



# United States Department of the Interior



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
Tucson Field Office  
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Tucson, Arizona 85748-7208  
[www.blm.gov/az/](http://www.blm.gov/az/)

November 10, 2010

Dear interested member of the public:

The Bureau of Land Management Tucson Field Office is pleased to announce the release of the final decision for the Middle Gila Transportation and Travel Management Plan and corresponding Environmental Assessment (EA). The TMP describes actions for managing access and travel on approximately 96,319 acres of public land administered by the BLM near Florence and Superior, Ariz. The EA provides an analysis of the potential environmental impacts of the proposed plan, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

This TMP represents the integration of extensive public collaboration and input into the BLM management of the Middle Gila Canyons area over the past eight years through the Middle Gila Canyon Partnership's efforts. The BLM is appreciative to all of those who contributed their time, knowledge and expertise to this effort by participating in the route inventory, route evaluation and selection of the proposed management actions since the planning process initiated in 2001. We welcome and encourage your continued participation as this plan is implemented during the next three years.

The release of the EA and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) begins a 30-day protest and appeal period ending Dec. 9, 2010. The plan and EA are available online at [http://www.blm.gov/az/st/en/prog/travel\\_mgmt/mgc\\_tmp.html](http://www.blm.gov/az/st/en/prog/travel_mgmt/mgc_tmp.html). Copies are also available for review at the Tucson Field Office, Arizona State Office, and the Phoenix District Office.

This decision may be appealed to the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of the Secretary. If an appeal is filed, the notice of appeal must be received in the Gila District Office, 1763 Paseo San Luis Sierra Vista, Ariz. 85635 within 30 days of receipt of the decision or no later than Dec. 9, 2010.

BLM's decision is based on the best information available at this time. New information may be revealed by new surveys or studies which could cause adjustments or modifications to the proposed management of the Middle Gila Canyons area in the future.

Thank you for your interest in the Middle Gila Transportation and Travel Management Plan.

Sincerely,

Brian B. Bellew  
Field Manager

# **Middle Gila Canyons Transportation and Travel Management Plan**

## **Decision Record**

### **Environmental Assessment # AZ-420-2007-014**

#### **I. Decision**

It is my decision to approve the *Middle Gila Canyons Transportation and Travel Management Plan* for public lands administered by the Arizona Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Tucson Field Office as described in the attached plan, environmental assessment, maps, and related documents dated October 2010.

#### **II. Rationale for Decision**

This decision is based on accommodating access to public lands administered by the BLM for administrative purposes and public use related to multiple uses, while protecting the resources of the public lands, promoting public safety, and minimizing conflicts among the various uses as required by current regulations. The travel management plan represents a balance between these concerns, and will serve as the framework for implementation of on the ground actions, visitor education, monitoring and enforcement. This decision is consistent with the applicable public land regulations at 43CFR8340 and 43CFR8360, the current Resource Management Plan (RMP), and current travel management planning guidance. This decision was arrived at following consideration of public comments, and a summary of the rationale for specific issues raised during public review is provided below.

#### Route designations

Overall, the transportation and travel management designations are carefully designed to accommodate access related to the multiple uses of public lands, including a variety of outdoor recreational opportunities, as well as mining, mineral exploration, livestock grazing operations, utilities, and wildlife management. The designations will facilitate management of the BLM transportation system with minimum damage to soil, watershed, vegetation, air quality, cultural resources, wildlife habitat, and other resource values found in the area. The plan will help BLM implement priorities for public education, visitor services, transportation maintenance, legal public access acquisition or adjudication of historic access routes, and enforcement.

The BLM transportation system being established consists of roads, primitive roads and trails, and includes route segments across non-BLM lands which are essential for access to BLM lands and movement within the planning area. Guidelines and objectives are identified for maintaining the condition of roads and primitive roads depending on the access purpose they serve.

#### Access

Access to authorized land uses is accommodated. Access to recreational opportunities is preserved for the variety of activities visitors engage in, which include hunting, camping, and driving off-road vehicles for pleasure, sightseeing, and technical challenge and skill. Access to habitat for game harvest is accommodated by the designated route system throughout the planning area, including hunting grounds easily accessible from a motor vehicle route (road or primitive road) and grounds with more remote, difficult access preferred by some hunters. Off road, or cross country motorized vehicle use in connection with hunting or the retrieval of game was requested by public comments, but such use is prohibited under current public land regulations. No substantial benefit would be gained by opening the area to cross country vehicle use for hunting or retrieval of game. Furthermore, the terrain is generally not conducive to off road driving, and can lead to soil and vegetation damage, and potential impacts on other resource values.

### Resource impacts

Impacts on natural and cultural resources will be reduced throughout the planning area. Resource impact summaries are provided below, and can be found in more detail in the accompanying Environmental Assessment:

*Wildlife habitat:* The designated network of roads and primitive roads will reduce the extent of disturbance related to vehicle traffic, helping minimize harassment of wildlife and minimizing significant disruption of wildlife habitats. Reducing the amount of motorized vehicle routes in sensitive habitat areas, including the Gila River riparian management area, other riparian areas, and xeroriparian habitat will benefit a variety of wildlife species that depend on those areas. A reduction in upland routes open to motorized use will minimize disruption of wildlife and preserve natural habitat qualities. Monitoring, surveys and special studies will be pursued to improve the understanding of the wildlife habitat in the area, its use by wildlife, and the effects of public use on habitat quality. BLM will adjust management accordingly if necessary.

*Cultural resources:* The risk of potential impacts on known cultural resource values is reduced by avoiding known sensitive areas in the route designations. Public outreach efforts will be pursued to help educate visitors about cultural resource protection. Cultural resource inventories will continue to be completed for the designated transportation system, and for related activities that require new surface disturbance, in accordance with current BLM policy, procedures and regulations. Information gained will be used to adjust travel management if needed to ensure resource values are protected.

*Soils/watershed:* Travel management will help protect watershed values by reducing road related erosion and protecting fragile soils. Road maintenance and repair/stabilization efforts (including restoration) will improve drainage and control erosion, reducing damage and erosion of the roadway and adjacent land, and reducing the amount of sediment entering the Gila River.

*Sensitive wildlife species:* Travel management will help reduce the impacts of roads and associated use within Category II and III Sonoran Desert Tortoise habitat by reducing the extent and distribution of motorized routes, including proliferating routes in washes. Some habitat disturbance and disruption will remain due to the route network designated to accommodate motor vehicle access, but the impact will be off-set by the overall reduction in motorized routes. Studies will be conducted to identify desert tortoise populations and habitat, and the information gained will be used to adjust management if needed.

*Threatened and endangered species:* Potential adverse effects on threatened or endangered species, or their habitat, will be avoided by the travel management designations, and the conservation measures from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Biological Opinion on the proposed plan. The designated Gila River ford crossing at Cochran may affect the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher and its critical habitat, but is neither likely to jeopardize its continued existence, nor likely to destroy or adversely modify its critical habitat. The river crossing may also affect the threatened spikedace and its critical habitat, but is neither likely to jeopardize its continued existence, nor likely to destroy or adversely modify its critical habitat. The plan is not likely to adversely affect the endangered lesser long-nosed bat, the threatened bald eagle, nor the candidate species *Acuna cactus*.

*Air Quality:* Air quality concerns related to vehicle traffic on soils highly prone to fugitive dust will be alleviated by avoiding those soils in the route designations, and by roadway treatment to minimize fugitive dust.

### Coordination with adjacent non-BLM land owners

Potential conflicts between public land visitors entering/using adjacent non-BLM lands will be reduced by coordinating and working with adjacent land owners and management agencies to address mutual concerns. Cooperative efforts that will be pursued with adjacent land owners/jurisdictions are outlined below:

*Private lands:* Public lands are intermingled with private property, leading to conflicts between public recreational use and adjacent private lands. The plan alleviates potential conflicts by minimizing crossing private land with the designated route system. Public comments raised concerns with trespass, liability, vandalism and other damage related to visitors using or crossing private lands without permission. Visitor information and education efforts, signing, fencing, gates, and cooperative boundary marking efforts with private land owners will be pursued to reduce potential conflicts. Several routes important for the BLM transportation system are identified for further planning to preserve or obtain legal public access across private lands deemed essential for the use and administration of public lands. Any acquisition would be from willing parties only, and in accordance with BLM policies, procedures and regulations for right of way acquisition.

*State Trust land:* Public lands are intermingled with State Trust lands throughout the planning area, presenting manageability issues related to public use and travel management. State Trust lands are available for public recreational use with a permit issued by the Arizona State Land Department (ASLD) according to State regulations. The existing roads and trails across State Trust lands are used and maintained by land use authorization holders (county, mining, grazing, utilities, etc.), and are not subject to BLM travel management designations unless provided for under a right of way or other form of written authorization from ASLD. Several existing routes important for the BLM transportation system are identified for pursuing rights of way or other authorization for roads and trails essential for the use and administration of public lands, to provide legal public access and maintain them for their intended purpose.

*National Forest land:* Several existing primitive routes on BLM land extend onto adjacent Tonto National Forest land, where they are not recognized in the Forest transportation plan. These routes are important for continuity of recreational access routes on BLM land, and cooperative management will be pursued. These routes were originally built for mining related exploration/extraction activities, or for rangeland improvements, and are narrow with relatively steep grades. Some pass near abandoned mines which may present public hazards. Cooperative management will be pursued to keep these routes open to public use, subject to site specific project plans to remediate route conditions, and abandoned/inactive mine and other hazards, including necessary surveys and written authorizations.

*National Guard land:* Several parcels of BLM land are under lease to the Arizona National Guard for purposes related to the adjacent Florence Military Reservation, and are closed to public use under the terms of the lease. Physical access routes on the leased lands are closed to public use to protect public safety and National Guard operations.

Coordination with trail plans: Several potential routes for recreational motorized and non-motorized trails identified in the Pinal County Trails Plan are accommodated, providing links from the surrounding communities to recreation opportunities in the planning area. The main route proposed by others for the Great Western Trail is accommodated, and the route designations support the Arizona National Scenic Trail currently under construction in accordance with a separate trail project plan. Future trail development will be subject to project plans and site specific surveys, compliance review, clearances and written authorizations.

Site improvements: The planned site improvements and developments needed to support public use are minimal, and limited to staging areas/trailheads at public land entrances and special interpretive sites. Existing dispersed camp sites and recreation activity areas will be monitored and cleaned up as needed, but no improvements will be provided, and action may be taken to project resources that may occur at these sites. Information kiosks, wayside displays, signs, traffic control barriers, gates and fencing will be installed at various locations where needed to implement the plan. Site specific project plans, surveys, compliance review, clearances and permits will be completed prior to site work involving ground disturbance.

Technical OHV sites: Several existing routes used for extreme OHV use (i.e. 'rock crawling') are designated as Technical OHV Sites. These sites will be managed to continue providing opportunities for driving specialized motor vehicles for low speed sport, challenge and skill under extreme driveway conditions. Baseline surveys and site plans will be prepared with users for these sites to ensure suitable conditions are preserved, maintained or enhanced with minimal impacts on other resource values, and to identify related site management actions as needed. Public comments were mixed on designating these sites, but they are important in achieving recreation management objectives, and the strategy for providing high quality opportunities will ensure impact on resource values are minimized.

Easements and rights of way: Public land access routes are designated to provide essential access from the public highway system to the BLM lands, and for movement across intermingled land ownership within the planning area. These routes are the priorities for long term preservation of access, and will be further studied for possible acquisition of transportation easements or rights of way, or adjudication of existing physical access. Easements or rights of way are the preferred method of ensuring legal public access is available in the future, and to allow expenditures for transportation maintenance and travel management.

Route closures and restoration: A number of routes identified in the physical access inventory will be closed to motorized travel to protect habitat and cultural resources, prevent user conflicts, decrease damage to natural and cultural resources, and prevent route proliferation. Many of these routes are reclaiming condition, are very lightly used primarily for recreational travel, and are in areas with sensitive resource values. Closure of Martinez Canyon to motorized vehicle use will help protect sensitive riparian resource values and wildlife habitat, as well as reduce damage from vandalism and inadvertent visitor use on historic and prehistoric cultural resources. Cultural resource values in Cottonwood Canyon will be protected, and closure of three user-created OHV sites (i.e. Woody, Overdose, Broken Ankle) will help restore wildlife habitat and other resource values affected by route proliferation in the past 10 years. All motor vehicle use will be prohibited on closed routes, and barriers or gates will be installed. Restoration work will be completed on routes designated for closure and rehabilitation as needed depending on site conditions. Site specific restoration/rehabilitation plans will be prepared to specify any soil and vegetation treatments, signing and traffic controls. Additional surveys and clearances will be completed as needed prior to new ground disturbance. Treatment areas will be monitored for compliance with the closure, and for progress toward desired soil and vegetation conditions. Retreatment or maintenance treatment will be carried out if necessary. Closed routes may be re-opened to accommodate access on a case by case basis as land use changes over time, as new access needs are developed, or trail development plans are implemented, subject to project planning, surveys, compliance review and amendment of the travel management plan.

Special Recreation Permits: Permits will continue to be required for commercial, competitive or organized recreational use in accordance with current regulations at 43 CFR 2930 and BLM policies. Public comments asked that a permit system be established for use of extreme motorized routes, but establishing a special permitting system for use of all technical OHV sites

or for routes planned for closure is beyond the scope of this plan. A programmatic special recreation permit system may be considered in the future as a separate action, or during preparation of the Tucson RMP revision.

Visitor services and enforcement: Official BLM presence in the area will be increased to implement the plan, both by recreation visitor services staff, maintenance crews and law enforcement personnel. Subject to available funds, regular patrols by BLM personnel will be conducted for monitoring, visitor education, compliance and law enforcement. Visitor services and enforcement will be pursued cooperatively with the Arizona Game and Fish Department. The plan establishes the system of motorized routes and related use restrictions, which will facilitate visitor education, compliance and law enforcement. A visitor access guide with maps of the roads, primitive roads and trails will be made available to promote public awareness, education and compliance. Signing, kiosks and waysides will be installed to mark the routes and promote awareness of the travel management plan, the use restrictions and the sensitive resource values in the area.

Public safety: The planning area contains a variety of natural hazards typical of back country desert environments, and hazards related to primitive road conditions and abandoned/inactive mines. Planned road maintenance will be correct road related hazards, and remediation of physical mine hazards will be pursued under a separate program using the initial hazard assessment completed in 2010 for the planning area by volunteers.

### **III. Implementation Schedule**

Planned designations and related actions will be implemented subject to available funds over a three year period, beginning with public outreach and education efforts, erosion control and stabilization of routes, and route closures. A phased approach will allow limited resources and funding to be used for the highest priorities over a period of time, allowing for fundraising efforts and reducing costs in a given year to make implementation feasible. The plan will facilitate preparation of budget packages for funding through the normal BLM financial system, as well as applications for grants, and volunteer projects under partnerships.

Plan revision and amendment: This plan will be in effect until rescinded or amended, with a comprehensive review to be completed during the Tucson Field Office RMP revision, which is expected to occur within the next five years. Monitoring and adaptive management will help respond to changing land use conditions and related access needs. New information on land use and resource values from proposals, surveys and studies will be used to evaluate this plan, and identify needs for updates or revisions through an adaptive approach on a case by case basis.

### **IV. Public Involvement**

Interested user groups, authorization holders, other Federal, State, county and local agencies, local land owners and land users participated in the development of the plan during its various stages. Public input shaped the plan, beginning with the Middle Gila Conservation Partnership's efforts to bring interagency management attention to the uses, issues and resources in the planning area. Public input helped complete the interagency physical access route inventory, and also contributed in the route evaluation to identify management alternatives for the motorized routes in the area. Public involvement during the travel management stakeholders workshops helped define consensus for the proposed management plan, and identify areas of disagreement. Comments received during the public review and comment on the proposed plan and environmental assessment, summarized in Appendix J, helped finalize the plan and arrive at this decision.

## V. Mitigation

This plan is designed to mitigate potential impacts on sensitive resource values, and no further mitigation measures are identified. Monitoring of implementation efforts, land use activity and resource conditions will help identify needs for adaptive management action to accommodate access and protect resources. Conservation measures identified in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's biological opinion on the proposed plan will ensure potential effects on threatened endangered or candidate species will not jeopardize the existence of the species and will protect or enhance their habitat. Requirements for site specific project plans, surveys and compliance reviews for some of the planned actions will ensure potential impacts are mitigated in implementing those actions.

## VI. Appeals

This decision may be appealed to the Interior Board of Land Appeals (IBLA) by any person who is adversely affected and believes it is incorrect, in accordance with procedures in 43 CFR Part 4. A person who wishes to appeal to the IBLA must file a Notice of Appeal within 30 days of after issuance of the decision.

The Notice of Appeal must be filed with the USDI Bureau of Land Management, Tucson Field Office, 12661 E. Broadway Blvd., Tucson, AZ 85748-72208, with a copy to Department of the Interior, Office of the Field Solicitor, Sandra Day O'Connor U.S. Court House #404, 401 West Washington Street SPC44, Phoenix, AZ 85003-2151

Within 30 days after filing the Notice of Appeal, a complete statement of the reasons for the appeal must be filed with the USDI, Office of Hearings and Appeals, Interior Board of Land Appeals, 801 N. Quincy Street, Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22203. A copy of the Statement of Reasons must also be filed with the Department of the Interior, Office of the Field Solicitor, Sandra Day O'Connor U.S. Court House #404, 401 West Washington Street SPC44, Phoenix, AZ 85003-2151.

Standards for Obtaining a Stay Except as otherwise provided by law or other pertinent regulation, a petition for a stay of a decision pending appeal shall show sufficient justification based on the following standards:

1. The relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied.
2. The likelihood of the appellant's success on the merits.
3. The likelihood of immediate and irreparable harm if the stay is not granted.
4. Whether or not the public interest favors granting the stay.

Approved By:

  
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Field Manager

10 November 2010  
Date