



Arrastra Mountain Wilderness Addition

Environmental Assessment #AZ-030-2001-0021

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

Mr. David Gelbaum, owner of the Kane Ranch Land Stewardship and Cattle Company LLC, offered to donate 360 acres of private land to the BLM on the Palmerita Ranch in late 2000. His intent was that the land be included in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) by adding this acreage to the adjacent Arrastra Mountain Wilderness. The transfer of land to the federal government was completed on January 16, 2001, and BLM is now in the process of evaluating the land for wilderness suitability.

B. Purpose and Need

The purpose of this Environmental Assessment is to propose adding the private lands donated to the BLM by Mr. Gelbaum to the NWPS, and more specifically, to the Arrastra Mountain Wilderness. The proposed action is needed to comply with the wishes of the grantor and to determine whether the donated lands have the requisite wilderness characteristics for inclusion in the NWPS.

C. Conformance with Land Use Plan

The donated lands were listed in the Kingman Resource Management Plan (RMP) for acquisition to protect riparian values, as they lie within the Three Rivers Riparian Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) and within a segment of the Santa Maria River which BLM has recommended for inclusion into the National Wild and Scenic River System (NW&SRS). Designating all or a portion of these donated lands as wilderness would provide the type of resource protection called for in the RMP. Adding the donated lands that have wilderness characteristics to the wilderness area would not conflict with any RMP decisions. Therefore, the proposed action is in conformance with the land use plan.

D. Relationship to Statutes, Regulations and Other Plans

Section 6 of the Wilderness Act of 1964 provides the

authority for the BLM to accept gifts of land adjacent to wilderness, for preservation as wilderness, following 60 days' notice from the Secretary of the Interior to Congress.

II. DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. Proposed Action

The proposed action is to designate 260 acres of donated land (see Wilderness Suitability Recommendation Map) as part of the Arrastra Mountain Wilderness, following the required 60 days' notification to Congress of the Secretary's intentions. This proposal is derived from the attached Wilderness Inventory Evaluation. Considered in this evaluation was the degree of naturalness observed, which includes a determination of which lands were primarily affected by the forces of nature, with the evidence of man's works being substantially unnoticeable. Manmade features which were observed during the evaluation include vehicle routes, fences, irrigation ditches, irrigated pasture, buildings, earthwork, trash and other miscellaneous items.

Two segments of potentially-suitable land were eliminated from the proposed designation because of anticipated use of the irrigation ditches running along the south side of the Santa Maria River. These ditches cut off the two segments from the remainder of the potentially-suitable block. Ditch management is expected to involve extensive use of motorized equipment which would be incompatible with wilderness character.

The remainder of the donated property, approximately 100 acres, would be managed according to the prescriptive measures for the Three Rivers Riparian ACEC.

B. No Action

Under the no action alternative, the donated property would remain in public ownership and would be managed under the RMP prescriptive measures identified for the Three Rivers Riparian ACEC. Eventually, the area may become part of the NW&SRS, which would provide further resource protection for this land.

C. Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis

When the property was donated to the government, the landowner wished to have the entire 360 acres placed into

the Arrastra Mountain Wilderness. The wilderness inventory revealed that about 100 acres of the property did not contain wilderness character due to the presence of buildings, water tanks and irrigated pasture land and irrigation ditches which will be put to use on a periodic basis. In addition, two transportation rights-of-way were reserved in the transfer deed which cross part the property and would be incompatible with wilderness management. This 100 acres was removed from further wilderness consideration.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

A. General Setting

The Palmerita Ranch Wilderness Inventory Unit (WIU) is located in west central Arizona, about 50 miles east of Parker, along the Santa Maria River. The property straddles the line between Mohave and LaPaz Counties. Public land flanks the unit on the north and south, and other private properties are located on the east and west sides. The 129,800-acre Arrastra Mountain Wilderness is contiguous with the property on the north and east sides. Topography of the area includes the rugged toe slopes of the Poachie Mountain range, heavily dissected by washes, which lead down to the broad, sandy Santa Maria River drainage. This river flows to the west and drains into Alamo Lake a few miles downstream from the WIU. Elevation in the WIU ranges from 1,260 feet in the river bottom to 1,460 feet on the south side of the unit. Average annual precipitation is about three inches. Seasonal temperatures range from highs of 118 degrees F. in the summer to 70 degrees F. in the winter.

This WIU is very accessible by vehicle via an improved road that originates from the Alamo Road to the west and goes directly to the former ranch headquarters in the south central portion of the WIU.

B. Vegetation

Vegetation consists of riparian plants such as Goodings willow, Fremont cottonwood, seepwillow, arrowweed, and salt cedar in the river bottom, to mesquite bosques on terraces, to typical Sonoran desert vegetation, including saguaro cactus, staghorn cholla, ocotillo, creosotebush, white bursage and brittlebush on the drier uplands.

C. Wildlife/Special Status Species

The two major vegetation types, Sonoran Desert scrub and

riparian support numerous wildlife species including but not limited to desert mule deer, javelina, coyote, bobcat, desert cottontail, black-tailed jackrabbit, kangaroo rats, pocket mice, red-tailed hawk, zone-tailed hawk, mourning dove, white-winged dove, northern cardinal, Bell's vireo, yellow-breasted chat, yellow-rumped warbler, Gambels' quail, kingsnake, gophersnake, western diamondback rattlesnake, black-necked gartersnake, desert spiny lizard, western whiptail lizard, side-blotched lizard, zebra-tailed lizard, Arizona toad, and red-spotted toad.

The following BLM-sensitive wildlife species are found on this allotment: lowland leopard frog, longfin dace, and desert tortoise.

There is category 2 desert tortoise habitat located on this property, located primarily on the north side of the Santa Maria River. There are portions of category two also located on the old terraces south of the river. The area south of these terraces is not categorized as desert tortoise habitat due to the preponderance of creosote flat vegetation in this area.

This portion of the Santa Maria River does not contain suitable or potential southwestern willow flycatcher habitat. Geomorphically, this portion of the Santa Maria River cannot support the wide enough patches of woody riparian vegetation to provide suitable willow flycatcher habitat. Cottonwood and willow are either located in thin linear stands along the river channel or in braided, anastomosed stands. Suitable willow flycatcher habitat has been documented farther downstream at the confluence of the Big Sandy and Santa Maria Rivers.

D. Wilderness

Immediately adjacent to the Palmerita Ranch WIU is the Arrastra Mountain Wilderness, which was designated in November 1990 through the Arizona Desert Wilderness Act of 1990. This unit is one of the largest wilderness areas in Arizona, at 129,800 acres. The Poachie Mountains, which include the namesake Arrastra Mountain, make up a large percentage of the unit. The Santa Maria and Big Sandy Rivers flow through the middle of the wilderness. These two rivers are special features of the wilderness, as they represent some of the most important riparian communities and wildlife habitat in this part of Arizona. Because of its vast size and the dissected nature of the terrain, this wilderness unit provides some excellent opportunities for primitive recreation and chances to experience solitude.

E. Cultural Resources

There has been no detailed cultural resource survey conducted on the Palmerita Ranch property. The Kingman Field Office archaeologist conducted a reconnaissance survey at the ranch headquarters and along the road leading west from the headquarters. The headquarters consists of two historic adobe dwellings, one modern dwelling, other modern structures, and a historic family-cemetery. There are no known prehistoric or historic period Native American sites on the property. However, there is one prehistoric site recorded nearby along the north bank of the Santa Maria River on land administered by the BLM. There may be prehistoric and historic sites on the parcel designated for wilderness.

F. Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC)

The Three Rivers Riparian ACEC is located along the Santa Maria, Big Sandy and Bill Williams Rivers, and includes public lands within about two miles of these river drainages. It does not include lands that have already been placed in wilderness protection. The purpose of the ACEC is to protect and enhance aquatic, riparian and Threatened and Endangered resources, emphasizing total ecosystem management.

G. Recreation

The Palmerita Ranch WIU was private land up until very recently and was not available for public recreation. Nevertheless, the river bottom and some areas on the terraces have been subjected to periodic passage by 4-wheel drive vehicles (primarily ATVs) by recreation users. Other types of recreation use which might occur are hunting, hiking, backpacking and horseback riding.

H. Wild and Scenic Rivers

The Santa Maria River, including the portion passing through the Palmerita Ranch WIU, was studied by BLM for suitability for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System (NW&SRS) in the *Arizona Statewide Wild and Scenic Rivers Legislative Environmental Impact Statement (LEIS)*, dated December 1994. The Record of Decision for this LEIS recommended to Congress that this segment of the Santa Maria River be designated as a Wild River, based on the outstandingly remarkable scenic and fish and wildlife habitat values that it possesses. Until Congress acts on

the recommendation, this segment remains under interim management as a suitable segment for inclusion into the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

I. Riparian/Water Quality

The Santa Maria River is a major riparian area flowing from east to west through the WIU. Based on natural potential, the dominant trees in the riparian community are cottonwood, Gooddings willow, screwbean and honey mesquite. Most of the riparian vegetation consists of honey mesquite located on a low terrace above the existing flood plain. These flood plains were historically farmed; since the cessation of farming, honey mesquite has become established. Dominant trees and shrubs found in the more xeric portions of the river channel include salt cedar, seep willow, waterweed baccharis, and burro brush. Herbaceous vegetation consists of cattails, bullrush, along with numerous perennial and annual grasses and forbs.

Water quality in the river is generally considered to be good. However, periodic passage of recreational motor vehicles causes temporary spikes in the levels of sediment carried by flowing water.

J. Alamo Herd Management Area

The Palmerita Ranch WIU is located within the boundaries of the Alamo Herd Management Area (HMA). The Alamo HMA encompasses 341,034 acres and is bordered on the north by the Big Sandy HMA (243,885 ac.) and on the west by the Havasu HMA (450,790 ac.).

Management of wild burros in the Alamo HMA is in accordance with the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971, and guided by the Alamo Interim Herd Management Area Plan (HMAP). Additional burro management guidance is contained in the Terms and Conditions of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Biological Opinion (1997) relating to the Endangered Southwestern willow flycatcher.

BLM is managing for a herd population of 200 wild burros. Results of a wild burro census conducted in January 2000 indicate a current population of 380 animals. Another capture and removal of excess animals will be scheduled for December 2000. Water is the limiting factor in the Alamo HMA, therefore the majority of wild burro use occurs within 3-4 miles of the river corridor and Alamo Lake.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

A. Critical Elements

The following critical elements have been considered and either are not present and/or would not be affected by the proposed action or no action alternatives:

- prime or unique farmlands
- hazardous or solid waste
- Native American religious concerns
- floodplains
- air quality
- invasive, nonnative plant or animal species
- environmental justice

B. Proposed Action

1. Vegetation

The placement of 260 acres of the Palmerita Ranch WIU into wilderness would enhance vegetation health. With the closure of this acreage to motor vehicle use, plants would no longer be at risk of being crushed by vehicle wheels. Further, without motor vehicle use occurring, soil compaction will cease, resulting in improved growing conditions on previously disturbed areas. Finally, wilderness designation would prevent any future opportunity for mineral extraction on the property.

2. Wildlife/Special Status Species

As with vegetation, lands within the Palmerita Ranch WIU which are designated wilderness would provide protection to wildlife species from motorized recreation and mineral extraction activity.

3. Wilderness

The Wilderness Act goal of preserving lands in natural condition for the benefit of future generations would be furthered by placing additional acreage into the Arrastra Mountain Wilderness and the NWPS.

4. Cultural Resources

The placement of a portion of the Palmerita Ranch WIU into wilderness would prevent future surface-disturbing

activities on those lands, thus providing protection for both found and undiscovered historic and prehistoric resources that may be present.

However, converting the Palmerita parcel to wilderness may draw recreational users into the historic Palmerita Ranch headquarters. People seeking access to the southwestern portion of the Arrastra Mountain Wilderness will use the abandoned ranch headquarters as an impromptu parking area and trail head. Such unmanaged use probably will lead to vandalism of the historic buildings and cemetery, littering, unauthorized occupancy, and other management problems.

The site has a history of vandalism. Vandals have damaged the historic structures by breaking windows and putting graffiti on the walls. The problem is bad enough that the private owner had hired a security guard to live at the site in order to protect it.

5. Area of Critical Environmental Concern

Implementing the proposed action would provide the additional protections of the Wilderness Act to the Three Rivers Riparian ACEC.

6. Recreation

The placement of a portion of the Palmerita Ranch WIU into wilderness would reduce the availability of motorized recreation in that river drainage, but would improve the availability of primitive recreation and solitude experiences.

7. Wild and Scenic Rivers

Lands in the WIU which are given a wilderness designation will provide further protection for the outstandingly remarkable values which caused this segment of the Santa Maria River to be recommended for inclusion into the NW&SRS.

8. Riparian/Water Quality

Initiation of the proposed action would provide a further measure of protection to riparian values, and would eliminate the disruptions caused to water quality by passage of motor vehicles.

9. Wild Burro Management

As would be the case with wildlife, wilderness designation would provide improved habitat conditions for these herbivores. Management of the burro herd could be slightly more difficult because of the loss of opportunities to use motor vehicles and traps within wilderness areas.

C. No Action

Under the no action alternative, there would be no change from the existing situation. ACEC designation and interim protection under the National Wild and Scenic River Act would continue to provide substantial protection for natural resources present on site.

D. Cumulative Impacts

Along with BLM's efforts to acquire wilderness inholdings in the State of Arizona, implementation of the proposed action would add to the amount of public lands in the NWPS. Conversely, these actions also lessen the amount of public land available for motorized recreation activities.

V. Mitigation Measures

None

VI. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

A. Public and Agencies

527 interested parties were mailed notification of the preparation of this EA on January 26, 2001, and were offered the opportunity to submit comments and concerns.

B. List of Preparers

Bruce M. Asbjorn, Outdoor Recreation Planner, Kingman Field Office

John R. Rose, Archaeologist, Kingman Field Office

David R. Smith, Wildlife Biologist, Kingman Field Office

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FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Arrastra Mountain Wilderness Addition

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Finding of No Significant Impacts: Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the attached environmental assessment, I have determined that impacts are not expected to be significant and an environmental impact statement is not required.

Field Office Manager

Date