



BRIEFING STATEMENT

Date: November 19, 2009

Title: Coordination of Rapid Ecoregional Assessments

Issue: BLM, CDFG, and The Nature Conservancy are each initiating rapid regional assessments of the California deserts. REAT agencies will reduce redundancy and gain efficiencies by closely coordinating the processes and desired outcomes.

Background

BLM, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), and the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) will each be initiating rapid ecoregional assessments in the fall of 2009. The CDFG assessment is part of the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP) and will be used a permitting tool under the California Endangered Species Act. The BLM assessments will result in spatially identified strategies that will be stepped down into management activities. Additionally, BLM will integrate the DRECP into its resource management plans. TNC will ultimately make its own recommendations for conservation to the agencies but much of the TNC assessment will require the completion of specific tasks that are also required for the agencies' efforts. While each assessment may have slightly different outcomes, each partner's effort will require assemblage of the same data sets and will involve similar modeling exercises. Each partner's effort will analyze the entire Mojave (California, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona) and the Lower Colorado (California Sonoran) deserts. Any coordinated effort between BLM, TNC, and CDFG must also coordinate and complement the numerous other on-going relevant investigations.

BLM

The BLM is initiating rapid ecoregional assessments throughout the Southwest. The Mojave Desert assessment will attempt to answer high-level questions related to the appropriate siting of renewable energy and conservation areas. The Sonoran Desert assessment is still in its initiation phase but will have similar goals.

BLM will assess the resource values of native species of concern, and regionally important terrestrial and aquatic ecological features and the change agents of invasive species, wild land fire, development (including renewable energy), and climate change. Keystone species for the Mojave assessment are big horn sheep, desert tortoise, and Mohave ground squirrel. BLM will identify and evaluate available data for the Mojave Desert in the fall of 2009. In this phase, BLM will refine management questions with stakeholders and partners; define significant ecological values to be assessed across the ecoregion; define significant change agents affecting ecological values; review existing assessments, data, and models; identify information gaps; and develop data standards and a data management plan. In the assessment phase, BLM will map ecological values and change agent

attributes; assess the status, risks, and trends associated with ecological values; and categorize ecological values based on exposure to change agents. BLM plans to complete the assessment no later than January 2011. While BLM needs to “own” the assessments, they will be a partner/stakeholder exercise.

TNC

TNC has already initiated an independent analysis of the Mojave and the Lower Colorado deserts to inform decisions related to siting, mitigation, and cumulative impacts of renewable energy development. This analysis will result in:

- a spatially-explicit analysis of the minimum area(s) needed to achieve specified conservation goals (for identified conservation targets) and TNC’s identification of "irreplaceable" areas that from a conservation perspective should be avoided due to their outstandingly unique biological values, including vital connectivity between core conservation areas;
- an analysis of threats and stresses to conservation targets, including development, fragmentation of habitat, wildfire, invasive species, and climate change;
- an assessment of climate change adaptation needs, which is currently a key data gap needed to effectively plan for both development and conservation;
- an evaluation of alternative development scenarios, cumulative biological impacts over time, and mitigation scenarios; and
- prediction of areas that are most likely to be impacted by invasive species, wildfires, and urban expansion.

TNC will completed their analysis will be completed by winter 2010. Initial data collection will be completed by February 2010 and results from initial analysis will be available in spring 2010.

Proposed Actions

- BLM and CDFG establish a multi-disciplinary, interagency core assessment team of scientists, ecologists, planners, etc from BLM, CDFG, and TNC. Engage USGS as scientific advisor and peer review for the entire process.
- BLM and CDFG convene a workshop of BLM National Operations Center (NOC) staff, TNC scientists, USGS scientists, and CDFG scientists to:
 - develop common data standards and data management and sharing protocols;
 - jointly develop a milestone table for deliverables to REAT that will meet each partner’s needs;
 - develop a detailed joint work plan of tasks that each group will provide and deliverables required by each group; and
 - establish a schedule of regular meetings between the core team from BLM, CDFG, TNC, and USGS.

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