

**SUMMARY MINUTES
BLM SOUTHERN NEW MEXICO
RESOURCE ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING
August 5, 2021**

Call to Order, Welcome and Introductions - Bill Childress, Las Cruces BLM District Manager, opened the meeting and RAC Chairman Jerry Schickedanz asked all attendees to introduce themselves. RAC member attendees were Chairman Schickedanz, John Cornell, Walter Pittman, Jim Hyatt, Emily Wirth, Travis Day and Earl Greer. Also in attendance were BLM Acting State Director Melanie Barnes, Bill Childress, Las Cruces District Manager, Chuck Schmidt, Roswell Field Manager, Ass't. Field Manager for Lands & Minerals Ruben Sanchez, Ass't. Field Manager for Resources Randy Howard, Mark Mathews, Socorro Field Office, National Monument Manager Mara Weisenberger, Las Cruces District, Dave Evans, Carlsbad Field Office and RAC coordinator Glen Garnand.

Determination of Quorum – Mr. Garnand confirmed that a quorum was in place.

Approval of Minutes – A motion was made to approve the minutes of the December 2, 2020 meeting and passed by acclamation.

Secretarial Priorities Update – Acting State Director Melanie Barnes gave an update on both the Department and State priorities. A narrative was given on the following:

Supporting Employees, filling vacancies, reducing time to fill vacancies, and improving morale

Changing fire workforce to year-round status, increasing pay and being able to be a nationwide assistance

Restructure of the workforce at the Helium Plant

Develop relationships with Tribes in the four-state area, improving consultations and building a fiduciary trust.

Recreation Access

Great American Outdoors Act

Sabinoso Wilderness Land Acquisition

Land & Water Conservation Fund

Collaborating with partners for recreation on BLM

Planning & NEPA

Monument RMPs – listed those in progress

Dingell Act

Designation of Wilderness areas

State Land Exchange

Many requirements in other parts of State areas

Landscape & Habitat Resilience

Support goal for 2030 – conserving 30% of lands
Vegetative treatments/climate change
Energy/Minerals

Support implementation of renewables across the state
Plugging orphan wells and help those without expertise
Climate change
Reduce greenhouse gasses
Mitigate reduction from oil & gas operations
Involve communities in NEPA – outreach

Ms. Barnes asked for any questions or comments.

Mr. Cornell asked for timelines on several items, and these were answered as follows:

Carlsbad Field Office Plan – Dave Evans will address in later presentation on agenda. Is a diverse scenario with the USFS, Forest Service and all impacted involved- anticipate another four (4) years, currently working with contractor

Startup of Tri-County Plan – Bill Childress responded that contract is in place for the EIS, will start in October

Organ Mountain RMP – will be addressed in presentation of another agenda item

Mr. Cornell suggested that impacts on wildlife need more study and was told partnership with the Game and Fish is stronger than in the past.

Mr. Schickedanz asked about the 30 by 30 progress and outlook/definitions and was told this may be pretty broad across the country.

Mr. Cornell asked for an update on Sun Zia and completion date. The schedule is to publish a Final EIS in 2022, have a draft by the winter of 2021. There are no additional concerns, the same as 2008.

Secretarial Orders Updates for Oil & Gas Field Offices

Roswell -Ruben Sanchez discussed the Roswell Field Office (RFO). Numbers were steady, COVID had effects, but getting back to normal in the south and east formations in Chaves County. Working with plugging of wells and old infrastructures, trying to move forward with old cleanup. New Mexico Oil & Gas Conservation Division (NMOCD) will work with BLM on this effort. To the question of what is involved in the plugging, Mr. Sanchez explained that BLM first starts with the oil and gas operator, then to the lessee and then start discussions with NMOCD. If the well is determined orphaned all efforts must first be exhausted and if all proposals are unsuccessful, will then contact NMOCD to work together on issues.

Regarding closeness to prairie chicken habitat, Mr. Sanchez relayed that the 2008 RMP addresses both the Chicken and Sand dune lizard. If there is movement to the north, the Plan helps with decisions about progressing there. If the area is primary, decision is cut and dry. If on the edges, these must be looked at and decisions made. The 2008 RMP does a great job of protecting T&E species.

Carlsbad – Dave Evans reported that activity had slowed down. Last year 2500 APDs were approved, and we are currently on track to be near that number this year. Year-to-date 2,015 APD's have been approved. Regarding habitat fragmentation, there is less due to the long horizontal wells drilled. A single location with multiple wells that go over two (2) miles of habitat results in a smaller footprint during development as compared to historical 40-acre spacing for full field development.

Socorro – Mark Mathews reported no activity of APDs or leasing over the last four (4) years. Very few areas are leased.

There was a comment that the moratorium doesn't appear to effect APDs issued and pending and was it safe to say no impact on production and development. Mr. Evans commented that all will be looked at on a case-by-case basis and further guidance is awaited. Industry is being cautious, with strategic development and conscientious of impacts is being seen. Also seeing a reduction in venting/flaring and more completions are being seen.

Great Outdoors Act:

Las Cruces:

Seven (7) projects were funded this year in the Las Cruces district. These include:
Permian trackway road
Starvation Draw
Palomas Dam
Apache Dam
Caballo & Cook's Peak roads
Cox and McGreagor Wells
Lake Valley

In renewables, there are three (3) companies proposing solar projects in the Lordsburg area and Afton area south of Las Cruces. One company is proposing wind energy projects south of Lordsburg and north of Deming.

Roswell:

Recreation projects include Valley of Fire campground, much visited spot in the State. Upgrades being done and signs being replaced.

Rob Jagers Campground expansion – electricity/water being worked on.
Rio Bonito – have four tracts, river restoration was done with an engineering firm and Game & Fish stocks an area regularly. Area has held up well after recent flooding events.
Mescalero Sands – currently an OHV area, plans to expand.
Haystack Mtn. – new water well.

There is interest in the center of the state and Roswell is working with Albuquerque/Rio Puerco re windfarms on private land.

Socorro:

Borderland wind project ties into Tucson Electric line.
project.

Datil Campground – working on upgrades, adding electricity to camp sites. May increase fees at a later date.

New Mexico Climbing Club- NM Tech, are our partners with the Box Canyon

Carlsbad:

Sunset Reef Campground – provides opportunity for both RVs and tents. Cooperation between federal agencies, industry and the community.

Six-mile Dam project – to day use area, cooperation with Mescalero Apache, BLM, the City of Carlsbad, and Eddy County.

Reclamation/Restoration done on mesquite and creosote. Cleanup on illegal dumping.

It was asked if the monsoons had/were having impacts.

Mr. Childress relayed that the local Las Cruces area is below average in rainfall, but ranchers/operators are reporting some rains throughout the District.

Mr. Mathews stated that rain is good in his field office but need more. It seems to be uniform, out west seeing later storms. Some areas are better than others, but overall better than in previous years.

Mr. Schmidt discussed the eastern part of the state and the very substantial green-up and forage. Flooding became a concern in some areas.

Mr. Evans stated there is a great green-up in CFO, looks great with reclamation areas.

LWCF Project Updates from each office – Chuck Schmidt relayed that this is a nationwide program, funded by royalties from offshore oil and gas production. Congress dedicated funds and opened competition within Interior for funding. The Great Outdoors Act fully funded LWCF. More money is available, which leads to opportunity to get funding in high priority areas.

Rowell:

Ruben Sanchez discussed a map shown and plans to expand recreation in the area.

1. Valley of Fire acquisition, 200 acres, being worked on with the landowner. Will be working on ESA, PTO, and start the IVIS process to request appraisal.
2. A proposal for 2023 is the Pecos River-Oxbow acquisition. This is 240 acres east off 380, butting up to Bitter Lake Refuge. Will have easy access, expand to fishing and access to parcels to east and west on contiguous property. There is consistent water in Oxbow. Great river frontage and no big cuts in bank. This acquisition is special and close to town. May have a recreation area/fee use area in the future.
3. Rio Bonito Ponds area – a special acquisition, off of 380 just west of Lincoln, in between tracts 2 and 3. Access is off of 380. There are four (4) ponds within the parcel, used by landowner and is also stocked. Will be a popular area. Submission requested to be able to acquire LWCF funds. Structures on the area are being discussed.

Mr. Schickedanz asked if it was currently farmland and was told yes, there are water rights tied to the property. Currently grass is grown, and owner produces livestock.

Mr. Schmidt relayed that BLM has water rights on the other tracts and works with the State Engineer and Stream Commission to benefit all in the area.

Mr. Cornell asked if the Bitter Lakes National Wildlife Refuge could be expanded under this acquisition. Mr. Schmidt replied that BLM could not speak to that as BLM has no authority over the Refuge. The proposal is for BLM to acquire and manage the area, but that the agencies do cooperate well.

Carlsbad:

No projects currently proposed

Las Cruces:

Organ Mountains Desert Peaks National Monument has several LWCF projects.

Achenbach Canyon – 6 parcels, total of 181.2 acres, 3 from each land group, 106.20 acres and 75.05 acres. Steps were listed to take place over the next 12-18 months. These include title, permission, inspection, reports, and environmental documents (cultural, T&E, recreation, etc.) and appraisal preparation.

Sierra Vista Trail – to connect to Achenbach Canyon will be a primitive trail, as is near wilderness area and community property residences nearby.

Vetlaw – 101 acres – would include easement to the parcels. This would connect to the monument area. Public has a ridge line hiking area currently and it would provide more access for the public.

Socorro:

No new proposal. Acquisition acquired in 2017 on north end of Datil. Much goes on to acquire, and after acquisition. The area was not fenced, this was done two (2) years ago. A company has been contracted for thinning to bring back the environment.

Before breaking for lunch, Mr. Schickedanz asked if there was any information on the appointments of those expiring soon. He was told that current appointment candidates are being vetted in the Washington Office.

It was asked if Las Cruces is involved in immigration issues, having border land in the District. Response was that they have quarterly meetings with Border Patrol personnel.

Mr. Childress explained an ongoing operation, designed to have law enforcement from other BLM areas. This allows 12 rangers doing surveillance in concert with the Border Patrol. It gives more opportunity to become aware of all issues to be addressed.

Mr. Childress stated that there is no increased vandalism to range improvements being seen, LCDO does have funding for trash removal.

Mr. Schickedanz relayed that improvement in trash cleanup has been seen. and there are opportunities available to have the public help identify illegal dump sites.

Mr. Day mentioned COVID restrictions and asked when all sites will be open. Response was that they are somewhat open with a 25% occupancy rate and must be masked in some areas.

Mr. Cornell asked about a horse problem in Ladrones. He was told yes that they come off the reservation. The horses are scattered but transit. If ownership cannot be proven they remain BLM's problem. Mr. Cornell added this is a controversial problem and that if the RAC can help they will be willing.

Grazing Allotment Permit Renewals (update on new proposed Regs.)

Socorro - began in 1999, still working on. 75% through the 2nd generation of renewals. Of 260 allotments, 170 in the 2nd round, 25 this year. Twenty to go by the end of the fiscal year and hope to make it!

Mr. Schickedanz mentioned that with the fluid nature of the office and low staffing and backup much turnover impact targets getting done.

Roswell – within Pecos every grazing permit has first generation of NEPA completed. Nearing completion of 2nd generation and starting on 3rd completed. Complicated by policy – decision that if ranch transferred, NEPA must be done again or permit until 10-year cycle comes around again. These are processed under FLPMA. Currently, Roswell has 280 fully

processed, 45 in process, 30 FLPMA permits. Monitoring 36 a year is planned, sometimes more, depending on expiring permits. Trends, conditions, etc. are tracked through Rangeland monitoring.

Carlsbad - We currently have 164 permits in FLPMA status, 106 permits are fully processed. 7 of the 164 FLPMA permits should become fully processed this year (data was collected in 2019/2020, NEPA review completed in 2019/2020, currently in a 45-day protest and appeal period). Sixteen of the 106 fully processed permits are expiring in 2022. The monitoring studies are complete for these but the data analysis/summary and NEPA documents are not complete. We hope to complete the NEPA process this year. Thirty of the 106 fully processed permits are expiring in 2023. We plan to complete monitoring studies for these allotments before spring 2022.

Part of the permit renewal process is completing a land health evaluation report (LHE) using any data collected in the evaluation area (can be from range studies, AIM studies, PFCs, etc.). It's a data summary and evaluation of whether the allotment(s) are meeting NM's land health standards. I'm working on completing a template for this document so that we can process the LHE and NEPA document faster moving forward. A useable database would also help smooth out this process. Right now, pre-2017 data is in an Access database that has some glitches and everything after that is in Excel.

We are still cleaning up/digitizing data from 2018–2021 monitoring studies. We are using a combination of paper data collection and Survey123 data collection in the field. We would like to switch to all electronic data collection and/or create a more functional, efficient database than the one we currently have.

We are in the process of hiring 2 CCNM interns to help with this year's monitoring and data entry. We did not complete monitoring of all range studies that were due in 2018 and 2019. We might need to go back and complete these so there's not a gap in the long-term trend data.

Las Cruces – of 603 allotments, 455 are 75% NEPA, 148 to complete. Decisions this month on 13 permits. Of 603 allotments, 38 are in the monument. In the monument 8 allotments require a 1st generation NEPA document. We anticipate four (4) allotments will be completed this month. Four (4) more allotments will be processed in the near future.

There are 50/60 transfers at any given time. Much movement going on. No one without a permit – if not fully, then issued under FLPMA. 148 to complete, eight (8) in the monument, 140 to go. Nine (9) to be issued within the District.

Mr. Schickedanz asked if there were many challenges or protests. The answer was “no” only comments on EAs, mostly from the Grazing Board in Otero County. He asked about the other Districts. Last one in Las Cruces was in 2007, no appeals in Roswell and no appeals or protests in Carlsbad.

Mr. Cornell stated that it seems that a 10/year plan is just not quick enough; that it should be a 3-year if BLM really wants to monitor.

Mr. Schmidt told the group that non-use applications are being encouraged, dealing with weather issues.

Mr. Cornell commented that he knew that most are responsible stewards of the land.

Mr. Childress stated that there had been no new decisions or updates from the new administration.

Organ Mountains Desert Peaks National Monument Update – Mara Weisenberger, Monument manager relayed that the Organ Mountains Desert Peaks was designated in 2014. Prior to 2014, the four (4) geological areas, the Organ Mountains, Dona Ana Mountains, Sierra del Las Uvas/Robledo Mountains, and Portillo Mountains were managed by the Bureau of Land Management. There are 10 Wilderness areas within the Monument, recently designated in 2019 as part of the S.47 Bill, John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management and Recreation Act (Dingell Act). Funding has been secured to initiate the Resource Management Plan. Now working on preparation for the Plan and will institute a contract this year with a kickoff expected in late FY 22.

Milestones were shown for each fiscal year, 2014 to 2020, in preparation of the plan. A final draft Analysis of the Management Situation was completed in 2018, setting out issues to address, which included workshops, surveys and meetings with the public in several areas.

In FY 2021, continued inventories. The following schedule was listed for the Plan:

In 2022 continue resource inventories pending funding availability and develop alternatives, and effects.

NOI in FY 2022, public scoping meetings and review for 30-days.

In FY 2023, Draft RMP/EIS and incorporate comments then the 90-day comment period, additional meetings.

FY 2024, NOA for proposed RMP/EIS, 30-day Protest Period concurrent with 60-day Governor's Consistency Review and then decision and approved RMP.

Resource inventories were listed, and a screen shot shown to the RAC members. These were discussed, as well as mention of a letter of agreement concerning research to be done with other agencies.

Ms. Weisenberger discussed the use of motorized/mechanized vehicles being prohibited in wilderness areas under the Dingell Act. Cable and gates will be installed where needed at pertinent locations. Some roads are excluded from the wilderness area and can be used.

A map of the area was shown, and Parcel D was discussed. This parcel has been identified by Congress for a decision to be made by the Department of Defense regarding recreational use on 2,035 acres currently managed by Fort Bliss.

There are 496,529 acres within the Organ Mountain Desert Peaks National Monument, predominately in Dona Ana County. Just under half of the monument now includes wilderness (241,554 acres).

Other topics being addressed include improvements for public access, future LWCF nomination prioritization, trash remediation and vandalism cleanup. Currently working with El Paso Electric Co. and others regarding erosion remediation. Kiosks and panels are being updated with a new look using both English and Spanish. Ten new brochures are being issued and will be uploaded to the BLM Web site.

Long-term range monitoring has been completed for Dripping springs, Baylor Canyon, and Saddle Mountain Allotments. Expected date for a Decision is expected by the end of FY 21 for four (4) permit renewals for the Aden Hills, Mimms Well, Horse Canyon, and Angostura Allotments. The architectural and engineering for a remodel of the Dripping Springs visitor center has been completed and the next step is to secure funding for a construction contracted for the building and develop interpretive and educational displays for the remodel.

Mr. Cornell asked about the status of land exchanges, and doesn't it make sense to have a Plan in place first? He was told that a tentative goal is to complete by the end of 2022. When the feasibility report is done and approved the exchange process will begin. There are no issues with acquiring, but Plan Amendments may be necessary regarding disposition of land to the State.

Mr. Schickedanz asked what the issue regarding vehicle use within the wilderness is and how large is the trespass issue within the wilderness by hunters? Ms. Weisenberger explained that the Wilderness Act of 1964 does not allow for motorized or mechanized use in wilderness areas. He was told that in the Portillo Mountains, some roads previously closed are now available with wilderness designation and monitoring is being done and mitigation is done where necessary.

Public Comment Period:

The public comment period was opened at 2:30 pm and Mr. Christopher Johnson asked if methane mitigation is part of the orphan well policy and what is the status of control of weeds?

Haystack Mountain OHV recreation area – there is water and power there and will there be more areas added? Randy Howard replied that this is in the plans, that they want to expand and add five new shelters and someday a group shelter. Also, a fee site in the future.

Mr. Evans responded to the methane gas question. The State of New Mexico is putting out new guidance regarding methane measurements and capture. There are financial, environmental, and social benefits to capturing methane by industry. Orphan wells initiative doesn't address this but every time a plugging is done it reduces emissions.

While allowing time for more public comment to come in, the RAC members had several questions addressed.

The status of the easement for the Continental Divide Scenic Trail.
It is being worked on and further information will be gotten to the RAC.

Any T&E issues seen coming?
There are some allotments with T&E species, and they will be addressing these.

Mr. Schmidt relayed that the Fish & Wildlife Service gave notice to list the prairie chicken as endangered and other areas as threatened. Also, the Dune sagebrush lizard is on the horizon. Comments are open to the public on the Prairie Chicken listing proposal. The comment period has been extended 30 days on the proposed listing.

Mr. Schmidt also discussed the National Public Lands Day that takes place in early September. The CFO has an event planned and so does Las Cruces. Carlsbad will be doing campground work and has a project on the Black River at a day use area. Socorro has an ORV use road needing rehabilitation. Las Cruces will have a mountain cleanup event and Roswell will be working with the girl scouts at the Rob Jagers area.

The public comment period was formally closed at 3:00 pm. There was one question from an attendee and two (2) asked through "chat" feature of virtual meeting.

RAC DISCUSSION:

Chairman Schickedanz asked the members for comments on the possibility of a field trip for their next meeting. Mr. Cornell asked if they could get one in before the end of the year. A meeting was suggested at the ft. Stanton NCA to see the Rio Bonito Pond area planned for recreation if LWCF funding is secured.

When asked for issues they might want to see, Mr. Schickedanz mentioned possibly something regarding oil and gas development regarding greenhouse gases. Several other issues were mentioned, and the possibility of a field trip to observe the technology reduction of habitat fragmentation by oil and gas industry, potash area in CFO, updates on renewable projects, State land exchange, 30/30 process proposal in general.

Mr. Schickedanz stated that he would like comments from the group about having a meeting at least three (3) times a year.

Mr. Cornell asked for a target to be January/February 2022 for the next meeting and that a field trip be considered.

This will be looked at, as well as a face-to-face meeting if possible. The last week of January will be targeted.

The meeting adjourned at 3:18 pm.