

Briefing Statement

Date: October 9, 2003

Title: Amargosa River Concerns

Purpose:

To apprise key managers of the current situation with respect to water rights in the Amargosa River. The proper management of water rights will critically affect BLM's ability to manage its natural resources over the long term in the region. Law requires the protection of many of the Amargosa's resources.

Issues:

The Amargosa River, whose headwaters begin in the mountains of Nevada, is located in the northeastern portion of the Barstow Resource Area. The River has hydrologic continuity with Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge and terminates in Death Valley National Park at Bad Water. The Amargosa River and its tributaries contain aquatic and riparian habitats essential for the survival of a rich assemblage of plants and animals.

1. Seven listed species, five species of special concern and three BLM sensitive species reside in habitat created by waters from the Amargosa. Numerous endemic species are obligate to the Amargosa's water dependant habitats.
2. Eight BLM wildernesses are located in the Amargosa watershed. The river itself flows through the Kinston Range Wilderness.
3. Almost twenty miles of the Amargosa River, from Shoshone to State Highway 127, have been determined to be eligible for the inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System.
4. Six Public Water Reserves, which ground water fed, are located in close proximity to the river.
5. The Old Spanish Trail, which follows the Amargosa, was recently included in the National Historic Trails System.
6. The Northern and Eastern Mojave Plan Amendment (NEMO) to the California Desert Conservation Area Plan (CDCA) created the Amargosa River Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). The management plan for the Amargosa River ACEC will provide specific administrative guidance for managing a variety of natural, historical, cultural, scenic, and recreational systems, resources, and values present within the ACEC. It is currently in draft form and is being prepared in conjunction with an accompanying environmental assessment (EA). The plan will require consultation with FWS.
7. The Amargosa River is about one hour from Las Vegas, Nevada and about three hours from Los Angeles, California. Both metropolitan areas predict significant population increases. This increase in population, coupled with new designations of the area's resources, will potentially impact the Amargosa through increased recreational pressure.
8. Ground water pumping in rapidly developing Nevada communities might potentially impact ground levels and discharges along the Amargosa in California.

The main issue here is the protection of current surface and ground water flows needed to maintain the sensitive species and their habitats, wilderness, Wild and Scenic River, and recreation resources that are dependant on the Amargosa's water.

Main Decision or Message:

There is a lush riparian zone located along the Amargosa River, which supports federally listed species such as the southwestern willow flycatcher and least Bell's vireo, as well as numerous avian species listed by the State of California as Species of Special Concern. The yellow-billed cuckoo, a federal candidate for listing has also been found within the riparian areas of Amargosa Canyon.

Other emergent wetland habitats adjacent to the river in the Tecopa Hot Springs area support the endemic Amargosa vole. Critical habitat for this subspecies of the California vole has been established within the Grimshaw Basin and northern end of the Amargosa Canyon.

Additionally, unique, alkali flats (lower Carson Slough) located about five miles northeast of Death Valley Junction support populations of the federally endangered Amargosa niterwort. This species has also been found on similar habitats in the Tecopa Hot Springs area in Grimshaw Basin. The lower Carson Slough is located in an area that receives surface and subsurface flows from springs in Ash Meadows, Nevada. The slough serves as the point where surface and subsurface flows from Ash Meadows, and flows from the main Amargosa River come together. Wet saltgrass meadows located in the lower Carson Slough also support populations of the federally endangered Ash Meadows gumplant, and possibly populations of the federally threatened spring-loving centauray.

Other species, listed by the BLM as sensitive, rely on the river as well. Populations of the Amargosa River speckled dace and the Amargosa pupfish inhabit perennial waters within the Amargosa Canyon. Populations of Tecopa bird's beak have been found in the Grimshaw Basin and at Lower Carson Slough.

The regional carbonate aquifer thought to feed the Amargosa derives its recharge from precipitation that falls at higher elevations. Water that passes through the aquifer comes to the surface as springs, seeps, or as broad diffused discharge areas such as playas or salt flats. The desert climate in this area has developed over the last 15,000 years. As precipitation rates have declined, so have percolation rates into the aquifer. The majority of water, which flows from springs that feed the Amargosa River, is likely precipitation that fell thousands of years ago, rather than months ago.

Several populated areas in Nevada are experiencing recent residential/commercial development such as Pahrump, Nevada; and the Frontline Subdivision in Clark County, Nevada located just across the state line. The Timbisha Shoshone Tribe will develop an approximately 1,000-acre reservation near Death Valley Junction in the coming years.

Population growth in these areas is expected to increase in the foreseeable future. One cumulative long-term human impact is groundwater depletion, the same groundwater that plays a significant role in maintaining surface flows for the Amargosa River as well as lower Carson Slough and the wetland areas of Grimshaw Basin.

Water is the limiting factor in the presence and extent of habitat for the listed and sensitive species that reside in the Amargosa region. As land managers, we are poised at a unique point in time to become proactive in managing key water resources that support these rare resources in this portion of the Mojave Desert.

Bureau Perspective:

The Bureau has a clear responsibility to take an active role in securing adequate water for the continued hydrology that supports the Amargosa vole, Amargosa niterwort, Ash Meadows gumplant, the Amargosa Wild and Scenic River, public water reserves, various riparian resources along the Amargosa River, and the Kingston Range Wilderness. Protection of water resources will also help to conserve BLM Sensitive Species and other species listed by California as Species of Special Concern. By protecting the Amargosa's water dependant habitats, we will be helping to prevent the listing of more species under the Endangered Species Act.

BLM must assert its water rights resulting from wilderness, Wild and Scenic River, and the six public water reserves located on the Amargosa River. Monitoring of flows must begin immediately to establish baseline flow data. Additional funding will be required to implement flow monitoring. An instream flow study will help determine the required flows necessary to maintain the area's resources. BLM California must establish communication and consultation with the Nevada State Engineer in order to protect the Amargosa aquifer.

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