain, and the Guadalupe Peaks (including Guadalupe Mountain in the eastern portion of the Monument) (Thompson and McMillan 1992). The peak of Ute Mountain (Cerro del Yuta), a large dacite volcano in the northeastern corner of the Monument, marks the highest point in the Monument.

Small deposits of Santa Fe Group sediments are mapped within the Monument and are often interbedded with lava flows. The Upper Santa Fe Group generally consists of conglomerate, sandstone, and mudstone deposited by alluvial fans and alluvial flats (i.e., piedmont deposits) as well as cross-bedded sandstone deposited in a fluvial environment by the ancestral Rio Grande River (i.e., axial-fluvial deposits), spanning from southern Colorado to southern New Mexico (Strain 1969, 1966; Mack et al. 1993). The Lower Santa Fe Group is predominantly sandstone and conglomerate, with minor contributions of mudstones deposited in bolsons (Baldwin 1956; Connell et al. 2002; Galusha 1966; Galusha and Blick 1971; Maldonado and Kelley 2009; Seager et al. 1971; Woodward and Timmer 1979). Within the Lower Santa Fe Group, the Chamita, Abiquiu, Tanos, Popatosa, and Rincon Valley Formations contain significant tuffs and basalt flows that are used to radiometrically date the formations (Asher-Bolinder 1988; Connell et al. 2002; Koning and Aby 2005; Maldonado and Kelley 2009; McIntosh and Quade 1995; Morgan et al. 1998).

3.2.5.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would proposed management actions and allowable uses affect unique geologic features?

The 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011) does not explicitly describe the types of effects that proposed management actions and land use allocations could have on geologic resources. However, the effects on geologic resources would be broadly analogous to those described for paleontological resources (BLM 2011:397–401). If unique geologic features within the Monument were destroyed, altered, or removed, then they could not be restored, and the effects would be adverse and long-term.

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, management of geologic resources would not change from the existing management prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a), which does not include specific management direction for geologic resources. However, existing protective management for special designations, lands with wilderness characteristics, designated wilderness, and other constraints on development contained in the 2012 Taos RMP and Proclamation 8946 would minimize adverse effects and provide long-term beneficial effects on geologic resources under Alternative A.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Under Alternative B, the BLM would apply existing constraints to mineral withdrawal, solar/wind ROW exclusions, and recreation-area restrictions on surface-disturbing activities to protect geologic objects. Alternative B would also implement case-by-case evaluations and site-specific reviews of surface-disturbing activities to determine whether geologic objects would be

adversely affected, providing increased short- and long-term beneficial effects on geologic resources when compared to Alternative A. The preservation and protection of geologic objects from surface-disturbing activities would be prioritized under Alternative B, resulting in additional short- and long-term beneficial effects when compared to Alternative A.

3.2.5.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs with the potential to result in cumulative adverse effects on geologic resources in the planning area include actions that could result in surface-disturbance, such as land-use authorizations (i.e., leases, permits, and ROW authorizations), and other actions relating to recreational uses and visitation. Section 3.1.3, *Cumulative Actions*, describes RFFAs considered in addition to those in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011). The BLM anticipates future growth and increased use of the Monument by the public; increased visitation and resource uses could contribute adverse effects on geologic resources within the Monument. OHV use, trail building, and social trail use would bring more of the public into contact with the unique geologic features of the Monument. Natural impacts, such as erosion, would also continue to affect geologic resources. The contributions of Alternative A and Alternative B to the cumulative adverse effects on geologic resources are anticipated to be similar, with Alternative B contributing slightly less than Alternative A because Alternative B prioritizes preservation and protection of geologic objects and places additional restrictions on surface-disturbing activities over a larger acreage for the protection of other resources, such as lands with wilderness characteristics and land-use authorizations. All RFFAs with surface-disturbing potential would be subject to site-specific NEPA analysis to determine whether geologic objects would be affected, which would further reduce potential cumulative effects under Alternative B.

3.2.6 Soils

3.2.6.1 Affected Environment

Soil is a key resource for public land health, and the preservation of topsoil is a high priority for the BLM. The 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:227) gives a general overview of soil types and the relation of soil condition to public land health. US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) soil survey data lists 53 soil map units within the decision area (NRCS 2024). Luhon–Travelers, extremely stony complex (1- to 9-percent slopes), Stunner–Travelers, extremely stony Luhon association (2- to 8-percent slopes), and Rock outcrop–Raton, very stony complex (15- to 30-percent slopes) are the dominant soil units within the decision area, comprising 24.5 percent, 17.6 percent, and 12.3 percent of the decision area, respectively. All of these mapped units are classified as well-drained soils (NRCS 2024).

Erosion is the process by which soils are transported by wind or water. Most soils in the decision area are subject to increased wind or water erosion that result from surface disturbances, although some soils have higher susceptibility due to small particle size and/or slope, particularly soils in the southern portion of the Monument (BLM 2011:227). Vegetation departure that has occurred within soil systems with potential for erosion has been documented in rural and shrubland areas of the Taos Plateau (Waltson et al. 2016). Biological soils crusts are composed of cyanobacteria, fungi, and lichen growing in a symbiotic relationship on the soil

surface and play an important role in the protection and stabilization of soil surfaces from erosion (Bryce et al. 2012). Although the location and extent of biological soil crusts within the decision area is not currently known, the *Río Grande del Norte National Monument Science Plan* (BLM 2019a) identifies biological soil crusts as a subject in need of research; surveys, mapping, and/or modeling efforts are anticipated to identify the extent of biological soils crusts over the life of the Monument plan.

3.2.6.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would land use allocations and discretionary uses affect soil health and productivity?

The 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:401–402) describes the types of effects that could occur to soils from proposed management actions and land use allocations. Adverse effects would occur where erosive forces, such as wind and water, come into contact with soil surfaces, particularly following surface-disturbing activities. The types of management actions that could adversely affect soil resources include activities from vegetation management, wildland fire management, land tenure and use authorizations, livestock grazing, recreation management, and vehicle use. Management decisions that would restrict surface-disturbing activities would provide a benefit to soil resources. Under all alternatives, management actions and land-use authorizations would be required to comply with terms and conditions to ensure they are operating consistently with the management goals in the decision area. The potential for surface disturbance is used as an indicator and analyzed between alternatives due to its relationship to soil health and productivity. For the purposes of this analysis, surface disturbance is considered to reduce short- and long-term soil health and productivity, and management decisions that prohibit or limit surface-disturbing activities are expected to protect soil health and productivity.

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, management of soil resources would not change from the existing management prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a). Under Alternative A, large-scale surface disturbance is not anticipated to increase across the decision area. This is primarily due to the types of allowable uses within the Monument and restrictions on development currently in place under the 2012 Taos RMP and Proclamation 8946 for the protection of resources and Monument objects.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Under Alternative B, the BLM would continue to uphold current restrictions to mineral withdrawal, wind- and solar-energy development, and recreation-area limitations on surface-disturbing activities to protect soil resources. However, Alternative B would also place an additional 5,096 acres in ROW exclusion, thereby reducing the potential for surface-disturbing activities and providing direct, indirect, and short- and long-term beneficial effects for soil health and productivity over a larger total area when compared to Alternative A. Designating ROW corridors over an additional 183 acres under Alternatives B would result in short-term direct adverse effects if development were to occur within the corridors themselves, but long-term

beneficial effects on soil health and productivity across the Monument by providing for greater opportunity for the co-location of utilities, when compared to Alternative A.

3.2.6.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs with the potential to result in cumulative adverse effects on soil resources in the planning area include actions that could result in surface disturbance, such as land-use authorizations (i.e., leases, permits, and ROW authorizations), and other actions relating to travel, recreational uses, and visitation. Section 3.1.3, *Cumulative Actions*, describes RFFAs considered in addition to those in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011). Erosion is a natural phenomenon that would continue to occur in some capacity, regardless of management actions, and which may be exacerbated in the future by climate change–driven drought and aridification. The BLM expects future growth and increases in visitation and recreational demand within the Monument, which would contribute to short- and long-term adverse effects on soil health and productivity. All forms of recreational activities can increase potential for erosion, sedimentation, gully creation, biologic soil-crust damage, and riparian and upland vegetation damage. However, the intensity of cumulative adverse effects varies with the nature and degree of disturbance and site-specific environmental conditions. Larger disturbances typically represent greater potential to damage soils and affect productivity. The contribution of Alternative A and Alternative B to the effects on soil health and productivity are anticipated to be similar, with Alternative B contributing slightly less than Alternative A because of the additional restrictions Alternative B would place on surface-disturbing activities over a larger acreage for the protection of other resources, such as lands with wilderness characteristics and land-use authorizations.

3.2.7 Vegetative Communities

Functional and healthy vegetation communities support a complex web of interactions on which the ecological health of the Monument relies. They stabilize soils and prevent erosion, compartmentalize and redistribute nutrients, moderate air and water quality, promote species diversity, and provide an array of habitats, including habitat for special status species.

3.2.7.1 Affected Environment

The Monument is in the Arizona/New Mexico Plateau Ecoregion Level III, which represents a large transitional region between the drier shrublands and wooded, higher-relief tablelands of the Colorado Plateaus in the north, the lower, hotter, less-vegetated Mojave Basin and Range in the west, and forested mountain ecoregions that border the region on the northeast and south (Griffith et al. 2006). The landscape is generally dry, although regional topography may cause variation in precipitation. The Monument encompasses the San Luis Shrublands and Hills, San Luis Alluvial Flats and Wetlands, and Taos Plateau Level IV Ecoregions and is home to a diverse range of vegetation. The area is characterized by shrublands, high-elevation grasslands, forested hills, steep canyon walls, and riparian areas.

Riparian Areas

Riparian vegetation in the Monument is diverse, and includes species such as cottonwoods, willows, and cattails. These species play important roles in the ecosystem, providing food and cover for wildlife, stabilizing banks, and improving water quality by filtering pollutants and excess nutrients. Additionally, shade provided by the streamside vegetation helps regulate water temperature and increase habitat complexity, creating conditions to support higher diversity for aquatic and terrestrial species. Riparian habitat comprises less than 1 percent (320 acres) of vegetation in the Monument and primarily provides recreational opportunities and important flyways and nesting areas for migratory birds. Riparian areas, such as the Rio Grande, represent corridors necessary for migration of amphibians, bats, migratory waterfowl, and other wildlife species and are critical to sustaining wildlife diversity and populations. Because of the importance of these areas, management to maintain and enhance properly functioning riparian areas and water-quality parameters are priorities within the Monument.

The vegetation type that comprises most of the riparian areas in the Monument is Rocky Mountain Lower Montane–Foothill Riparian Woodland and Shrubland (approximately 207 acres in the decision area). This ecological system is primarily linear in the Monument, forming narrow bands on small, rocky canyon tributaries, floodplain swales, and irrigation ditches, but also forms large, wide occurrences within the flood zone of rivers and streambanks; these can extend into basins where the adjacent vegetation is sage steppe (NatureServe 2023).

This system is largely intact in the Monument, with high species diversity and quality wildlife habitat. Because of the Monument's remote, inaccessible nature, there is little or no evidence of alteration due to drainage, flood control, irrigation canals, livestock grazing, soil compaction, digging, burning, mining, or vehicle use (Fullerton and Batts 2003; BLM 2012a). However, invasive, nonnative vegetation threatens riparian areas along the Rio Grande. Additionally, annual average river flows have declined approximately 50 to 100 cubic square feet since 1951 (Llewellyn and Vaddey 2013). Average temperature has increased roughly 1.5 degrees Fahrenheit compared to the 1960–1979 baseline period in the southwestern US, including the planning area (Karl et al. 2009).

Terrestrial Vegetation

Landscape Fire and Resource Management Planning Tools (LANDFIRE) is a shared program between the wildland fire-management programs of the US Forest Service (USFS) and U.S. Department of the Interior, providing landscape-scale geospatial data to support cross-boundary planning, management, and operations. The LANDFIRE database is used to describe vegetation in the Monument because it provides consistent, comprehensive, and recent data.

According to the LANDFIRE database, five terrestrial vegetation types comprise almost 95 percent (227,854 acres) of the decision area (Table 3-3; USGS EROS 2020a). Table 3-3 lists the vegetation types in the Monument, which represent a mosaic of terrestrial vegetation types that are broadly defined and have substantial overlap. Generally, vegetative communities within the Monument are semi-arid shrub–steppe types, compositionally diverse, but consisting of an open shrub to moderately dense woody layer that often has a very productive herbaceous

understory that provides high-quality forage for livestock (NatureServe 2023). Map B.2 (Appendix B) illustrates the vegetation community types across the planning area.

Table 3-3. Vegetation Types in the Decision and Planning Area

Vegetation Community Type	Decision Area (acres)	Decision Area (%)	Planning Area (acres)	Planning Area (%)
Inter-Mountain Basins Semi-Desert Shrub–Steppe	71,842	29.6	92,541	29.8
Inter-Mountain Basins Big Sagebrush Shrubland	42,523	17.5	58,467	18.8
Southern Rocky Mountain Piñon–Juniper Woodland	41,113	16.9	53,953	17.4
Inter-Mountain Basins Mixed Salt Desert Scrub	38,063	15.7	48,691	15.7
Inter-Mountain Basins Montane Sagebrush Steppe	34,313	14.1	40,457	13.0
Inter-Mountain Basins Semi-Desert Grassland	3,457	1.4	3,928	1.3
Southern Rocky Mountain Montane–Subalpine Grassland	1,803	0.7	1,857	0.6
Southern Rocky Mountain Ponderosa Pine Woodland	1,330	0.5	1,512	0.5
Southern Rocky Mountain Dry-Mesic Montane Mixed Conifer Forest and Woodland	1,131	0.5	1,149	0.4
Rocky Mountain Lower Montane–Foothill Shrubland	1,114	0.5	1,211	0.4
Rocky Mountain Gambel Oak–Mixed Montane Shrubland	938	0.4	1,087	0.3
Open Water	749	0.3	800	0.3
Developed Roads	576	0.2	624	0.2
Colorado Plateau Mixed Low Sagebrush Shrubland	498	0.2	553	0.2
Great Basin and Intermountain Introduced Annual and Biennial Forbland	487	0.2	637	0.2
Western Cool Temperate Urban Shrubland	474	0.2	548	0.2
Colorado Plateau Piñon–Juniper Woodland	422	0.2	678	0.2
Southern Rocky Mountain Mesic Montane Mixed Conifer Forest and Woodland	408	0.2	410	0.1
Interior Western North American Temperate Ruderal Grassland	308	0.1	339	0.1
Rocky Mountain Subalpine–Montane Mesic Meadow	162	0.1	194	0.1
Rocky Mountain Lower Montane–Foothill Riparian Woodland	153	0.1	212	0.1
Rocky Mountain Aspen Forest and Woodland	104	<0.1	104	<0.1
Quarries–Strip Mines–Gravel Pits–Well and Wind Pads	102	<0.1	115	<0.1

Vegetation Community Type	Decision Area (acres)	Decision Area (%)	Planning Area (acres)	Planning Area (%)
Great Basin and Intermountain Introduced Perennial Grassland and Forbland	80	<0.1	81	<0.1
Rocky Mountain Lower Montane–Foothill Riparian Shrubland	62	<0.1	86	<0.1
Western Cool Temperate Urban Evergreen Forest	61	<0.1	69	<0.1
Total	**242,668**	**100.0**	**310,792**	**100.0**

Source: USGS EROS 2020a.
Note: Vegetation community types comprising less than 50 acres were not included.

Special Status Plant Species

No federally listed plant species are present or have the potential to be present in the planning area. BLM sensitive plant species occurring or potentially occurring in the planning area include Ripley's milkvetch, Taos milkvetch, Taos (or Spellenberg's) springparsley, and clipped wild buckwheat (BLM 2019b).

3.2.7.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would existing and proposed vegetation-management actions and allowable uses affect riparian and terrestrial vegetation, including special status plant species?

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, management of terrestrial and riparian vegetation would not change from the existing management prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a). Existing management under Alternative A and application of BMPs outlined in Appendix D would minimize the potential and intensity of adverse effects from activities on vegetation in the decision area.

Current riparian and terrestrial vegetation management practices include the following.

- Maintenance of the health and resilience of the sagebrush–steppe grasslands through a variety of fire-management strategies, including controlled burning, firebreaks, and fire exclusion (BLM 2004)
- Promotion of the proper functioning condition of riparian vegetation communities through implementation of the *Riparian and Aquatic Habitat Management Plan* (BLM 2000b), the *Rio Grande Corridor Final Plan* (BLM 2000a), the *Southwestern Willow Flycatcher Management Plan for the Taos Field Office* (BLM 1998), and the *USFWS Recovery Plan for the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher* (USFWS 2002)
- Removal of invasive plant species, such as cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), and planting native vegetation, which helps increase biodiversity and improves ecosystem function, and implementation of BMPs (e.g., equipment, fill dirt, seed, mulch being clean and free of invasive/noxious weeds) (BLM 2012a, Appendix C)

- Withdrawal of grazing in certain areas, such as riparian areas and wetlands, and limiting and managing grazing to ensure the enhancement of critical elk and pronghorn winter range on the Monument (BLM 2012a)
- Intensive management of fuelwood sales

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Under Alternative B, management of terrestrial and riparian vegetation would continue as prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a) with additional management actions to refine and focus monitoring methods and schedules, broaden definitions of ecological health, and expand restoration resources. As detailed below, these actions would further restore, maintain, or enhance vegetative communities and ecological diversity across the decision area, which would include habitat for sensitive plant species, resulting in additional long-term beneficial effects, when compared to Alternative A.

Identification and incorporation of more-robust survey schedules and monitoring methodologies under Alternative B that target the ecological drivers of riparian vegetative health, such as soil and hydrology, would allow the BLM to identify and prioritize degraded areas. These additional data, informed by best-available science, would also provide opportunities for adaptive management to address factors contributing to the degradation of riparian vegetation.

Alternative B replaces the concept of *proper functioning condition*, which typically applies to riparian areas, with the concept of *desired ecological conditions and function* for terrestrial vegetation-management actions. This change would more appropriately define the role of terrestrial vegetation management, such as prescribed burning and conifer removal, to ensure that terrestrial vegetation communities achieve a desired ecological function.

Under Alternative B, the BLM's Seeds of Success program and National Seed Warehouse would provide additional resources for riparian and terrestrial vegetation-restoration management actions. This would benefit the vegetation in the Monument by increasing the quantity and quality of native plant materials available. Much of the seed available in these programs is collected from the field and can be sourced from locally adapted plant populations, conferring genetic resilience and increasing the success of restored ecosystems. Additionally, these resources would support adaptive-management actions under Alternative B by identifying priority seed needs for future riparian- and terrestrial-reclamation projects.

Alternative B would close two grazing allotments (totaling 1,772 acres) within the Monument. Closing these allotments would benefit vegetative communities, but the effects would likely be negligible when compared to Alternative A because there has been no grazing in those allotments since the Monument's designation. Allowing grazing as a vegetation-management tool to reduce undesirable plant species north of the Cerro del Yuta wilderness would benefit efforts to promote seed propagation and the establishment of desired species and support adaptive-management actions under Alternative B.

3.2.7.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs affecting riparian and terrestrial vegetation and special status plant species in the planning area include climate change, drought, aridification, and wildfire frequency and severity; these factors are expected to continue and increase in intensity in the planning area and cumulatively contribute to adverse effects on vegetation and ecological diversity. Changes to vegetation composition in the planning area are expected from approved vegetation-management and prescribed-fire activities, wildfire, livestock grazing, and other uses. Additionally, recreational and traditional uses are expected to increase and may affect future special status plant species distributions.

The contributions of Alternatives A and B to the cumulative effects on vegetative communities are expected to be similar, although Alternative B would expand adaptive-management criteria and opportunities for resiliency beyond Alternative A through the incorporation of targeted, scheduled monitoring and additional restoration resources grounded in best-available science.

3.2.8 Visual Resources

3.2.8.1 Affected Environment

Visual resources within the Monument range from being highly distinctive to common to the region, highly to moderately valued by the public, minimally developed, and highly intact. In addition to the dramatic and stark beauty of the Monument's landscape, the Monument contains the Rio Grande and Red River WSRs, Wild Rivers Back Country Scenic Byway, Old Spanish National Historic Trail (OSNHT), and other areas of special designation that draw recreationists and sightseers to the area. In general, high scenic quality within the Monument is a product of the area's diverse vistas and canyons, its extraordinary topography, a scenic river corridor, dramatic, colorful, and unusual geology, cultural history, including prehistoric petroglyphs, pictographs, and structures, and lack of development. Areas with high visual sensitivity are the primary result of the high degree of visitor interest in and public concern for a particular area's visual resources, the area's high degree of public visibility, the level of use of an area by the public, and the type of visitor use that the area receives. For some people (including members of the Taos, Picuris Pueblos, Jicarilla Apache, and Ute Tribes), the portions of the Monument landscape are considered sacred and provide the opportunity to connect to ancestors.

The BLM uses the VRM system (BLM 1984) to classify and manage visual resources on lands under its jurisdiction (Table 3-4), assigning a Visual Resource Inventory (VRI) (BLM 1986) class designation to indicate the relative scenic quality of various areas. The Monument's VRI indicates that approximately 5 percent (12,274 acres) is classified as VRI Class I lands that predominantly surround the Rio Grande and Red River WSR. Approximately 45 percent (108,433 acres) of BLM-administered lands are inventoried as VRI Class II. Similarly, approximately 45 percent (108,122 acres) are inventoried as VRI Class III, which results from combining scenic quality, public sensitivity, and proximity to viewing platforms, such as commonly used roads. Approximately 4 percent (9,753 acres) is inventoried as VRI Class IV (see Appendix B, Map B.3). The 2012 Taos RMP identifies the VRM classifications for the Monument (BLM 2012a), which are provided in Table 3-4 and depicted on Map B.4 (Appendix B). Assignments of VRM classes

to support management objectives for resources such as National Historic Trail segments, WSRs, and lands with wilderness characteristics were considered during the 2012 Taos RMP planning process. Approximately 16 percent (39,907 acres) and 83 percent (202,554 acres) of Monument lands are in VRM Class I and Class II, respectively. Less than 0.5 percent (350 acres) of Monument is in VRM Class III (Table 3-4). No BLM-administered lands within the Monument are currently managed as VRM Class IV.

The Light Pollution Atlas 2020 (Lorenz 2020) provides the fraction of artificial night-sky brightness to natural night-sky brightness. For example, a fraction of natural night-sky brightness of 3.0 means that the artificial night-sky brightness is three times as bright as natural night-sky conditions. Based on the mappings for the Monument, artificial night-sky brightness within much of the Monument is very low and ranges, predominantly, from less than 0.01 to 0.06. However, the easternmost edge and southern portion of the Monument receives greater night-sky illumination from Questa and Taos, and artificial night-sky brightness ranges from 0.06 to 0.11, which is still low. The eastern portion of the Monument, near Questa, receives the greatest illumination of 0.11 to 0.19 because it is located within close proximity to the village's outskirts.

Table 3-4. Visual Resource Management Class Descriptions and Acreages within the Río Grande del Norte National Monument Decision Area

VRM Class	Description	Acreage
I	The objective of this class is to preserve the existing character of the landscape. This class provides for natural ecological changes; however, it does not preclude very limited management activity. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be very low and should not attract attention.	39,907
II	The objective of this class is to retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be low. Management activities may be seen, but should not attract the attention of the casual observer. Any changes must repeat the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.	202,554
III	The objective of this class is to partially retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be moderate. Management activities may attract attention, but should not dominate the view of the casual observer. Changes should repeat the basic elements found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.	350
IV	The objective of this class is to provide for management activities that require major modifications of the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape can be high. These management activities may dominate the view and be the major focus of viewer attention. However, every attempt should be made to minimize the impact of that activity through careful location, minimal disturbance, and repeating the basic elements.	0
TOTAL	–	**242,811**

Source: BLM 1986, 2012a.
VRM = Visual Resource Management.

3.2.8.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would proposed management preserve or retain the existing visual character of the landscape and protect dark night skies?

The 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:417–421) describes the types of effects that could result on visual resources from planning-level decisions. The inclusion of the visual landscape in Proclamation 8946 establishes the requirement to manage lands in the Monument to protect the visual resources and values associated with the visual landscape. Additionally, the BLM is required to manage lands in a manner that would preserve scenic values by a broad range of authorities, including Federal mandates under FLPMA and NEPA for scenic and aesthetic resources.

As noted in the 2011 PMRP/FEIS (BLM 2011:419), management of visual resources at higher VRM classes than inventoried (i.e., VRI) can result in greater protection to areas more visible along travel routes and where the topography is less able to absorb larger scale or multiple users. For example, VRM is considered protective of existing visual resources when it assigns VRM Class I and II objectives to inventoried Class II or III lands.

Direct effects from resource programs would occur from vegetation treatments and potential increases in surface-disturbing activities from ROW development and land-use authorizations, which could contribute to potential changes in VRI Classes I, II, and III. In comparison, instituting constraints on resource uses would reduce potential long-term direct and indirect, adverse effects on visual resources.

The potential for adverse effects on dark night skies is driven by the degree of use restrictions, such as the development of facilities and OHV use (both of which can decrease light pollution), and the extent and management of special designations (which may limit future development and associated light pollution).

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, approximately 16 percent (39,894 acres) and 83 percent (202,542 acres) of Monument lands would be continued to be managed as VRM Class I and Class II, respectively (see Appendix B, Map B.4). As a result, visual resource management under Alternative A would maintain VRI and existing scenic integrity values across the Monument. Only 350 acres in the area around the Wild Rivers Visitor Center would be managed as VRM Class III, where the current VRI is Class II. Indirect and direct effects from other resource programs would be the same as described in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:417–421, Alternative A). There would be no additional management to protect dark night skies; however, existing restrictions on OHV, development, and management of special designations would minimize the potential for new sources of light pollution.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Alternative B would manage the same percentage of land in VRM Classes I, II, and III as Alternative A: approximately 16 percent (39,821 acres) and 83 percent (202,425 acres) as VRM Class I and Class II, respectively (see Appendix B, Map B.5). Therefore, the effects from visual-

resource management would be the same as described for Alternative B. Under Alternative B, direct and indirect effects of other resource programs would be the same as Alternative A, with the exception of land-tenure and land-use authorizations. Alternative B would increase the amount of designated ROW corridors in the decision area by 183 acres, compared to Alternative A (see Section 3.2.13.2, *Cumulative Effects*), which would potentially increase infrastructure, such as transmission lines, in small portions of the Monument that are currently inventoried as VRI Class I and II and managed as VRM Class I and II. The areas within designated ROW corridors that would be added under Alternative B would be managed to VRM Class III objectives where they are currently in VRM Class II under Alternative A. Therefore, designated ROW corridors under Alternative B would have greater short- and long-term direct adverse effects on visual-resource management than Alternative A. The new Horsethief Mesa ROW corridor under Alternative B would follow an existing overhead electric utility line. Over the long term, designated ROW corridors under Alternative B would increase the opportunity for the consolidation of utilities and concentrate visible structures in a limited number of areas, resulting in beneficial effects on visual resources.

Alternative B1 designates the Cerro de la Olla unit as a WSA and, compared to Alternatives A and B, increases the amount of land being managed as VRM Class I to approximately 19 percent (44,941 acres) and reduces the amount of VRM Class II to 81 percent (197,306 acres) (see Map B.6, Appendix B). Additionally, the Cerro de la Olla WSA would be managed as ROW exclusion and be closed to motorized travel, which would result in short- and long-term beneficial effects on visual resources by reducing potential changes to the landscape in 5,120 acres of the Cerro de la Olla unit. All other elements of Alternative B1 would be the same as Alternative B.

Effects to dark night skies under Alternatives B and B1 would be similar to Alternative A, except for specific management requiring that lighting minimize illumination and partnerships with local parties to maintain night skies, measure light pollution, and implement artificial-light BMPs, which would reduce effects to a negligible level.

3.2.8.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs listed in Section 3.1.3, *Cumulative Actions*, including future growth in the demand for land-use authorizations in the planning area, have affected and would continue to affect visual resources in the Monument. It is anticipated that VRI values would remain stable within the Monument into the future but increases in population and visitation to the Monument may create pressures on the Monument's popular destinations. The resulting effect could lead to visitors to seek out areas that are more remote and less crowded, which would likely result in greater exploration of the landscape and an increase in the number of visitors that place a high value on the Monument's landscape, compared to the existing condition. However, a stable trend for maintaining scenic quality and landscape character has resulted from the Monument's designation, the sparse population density of the planning area, and large, continuous tracts of BLM-administered lands within the Monument.

The contribution of Alternative A and Alternative B to the effects on visual resources and dark night skies are anticipated to be similar, with Alternative B contributing slightly less than

Alternative A because of the additional protections for Monument objects and restrictions on development over a larger acreage for the protection of other resources, such as land-use authorizations and lands with wilderness characteristics.

3.2.9 Water Resources

3.2.9.1 Affected Environment

The decision area is located within portions of three Hydrologic Unit Code (HUC) 8 watersheds: Alamosa–Trinchera (HUC 13010002), Conejos (HUC 13010005), and Upper Rio Grande (HUC 13020101). The Conejos subbasin drains into the Conejos River, which flows into the Rio Grande north of the planning area. The Alamosa–Trinchera subbasin also drains into the Rio Grande north of the planning area. The Upper Rio Grande subbasin comprises the vast majority of the planning area and includes water draining from the Tusas Mountains to the east and the Sangre De Cristo Mountains to the west. The largest tributaries to the Rio Grande in the planning area include Rio San Antonio, Latir Creek, Rio Hondo, and Rio Pueblo de Taos (see Map B.7, Appendix B).

The Monument encompasses approximately 1,034 miles of mapped streams and rivers, with 813 miles occurring on BLM-administered lands (USGS 2024). Within the Monument, 128 waterbodies (i.e., lakes and ponds) have been mapped, 83 of which are located in the decision area. Waterbodies in the planning area are characterized as perennial (10 total, 3 in the decision area) or intermittent (118 total, 80 in the decision area). According to the National Wetlands Inventory (NWI), approximately 4,436 mapped acres of wetlands occur within the Monument, 3,430 acres of which are in the decision area (USFWS 2024b), as are numerous seeps and springs. Map B.7 (Appendix B) depicts surface-water resources that occur within the planning area.

The BLM, USGS, and New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) conduct water-quality and stream-flow monitoring programs, including within the decision area. Several NMED assessment units cross into the decision area; Table 3-5 identifies the assessment units in the decision area that are Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 303(d)-listed[3] waterbodies and their cause for impairment.

[3] Section 303(d) of the CWA authorizes the US Environmental Protection Agency to assist states, territories, and authorized Tribes in listing impaired waters for these waterbodies and developing Total Maximum Daily Loads, which establish the maximum amount of a pollutant allowed in a waterbody and serve as the starting point or planning tool for restoring water quality (EPA 2024).

Table 3-5. New Mexico's 303(d) List of Waters for Reporting Year 2022

Assessment Unit Name	Current Impairments	Miles of Waterbody within Decision Area
Costilla Creek (Rio Grande to CO border)	Flow regime modification	2.28
Red River (Rio Grande to Placer Creek)	Turbidity	3.19
Rio de los Pinos (New Mexico Reaches)	Aluminum, temperature	0.22
Rio Grande (Embudo Creek to Rio Pueblo de Taos)	Turbidity	5.14
Rio Grande (Red River to CO border)	Temperature	28.17
Rio Grande (Rio Pueblo de Taos to Red River)	Temperature, pH	12.37
Rio Hondo (Rio Grande to USFS-administered lands)	Temperature	0.46
Rio San Antonio (CO border to Montoya Canyon)	Aluminum, total dissolved oxygen, temperature	4.53
TOTAL	**–**	**56.34**

Source: NMED 2022. The 2022 reporting year is the most current available dataset for 303(d)-listed waters. The Draft 2024–2026 Integrated List is pending US Environmental Protection Agency approval at time of this publication.
Notes: CO = Colorado; USFS = US Forest Service.

BLM Aquatic Habitat Management personnel have surveyed 123 springs and seeps within the Monument to provide baseline information of spring and seeps function and recharge for the Rio Grande. To date, the BLM has completed assessments of 77 springs within the Monument; 73 springs (95 percent of springs in the Monument) were found to be in proper functioning condition, three were determined to be functional, but at risk, and one spring was determined to be in nonfunctioning condition. A total of 51 playa lakes also occur on BLM-administered lands within the Monument. Of those, five have associated earthen tanks.

3.2.9.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would the proposed management and land-use allocations affect the health of the Rio Grande River corridor, perennial and intermittent streams, playa lakes, seeps, and springs within the Monument?

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, the management of water resources would not change from the existing management prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a). The types of effects on water resources would be the same as described in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:421–428). However, under Alternative A, large-scale surface disturbance would not be anticipated to increase across the decision area. This is primarily due to the types of allowable uses within the Monument and restrictions on development currently in place under the 2012 Taos RMP and Proclamation 8946 for the protection of resources and Monument objects.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Compared to Alternative A, Alternative B would result in additional protections for the streams, playa lakes, seeps, and springs located within the Monument. The implementation of the best-available science and methods to prioritize restoration efforts would result in long-term beneficial effects by focusing on areas of potential degradation, while developing shared protocols with NMED for implementing ONRWs protection for water resources within the Monument. Any proposed project would comply with NMED's antidegradation policy and adaptive-management strategies, thus ensuring that watershed health priorities are achieved by promoting an improved strategy to address 303(d)-listed impairments within the Monument.

Short- and long-term beneficial effects on playas and springs would also result under Alternative B from management actions that increase survey efforts and the prohibition of modifications to playas, wetlands, and surrounding uplands. Alternative B would also result in long-term water-quality benefits from 5,096 acres in ROW exclusions and the closure of an additional 5,120 acres to OHV travel, which would reduce surface erosion and subsequent sedimentation impacts on surface water quality.

3.2.9.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs would continue to affect water resources within the planning area. Specifically, adverse effects on water quality from sedimentation would result from management activities due to increased erosion. Increased erosion is possible from any surface-disturbing activity, including vegetation alteration or removal, motorized vehicle travel, or recreational uses that affect vegetative cover on the landscape. The BLM expects future growth and increased use by the public within the Monument. An increase in the number of visitors and land-use authorizations would contribute cumulative adverse effects on water quality and water resources within the Monument.

Erosion is a natural phenomenon that would continue to occur in some capacity, regardless of management actions. Climate change could cause an increase in temperatures and variations in precipitation that could exacerbate the effects of drought and aridification. Cumulative effects would occur to water resources as result of natural events, such as drought and erosion, and from any actions outside of the Monument that would result in large water withdrawal and sedimentation, or allow other sources of pollution to enter the water system. The contributions of Alternative A and Alternative B to cumulative adverse effects on water resources are anticipated to be similar, with Alternative B contributing less than Alternative A because of the additional restrictions on surface-disturbing activities over a larger acreage for the protection of other resources, such as lands with wilderness characteristics and land-use authorizations.

3.2.10 Lands with Wilderness Characteristics

3.2.10.1 Affected Environment

Section 201 of FLPMA (43 U.S.C. 1711) requires the BLM to maintain on a continuing basis an inventory of all public lands and their resources and other values, which includes wilderness characteristics. On December 22, 2010, the Secretary of the Interior issued Order No. 3310

(Protecting Wilderness Characteristics on Lands Managed by the Bureau of Land Management), which resulted in development and issuance of BLM policies relating to lands with wilderness characteristics (BLM Manuals 6310 and 6320). From the fiscal-year end of 2011 until the passing of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018, Congress included appropriations riders in every appropriations bill that prohibited the use of funds to implement or enforce Secretarial Order No. 3310. In January 2021, Secretarial Order 3393 rescinded Secretarial Order 3310. Also in January 2021, the BLM issued updated guidance and general procedures for conducting wilderness-characteristics inventories, as outlined in BLM Manual 6310.

The first inventory for wilderness characteristics on lands now designed as the Monument was conducted in the late 1970s and resulted in designation of the Rio San Antonio WSA. The BLM completed an inventory of lands with wilderness characteristics in 2006, prior to the implementation of the 2012 Taos RMP. The 2006 inventory identified approximately 23,300 acres of lands with wilderness characteristics across two units: (1) San Antonio East (9,830 acres); and (2) Ute Mountain (13,172 acres).

Following the designation of the Monument in 2013, the BLM completed a follow-up wilderness-characteristics inventory in 2017, utilizing the inventory processes outlined in BLM Manual 6310. The inventory included desktop and field-based reviews, along with input from livestock permittees pertaining to roads and range improvements. The BLM also reviewed citizen inventories prepared by Friends of the Río Grande del Norte; the 2017 inventory tentatively identified 11 units as having wilderness characteristics (BLM 2017a) (see Table 3-6). The Rio San Antonio WSA and the Ute Mountain lands with wilderness characteristics unit were designated as Wilderness in 2019 (see Section 3.2.17, *Special Designations*). Currently, only the San Antonio East unit (9,855 acres) is managed to protect wilderness characteristics.

Table 3-6. 2017 Lands with Wilderness Characteristics Inventory

Name	Acreage (Decision Area)[1]
Central Playas	8,339
Cerro de la Olla	12,236
Guadalupe Mountains	7,131
La Junta Rim	9,335
Llano	6,588
North Chiflo	34,452
Plover Prairie	32,636
Punche Valley	25,772
San Antonio East[2]	9,855
San Antonio North	5,841
Ute Mountain[3]	13,921
TOTAL	**166,106**

Source: BLM 2017a.
[1] The BLM notes slight discrepancies in acreages reported between the 2017 *Lands with Wilderness Characteristics Inventory Report* and geographic information system data.
[2, 3] Units were identified as part of the 2012 RMP Update Process. The Ute Mountain unit was designated as the Cerro del Yuta Wilderness in 2019.

The *Horsethief Mesa Travel Management Plan* (TMP) was approved in December 2021, designating specific routes and determining route closures across 2,060.5 acres within the Monument (BLM 2021c). Lands considered under the TMP did not meet the criteria for having wilderness characteristics; thus, no adverse effects on wilderness characteristics were anticipated from the approval of the 2021 TMP.

3.2.10.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would land use allocations, proposed management, and recreational uses affect the existing and inventoried values of lands with wilderness characteristics within the Monument?

The 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:422–428) describes the types of effects that could result to lands with wilderness characteristics from planning-level decisions. Lands with wilderness characteristics can be affected by a wide range of management decisions and environmental factors. Actions that create surface disturbance could adversely affect the natural character of these areas and diminish the setting for experiences of solitude and primitive recreational activities. Similarly, the noise and presence of people in these areas from activities relating to motorized uses, prescribed burns, and vegetation treatment could result in short-term adverse effects by detracting from opportunities for both solitude and primitive forms of recreation. Decisions to manage units with lands within wilderness characteristics to maintain or protect their wilderness characteristics, such as limiting surface disturbance through ROW exclusion, would result in short- and long-term beneficial effects. All alternatives would provide for some amount of protective management to areas identified as having wilderness characteristics.

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, only the San Antonio East unit (9,855 acres) would be managed to protect and maintain wilderness characteristics through management decisions that would eliminate allowable uses that may affect naturalness, opportunities for solitude and unconfined recreation, and other supplemental values (see Map B.8, Appendix B). These management decisions include the exclusion of land-use authorizations, VRM Class I, and closing the area to OHV travel and would result in beneficial effects on lands with wilderness characteristics within the San Antonio East unit. Under Alternative A, other inventoried areas identified as having lands with wilderness characteristics would not be managed separately to protect wilderness characteristics. Alternative A would maintain the existing ACECs and provide no new protections nor beneficial effects on lands managed as lands with wilderness characteristics. However, protections provided by the Monument's designation (e.g., mineral withdrawal) and management of other resources and resource uses under Alternative A (i.e., existing ACEC management to protect relevant and important values, OHV limits, and ROW-avoidance and -exclusion areas) would protect or mitigate adverse effects on the criteria for which inventoried lands with wilderness characteristics are evaluated (e.g., size, naturalness, solitude, primitive unconfined recreation). Therefore, areas with wilderness characteristics would likely retain much of the wilderness qualities identified in the 2017 inventory (BLM 2017a). Wood cutting and the ancillary use of vehicles for access to these sites, particularly in the Cerro de la Olla unit,

could potentially lead to impairment of naturalness and the loss of opportunities for solitude. However, as noted in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS, the inaccessible nature of the terrain around Cerro de la Olla reduces the potential for these adverse effects (BLM 2011:427).

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Alternative B would carry forward management from Alternative A for the San Antonio East lands with wilderness characteristics unit (9,855 acres) and manage 5,120 acres of the Cerro de la Olla unit to protect and maintain wilderness characteristics (see Map B.9, Appendix B). The BLM identified this portion of the Cerro de la Olla unit using the 8,200-foot elevation contour line to account for existing access, wildlife-habitat improvements, and other resource uses within the boundary proposed in the legislation to designate the area as Wilderness (Senate Bill 593). Management of the 5,120-acre area for Cerro de la Olla under Alternative B would apply to only the decision area (i.e., to BLM-administered lands). Overall, the types of effects on lands with wilderness characteristics would be the same as Alternative A, except for managing 5,120 acres of the Cerro de la Olla unit to protect wilderness characteristics, which would reduce the likelihood for impairment or loss of its identified wilderness qualities over the long term. Specifically, Alternative B would close 5,491 acres to motorized travel and exclude the area from ROW development, whereas current Alternative A would manage the area as OHV-limited and ROW-avoidance.

Under Alternative B, vegetation treatments and wildland fire management would be similar to current management and would not result in measurable effects on lands with wilderness characteristics beyond those discussed in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:425–426). Vegetation management to protect communities, improve natural character of an area, or control noxious and invasive plants would result in short-term adverse effects from the presence of vehicles and the occasional use of heavy equipment, but would result in beneficial effects on wilderness characteristics over the long term by providing a more naturally appearing mix of vegetation types. Similarly, prescribed burning would result in short-term effects on naturalness and solitude in lands with wilderness characteristics, but could help maintain or re-create a more naturally appearing mosaic of vegetation in the long term. Additionally, wildlife management under Alternative B that allows safe wildlife passage by modifying, replacing, or removing existing fences identified as barriers to wildlife movement, and managing the entirety of the Taos Plateau as a migration corridor for big game, would provide more opportunity for wildlife viewing in a primitive setting, when compared to Alternative A.

Alternative B1: Designate Cerro de la Olla WSA

The types of effects under Alternative B1 would be the same as Alternative B, except that the 5,120-acre area of the Cerro de la Olla unit would be designated as a WSA (see Map B.10, Appendix B) and specifically managed in a manner so as not to impair the suitability of the area for preservation as wilderness (see Section 3.2.17, *Special Designations*, for an analysis of WSAs across the alternatives).

3.2.10.3 Cumulative Effects

Past actions, particularly the Monument's designation in 2013 and the designation of the Cerro del Yuta Wilderness (13,420 acres) and Rio San Antonio Wilderness (8,120 acres) in 2019 (see Section 3.2.17, *Special Designations*) have contributed to cumulative beneficial effects by providing long-term protection for lands with wilderness characteristics within the Monument. Present and RFFAs, such as continued recreational use, increased visitation to the Monument, traditional and other resource uses, and vegetation treatments, have the potential to cumulatively affect the naturalness of lands with wilderness characteristics. Continued growth in visitation may also shift traditional use patterns away from more popular monument sites to undeveloped areas, expanding the overall adverse effects on Monument resources (BLM 2021a). Under all alternatives, increasing recreational use and shifts in use patterns throughout the Monument may alter the landscape over time and affect naturalness, thereby contributing to adverse effects on wilderness characteristics by reducing opportunities for solitude and primitive recreational activities. The contributions of Alternative A and Alternative B to the effects on lands managed to protect and those with wilderness characteristics are anticipated to be similar, with Alternative B contributing slightly less than Alternative A because of the additional protections afforded to 5,120 acres of the Cerro de la Olla unit.

3.2.11 Wildland Fire

3.2.11.1 Affected Environment

The 2012 Taos RMP directed completion of a BLM Taos Field Office Fire Management Plan (FMP), which describes management priorities for suppression, prescribed fire, non-fire fuels treatments, and community protection/assistance. The FMP provides specific implementation strategies, evaluation criteria, and accomplishment reporting. Cooperation would be carried out with adjacent landowners (Federal, State, Tribal, and private) for fire-management activities across jurisdictional boundaries (BLM 2012a).

Fire-management planning has identified current vegetation conditions using the fire-regime condition-class concept, which describes vegetation communities by their degree of departure from "historic" conditions (USGS EROS 2020a, 2022b). Before the initiation of effective fire suppression in the late 1800s, foothill grasslands were maintained free of invading trees and shrubs by periodic fires. With fire suppression, many grasslands are becoming woodlands or shrublands, and many shrublands are being converted to woodlands. Although the available data do not indicate vegetation condition by vegetation type, a large proportion of terrestrial vegetation within the decision area has departed significantly from its historical reference condition. Approximately 165,491 acres (68.2 percent) of the decision area and 223,349 acres (71.9 percent) of the planning area are mapped as vegetation condition class (VCC) III.A (high vegetation departure) (USGS EROS 2022c) (Appendix B, Map B.11). This extent of departure from the natural state is used to prioritize areas for treatment.

Fire Regime Groups characterize the presumed historical fire regimes within landscapes, based on interactions between vegetation dynamics, fire spread, fire effects, and spatial context. The groups incorporate data about presumed pre-Colombian vegetation as a reference condition and model changes to the current vegetation type from field data, historical weather data, and

successional processes (USGS 2014). The majority of the vegetation zones in the Monument are considered as having a high fire-return interval or have variability that may include a high fire-return interval. Approximately 70 percent of the decision area and 73 percent of the planning area are mapped as Fire Regime Group IV-A, meaning that these lands experience fires that are moderately frequent (occurring every 36 to 100 years) and severe (where fire kills all or most of more than 80 percent of the vegetation). Table 3-7 lists acreages of the decision area and planning area for each Fire Regime Group. Map B.12 (Appendix B) depicts the Fire Regime Groups across the planning area.

Table 3-7. Fire Regime Groups in the Decision Area and Planning Area

Group	Fire Frequency (years)	Severity	Acres in Decision Area (%)	Acres in Planning Area (%)
I-B	6–15	Low, percentage of replacement fire less than 66.7%	5,913 (2.4%)	6,296 (2.0%)
I-C	16–35	Low	20,858 (8.6%)	22,701 (7.3%)
II-B	6–15	Stand replacement, percentage of replacement fire, greater than 66.7%	354 (0.1%)	500 (0.2%)
II-C	16–35	Stand replacement	356 (0.1%)	512 (0.2%)
III-A	36–100	Mixed, percentage of replacement fire less than 80%	7,076 (2.9%)	8,573 (2.8%)
III-B	101–200	Mixed, percentage of replacement fire less than 66.7%	25,570 (10.5%)	29,913 (9.6%)
IV-A	36–100	Stand replacement, percentage of replacement fire greater than 80%	168,447 (69.4%)	226,466 (72.9%)
IV-B	101–200	Stand replacement, percentage of replacement fire greater than 66.7%	12,585 (5.2%)	14,247 (4.6%)
V-A	201–500	Any severity	828 (0.3%)	876 (0.3%)
V-B	500+	Any severity	435 (0.2%)	462 (0.1%)
NA	NA	NA	246 (0.1%)	246 (0.1%)
TOTAL	–	–	**242,668 (100%)**	**310,792 (100%)**

Source: USGS 2014; National Wildfire Coordinating Group 2023.

3.2.11.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would proposed management affect fuel treatments that could further increase human safety and protect structures within and adjacent to the Monument?

Generally, wildland fire management is intertwined with vegetation-management practices associated with wildlife, livestock grazing, and forestry and woodlands. Vegetation and fuel conditions are affected, in part, by management of such resources on BLM-administered lands, but are also greatly influenced by broader trends in climate, present and past land uses, and the presence of invasive plant species. Management decisions to conduct vegetation and fuel treatments generally result in long-term beneficial effects on wildland fire management by making ecosystems more resilient to subsequent fires. Decisions that restrict the ability to conduct or manage fuel treatments, or prescribed fire, would have adverse effects on wildland

fire management. Restrictions on access, development, and visitation could reduce the potential for unplanned ignitions. Similarly, restrictions on new infrastructure development or land-use authorizations would reduce the need for protection through fire suppression. Access and visitation are anticipated to be the same under all alternatives, and there would be no OHV-open areas under the alternatives, resulting in the same limited risk of unplanned ignitions from visitors and recreation within the decision area. Under all alternatives, the potential adverse effects on wildland fire for any authorization could be reduced by BMPs (Appendix D) or proposed mitigation, depending on site-specific surveys and project design.

Under all alternatives, and where appropriate, wildland fire, prescribed fire, and other fuel-treatment projects would have the long-term beneficial effect of moving VCC III areas toward VCC I or VCC II, proactively reducing fuel loading around developed areas and sensitive resources and meeting other resource objectives.

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, management of wildland fire would not change from the existing management prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a). Direct and indirect effects on wildland fire management would be the same as described in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:428–429).

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Wildland fire management under Alternative B would be similar to Alternative A, except that the BLM would utilize partnerships with State agencies and private entities to conduct fuels treatments, community assistance, education/mitigation programs, and rehabilitation/ restoration actions to meet management objectives. Additionally, Alternative B would use prescribed burning as a tool to remove heavy fuel loading in woodlands and reduce woodland encroachment in grasslands and shrublands, resulting in long-term beneficial effects on wildland fire management. When compared to Alternative A, management under Alternative B would increase the potential for vegetative communities to move toward proper functioning condition and desired VCC and Fire Regime Groups, resulting in reduced potential for severe, stand-replacing fires and providing long-term beneficial effects.

Compared to Alternative A, Alternative B would place an additional 5,096 acres in ROW exclusion and provide for an additional 183 acres of designated ROW corridors, thereby reducing the potential for human-caused fire ignitions due to the possibility of fewer authorized projects and associated operations.

3.2.11.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs with the potential to alter the condition of vegetation and natural fire regimes across the landscape include fire suppression, vegetation treatments, grazing, noxious and invasive weed spread, and drought. In general, areas have become more prone to large intense fires over the short term, but long-term susceptibility for fires would decrease as areas within the planning area are burned. Climate change is expected to result in the increase in the severity, frequency, and size of wildfires at a global scale. Additionally, other climate-driven

landscape-scale changes may increase wildfire risk, including the establishment and proliferation of invasive species and forest disease or pests, resulting in tree die-offs.

The BLM Taos Field Office has proposed the implementation of a landscape-scale fuels-management program (the Cones Fire Project) in the Monument, which would reduce the quantity of hazardous fuels that threaten public health, safety, and property and protect and enhance the ecological diversity recognized in the Presidential Proclamation 8946 (BLM 2020). The Cones Fire Project would be managed to utilize unplanned wildfire starts—referred to as *wildfire for resource benefit*—to meet objectives for landscape-scale fuels and fire regimes. That is, in the event of a wildfire anywhere within 106,634-acre Cones Fire Project within the Monument, the fire would be managed in order to meet the objectives for the hazardous-fuels reduction and restoration project.

Recreational activities and visitation to the Monument, as well as population growth in adjacent communities, are expected to increase, creating additional potential ignition sources and increasing the likelihood of wildland-fire occurrence. The contributions of Alternative A and Alternative B to cumulative adverse effects on wildland fire and fire management are anticipated to be similar, with Alternative B contributing slightly less than Alternative A because of treatments that would provide more potential for moving toward desired VCC and Fire Regime Groups and by excluding ROW over a larger acreage.

3.2.12 Invasive Species/Noxious Weeds

3.2.12.1 Affected Environment

Controlling undesirable noxious weeds and invasive nonnative species can be one of the most difficult challenges and most-significant problems facing land managers. Noxious weeds and invasive nonnative plants disrupt or have the potential to disrupt or alter natural ecosystem function, composition, or diversity of areas where they become established. These plant species complicate natural resource use and may interfere with management objectives.

These undesirable plant species are nonnative and can persist on many sites, grow quickly, and spread to the point of disrupting native plant communities or ecosystems. If their future establishment and growth is not controlled by management interventions, then these plant species have the potential to become a dominant or codominant species in an area. Early successional native plant species that become dominant following cyclical events (e.g., a short-term response to drought or wildfire) are not considered invasive plants (BLM 2008b).

Noxious weeds are a subset of invasive plants. These are plant species designated by a Federal or State law as generally possessing one or more of the following characteristics: aggressive and difficult to manage; parasitic; a carrier or host of serious insects or disease; or nonnative, new, or not common in the US (BLM 2008b). Noxious weeds are designated by State and County entities. The New Mexico Department of Agriculture (NMDA) maintains a New Mexico Noxious Weed List by class (NMDA 2020).

The NMDA noxious weed list classification of species are as follows.

- **Class A** species are currently not present in New Mexico or have limited distribution. Preventing new infestations of these species and eradicating existing infestations is the highest priority.
- **Class B** species are limited to portions of New Mexico. In areas with severe infestations, management should be designed to contain the infestation and stop any further spread.
- **Class C** species are widespread in New Mexico. Management decisions for these species should be determined at the local level, based on feasibility of control and level of infestation.

At the time the 2012 Taos RMP was approved, no comprehensive weed surveys had been completed within the Taos Field Office; however, individual infestations were known within the Orilla Verde Recreation Area (BLM 2012a).

In 2017, the Taos Field Office initiated a weed-mapping effort for the Monument, whereby the locations and size of noxious weed infestations, as well as areas that have been treated for noxious weeds on the Monument, would be captured in digital format (BLM 2019a). The program was built to be compatible with the National Invasive Species Information Management System (NISIMS), and data is collected and pushed to NISIMS at the end of each fiscal year. Since that time, NISIMS has been replaced with the Vegetation Management Action Portal. The purpose of the weed mapping project is to: (1) track the presence and potential spread of noxious weeds on the Monument (as well as other areas within the Taos Field Office); (2) guide treatment efforts and learning; and (3) help monitor the effectiveness of noxious-weed treatments (BLM 2019a). Noxious weeds and invasive nonnative plants have been found in various locations and habitat types within the Monument, with waterways and transportation systems being the major vectors of spread. Other vectors include vehicle use, wind, wildlife, livestock, and humans.

The NMDA New Mexico Noxious Weed List currently designates 41 plant species as noxious weeds to be targeted for control or eradication and 6 watch list species (NMDA 2020). To date, 15 of the 41 plant species designated by NMDA as noxious weeds have been documented in the decision area since commencement of the 2017 weed-mapping effort; these species and their NMDA classifications are listed in Table 3-8.

Table 3-8. New Mexico Noxious Weeds with Documented Occurrences in the Monument

Common Name	Scientific Name
Class A Species	–
Black henbane	*Hyoscyamus niger*
Canada thistle	*Cirsium arvense*
Hoary cress spp.	*Cardaria spp.*
Yellow toadflax	*Linaria vulgaris*
Class B Species	–
Bull thistle	*Cirsium vulgare*

Common Name	Scientific Name
Perennial (broadleaf) pepperweed	*Lepidium latifolium*
Poison hemlock	*Conium maculatum*
Teasel (Fuller's)	*Dipsacus fullonum*
Class C Species	–
Cheatgrass	*Bromus tectorum*
Jointed goatgrass	*Aegilops cylindrica*
Musk thistle	*Carduus nutans*
Russian knapweed	*Acroptilon repens*
Russian olive	*Elaeagnus angustifolia*
Saltcedar	*Tamarix* spp.
Siberian elm	*Ulmus pumila*

Source: BLM 2019a; NMDA 2020; Reitsma 2021.

3.2.12.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would proposed management affect the spread of noxious weeds/invasive nonnative plants and protect species and habitat?

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, management of invasive species and noxious weeds in the Monument would not change from the existing management prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a). Guidelines implemented from the 2012 Taos RMP to control the spread of noxious weeds include would continue under Alternative A (see Appendix C, Table C-13, and BLM 2012a:30–32).

Under Alternative A, the BLM would also continue to work in cooperation, consultation, and collaboration with State, Tribal, and local governments, interested parties, special-interest groups, and the public to develop an annual project plan that identifies initial and retreatment sites, methods to be used, monitoring activities required, and educational-outreach opportunities.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Under Alternative B, management of invasive species and noxious weeds would continue as prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a), with additional management actions to achieve consistency across policy and guidance documents, emphasize coordination with State and local land managers, and establish a certification process for ensuring weed-free sources of fill, mulch, seed, hay, and other livestock feed. When compared to Alternative A, these actions would result in long-term beneficial effects by further limiting the spread of noxious weeds and increasing opportunities to identify and treat new infestations.

In addition to guidance contained in the *Final Vegetation Treatments Herbicides Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement*, Alternative B would tier management to more recent programmatic Environmental Impact Statements for vegetation treatments using various herbicides (BLM 2017b, 2023b). This would result in direct short- and long-term benefits for the

management of invasive species and noxious weeds by ensuring project- or site-specific step-down NEPA analyses consistent with IM 2017-07 prior to project implementation of chemical vegetation treatments.

The Monument comprises approximately 310,793 acres, 39,125 of which are under jurisdiction of the New Mexico State Land Office (i.e., State Trust Land), and 29,000 acres are privately held. Alternative B would emphasize identification of existing invasive species and noxious-weed populations on and off public lands through data sharing with State and local land managers, including in partnership with the New Mexico State Land Office. Compared to Alternative A, this would provide long-term benefits to the Monument by identifying potential source populations of invasive species and noxious weeds and providing additional resources for control before they become established on Monument lands managed by the BLM.

Alternative B would also employ a method by which fill, mulch, seed, hay, and other livestock feed can be certified "weed-free." This confers distinct short-term and long-term benefits to the management of invasive species and noxious weeds, when compared to Alternative A, by providing a prescriptive standard, such as the New Mexico State University Seed Certification and Noxious Weed Free Program, or similar standard approved by the BLM, with which vendors, project proponents, and land managers can comply.

Management actions for other resource programs under Alternative B, including placing an additional 5,096 acres in ROW exclusion, would reduce the potential for surface-disturbing activities and the potential spread of noxious weeds over a larger total area when compared to Alternative A. Similarly, designating ROW corridors over an additional 183 acres under Alternative B would result providing greater opportunity for the co-location of utilities and reduce the potential spread of noxious weeds, when compared to Alternative A.

3.2.12.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs affecting invasive species and noxious weeds in the planning area include climate change, drought, aridification, and wildfire frequency and severity, which are expected to continue and increase in intensity in the planning area and cumulatively contribute to impacts on invasive species and noxious weeds. Changes to vegetation composition in the planning area are expected from approved vegetation-management and prescribed-fire activities, wildfire, livestock grazing, and other uses. Additionally, recreation and traditional uses are expected to increase and may affect the future distribution of invasive plant and weed species.

As a result of natural and anthropogenic introductions, established noxious weed or invasive nonnative plant populations would likely continue to expand, and new noxious weed or invasive nonnative plant species would continue to appear in the decision area. The degree to which these plant species spread is directly correlated to human activities, disturbances, and control or treatment efforts. Recreational equipment, such as rafts, sleeping bags, bicycles and e-bikes, tents, and clothing, contribute to noxious weed and invasive nonnative plant species population increases. Vehicular travel and other land-use activities contribute to noxious weed proliferation, although natural elements, such as wind and wildlife, would likely also continue to contribute.

Cheatgrass and tamarisk (*Tamaricaceae*) are known to alter ecosystem processes, such as fire regimes and hydrologic processes; they have the potential to expand their distribution, despite human and natural disturbances, and to adapt and shift their range in response to climate change. Invasive vegetation often outcompetes native species by using soil nutrients and water at a greater rate or earlier in the season and regularly producing greater biomass (Walston et al. 2016). Invasive annual plant species, such as cheatgrass, would continue to alter fire regimes by facilitating increases in fire frequency and size. This would occur due to increasing fine fuel loads and continuity in areas that were once fuel-limited or had less to burn. As fires burn these areas, cheatgrass or other invasive plant species would replace desired native vegetation, reinforcing this feedback cycle.

The contributions of Alternatives A and B to the cumulative effects on invasive species and noxious weeds are expected to be similar, although Alternative B would further limit the introduction and spread of invasive species and noxious weeds by providing for additional project- or site-specific analysis of herbicide treatments, a robust "weed-free" certification standard for materials brought into the Monument, and identification of extant threats on State-managed and private lands within the Monument by data sharing.

3.2.13 Land Tenure and Land-use authorizations

3.2.13.1 Affected Environment

The BLM's Lands, Realty, and Cadastral Survey program (BLM 2024a) facilitates commercial, noncommercial, recreational, and conservation activities to ensure that public lands are working landscapes managed for the use and enjoyment of current and future generations. This program mission encompasses a wide range of public land transactions, such as acquisitions, sales, exchanges, and withdrawals. Leases, permits, and ROW authorizations support renewable-energy development, film permitting, and other economic activities. Cadastral survey services establish official BLM-administered land boundaries, and land records document all activities and authorizations (BLM 2023c). The BLM anticipates that the demand for ROWs in the planning area could increase with time. The rate of increase is tied to the rate of population growth and associated private-land development, access needs, and utilities development. Demand for ROWs is also tied to renewable energy development in the planning area. Proclamation 8946 dictates that

> Nothing in this Proclamation shall be construed to preclude the Secretary from renewing or authorizing the upgrading of existing utility line ROWs within the physical scope of each such ROW that exists on the date of this Proclamation. Additional utility line ROWs or upgrades outside the existing utility line ROWs may only be authorized if consistent with the care and management of the objects identified above.

The establishment of the Monument under Proclamation 8946 also dictates that

> All Federal lands and interests in lands within the boundaries of this Monument are hereby appropriated and withdrawn from all forms of entry, location, selection, sale, leasing, or other disposition under the public land laws, including withdrawal from location, entry, and patent under the mining laws, and from disposition under all laws relating to mineral and geothermal leasing, other than by exchange that furthers the protective purposes of this Proclamation. The establishment of this Monument is subject to valid existing rights. Lands and interests in lands

> within the Monument's boundaries not owned or controlled by the United States shall be reserved as part of the Monument upon acquisition of ownership or control by the United States."

Therefore, any land-tenure adjustments would occur by exchange, acquisition, or donation.

The 2012 Taos RMP identified lands for potential acquisition within the Monument, described as all private and State lands from willing sellers within the Taos Plateau ACEC (approximately 222,500 acres). The 2012 Taos RMP also set forth the consideration to acquire private and State lands from willing sellers within 5 miles of the Rio Grande, if the acquisition would provide protection to Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (BLM 2018). Since 2013, 29,371 acres have been acquired within the Monument.

According to the BLM Case Recordation, 20 land-use authorizations and land-tenure adjustments are pending in the Monument (BLM Legacy Rehost 2023). The majority of pending cases are land-tenure adjustments (i.e., acquisitions and exchanges), totaling approximately 71,005 acres within the Monument. One of these pending land exchanges is the 43,000-acre agreement with the New Mexico State Land Office to initiate a land exchange in the Monument and Sabinoso Wilderness, which was paused in 2018.

The BLM typically issues communication use leases for communication facilities on BLM-administered land. One such communication site (Serial Number 0309477) is currently authorized within the Monument on approximately 10.2 acres within the Wild Rivers Recreation Area. Other authorizations predate the Monument designation and continue under the valid existing-rights language contained in Proclamation 8946. Land-use authorizations predating the Monument primarily consist of ROWs and grants for roads, pipelines, powerlines, telephone/fiber optics, and water facilities. Few mineral-material authorizations (approximately 116 acres) occur within the Monument; however, 10 placer mining claims (all held by the same claimant) exist in the Monument. Six of the placer claims were filed in 1982, and four were filed in 1997. The total area of quadrants associated with these placer claims is approximately 480 acres, although a portion of some of these claims may extend outside of the Monument boundary (BLM Mineral and Land Records System 2023).

3.2.13.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would proposed management affect land-use authorizations in the decision area?

The 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:431–436) describes the types of effects that could result on the lands and realty program from planning-level decisions. All alternatives would provide for some amount of land-use authorizations, such as grants, leases, permits, or easements, in a manner that protects Monument objects, which can have direct and indirect long- and short-term effects on lands and realty. Each land-use authorization would be required to comply with terms and conditions to ensure that they are managed consistently with the management goals in the decision area.

Under all alternatives, the BLM would retain all lands in the decision area in Federal ownership, which would improve overall public and resource values of those lands. Land exchanges and acquisitions would help consolidate the public land-ownership patterns within the decision area and allow for better management of Monument lands and the beneficial protection of

Monument objects over the long term. Consolidating public land holdings would improve access to public lands, thereby reducing the number of access easements needed and miles of boundary to be managed and helping to reduce encroachment.

Designations of ROW exclusion and avoidance areas affect the BLM's ability to site new ROWs on public land. The alternatives would implement slightly different restrictions on ROWs in the decision area and provide varying opportunity to co-locate utilities within designated ROW corridors.

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, management of the lands and realty program would not change from the existing management prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a). Alternative A would continue to manage 185,319 acres as ROW-avoidance areas and 56,850 acres as ROW-exclusion areas within the Monument (see Appendix B, Map B.13). The BLM would continue to prioritize the use of existing ROWs (60 acres) whenever possible. Renewable-energy development would continue to be excluded on 242,447 acres (99.9 percent) of Monument lands. Land-tenure adjustments in the form of exchanges, acquisitions of private and State inholdings, and donations would continue to occur with willing sellers.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Alternative B would manage 100 percent of the decision area as exclusion areas for wind- and solar-energy development. Additionally, to manage for the protection of their wilderness characteristics, the Cerro de la Olla (5,120 acres) and San Antonio East (9,855 acres) lands with wilderness characteristics units would be managed as ROW-exclusion areas. In total, Alternative B would manage 180,041 acres (74.2 percent of the decision area) and 61,946 acres (25.5 percent of the decision area) as ROW-avoidance and -exclusion areas, respectively, which would be a 2.8 percent decrease of areas in ROW avoidance, but a 9.0 percent increase of ROW-exclusion areas, compared to Alternative A. Managing more acres as exclusion areas for land-use authorizations under Alternative B would provide long-term benefits because these lands would receive the greatest level of protection for Monument objects and resources. Minor adverse effects would occur under Alternative B because of the decrease in opportunities for new authorizations in the decision area, when compared to Alternative A. However, the widening of the existing Powerline Falls ROW corridor from 190 feet to 600 feet, and the designation of the new Horsethief Mesa ROW corridor (450-foot width), as proposed under Alternative B, would add 183 acres to the amount of designated ROW corridors in the decision area, resulting in long-term beneficial effects on the lands and realty program by providing for greater opportunity for the co-location of utilities within designated corridors (see Appendix B, Map B.14). Land-tenure adjustments would be the same as described under Alternative A.

3.2.13.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs with the potential to result in cumulative effects on the lands and realty program primarily include ongoing updates, replacement, or modifications to existing transmission and distribution lines and land-use authorizations. The BLM expects future growth in demand for land-use authorizations, including commercial-filming permits and renewable-

energy and utility development, which would contribute cumulative effects on the lands and realty program, as well as resources within the Monument. Additional future development of adjacent lands would likely result in additional requests for, and approval of, these land-use authorizations.

3.2.14 Livestock Grazing

3.2.14.1 Affected Environment

The primary laws that govern grazing on public lands include the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, as amended, EOs that implement the Bankhead–Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937, FLPMA, and the Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978. The BLM manages grazing lands under 43 CFR Part 4100 (version October 1, 2005) and BLM Handbooks 4100–4180, and it conducts grazing management practices through BLM Manual H-4120-1, *Grazing Management* (BLM 1987). The BLM administers livestock grazing in accordance with the *New Mexico Standards for Public Land Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management* (BLM 2001). These standards are based on the analysis of rangeland conditions through monitoring, analysis of data, and the history of allotments to ensure that range health standards are met.

An *allotment* is a designated area or management unit that allows grazing and can comprise multiple pastures and various land ownership. *Permitted use* is defined as the forage allocated by, or under the guidance of, an applicable land-use plan for livestock grazing in an allotment under a permit or lease and is expressed in Animal Unit Months (AUMs). An AUM is equal to the approximate amount of forage needed to sustain one cow, cow-calf pair, five sheep, five goats, or one horse or mule for one month.

A total of 62 allotments fall within or overlap the Monument, all of which are managed by the BLM and are located on 205,328 acres of BLM-administered land (see Appendix B, Map B.15). In total, the Monument provides 16,626 permitted AUMs across all allotments (BLM 2024b). The terms and conditions for grazing on BLM-administered lands are set forth in grazing permits and leases with permittees and lessees. These terms and conditions outline management of the allotment and may include items such as “livestock grazing may be delayed, discontinued, or modified to allow for the protection of rangeland resources and values when there is a lack of plant growth as outlined in the Taos Field Office range readiness and monitoring plan for grazing allotments.” A grazing permit or lease is typically in place for a 10-year period, and the terms and conditions are reevaluated during permit renewal. IM 2018-024 provides guidance for prioritizing the review and processing of grazing permits, as well as monitoring the effectiveness of livestock grazing management and progress toward achieving land health standards (BLM 2017c).

3.2.14.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would proposed management affect livestock grazing and rangeland, while also providing for the protection and preservation of Monument objects and values?

The 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:436–441) describes the types of effects on livestock grazing that could result from management actions and other resource programs. Direct and

indirect adverse effects on livestock and livestock operations can include loss of AUMs, the introduction and spread of invasive and noxious weed species, and overall compromised rangeland health. Beneficial effects can result from management actions that increase AUMs and water, reduce or eradicate invasive and noxious weed species, and resolve conflicts with other resources and resource uses, such as recreation and wildfire.

The primary management actions of the alternatives that could affect the availability of BLM-administered lands to grazing are allotment closures and modifications or restrictions to season of use within allotments. Modifications or restrictions on duration of livestock use and modifications to authorized AUMs would only result from allotment-specific evaluations. Existing timing and spatial restrictions for livestock grazing from the 2012 Taos RMP for the protection of seasonal critical ranges, migratory corridors for big game, and special status species would apply to all alternatives and are not analyzed further in this section.

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, management of livestock grazing would not change from the existing management prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a). All 62 allotments within the decision area would remain available for grazing (see Appendix B, Map B.15), and 16,626 permitted AUMs across all allotments would be unaffected.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Under Alternative B, management of livestock grazing would be the same as Alternative A, except that under Alternative B, two vacant grazing allotments (East Rio Grande and Arroyo Hondo) would become unavailable for livestock grazing (see Appendix B, Map B.16). These allotments have not been applied for since the Monument designation, potentially due to the lack of access and range improvements, such as fencing and water development. As a result, Alternative B would result in long-term adverse effects by removing an additional 1,749 acres available acres for grazing, when compared to Alternative A. However, because these allotments have not been applied for since Monument designation, permitted AUMs under Alternative B would remain the same as Alternative A.

Unlike Alternative A, Alternative B would allow consideration of livestock grazing in the area north of the Cerro del Yuta Wilderness boundary to promote seed propagation, reduce undesired grasses, and promote new growth for wildlife utilization. This would provide long-term benefits to the livestock-grazing program by allowing grazing north of the Cerro del Yuta Wilderness and to wildlife by reducing caespitose grasses.[4] Under Alternative B, range improvements for grazing management would be utilized to provide for continual multiple use, including those considered traditional, such as grazing. Alternative B1 would be the same as Alternative B, but would result in slightly increased short- and long-term adverse effects on livestock grazing by prohibiting new range improvements or changes to existing range improvements that could impair wilderness characteristics within 5,120 acres of the Cerro de la Olla unit.

[4] *Caespitose grasses* are grasses that grow in clumps or bunches and are not sod-forming (Allred 2005).

3.2.14.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs with the potential to result in cumulative effects on livestock grazing include activities that affect forage availability and livestock-grazing operations, including vegetation- and weed-management activities, recreational uses, and land-use authorizations. Cumulative adverse effects would include alteration of natural trends that comprise healthy rangeland conditions, such as drought, aridification, wildfire, the spread of noxious and invasive weeds, and human-related activities, such as dispersed camping and trail use from increased visitation. Climate change is expected to exacerbate the intensity of and duration of wildfire, drought, and aridification, while also influencing the establishment and proliferation of invasive species. These trends are expected to continue and increase in intensity and contribute to the degradation of forage vegetation. Recreation and traditional uses are expected to increase and may affect grazing allotments, AUMs, and available forage quality and quantity through trampling from concentrated and dispersed pedestrian-based activities and fugitive-dust deposition on vegetation from motorized activities.

Changes to vegetation composition in the planning area would result from allotment-management plans, approved vegetation-management and prescribed-fire activities, wildfire, erosional processes, management strategies for livestock grazing, and other uses. The incremental contribution of Alternative B on the cumulative effects on livestock grazing include making an additional 1,749 acres unavailable to grazing. However, the contribution of Alternative B to cumulative adverse effects would be negligible because these areas proposed for closure are not currently being grazed, likely due to lack of access and range improvements, and contain minimal acreage in relation to the scale of available grazing within the decision area.

Additional activities that could contribute cumulative effects include land-use authorizations, such as ROWs. Restrictions to renewable-energy development and ROW authorizations on BLM-administered lands under the alternatives would reduce adverse effects on livestock forage from those types of activities. Revegetation and BMPs, such as those requiring stabilization and vegetation practices designed to minimize erosion, would provide an improved forage conditions (See Appendix D).

3.2.15 Recreation

3.2.15.1 Affected Environment

Recreational opportunities within the Monument encompass various activities, such as rafting on the Rio Grande, enjoying developed campgrounds with river access in the Orilla Verde Recreation Area, boating, fishing, and exploring remote hiking locations for solitude within Cerro de Yuta and Rio San Antonio Wildernesses. The Rio Grande Gorge serves as a recreational destination for local families and visitors from Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and beyond. In addition to boating, hiking, and fishing, the Monument provides diverse recreational options, such as picnicking, scenic drives, stargazing, rock climbing, hiking, heritage tourism (i.e., petroglyphs), horseback riding, wildlife viewing, mountain biking, cross-country skiing, hot springs, and hunting.

Recreation Management Areas

Recreation Management Areas (RMAs) serve as BLM planning-level tools to oversee recreational use on BLM-administered lands. These lands are designated as either SRMAs or Extensive Recreation Management Areas (ERMAs), with non-RMA lands encompassing those not assigned as either. SRMAs focus on enhancing specific recreational values and managing targeted activities, experiences, benefits, and setting characteristics. ERMAs acknowledge existing recreational uses, aligning management with other resources to sustain principal recreational activities. RMAs may be further divided into RMZs, specifying recreational opportunities and defining their own objectives. SRMA/RMZ objectives define the specific recreational opportunities (i.e., activities, experiences, and benefits derived from those experiences) that help define the BLM's management of these areas. Non-RMA lands meet basic recreational needs and visitor services, with an emphasis on resource stewardship and limited recreational activities. The BLM may also designate Backcountry Conservation Areas to protect, conserve, restore, and enhance lands containing habitat for recreationally important fish and/or wildlife species and that are generally intact and undeveloped. A more detailed description of the BLM's RMAs can be found in Appendix F.

Visitation

The BLM utilizes the Recreation Management Information System, an internal database, to calculate estimates of recreational visitation. This system assesses participation in 65 types of recreational activities at BLM sites and areas, drawing insights from registrations, permit records, observations, and best professional judgment. Based on the 2021 *Annual Managers Report* (BLM 2021a), the Monument had an estimated 288,655 visits in 2021. National BLM data indicate that visitation to BLM-administered lands in New Mexico has steadily increased over the past 10 years (BLM 2011–2021). The visitation trend dipped slightly in 2020, likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but quickly resumed a steady increase the following year. High-use recreation sites that have continued to see increased visitation in 2022 include the Taos Valley Overlook Trailhead (92,554 visitors), Taos Junction Bridge (11,923 visitors), and John Dunn Bridge (102,343 visitors) (BLM 2023d).

The BLM anticipates an increasing demand for day use activities, such as hiking, mountain biking, rafting, and visiting easily accessible interpretive sites. Areas such as Wild River and Orilla Verde Recreation Areas and visitor hot spots, including the John Dunn Bridge, High Bridge, and hot springs, have continued to see higher levels of use since Monument designation.

Special Recreation Permits

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act requires SRPs for five types of uses: (1) commercial; (2) competitive; (3) vending; (4) individual or group use in special areas; and (5) organized group activity and event use. SRPs are issued to outfitters, guides, vendors, recreation clubs, and commercial competitive-event organizers that provide recreational opportunities or services without using permanent facilities. The permits are issued to manage visitor use, protect natural and cultural resources, accommodate commercial recreational uses, and provide guided and organized recreation opportunities. SRP activities often offer a

specialized opportunity for public recreational users to experience activities that they themselves do not have the skills, equipment, or resource knowledge to perform independently.

3.2.15.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would proposed management affect the BLM's ability to provide for diverse, equitable, and inclusive increased recreational opportunities and use to meet demand, while preserving other resources within the Monument, including Monument objects and values?

Issue 2: How would proposed management affect the BLM's ability to accommodate increasing visitation, while mitigating the effects of overcrowding and unauthorized uses and their impact on recreational experience and opportunities?

Issue 3: How would proposed management of SRPs, including hot-air balloon launching, to be consistent with the care of Monument objects?

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Recreation Management Areas

Under Alternative A, recreation management would not change from the existing management outlined in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a). Within the Monument boundary, the BLM currently manages three ERMAs and one SRMA comprising eight RMZs, as displayed on Map B.17 (Appendix B) and outlined in Table 3-9, below. Within the Monument boundary, all lands would be designated as an RMA, comprising 194,039 acres of ERMA (80 percent), and 48,190 acres would be designated as SRMAs (20 percent). The management for these RMAs is outlined in Appendix F.

Table 3-9. Existing Recreation Management Areas within the Monument

Recreation Management Area	Acres
Taos Plateau ERMA	168,889
Ute Mountain ERMA	17,784
San Antonio Gorge ERMA	7,366
Rio Grande Gorge SRMA	48,190
Rio Del Norte RMZ	10,334
Taos Box RMZ	3,323
Wild Rivers Rim RMZ	749
Guadalupe Mountain RMZ	10,573
Orilla Verde and Lower Gorge RMZ	3,950
Taos Valley Overlook RMZ	2,314
Río Grande Rim and Cooper Hill RMZ	16,947
TOTAL	**290,419**

Source: BLM 2024c.
ERMA = Extensive Recreation Management Area; RMZ = Recreation Management Zone; SRMA = Special Recreation Management Area.

Because the RMAs were established prior to Proclamation 8946 and extend beyond the Monument boundary, current management actions are less detailed and less aligned with current conditions and trends within the Monument. Consequently, Alternative A would not foresee or adequately plan for future increases in visitation and population growth. The broad approach of current management may result in adverse effects on desired recreational settings and experiences, as well as other Monument objects and values.

Camping

Under Alternative A, the entire decision area would remain open to dispersed recreation, including camping. Dispersed camping would remain closed in John Dunn bridge and developed recreation areas, the Taos Valley Overlook RMZ, within 300 feet of descent points into the Rio Grande or Costilla Creek in the Ute Mountain ERMA, and in the Guadalupe Mountain RMZ, except in designated campsites along the Wild Rivers rim. Camping would be limited to 14 days, as outlined by BLM policy. The effects on recreational opportunities would not change. Other resources throughout the Monument would continue to be affected by camping in high-use areas that are available to camping.

Special Recreation Permits and Vendors

The BLM would continue to consider the administration of SRPs for commercial, noncommercial, and competitive events on a case-by-case basis. Under Alternative A, only SRPs for commercially guided angling would continue, with seasonal restrictions in the Ute Mountain segment from April 1 to May 31 to protect sensitive wildlife-breeding areas. Boating management would follow the prescriptions set forth in the 2012 Taos RMP and the *2000 Rio Grande Corridor Final Plan* (BLM 2000). SRPs and recreational sites would be managed in a manner that supports Monument objects and values, as determined by the BLM. The BLM's ability to approve the issuance of SRPs on a case-by-case basis would allow for flexibility in management. The effects associated with SRP use would continue to affect resources, such as wildlife, in areas and times of high use.

Rock Climbing

Under Alternative A, the BLM would continue to manage rock climbing throughout the Monument, requiring BLM preapproval for the installation of new rock-climbing routes or hardware. This management would limit the development of rock-climbing routes or the installation of hardware throughout the Monument. Effects from climbing would remain limited to the areas of current use, unless otherwise approved by the BLM.

Access

The BLM would continue to utilize the management outlined in the 2012 Taos RMP to meet the needs associated with increased visitation and recreational access. The BLM would continue to manage and maintain recreational sites and established trails. Access and trails within the Horsethief Mesa area would be managed as outlined in the Horsethief Mesa TMP (BLM 2021c).

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Recreation Management Areas

Under Alternative B, the BLM would adjust and remove the existing recreation-management allocations. The ERMA designation would be removed from the Taos Plateau, Ute Mountain, San Antonio Gorge RMAs (194,039 acres), and the BLM would designate three new SRMAs to focus management on the high-use areas within the Monument. Table 3-10, below, outlines the new SRMAs and their associated RMZs. These areas are illustrated on Map B.18 in Appendix B, and their detailed management is outlined in Appendix F.

Table 3-10. Special Recreation Management Areas under Alternative B

Recreation Management Area	Acres
Wild Rivers SRMA	*11,322*
Wild Rivers Rim RMZ	749
Guadalupe Mountain RMZ	10,573
Black Rock SRMA	*4,664*
Horsethief Mesa RMZ	1,742
John Dunn Bridge RMZ	394
Black Rock Rim RMZ	2,529
Orilla Verde SRMA	*6,264*
Orilla Verde and Lower Gorge RMZ	3,950
Taos Valley Overlook RMZ	2,314
TOTAL	**22,250**

Source: BLM 2024c.
RMZ = Recreation Management Area; SRMA = Special Recreation Management Area.

Under Alternative B, the ERMA designation would be removed from all lands within the Monument. These lands would continue to meet basic recreational and visitor-service needs, while emphasizing stewardship of Monument objects and values. Therefore, this action would have no direct effects on the public recreational opportunities available on these lands.

Within the Wild Rivers SRMA, both RMZs would carry forward the management from the 2012 Taos RMP (see Appendix F). Similarly, the management for the Orilla Verde, Lower Gorge, and Taos Valley Overlook RMZs would remain the same as Alternative A. The newly designated Black Rock SRMA and its associated RMZ would be managed under new guidance, as outlined in Appendix F. These three new RMZs would overlap portions of the current Río Del Norte RMZ, Rio Grande Rim and Copper Hill RMZ, Taos Box RMZ, and Taos Plateau ERMA. Under Alternative B, two vacant allotments within the Horsethief Mesa RMZ would become unavailable to livestock grazing. That RMZ is primarily used for trail-based recreation, including hiking, mountain biking, OHV use, and e-bike riding. Changing the two vacant allotments to unavailable would avoid potential conflicts with recreational users and result in long-term direct benefits to recreational user experiences.

The restructuring of RMA and RMZ allocations would result in direct short- and long-term beneficial effects by providing management that focuses on providing access and development

of recreational opportunities in the areas where concentrated recreational use occurs. Additional management would allow the BLM to monitor effects on Monument objects and values and implement adaptive-management strategies such as seasonal and spatial timing restrictions that would reduce long-term adverse effects when compared to Alternative A. The ability for the BLM to adaptively manage effects from recreation would reduce potential effects on special status species, raptors, and other resources.

The focused management provided by SRMA designation could help provide long-term direct and indirect beneficial effects through the preservation of recreational settings and experiences. The focused management of recreation in the Monument's high-use areas has the potential to provide greater understanding of the Monument's resources, while reducing the use of unauthorized roads and trails and decreasing the potential for destruction or vandalism of Monument objects. The framework outlines essential components of the proposed RMZs, such as activities, experiences, outcomes, and permissible uses on BLM-administered lands. Designating RMZs would yield long-term beneficial effects on managing and safeguarding recreational opportunities and experiences by regulating the extent and nature of activities permitted, in line with public input and the sensitivity of natural and cultural resources.

Camping

Similar to Alternative A, the entire decision area would continue to permit dispersed recreation, including camping. However, under Alternative B, the high-use John Dunn Bridge RMZ would remain closed. Additionally, to safeguard special status species and wildlife, the Black Rock Rim and Horsethief Mesa RMZs would prohibit dispersed camping from January 1 to April 1. Conversely, the Guadalupe Mountain RMZ would be open to dispersed camping under Alternative B. This alternative would allow the BLM to manage camping more effectively in the high-use areas of the Monument, while providing for additional backcountry camping opportunities in the Guadalupe Mountain RMZ, which would result in direct short- and long-term beneficial effects on recreational experiences, while also providing indirect beneficial effects on other resources throughout the Monument.

SRPs and Vendors

The management of SRPs in Alternative B would remain the same as Alternative A, with the exception that, under Alternative B, SRPs may be subject to adaptive-management strategies that apply spatial and timing limitations on activities to protect Monument Objects and values, such as wildlife and habitat. Within the proposed Black Rock SRMA, to avoid direct and indirect adverse effects on wildlife, no large-group SRPs would be permitted within the Black Rock Rim and Horsethief Mesa RMZs between January 1 and April 1.

Alternative B would include management that would restrict hot-air balloon flights below the rim of the gorge in the Black Rock SRMA. The proposed management would provide direct beneficial effects on recreational users by preserving the recreational experience throughout the SRMA. The proposed management would also reduce indirect adverse effects caused by the presence of hot-air ballons below the rim by reducing adverse conflicts with wildlife and special status species. The disallowance of hot-air ballon flights below the rim would result in adverse effects on commercial hot-air ballon vendors. The addition of management language

regarding the management of SRPs would provide both short-term and long-term benefits to recreational users and Monument resources through the better management of visitor use and protection of natural and cultural resources. The proposed management would provide these beneficial effects, while providing for commercial recreational use and events within the Monument.

Rock Climbing

Alternative B would also provide additional clarifications regarding the use of rock-climbing hardware. Under Alternative B, only new rock-climbing routes requiring fixed hardware would require pre-approval by the BLM through site-specific NEPA analysis and would be subject to NHPA Section 106. Additionally, climbing would be prohibited within raptor-nesting areas during specified timeframes and within 50 feet of cultural resources, such as petroglyphs. This management would provide long-term direct beneficial effects on the cultural resources within the Monument and slight direct adverse effects on recreational climbing opportunities. Overall, Alternative B would reduce the long-term adverse effects on Monument objects and values by providing additional protections to cultural resources from recreational use.

Access

Alternative B aims to expand recreational infrastructure, such as trails, trailheads, parking, and facilities, as necessary, within SRMAs and would provide direct beneficial effects on visitor access to desired recreational experiences and settings, including connections to urban and riverfront trail systems. Under Alternative B, recreation management would protect Monument objects and values and minimize direct and indirect adverse effects on ecological resources through site-specific NEPA analysis prior to the implementation of recreation improvements. The BLM would balance management efforts to protect Monument objects and values by implementing appropriate levels of use, facilities, management services, and administrative controls in each recreation area. Specifically, Alternative B would prioritize providing various access points in the SRMAs, including trail connections from rim areas to the John Dunn Bridge area, thus facilitating nonmotorized access to the bridge area. This proposed management would provide short-term and long-term beneficial effects to recreational users through improved access, compared to Alternative A. Additionally, the BLM would establish thresholds for managing motorized access to the John Dunn Bridge area. The creation of trails and associated parking from both the Black Rock Rim RMZ and Horsethief Mesa RMZ to the John Dunn Bridge area could provide indirect beneficial effects on the recreational experience of Monument visitors through the reduction of traffic and vehicle presence in this high-use area.

3.2.15.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs with the potential to result in cumulative effects on recreation may arise from activities in neighboring communities, recreational visits to nearby BLM-administered lands, and resource-use activities. RFFAs outlined in Section 3.1.3, *Cumulative Actions*, describe potential activities related to travel, recreational uses, and visitation considered in addition to those in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011). Development of connectors with the Rio Grande Trail to the John Dunn Bridge and development of the Red River Trail Corridor would contribute long-term beneficial cumulative effects on the Monument and surrounding BLM-

administered lands accessible to recreational users. Long-term direct beneficial effects could occur as a result of projects that improve access to the Monument and provide additional recreational opportunities to users. Improved access and recreational use in the Monument could result in indirect adverse effects on Monument resources and values as a result of increased use. Continued growth and development in northern New Mexico and the urban areas surrounding the Monument would also result in increased demand for recreational opportunities.

3.2.16 Transportation and Access

3.2.16.1 Affected Environment

Current transportation and access routes into and through the planning area consist of Federal and State highways, BLM and USFS roads (i.e., those adjacent to the Monument), County road systems, and ROW access roads (see Map B.19, Appendix B). The current transportation system in the panning area creates access for a variety of current uses on the Monument, including recreational activities, access for traditional uses, and range management, and is expected to provide access for future use.

Two Travel Management Areas (TMAs) were established under the 2012 Taos RMP and overlap nearly all of the Monument: (1) the Taos Plateau TMA, and (2) Lower Rio Gorge/Copper Hill TMA. Motorized travel within these TMAs is currently managed under the following categories in consideration of natural resource protection, route utility, and public safety: (1) limited to designated routes; and (2) closed to motorized use. TMA information is available in the 2012 Taos RMP and the 2017 Taos Plateau TMA (BLM 2012a). Based on these TMAs, approximately 538 miles of BLM-administered roads are present within the Monument, the majority consisting of primitive, unpaved OHV roads (approximately 533 miles). Primary BLM-administered roads account for approximately 4 miles of roadways within the Monument. An additional, approximately 89 miles of inventoried primitive roads under USFS-administration or the ownership of Pueblos, private landowners, or the State of New Mexico, occur within the Monument (see Map B.19, Appendix B).

In 2021, the BLM approved a TMP for Horsethief Mesa, which encompasses 2,060.5 acres within the Monument (BLM 2021c). The TMP established a comprehensive travel network to meet current and future access needs to the public lands in this area of the Monument, while minimizing effects on sensitive resources. The travel network identified in the approved TMP comprises both motorized and nonmotorized routes.

Under Proclamation 8946, all motorized-vehicle use in the Monument is limited to designated routes. Nonmotorized mechanized vehicle use is limited to designated roads and trails. Exceptions would be allowed for emergency or authorized administrative purposes.

3.2.16.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would proposed management affect access, ingress, egress, parking, and user conflicts, while also providing for resource protection within the Monument?

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, transportation and access management would not change from the existing management outlined in Proclamation 8946 and the 2012 Taos RMP, 2017 Taos Plateau TMA, and the Horsethief Mesa TMA. The management under these documents is illustrated on Map B.19 in Appendix B and includes the following.

- San Antonio and Ute Mountain zones would remain closed to mechanized travel.
- Motorized vehicle use and nonmotorized-mechanized vehicle use would remain limited to designated routes (except for emergency or authorized administrative purposes).
- To improve riparian conditions, certain sites in the Lower Gorge would remain closed to vehicles.

Under Alternative A, approximately 216,551 acres (89 percent) would be designated as limited, and 25,822 acres (11 percent) would be closed to mechanized and motorized travel. Road designations within the Monument under Alternative A are outlined in Table 3-11.

Table 3-11. Alternative A Travel Designation

Designation	Miles
Limited to Designated Roads and Trials	*603.88*
Primary Road	26.76
Primitive Road	576.22
Trail	0.90
Closed to Motorized and Mechanized	*10.13*
Primary Road	0.98
Primitive Road	9.07
Trail	0.8
TOTAL	**614.01**

Source: BLM 2024c.

In addition to designations, Alternative A would continue to manage the use of e-bikes or e-mountain bikes as limited to designated roads and trails and would not allow the use of e-bikes on trails currently used by non-electric bicycles.

Under Alternative A, increasing visitation and use of transportation routes and trails within the boundaries of the Monument may lead to increased effects on the surrounding environment and a higher demand for road and trail maintenance. Current management provides limited guidance for areas outside of the Horsethief Mesa and Taos Plateau TMAs. Under Alternative A, issues with access, ingress, egress, and parking would continue to create user conflicts and result in adverse effects on resources throughout the Monument.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Under Alternative B, the BLM would provide additional goals and objectives to guide the management of transportation and access. Alternative B would provide for the development of

a TMP for the Monument and prioritize management of parking and travel opportunities and protection of sensitive resources throughout the Monument.

As designated in Presidential Proclamation 8946, except for emergency or authorized administrative purposes, motorized-vehicle use in the Monument is limited to designated roads, and nonmotorized mechanized-vehicle use is limited to designated roads and trails. Additionally, Cerro de la Olla would also be closed above 8,200 feet in elevation; this area consists of 5,120 acres of BLM-administered lands under both Alternative B and Alternative B1. The closure of these roads would provide long-term beneficial effects on Cerro de la Olla, compared to Alternative A, by protecting its primitive characteristics. Administrative/authorized use of motor vehicles would only be allowed within this area. Under Alternatives B and B1, travel management under the Proposed Action within the Monument would result in an additional 2.26 miles of previously limited primitive roads being designated as closed to motorized vehicle use as a result of the Cerro de la Olla closure to motorized use. Travel management designations under Alternative B are illustrated on Map B.20 (Appendix B). Table 3-12 compares travel management under Alternatives A, B, and B1. Travel management designations under Alternative B1 would be the same as Alternative B, and, therefore, the effects under Alternative B1 would be the same as described below for Alternative B.

Table 3-12. Alternatives Travel Designations

Designation	Alternative A	Alternative B and Alternative B1
Limited to Designated Roads and Trails	216,551	211,431
Closed to Motorized and Mechanized Use	25,822	25,822
Closed to Motorized Use	0	5,120
TOTAL	**242,373**	**242,373**

Source: BLM 2024c.

The closure of Cerro de la Olla to motorized use above 8,200 feet would reduce direct and indirect adverse effects on Monument objects relating to wildlife and vegetation through the reduction in vehicle presence and associated effects. Beneficial effects would include the long-term preservation of the primitive nature of the area, compared to Alternative A. The remainder of the Monument would continue to be managed similarly to Alternative A, as designated under Proclamation 8946. Additional goals, objectives, and management decisions outlined in Alternative B would allow the BLM to provide additional planning and resources toward travel management to account for the anticipated increase in visitation to the Monument. The additional planning and analysis that the BLM would conduct would reduce long-term indirect adverse effects within the Monument that could result from increased visitation. The BLM's emphasis on coordination with State and local agencies would provide direct beneficial effects to potential visitors to the Monument by improving access and protecting Monument objects and values.

Under Alternative B, the BLM would employ the e-bike definitional exclusion from the motorized classification, as provided at 43 CFR 8340.0-5(a), for the purposes of authorizing e-bikes (or e-mountain bikes) on nonmotorized trails within the Monument. This would allow for users to

utilize e-bikes on single-track trails currently available only to non-electric bicycles. The BLM would implement adaptive-management strategies with the use of e-bikes and develop restrictions or stipulations, if necessary, to reduce direct and indirect adverse effects on natural or cultural resources within the Monument. The change in this management would provide direct beneficial effects to recreational users by providing increased recreational opportunities throughout the Monument.

3.2.16.3 Cumulative Effects

In addition to being identified and discussed in the 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011), cumulative effects on the transportation and road networks bordering BLM-administered lands within the planning area and RFFAs are accounted for in Section 3.1.3, *Cumulative Actions*, of this RMPA/EA and describe potential activities related to travel and visitation. This network encompasses routes overseen by various Federal, State, and County entities, as well as those owned by private landholders. Past, present, and RFFAs could include other ongoing Federal, State, and local TMPs or associated planning actions. Enhancements to Federal and State highways, along with their ongoing maintenance, would provide beneficial long-term effects on travel and access throughout the Monument by improving connectivity with BLM-administered roads and County-managed routes, facilitating improved access across the Monument and surrounding area. The improved access throughout the Monument could result in indirect adverse effects on Monument resources as a result of increased traffic and visitation. Potential traffic surges resulting from development, local residency, and the anticipated rise in visitors across the planning area could collectively influence traffic patterns and road conditions.

3.2.17 Special Designations

3.2.17.1 Affected Environment

National Landscape Conservation System

BLM National Conservation Lands, also known as the NLCS, are managed by the BLM under its mission to conserve, protect, and restore nationally significant landscapes and places that have outstanding cultural, ecological, and scientific values for the benefit of current and future generations. NLCS (as defined by the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009) includes the following areas administered by the BLM: National Monuments, National Conservation Areas, National Wilderness Areas, WSAs, National WSRs, National Scenic, Historic, or Recreational Trails Designated as Components of the National Trails System, and any area designated by Congress to be administered for conservation purposes (BLM 2012a). The *National Landscape Conservation System 15-Year Strategy, 2010 to 2025,* provides national-level guidance for managing BLM's National Conservation Lands (BLM 2010a). The BLM New Mexico implementation strategy was designed to facilitate and support the implementation of planning decisions at the unit level and ensure consistency with the national strategy. The decision area is part of the NLCS in New Mexico and, therefore, is subject to the National- and State-level strategies (BLM 2010b).

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

ACECs are areas where special management attention is required to protect and prevent irreparable damage to important historical, cultural, or scenic values, fish and wildlife resources, or other natural systems or processes or to protect life and ensure safety from natural hazards. To be designated an ACEC, the area must meet criteria for both relevant and important (R&I) values, as defined in 43 CFR 1610.7 and in BLM Manual 1613, *Areas of Critical Environmental Concern* (BLM 1988).

As part of the 2012 Taos RMP process, the BLM reviewed and evaluated all recommended areas for ACECs, consistently with 43 CFR 1610.7-2 and BLM Manual 1613. Two ACECs, the Taos Plateau ACEC (222,500 acres) and the Lower Gorge ACEC (21,190 acres), currently overlap the Monument decision area in their entirety, as shown on Map B.21 (Appendix B). 2012 Taos RMP Section 2.2.10, *Special Designations*, and Appendix A, *Management Prescriptions for Special Designations*, set forth the direction and prescriptions for these two ACECs, which are also summarized in Appendix C, Table 18, of this draft RMPA/EA. The Taos Plateau ACEC was established to protect R&I values associated with wildlife habitat, special status species, water quality and quantity, wetlands, and scenic quality. The Lower Gorge ACEC was established to provide direct management of R&I riparian vegetation, special status species and wildlife habitat, and cultural values. Management of the Lower Gorge ACEC also includes an emphasis on recreation.

Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas

A *BLM wilderness area* is an area of public lands that Congress has designated for the BLM to manage as a component of the National Wilderness Preservation System, in accordance with the Wilderness Act of 1964 (PL 88-577). With the passage of FLPMA in 1976, Congress directed the BLM to inventory, study, and recommend which public lands under its administration should be designated as wilderness. In 1991, the BLM made wilderness recommendations to Congress for 50 WSAs in the State of New Mexico (BLM 2019c). The 2012 Taos RMP directed management of the San Antonio WSA (7,371 acres), consistently with the BLM's *Interim Management Policy for Lands Under Wilderness Review* (BLM 2012a).

On March 12, 2019, President Trump signed Senate Bill 47 into law as PL 116-9, also known as the John D. Dingell, Jr., Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act (Dingell Jr. Act). The Dingell Jr. Act designated two wilderness areas within the Monument boundary, the Cerro del Yuta Wilderness (13,420 acres) and Rio San Antonio Wilderness (8,120 acres) (see Map B.21, Appendix B). The Dingell Jr. Act released all remaining acreage previously deemed a WSA, including the San Antonio WSA, which was the only WSA within the Monument (BLM 2024d). Therefore, no WSAs currently exist within the Monument.

The Cerro del Yuta Wilderness consists of an isolated volcanic cone rising starkly out of the high desert plains. Reaching 10,093 feet in elevation, Cerro del Yuta is the highest point in the Monument. The Cerro del Yuta Wilderness overlaps lands previously identified as lands with wilderness character (i.e., the Ute Mountain unit). The Rio San Antonio Wilderness consists of a meandering gorge lined with Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) and spruce (*Picea*) cutting across the sagebrush plains and highland mesas. Interest in special designations, including

wilderness preservation, within the Monument has and continues to be a national and regional focus over the last decade. Additional proposed wilderness legislation for Cerro de la Olla (12,898 acres) is pending Congressional action as of 2024 (Senate Bill S.593 2023).

Wild and Scenic Rivers

WSRs are streams or segments of streams designated by Congress under the authority of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 (PL 90-542, as amended; 16 U.S.C. 1271–1287) for the purpose of protecting the stream or stream section in its free-flowing condition, water quality, and its ORVs, which are identified on a segment-specific basis and may include scenic, recreational, geological, fish and wildlife, historical, cultural, or other similar values.

The Rio Grande WSR was designated as part of the original Wild and Scenic Rivers Act legislation signed into law in 1968 (PL 90-542; 16 U.S.C. 1271 et seq.). It includes 74 miles of the river as it passes through the Rio Grande Gorge and 4 miles of the Red River (BLM 2024e) (see Map B.21, Appendix B). The ORVs for the Rio Grande and Red River WSRs include cultural, fish and wildlife habitat, geological, recreational, riparian, and scenic values. The river gorge is home to numerous species of wildlife, including big horn sheep, river otter, and the Rio Grande cutthroat trout. The Rio Grande and Red River WSRs provide a wide variety of recreational opportunities, luring anglers, hikers, artists, and whitewater-rafting enthusiasts. Two developed recreation areas are located along the river: (1) Wild Rivers in the north; and (2) Orilla Verde in the south. In addition to these recreation areas, a spectacular vista of the gorge is viewable from the High Bridge Overlook, where Highway 64 crosses (BLM 2024e).

The public use of the area contained in the Rio Grande and Red River WSR corridor Is managed to preserve the rivers' natural and primitive conditions. The entire length of the Rio Grande within the Monument is designated as ONRWs, which are defined as streams, lakes, and wetlands that receive enhanced protection against degradation under the State of New Mexico's Standards for Interstate and Intrastate Surface Waters and the Federal Clean Water Act. An ONRW designation is the highest level of protection against degradation that can be afforded for a waterbody under the State's Water Quality Standards (NMED 2024). No other ONRWs are currently designated within the Monument.

The *Rio Grande Corridor Plan,* finalized In January 2000, completed the requirement for a comprehensive river-management plan, as required under the Wild and Scenic River Act, to manage public land along 94 miles of the Rio Grande and 42.7 miles of Rio Grande tributaries (DOI 2000). As part of the planning process for the this Plan, and the 2012 Taos RMP, the BLM undertook WSR-eligibility and -suitability studies; the following segments were determined eligible for the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System: Arroyo Hondo (1.3 miles), Red River (1.0 mile), and Rio San Antonio (4.5 miles). A 1.1-mile segment of the Rio Pueblo de Taos was also determined to be suitable. Suitability status of Arroyo Hondo, Red River, and Rio San Antonio were deferred by the BLM in 2012, pending suitability studies initiated by the Carson National Forests as part of their forest plan revision. During the summer of 2022, the Carson National Forest issued a final decision for their updated Forest Plan (USFS 2022). As part of that planning process, USFS completed a Wild and Scenic Rivers eligibility study, finding the Arroyo Hondo, Red River, and Rio San Antonio eligible for inclusion in the WSR system. However, the

planning process did not include a suitability study (USFS 2022). Instead, a suitability study is required for any proposed project or activity on Carson National Forest lands that would conflict with the river's eligibility requirements (USFS 2022).

National Trails

The National Trail System includes congressionally designated historic and scenic trails and administratively designated recreational trails. *Scenic trails* are established "for maximum outdoor recreation potential, and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, or cultural qualities of the areas through which such trails may pass"; *historic trails* are "extended trails which follow as closely as possible and practicable the original route or routes of travel of national historical significance" and are designated for "the identification and protection of the historic route and its historic remnants and artifacts for public use and enjoyment" (PL 90-543, as amended through PL 116-9, March 12, 2019). Section 4 of the National Trails System Act establishes that administrative units, including the BLM, may establish National Recreational Trails for "a variety of compatible outdoor recreation uses in or reasonably accessible to urban areas or high-use areas." Although similar to historic and scenic trails, National Recreation Trails therefore do not require congressional approval.

The OSNHT, designated on December 4, 2002, by the Old Spanish Trail Recognition Act of 2002, parallels the Monument on its eastern boundary from the Colorado State Line to the Rio Hondo, where it crosses into the Monument for approximately 1.5 miles before continuing south (see Map B.21, Appendix B). Twelve miles of the Wild Rivers Recreation Area trails were designated as National Recreation Trails in 1981.

3.2.17.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would proposed management affect designated wilderness?

Issue 2: How would proposed management affect waterway segments previously found as suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System, preservation of Monument objects and values, and the ability of visitors to access diverse recreational experiences?

Issue 3: How would proposed management affect and consider ONRWs within the Monument?

Issue 4: How would proposed management affect the OSNHT?

The 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:467–472) describes the types of effects that could result on special designations from planning-level decisions. The potential effects on the resource values driving each special designation addressed in this section are summarized below. The analysis focuses on the planning issues listed above; however, additional analysis can be found elsewhere in this draft RMPA/EA, where adverse effects on resource values associated with special designations are described in more detail (e.g., Section 3.2.3, *Fish and Wildlife*; Section 3.2.5, *Geology*; Section 3.2.15, *Recreation*).

Management of the Rio Grande and Red River WSR corridor would not vary by alternative and would continue to be managed according to BLM policy, Wild and Scenic Rivers Act direction, and the existing 2000 *Rio Grande Corridor Plan*. All alternatives would include management

direction to protect the ORVs, free-flowing conditions, and the classification of Wild and Scenic River corridors. Maintaining the conditions that characterize the Rio Grande and Red River WSRs would uphold the standards set forth in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and benefit present and future generations through the enjoyment of these areas. Managing these areas to maintain their free-flowing nature and ORVs would help protect water quality, scenic integrity, areas of cultural or historic significance, recreational opportunities, and wildlife species' health and diversity. No other effects are anticipated on designated Wild and Scenic Rivers from other resources or resource uses under the alternatives.

Under all alternatives, the BLM would continue to work in partnership with the National Park Service to manage the OSNHT and apply protective-management prescriptions for the trail corridor on BLM-administered lands, which would result in short- and long-term beneficial effects. Management actions for other resources and resource uses are not expected to affect the values of the OSNHT. Existing legal statutes, policies, and administrative procedures would be implemented to stop, limit, or mitigate any adverse effects.

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, management of special designations would not change from the existing management prescribed in the 2012 Taos RMP (BLM 2012a). Alternative A would maintain the Taos Plateau ACEC (22,500 acres) and Lower Gorge ACEC (21,190 acres) and would manage the areas to protect and enhance identified R&I values consistently with Proclamation 8946 and relevant BLM policies. Although management for these ACECs would be largely consistent with the purposes of the Monument's designation, Alternative A would not specifically prescribe management for the restoration, protection, and preservation of Monument objects.

The Cerro del Yuta Wilderness (13,420 acres) and Rio San Antonio Wilderness (8,120 acres) were previously managed as a land with wilderness characteristics and a WSA, respectively, under the 2012 Taos RMP, pursuant to guidelines consistent with the Wilderness Act of 1964, the enabling-legislation regulations for wilderness management at 43 CFR 6300, and the BLM's guidance and policies for wilderness management. However, the BLM manages these designated wilderness areas according to direction in the Dingell Jr. Act, as well as BLM Manual 6340, *Management of Designated Wilderness Areas* (BLM 2012b). Proclamation 8946 also withdrew all Monument lands from all forms of entry and location under the public land laws. Therefore, designated wilderness under Alternative A would be managed as ROW-exclusion areas (including for renewable-energy development), VRM Class I, and closed to motorized travel. Management of other resources and resource uses under Alternative A would not affect designated wilderness.

Alternative A would not affect eligible and suitable WSRs (see Map B.22, Appendix B) and would continue management actions to protect the WSRs' identified ORVs, tentative classification, and free-flowing character.

Alternative B (Proposed Action) and Alternative B1 (Designate Cerro de la Olla WSA)

The BLM would not designate ACECs under Alternative B because Monument protections are substantially equivalent to ACEC designation (see Map B.23, Appendix B). Under Alternative B,

the management of R&I values for the Lower Gorge ACEC and Taos Plateau ACEC would be the same as Alternative A, except where updated to provide for additional protective management. Generally, Alternative B would result in additional protections for R&I values and Monument objects by managing more acres for the protection of lands with wilderness characteristics, closing an additional 1,749 acres to livestock grazing, and reducing the potential for land-use authorizations through the designation of an additional 5,096 acres as ROW exclusion, when compared to Alternative A.

Under Alternative B, management and the effects on designated wilderness would be the same as Alternative A. Alternative B would not designate new WSAs, but would manage 5,120 acres of the Cerro de la Olla unit to protect and maintain its wilderness characteristics (see Section 3.2.10.2, *Environmental Consequences*). Unlike Alternative B, Alternative B1 would designate 5,120 acres of the Cerro de la Olla unit as a WSA and manage the area pursuant to the BLM's non-impairment standard (BLM Manual 6330) (see Map B.24, Appendix B). Activities permissible within the Cerro de la Olla unit under Alternative B1 would be generally the same as Alternative B, except that Alternative B1 would manage the area to VRM Class I objectives, instead of VRM Class II, and new range improvements or changes to existing range improvements that could impair suitability for wilderness designations would not be allowed. As a result, Alternative B1 would result in greater long-term beneficial effects on wilderness characteristics by allowing very low level of change to the existing character of the landscape. If the Cerro de la Olla unit were to be released from wilderness consideration, then the 5,120 acres would be managed under Alternative B1 in a manner that would ensure wilderness-designation suitability, unless otherwise specified by Congress in its releasing legislation. Overall, Alternatives B and B1 would result in similar effects on naturalness and outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined types of recreation; however, over the long term, Alternative B1 would reduce the likelihood for impairment of wilderness suitability to a slightly greater extent than Alternative B.

Management of eligible and suitable WSRs would be similar to Alternative A; however, specific, interim protective-management guidelines would clarify how these river segments would be protected and provide more comprehensive management, maintenance, and protections of free-flowing conditions, ORVs, classifications, and water quality. As the area population and visitation to the Monument increase, the value of managing these areas in their natural, free-flowing condition could increase user satisfaction and contribute to the increased wellbeing of visitors who spend time in these areas. Conversely, increased visitation to WSR areas could have some detrimental ecological effects, such as increased refuse or discarded items, the introduction or spread of nonnative species, reduced fish populations (through increased fishing pressure), or aquatic-habitat degradation. Management under Alternative B would apply protective measures to prohibit new or increased degradations and provide for restoration to protect and promote water quality (Appendix C, Table C-22). Additionally, management of designated ONRWs within the Monument under Alternative B would include coordination with NMED's Surface Water Quality Bureau to develop shared protocols for implementing ONRW protections and would decrease the potential for water-quality degradation, when compared to Alternative A.

Under Alternative B, management decisions for the OSNHT would be similar to Alternative A, except that new strategies and updated information would be incorporated to increase agency coordination and consistency for OSNHT management the across the planning area. Overall, incorporation of the *OSNHT Comprehensive Strategy* (BLM and NPS 2017), the *Multi-Agency National Trails System Memorandum of Understanding* (NPS 2017), and recent BLM policies and technical references relating to the management of National Historic Trails provide greater beneficial effects, when compared to Alternative A.

3.2.17.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs that can affect special designations include grazing, recreation, vegetation management, and travel management. Continued recreational uses, increased visitation to the Monument, traditional and other resource uses, and vegetation treatments have the potential to affect designated wilderness, WSRs (i.e., designated, eligible, and suitable segments) and National Historic Trails, including the OSNHT. Designated wilderness areas would be primarily affected by the number and proximity of adjacent motorized-travel corridors, the volume and type of traffic on those corridors, the sights and sounds of human activities near or on the borders of wilderness, and the quantity and type of recreational users. Similarly, increased visitation within and around the OSNHT could contribute to adverse effects on the trail's integrity. Cumulative effects would occur to designated, eligible, and suitable WSR segments as a result of natural events, such as drought and erosion, and from any action outside of the Monument that would result in large water withdrawals, sedimentation or other sources of pollution entering the water system, a noticeable increase in human presence, or adverse effects on visual resources.

The contribution of Alternative A and Alternative B to the effects on special designations are anticipated to be similar, with Alternative B contributing slightly fewer adverse effects than Alternative A because of the additional protections afforded by closing 1,749 acres to livestock grazing and the reduction of potential for land-use authorizations that would be achieved by designating an additional 5,096 acres as ROW exclusion, when compared to Alternative A. Alternative B1 would provide greater long-term protections for wilderness by managing 5,120 acres of the Cerro de la Olla unit as a WSA and would therefore contribute the least to overall adverse cumulative effects.

3.2.18 Socioeconomic Context and Environmental Justice

3.2.18.1 Affected Environment

This section evaluates the existing demographic, economic, and environmental-justice conditions around the Monument and assesses the economic role of activities that rely on BLM-administered resources in the region. The Monument is withing Rio Arriba and Taos counties, New Mexico. The socioeconomic and environmental-justice analysis areas extend not only to Rio Arriba and Taos counties, but also to two bordering counties in Colorado, Conejos and Costilla. Most of the demographic and economic data to follow are presented at the place level, which references statewide conditions and trends for context. Although County-level data may mask variation within the counties, the block-group, or place-level data, particularly in rural

areas, is scarce and contains large margins of error. Therefore, County-level data is considered a sufficiently granular geographic scale for demographic and socioeconomic analysis. For environmental justice–population identification, place-level data is used to better identify specific populations that could be disproportionately and adversely affected by the management of resources in the region.

Socioeconomic Context

A variety of groups and communities of interest are interested parties in the use and management of BLM-administered lands, including groups concerned with Tribal and cultural resources, habitat and resource conservation, recreation, mineral development and production, and visual resources, and local residents and communities. These organizations and individuals have varying interests in the use and management of BLM-administered public resources. Different types of interested parties have distinct sets of attitudes, beliefs, values, opinions, and perceptions about BLM-administered public resources and the effects of various management policies and actions. These views reflect different cultural and economic linkages that people have to BLM-administered lands. Individuals may belong to or share values with more than one group of interested parties.

As Appendix G details, residents of the socioeconomic analysis area engage with and rely on the resources the Monument offers. The potential socioeconomic effects of management decisions on those resources are detailed in Section 3.2.18.2, *Environmental Consequences*.

Environmental Justice Context

EO 12898 requires each Federal agency to "make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations" (59 *FR* 7629, February 16, 1994). Fundamental principles of environmental justice require that Federal agencies incorporate the following.

- Avoid, minimize, or mitigate disproportionately high and adverse human-health and environmental effects, including social and economic effects, on minority and low-income populations.
- In the decision-making process, ensure the ability of full and fair participation for all potentially affected communities.
- Prevent the denial of, reduction in, or significant delay in the receipt of benefits of the project to minority and low-income populations.

An evaluation of environmental justice effects requires identification of minority and low-income populations (including Tribal Nations) within the affected area and evaluation of the potential for the alternatives to have disproportionately high and adverse effects on such populations. Following publication of EO 12898, the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), part of the Executive Office of the President, issued guidance for considering environmental justice within the NEPA process (CEQ 1997). This guidance defines minorities as individuals who are members of the following population groups: American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian

or Pacific Islander; Black, not of Hispanic origin; or Hispanic. The guidance further defines a minority population as follows: "Minority populations should be identified where either: (1) the minority population of the affected area exceeds 50 percent; or (2) the minority population percentage of the affected area is meaningfully greater than the minority population percentage in the general population or other appropriate unit of geographic analysis" (CEQ 1997). The CEQ guidance does not define what constitutes *meaningfully greater*, but the BLM recommends using 110 percent of the reference population as the threshold (BLM 2022). The guidance also makes clear that Tribal Nations in the affected area should also be considered in the environmental justice–screening analysis. The CEQ guidance does not specify how to identify a *low-income population*, but, in practice, an approach similar to that used for minority populations can be followed: where the percentage of the area's total population with income below 200 percent of the poverty threshold is equal to or greater than either 50 percent or the percentage in the general population or an appropriate comparison area (i.e., the reference population). The BLM defines low-income populations as being present if the region's percentage of the population with income below 200 percent of the poverty threshold is greater than or equal to the poverty rate of the reference area.

These thresholds are based on experience evaluating environmental-justice indicators and the sense that these thresholds represent significant differences between the affected and reference populations. For the purposes of this screening, the thresholds from the CEQ and the BLM, stated above, have been used to identify any low-income or minority communities in the environmental justice–analysis area.

As detailed in Appendix G, the analysis area comprises many potential environmental-justice communities. Most inhabited portions of the study area are considered environmental-justice communities, compared to their corresponding reference values. The only Census-Designated Places (CDPs) in the study area that are not considered environmental-justice communities within New Mexico include the Conjilon, Canova, Coyote, Lyden, Ojo Caliente, Truchas, Arroyo Hondo (Taos County), Arroyo Seco, Questa Village, San Cristobal, and Talpa CDPs.

The adjacent counties in Colorado were screened for potential environmental-justice populations because it is possible that nearby communities may have a cultural or historical link to the planning area. Based on this screening of surrounding counties, all CDPs within Costilla and Conejos Counties are considered environmental-justice communities because they fall above the threshold for minority and/or low-income status.

As Appendix G details, residents of the environmental justice–analysis area engage with and rely on the resources that the Monument offers.

3.2.18.2 Environmental Consequences

Issue 1: How would the alternatives affect socioeconomic status in the analysis area? Would alternatives result in beneficial or adverse impacts on resource stakeholders?

Issue 2: How would proposed management affect environmental-justice populations?

Issue 3: How would proposed management affect minority or low-income populations or Tribal Nations?

The 2011 Taos PRMP/FEIS (BLM 2011:472–479) describes the types of effects that could result on socioeconomic and environmental-justice communities from planning-level decisions. The potential effects on the groups and communities addressed in this section are summarized below. The analysis focuses on the planning issues listed above; however, additional analysis can be found elsewhere in this draft RMPA/EA. where adverse and beneficial effects on resource values associated with socioeconomics and environmental justice are described in more detail (i.e., Section 3.2.1. *Cultural Resources*; Section 3.2.2, *Traditional Uses;* Section 3.2.3, *Fish And Wildlife;* Section 3.2.8, *Visual Resources;* Section 3.2.13, *Land Tenure and Land-Use Authorizations;* Section 3.2.14, *Livestock Grazing;* Section 3.2.15, *Recreation; and* Section 3.2.16, *Transportation and Access*).

Alternative A: No-Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, no changes are anticipated from the baseline conditions described above and in Appendix G.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Under Alternative B, the anticipated changes to resources are outlined in Appendix C. Key resources with potential socioeconomic or environmental-justice effects are detailed in this RMPA/EA in Section 3.2.1, *Cultural Resources*; Section 3.2.2, *Traditional Uses*; Section 3.2.3, *Fish and Wildlife*; Section 3.2.8, *Visual Resources*; Section 3.2.13, *Land Tenure and Land-use authorization*; Section 3.2.14, *Livestock Grazing*; Section 3.2.15, *Recreation*; and Section 3.2.16, *Transportation and Access*. Across those key resources, Alternative B would not result in short- or long-term effects on the socioeconomic or environmental justice conditions of the analysis area.

3.2.18.3 Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and RFFAs would continue to affect the socioeconomic and environmental-justice conditions of the analysis area. As described throughout the cumulative effects analysis for the resource programs above, the BLM is expecting many trends to continue for future growth in socioeconomic conditions around the Monument, as well as protection of cultural heritage practices and sites. Additional future changes to these underlying resources would contribute to the cumulative socioeconomic and environmental-justice status.

4 Consultation and Coordination

This chapter documents the BLM's public outreach, consultation, and coordination efforts throughout the preparation of this Draft RMPA/EA. The CEQ's regulations (40 CFR 1506.6) provide guidance for ensuring public involvement in land-use planning, in accordance with NEPA. Title II, Section 202 of FLPMA directs the BLM to coordinate its land-use planning with other Federal agencies, State and local governments, and Tribes to the extent that those external plans are consistent with the laws governing BLM-administered surface lands. Presidential Proclamation 8946 also directs the BLM to undertake Monument planning with maximum public involvement, including, but not limited to, consultation with State, local, and Tribal governments, as well as community land-grant and acequia associations.

4.1 Public Participation

When creating an RMP/EIS, public involvement is not only vital, but legally mandated (BLM 2005). The BLM's public outreach and collaboration for this project are ongoing and would continue throughout the development of this RMPA/EA.

4.1.1 Scoping

Public scoping is the process through which the public has an opportunity to provide comments on the identification of issues (43 CFR 1610.2(f)(1)) and proposed planning criteria (43 CFR 1610.2(f)(2)). Through the process of public and internal scoping, the BLM determined the scope and significant issues to be analyzed in depth in this draft RMPA/EA, identified and eliminated from detailed study the issues that are not significant, and identified a range of reasonable alternatives to be analyzed in this draft RMPA/EA (40 CFR 1610.4). In accordance with 43 CFR 1610.2(d), the results of the public-scoping process are documented in a scoping report (BLM 2023a).

The BLM formally initiated the external scoping process for the RMPA/EA on August 11, 2023, with publication of an NOI in the FR (88 FR 54660). The NOI defined the end date of scoping as September 11, 2023, or 15 days after the last public meeting, whichever occurred later. The last public meeting was held on September 5, 2023, and public scoping closed on September 20, 2023. The public scoping period lasted a total of 40 days.

Outreach efforts conducted by the BLM included publication of the NOI, distribution of news releases on August 11, August 22, and August 24, 2023, that identified the start of the public scoping period, meeting dates, locations, and methods by which interested parties could comment, and the public-scoping meetings. The BLM hosted two public-scoping meetings, two in-person and one virtual (Table 4-1). The purpose of these meetings was to provide the public with an opportunity to be informed about the project, ask any questions they may have, and. in the case of the in-person meetings, to provide an opportunity to accept handwritten and hand-delivered comments.

Table 4-1. Scoping Meeting Information

Meeting Date and Time	Meeting Location	Approximate Number of Attendees
August 28, 2023, 6:00 to 8:00 p.m.	Sagebrush Inn and Suites, Taos, New Mexico	39
August 29, 2023, 6:00 to 8:00 p.m.	BLM New Mexico State Office, Santa Fe, New Mexico	4
September 5, 2023, 6:00 to 8:00 p.m.	Virtual via Zoom	19
TOTAL	**–**	**62**

The BLM received a total of 316 submissions during the scoping period. Most submissions were form letters, but 67 letters were unique submissions. Comments received were coded according to issue categories. The issue categories that were identified most frequently were: (1) recreation use and visitor services; (2) wildlife and fisheries; (3) rangeland health and livestock-grazing management; (4) travel, transportation, and access management; (5) cultural-resources management, Native American religious concerns, and Tribal use; and (6) hydrology (e.g., groundwater, surface water, wetlands, riparian areas, floodplains, water quality). Refer to Scoping Report Section 3, *Issue or Concern Statement and Comment Summaries* (BLM 2023a), for a summary of public comments; Table A.2 in Appendix A of the Scoping Report (BLM 2023a) provides all individual, substantive comments, sorted by topic. The Scoping Repot is available on the project website (https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2024165/570).

4.2 Consultation and Coordination with Federal, State, and Local Agencies and Tribes

4.2.1 Cooperating Agencies

Cooperating agencies include Federal, State, or local government agencies or Native American Tribes that entered into formal agreements with the BLM to help develop the environmental analysis for this RMPA/EA. The BLM invited 45 groups, comprising agencies and Tribes, to be cooperating agencies; of these, 11 signed, or are in the process of signing, formal Memoranda of Understanding with the BLM to share knowledge and resources throughout development of this RMP/EA, as shown in Table 4-2.

The BLM held an initial cooperating-agency meeting during the scoping period for the RMPA/EA to familiarize cooperators with the RMP-development process. The BLM held four meetings with the cooperating agencies in October and November 2023, giving time to these cooperators for them to comment on the preliminary alternatives and identify concerns or issues. The BLM provided the cooperating agencies with the opportunity to review the preliminary Draft RMPA/EA in February 2024 and revised the preliminary alternatives and analysis in the RMPA/EA based on those comments prior to releasing this Draft RMPA/EA to the public.

Table 4-2. Cooperating Agencies and Statuses

Invited Agency or Tribe	Response	MOU Status
All Pueblo Council of Governors	No response	–
Cochiti Pueblo	No response	–
Comanche Nation of Oklahoma	No response	–
East Rio Arriba Soil and Water Conservation District	Yes	Signed by both parties
Hopi Tribe	No response	–
Jicarilla Apache Nation	Yes	Awaiting signature
Kiowa Indian Tribe of Oklahoma	No response	–
National Park Service – Intermountain Region	No response	–
Navajo Nation	No response	–
New Mexico Department of Agriculture	Yes	Signed by both parties
New Mexico Department of Energy, Minerals, and Natural Resources	No response	–
New Mexico Department of Game and Fish	Yes	Signed by both parties
New Mexico Department of Transportation	No response	–
New Mexico Land Grants Council	Yes	Awaiting signature
New Mexico Outdoor Recreation Division	Yes	Signed by both parties
New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office	No response	–
New Mexico State Land Office	No response	–
Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo	No response	–
Pueblo of Isleta	No response	–
Pueblo of Nambe	No response	–
Pueblo of Picuris	No response	–
Pueblo of Pojoaque	No response	–
Pueblo of San Ildefonso	No response	–
Pueblo of Sandia	No response	–
Pueblo of Santa Clara	Yes	Awaiting signature
Pueblo of Santo Domingo	No response	–
Pueblo of Taos	No response	–
Pueblo of Tesuque	No response	–
Rio Arriba County	No response	–
Rio Arriba County Planning Department	No response	–
Southern Ute Tribe	No response	–
Taos County	No response	–
Taos County Chamber of Commerce	No response	–
Taos County Commission	No response	–
Taos Soil & Water Conservation District	Yes	Awaiting signature
Town of Taos	Yes	Signed by both parties
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency – Region 6	No response	–
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – Southwest Region	No response	–

Invited Agency or Tribe	Response	MOU Status
U.S. Forest Service – Carson National Forest	Yes	Signed by both parties
U.S. Geological Survey	Yes	Awaiting signature
U.S. Geological Survey – Core Research Center	No response	–
Village of Questa	No response	–
Zia Pueblo	No response	–
Zuni Pueblo	No response	–

MOU = Memorandum of Understanding.

4.2.2 Consultation with Tribes

Government-to-government consultation for the Draft RMPA/EA began in March 20, 2023, when the BLM sent preliminary letters to 21 Native American Tribes and Pueblos informing them of the BLM's intentions to prepare a plan for the Monument and seeking input on preliminary evaluation of potential issues to be addressed in the planning process. These letters were sent to the All Pueblo Council of Governors and the following Tribes and Pueblos: Cochiti Pueblo, Comanche Nation of Oklahoma, Hopi Tribe, Pueblo of Isleta, Jicarilla Apache Nation, Kiowa Indian Tribe of Oklahoma, Navajo Nation, Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, Pueblo of Nambe, Pueblo of Picuris, Pueblo of Pojoaque, Pueblo of San Ildefonso, Pueblo of Sandia, Pueblo of Santa Clara, Pueblo of Santo Domingo, Pueblo of Taos, Pueblo of Tesuque, Southern Ute Tribe, Zia Pueblo, and Zuni Pueblo.

BLM also sent formal invitations to the above-listed Tribal Nations/Pueblos to be cooperating agencies on May 26, 2023, as well as formal invitations to consult under Section 106 of the NHPA on June 23, 2023. The BLM invited Tribal Nations/Pueblos to participate under the provisions of Section 106 of the NHPA and as co-stewards per Secretarial Order 3403. Two Tribes and Pueblos, the Jicarilla Apache Nation and the Pueblo of Santa Clara, are in the process of signing a Memorandum of Understanding to be a cooperating agency for the Draft RMPA/EA under NEPA. Additionally, the Jicarilla Apache Nation, the Comanche Nation of Oklahoma, the Pueblo of Tesuque, the Pueblo of Isleta, and the Pueblo of Santa Clara are participating in the NHPA Section 106 process as consulting parties for this undertaking. The BLM hosted a NHPA Section 106 Consulting Parties meeting on October 16, 2023, providing an overview of the project, discussing the planning process, and providing an overview of the *Class I Cultural Resources Report* (Seltzer-Rogers 2024), which provides an overview of existing cultural-resources information and site-record data in the decision area. This report was also provided to the consulting Tribes for review on January 19, 2024. No comments have been received on the report. The BLM would continue to work closely with Tribes and Pueblos throughout research for and implementation of this project.

4.2.3 National Historic Preservations Act Section 106 Consultation

The BLM began formal NHPA Section 106 consultation for this Draft RMPA/EA on June 23, 2023, by inviting 23 Federal, State, and local agencies and organizations with a demonstrated interest in the project, as well as the All Pueblo Council of Governors and the 20 Tribes and Pueblos listed above in Section 4.2.1, *Consultation with Tribes*. Seven groups confirmed with the

BLM that they would like to participate as NHPA Section 106 consulting parties: the New Mexico SHPO, the Jicarilla Apache Nation, the Comanche Nation of Oklahoma, the Pueblo of Tesuque, the Pueblo of Isleta, the Pueblo of Santa Clara, the New Mexico State Land Office, the Archaeological Society of New Mexico, and the Taos County Historical Society. As described in Section 4.2.1, *Cooperating Agencies*, the BLM hosted a NHPA Section 106 Consulting Parties meeting on October 16, 2023, and provided the *Class I Cultural Resources Report* (Seltzer-Rogers 2024) to these parties on January 19, 2024. No comments were received on the report.

4.2.4 Endangered Species Act Section 7 Consultation

The BLM is preparing a Biological Assessment (BA) to evaluate the potential effects of this Draft RMPA/EA on species listed as Threatened or Endangered under the ESA. During the preparation of the BA, the BLM and the USFWS would engage in informal discussions regarding the species and habitats present in the decision area and the likely effects of the Draft RMPA/EA. USFWS would be provided with an opportunity to review and comment on the draft BA prior to initiating formal ESA Section 7 consultation. The BLM would not issue a FONSI until informal consultation is complete, or, if formal ESA 7 consultation in necessary, when the USFWS issues a Biological Opinion.

4.3 List of Preparers

The individuals involved in the preparation of this Draft RMPA/EA are listed in Table 4-3.

Table 4-3. List of Preparers

Name	Role
Bureau of Land Management	
Pamela Mathis	Taos Field Office Manager
Eric Valencia	Acting Taos Field Office Manager
Brad Higdon	Assistant Field Manager – Recreation
David Peters	Assistant Field Manager – Resources
David Alderman	State Planning Lead
Chris Anderson	Cultural Resources Specialist
Cameron Cox	Archaeologist
Sage Dunn	Fisheries and Aquatic Habitat Biologist, Science Coordinator
Paul Leatherbury	GIS Specialist
Pam Herrera-Olivas	Wildlife Specialist
Hebin Lin	Socioeconomics Specialist
Teddy Lucero	Recreation Specialist
Mark Lujan	Realty Specialist
Brianna Martinez	Range Management Specialist
Randy Roch	Recreation Specialist
Alex Stubberfield	Planning and Environmental Coordinator

Name	Role
Carl Thomson	Range Management Specialist
Tami Torres	Outdoor Recreation Planner
CJ Vialpando	Natural Resource Specialist (Fuels)
Sami Naibauer	Botanist/Ecologist
Barry Weinstock	Recreation Specialist
Chris Wenman	Geology Specialist
Contracting Team	
ICF	–
Chronicle Heritage	–
Barr Engineering Co.	–