

United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Environmental Assessment DOI-BLM-CA-D060-2024-0001-EA

Finding of No Significant Impact
for the
Comprehensive River Management Plan for the Whitewater River Wild and
Scenic River
Riverside and San Bernardino County, California

California Desert District
Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office
1201 Bird Center Drive
Palm Springs, CA 92262



Finding of No Significant Impact California Desert District Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office

INTRODUCTION:

As the lead federal agency under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the USFS prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Whitewater River Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive River Management Plan (CRMP) and the BLM served as a cooperating agency and adopts the EA (DOI-BLM-CA-D060-2024-0001-EA). The river corridor has been managed as a designated wild and scenic river (WSR) since the 2019 John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act added 28.1 miles of the Whitewater River to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The US Forest Service (FS) and BLM jointly administer Whitewater River. The Bureau of Land Management administers 9.0 river miles, and the Forest Service administers 19.1 river miles. The river segment under FS jurisdiction is part of the Front Country Ranger District of the San Bernardino National Forest. The sections under BLM jurisdiction are part of the California Desert District Office area, administered by the Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office. The designated Whitewater River corridor is also located within the Sand to Snow National Monument, designated by Presidential Proclamation in 2016. The Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (PCT) also runs through the corridor.

The EA analyzed the proposed action and no action alternatives in detail. The statements and conclusion reached in this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) are based on the documentation and analysis provided in the EA related to the Proposed Action.

The proposed action is to adopt a CRMP for the Whitewater River. This proposed CRMP would cover the designated wild and scenic river (WSR), which is in the California Desert Conservation Area. The CRMP provides overall management direction and there are no surface disturbing-activities associated with the proposed action. Actions proposed include identifying desired future conditions for protecting and enhancing river values, including outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs), free-flow, and water quality; delineating a final river management boundary; establishing visitor capacity levels for the river; and establishing a monitoring strategy.

ADOPTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT:

As the lead federal agency under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the USFS prepared the EA (DOI-BLM-CA-D060-2024-0001-EA) for the Whitewater River Wild and Scenic River CRMP. The BLM served as a cooperating agency under NEPA for the preparation of the EA, providing input on the scope and issues included in the environmental analysis as well as determining the appropriate public engagement and associated revisions to the EA.

Consistent with Public Law 91-190, I have independently reviewed the EA prepared by the USFS for the Whitewater River Wild and Scenic River CRMP and found it sufficient and

complete. The BLM concludes that all comments, suggestions, analysis, and public review requirements have been satisfied and hereby adopts the EA for compliance under the NEPA.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT:

Based on my review of the attached EA (DOI-BLM-CA-D060-2024-0001-EA) and supporting documents, I have determined that the Proposed Action will not significantly impact the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not required. This finding is based on the degree of the effects described in the following sections within the identified affected environment.

Potentially Affected Environment

The BLM is proposing to adopt a CRMP for the sections of the Whitewater River designated under the Wild and Scenic River Act (the river). This CRMP provides overall direction for managing the river and the actions proposed here include establishing a permanent boundary, establishing maximum visitor capacity levels, and providing programmatic management direction. The CRMP outlines the desired conditions in the river corridor and proposes management actions to aid in achieving these conditions. Approval of the CRMP does not directly implement any ground-disturbing actions; no surface-disturbing activities would occur directly following this decision. All future projects in the river corridor would require site-specific NEPA analysis.

Consistent with Public Law 91-190, the EA details the potentially affected environment. The plan area follows a 28.1-mile stretch of the Whitewater River, of which the BLM administers 9.0 river miles and the USFS administers 19.1 river miles of Whitewater River in San Bernardino and Riverside counties, California. The area includes portions of the Sand to Snow National Monument, Sand to Snow Special Recreation Management Area, the Pacific Crest Trail National Scenic Trail, the San Gorgonio Wilderness, the Pacific Crest Trail Special Recreation Management Area, and the Whitewater Canyon Area of Critical Environmental Concern.

Degree of Effects

The following have been considered in my evaluation of the proposed action alternative:

Short- and long-term effects

As detailed in the EA, implementation of the Proposed Action could have long-term, minor, indirect beneficial impacts on the BLM segment of the river. It is long-term because the CRMP does not have a sunset date, it is in effect in perpetuity. Implementation of the CRMP would also establish user capacity thresholds and adaptive management actions triggered by these thresholds, thereby affording additional long-term protection of scenic resources due to less impact from unauthorized recreational use (DOI-BLM-CA-D060-2024-001-EA, Ch.3: Affected Resources, BLM page 27). Potential short-term adverse effects could occur on the hydrology from human activity such as water quality but are not considered significant as they would be short-term in nature because they are minor and momentary in time (a few minutes to a few hours). Additional long-term, beneficial effects would occur on the hydrology from the user

capacity thresholds. Protection measures that include physical barriers and routing of hiking trails to avoid or minimize access and impacts to cultural resources, would reduce direct and indirect impacts to cultural resources. Reduced erosion from improved trail design and maintenance would also afford greater protection (DOI-BLM-CA-D060-2024-001-EA, Ch.3: Affected Resources, BLM page 30). The objective of the monitoring plan is to track impacts on Whitewater River WSR's corridor from various types of uses. Monitoring data on free-flowing condition, water quality and quantity, outstandingly remarkable values, and visitor use will help Bureau of Land Management if management actions are necessary to protect river values from degradation. A long-term effect of monitoring could be that potential future management activities are triggered to maintain or enhance stream conditions, which would be beneficial to the resources. However, any ground disturbing activities will require additional environmental review and are not included in the Proposed Action. In the long-term, monitoring and management actions proposed for implementation, if thresholds are reached, as described in the user capacity analysis, would ensure that the desired conditions for the area would continue to be met.

Beneficial and adverse effects

As detailed in the EA, the Proposed Action will result in long-term beneficial effects to river hydrology through the establishment of a final boundary and capacity thresholds which will help protect water quality and quantity by ensuring public use of the river does not increase uncontrollably (DOI-BLM-CA-D060-2024-001-EA, Ch.3: Affected Resources). It will also result in beneficial impacts on the river's scenery because of the implementation of actions to maintain and improve riparian vegetation and to prevent erosion at riverbanks. Similarly, the Proposed Action will result in indirect beneficial effects to river wildlife and botany through the additional protections afforded by the CRMP; protections such as a final boundary, capacity thresholds, and additional management guidance could prevent disturbance to wildlife in the river corridor and will benefit the conservation of botanical and wildlife species alike. It would implement management direction that would indirectly strengthen protections for federally listed species, BLM sensitive species, potential/occupied habitat for federally listed species, and habitat for federally listed species. The Proposed Action will have indirect beneficial impacts on recreation in the river corridor because management actions in the CRMP could counteract the negative impacts of overuse along the WSR. Effects of the proposed action alternative are not considered significant due to multiple factors including the beneficial and administrative nature of a CRMP and its associated analysis. In the long-term, monitoring and management actions proposed for implementation, if thresholds are reached, as described in the user capacity analysis, would ensure that the desired conditions for the area would continue to be met.

Effects on public health and safety

As detailed in the EA (DOI-BLM-CA-D060-2024-0001-EA), the CRMP would not adversely affect public health or safety in any way. Specifically, the Proposed Action is not anticipated to result in substantial environmental hazards or effects to differential patterns of consumption of natural resources. Given that the Proposed Action does not involve any ground-disturbing activities, adoption of the CRMP would not have disproportionately high or adverse effects to public health and safety. There could be beneficial effects in the form of this plan does not conflict with other jurisdictional plans or policies.

Effects that would violate Federal, State, Tribal, or local laws protecting the environment

As detailed in the EA, no Federal, State, local, or Tribal laws or requirements that have been imposed for the protection of the environment would be violated as a result of implementing the CRMP. Only Federal, State, or local law or requirements for the area concerned that are applicable to the plan adoption, have been considered. The Proposed Action does not propose ground disturbance and would not cause any effects to Historic Properties or cause loss of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. Subsequent plans would continue to be subject to compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act, and other relevant laws protecting heritage resources, including consultation responsibilities.

The Proposed Action is not expected to have significant adverse impacts to federally listed, proposed, or BLM sensitive species, as analyzed in the EA. Critical habitat for the Coachella Valley milkvetch does occur within the BLM portions of this project area, however the plan does not propose ground disturbance and therefore a No Effect evaluation has been made. The Proposed Action would offer wildlife habitat benefits through the additional protection by way of establishing management actions, desired future conditions, outlining future actions that may take place, and monitoring. As such, sensitive species and habitats would not be adversely affected by this decision.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings discussed herein, I conclude that the Proposed Action (**DOI-BLM-CA-D060-2024-0001-EA**) will result in no significant impacts to the quality of the human environment, individually or cumulatively and that preparation of an EIS is not required.

Palm Springs-South Coast Field Manager
Bureau of Land Management, California

Date