



Bureau of Land Management
Price Field Office
125 South 600 West
Price, Utah 84501

January 13th, 2020

Dear BLM Planning Team:

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on your Draft Environmental Assessment (DEA) of the San Rafael Desert (SRD) Travel Management Area. To be consistent, our new comments will simply update the points we made regarding your preliminary alternatives last summer, and our new comments will follow the same item letters/number (see 8/2/2019 comments at bottom).

Items A through D aim to establish the proper context for this planning effort in order to convey that Alternative D is actually the most balanced of the four alternatives.

A. The DEA Section 1.3 "Purpose and Need" (on Page 2) adequately acknowledges that most of the SRD was not even inventoried of routes prior to approval of the current travel plan in 2008, which is why the RMP pledged to follow up with a later planning effort for considering additional routes. The DEA Section 2.3 (on Page 9) points out that, of all the subsequently-inventoried routes that are missing from the 2008 travel plan, only 3% of them were deliberately closed by the BLM. The DEA Table 2.1 "Miles of routes by designation and alternative" (Page 8) finally compares each alternative to the total mileage of BM-inventoried routes, which is 1,202.7 although that figure misses the 80 miles of BLM-inventoried routes in the Labyrinth Canyon Wilderness as well as some existing routes across the SRD not inventoried. Therefore the percentage of existing routes that would be closed by each alternative, which BLM reports to be 70% / 35% / 26% for Alternatives B / C / D, is actually higher.

These facts and the rest of the DEA were surely read by groups seeking to vastly-expand wilderness designation, yet they have chosen to mischaracterize any and all routes that were overlooked in 2008 (let alone 2019), soliciting new comments from their supporters which will be based on a false premise. Meanwhile OHV groups have known of the travel plan's inadequacy, yet we waited patiently, as litigation from the wilderness-expansion groups delayed the BLM's progress.

B. The DEA Section 2.1.2 "Route Inventory" (Page 6) doesn't quite acknowledge the new route inventory's shortcomings. It states "During ID team review, some linear features (such as seismic lines and animal trails) were identified that are not, nor were ever, BLM-authorized or designated routes. These features were evaluated by BLM staff but not included in any alternatives." In fact, some of the routes not included in any alternatives

were indeed BLM-authorized, such as parts of the courses that the Pathfinders Motorcycle Club used for races that were permitted by BLM. Furthermore, back then a lot of routes didn't require BLM authorization, so BLM authorization is not relevant when evaluating older routes. The BLM should mention these points in its next draft.

C. While the DEA doesn't point out that most of the substantive, personalized comments for the 2015 scoping period support access for responsible OHV riding, the DEA does appear to adequately identify issues in Chapter 4, Appendix D, and Appendix E. One notable omission is socio-economics, which BLM has regarded to be not significantly affected by the decision of which travel-plan alternative to choose. In fact the SRD represents a significant existing and potential tourism opportunity for the nearby towns of Green River and Hanksville, particularly for OHV riding that is displaced by the Dingell Act's designation of wilderness across over 600,000 acres in Emery County (over 50,000 acres of which is in the SRD planning area). In developing a proposed alternative, BLM should consult Green River and Hanksville to ensure that the remaining parts of the SRD not designated as wilderness are managed to provide more OHV riding in order to rebalance a diversified tourism economy.

D. While the DEA acknowledges that 80 miles of BLM-inventoried routes were permanently closed by the Dingell Act's designation of the Labyrinth Canyon Wilderness, it does not spell out the fact that:

(a) these were generally the highest-quality routes in the SRD due to the more scenic, rocky, and rugged topography of Labyrinth Canyon and its tributaries, and

(b) OHV riding on these routes will need to be absorbed by the remainder of the SRD.

Even though the Labyrinth Canyon Wilderness cannot have motorized routes designated within its boundaries, it is still part of the SRD planning area per the settlement agreement, so it should still be part of the analysis. When addressing wilderness characteristics per the settlement agreement, BLM should recognize the Labyrinth Canyon Wilderness as providing all of the minimization to impacts of wilderness characteristics that's needed for the entire planning area, thus the remainder of the SRD should not be restricted for the sake of further minimization.

With this context in mind, we continue to support Alternative D with six modifications (see purple numbers and highlights on attached map).

1. The spur (and Class D) road that reaches the head of Keg Spring Canyon (SD494) should be left open for another 0.3 miles in order to reach a SITLA section. If the Congressional map for the Dingell Act truncated this road, it should be regarded as a mistake. The Congressional map was based on the 2008 travel plan, which did not deliberately block access to the existing road on SITLA property, rather it was obviously one of many oversights. It's time for BLM to fix this escalation of a simple mistake by working with SITLA and elected officials to make the boundary- and route-data match the use, conditions, and management feasibility on the ground. When the public wants to reach a more worthy destination at the end of an old road on SITLA property, BLM should not waste its limited resources perpetually trying to fight public interest and property rights when the current use is not significantly impacting any other social or natural resources.

2. The DEA's Alternative D now leaves open the spur (and Class D) road immediately north of Three Canyon (SD679a) so the public can continue to reach the overlook of Trin-Alcove Bend. Thank you for fixing this issue.

3. The DEA's Alternative D now leaves open the spur (and Class D) road further north of Three Canyon (SD681a) so the public can continue to reach the overlook of Bull Bottom. Thank you for fixing this issue.

4. The through-going (and Class D) road that climbs from the San Rafael Valley to the Acerson Mine (SD984), should remain open to the general public, not limited to administrative use. The BLM's route report doesn't provide a compelling reason why motorized use by the public should be eliminated. The report does suggest allowing non-motorized use, but this relatively flat and straight route across a sandy desert isn't of particular value for bicycling or other non-motorized uses. Administrative and non-motorized designations are appropriate on some routes, but not this one.

5. The through-going (and Class D) road up Dry Lake Wash (SD810) should remain open to the general public, not limited to administrative use. The BLM's route report doesn't provide a compelling reason why motorized use by the public should be eliminated. The report does suggest allowing non-motorized use, but this relatively flat and active wash bottom across a sandy desert isn't of particular value for bicycling or other non-motorized uses. Administrative and non-motorized designations are appropriate on some routes, but not this one.

6. Even Alternative D misses important segments of routes across the SRD. The link between Dry Lake Wash (SD810 mentioned above) and its upper end (SD819) is just one example. Our new map highlights over a dozen other examples of existing routes that have recreational value and few resource issues. All of these routes deserve to be analyzed and considered for designation by the BLM. If you can't do so now, have your next draft pledge to do so in the near future.

As for future requests to construct new routes, your Draft Implementation Guide provides adequate direction for BLM to consider additional routes, particularly Section 1.1 (Page 1), Section 3.5.5 (Page 19), and Section 4.4 (Page 29). With some enhancement of the existing route network, the SRD could provide great day loops as well as point-to-point routes between Green River and Hanksville (similar to the concept of Paiute Trail) with options for motorized singletrack, 4WD trail, and everything in between.

Let us reiterate concerns about the "open with limitations" category of the route designations in your DEA. Limitations that pertain to vehicular equipment (such as being modified 4WD versus stock 4WD, or being a SxS versus a pickup truck) can be useful when establishing trail-management objectives (e.g. establishing whether a given route should be maintained for passage by the average high-clearance, 2WD vehicle) or when posting recommendations for the visitor to make an informed decision at an intersection. However they should generally not be used to make rules except as they pertain to the route's intended width in order to preserve the narrow character of a given trail. In other words, it's appropriate for a minority of the routes to be closed to vehicles over 40", 50", etc. It's not appropriate for a route to be closed to Jeeps if it's open to all sizes of SxS, especially since some newer SxS models are approaching the width and weight of a Jeep, even more so when they're modified. Please adopt this approach when developing your proposed alternative, and produce a map that distinguishes between routes based on their width restrictions (which should be rules), not between their suggested equipment (which should be recommendations).

In summary, we appreciate your response to half of the items from our 8/2/2019 comments, and hope you can use this update to resolve the other half. With the above modifications, Alternative D would be a very viable travel plan for gaining compliance, and we intend to assist your implementation.

Sincerely,

Wade Allinson
Southeastern Utah Public Lands Representative
Sage Riders Motorcycle Club

Clif Koontz
Executive Director
Ride with Respect



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August 2nd, 2019

Dear BLM Planning Team:

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on your preliminary alternatives of the San Rafael Desert (SRD) Travel Management Area (TMA). They are based on a relatively-thorough inventory of the existing routes, and we look forward to your development of a draft NEPA document for public comment.

Ride with Respect (RwR) was founded in 2002 to conserve shared-use trails and their surroundings. Since then, over 750 individuals have contributed money or volunteered time to the organization. RwR has performed nearly 20,000 hours of high-quality trail work on public lands, most of which was in the Moab Field Office. In the Price Field Office, RwR has participated in the 2008 RMP and subsequent travel planning.

The Sage Riders Motorcycle Club has approximately 100 dues-paying members. Specific to the Price Field Office, the club has spent hundreds of hours advocating for responsible off-highway vehicle (OHV) access leading up to the 2003 travel plan for the San Rafael Swell. Since then they have volunteered thousands of hours of community service implementing this travel plan, which included blocking off some routes, marking other routes "open," developing a travel map of the area, and improving this trail system for all to enjoy.

BlueRibbon Coalition (BRC) is a nonprofit corporation that champions responsible recreation and encourages individual environmental stewardship. BRC has members in all 50 states, including Utah. BRC members use various motorized and non-motorized means to access BLM and other public lands, specifically including the SRD TMA. BRC has a long-standing interest in the protection of the values and natural resources addressed in this evaluation, and regularly works with land managers to provide recreation opportunities, preserve resources, and promote cooperation between public land visitors.

Our organizations support preliminary Alternative D with six modifications that are listed at the end of this document. Even though Alternative D is the most access-oriented of the four alternatives, it would effectively conserve the other social and natural resources, and is balanced when considering the following context:

A. Based on past SRD travel-planning comments from wilderness-expansion groups, we presume that those groups will argue that none of the preliminary alternatives minimize resource impacts compared to the no-action

"status quo." This argument would be flawed because the current travel plan in the SRD is not complete or even logical, and therefore not legally defensible, which is why use has continued on virtually all existing routes since 2008. Looking forward, we support the BLM's work to develop a defensible and enforceable travel plan in the SRD but, to do so, all parties should acknowledge how we've arrived at the present circumstances.

The BLM developed one of its first-ever travel plans in the San Rafael Swell in the 1990's and, although the plan was ultimately upheld in court (with our assistance), a legal challenge from wilderness-expansion groups tied the agency's hands until 2003. Then, when the agency was finally allowed to implement the travel plan, it had to begin developing a new RMP by 2008 that was supposed include a travel plan across the entire Price Field Office. Understandably the BLM deferred to its 2003 travel plan, which worked well for the interior of the Swell, but was inadequate for the surrounding areas because (a) much of the area was open to cross-country travel in 2003 and therefore had no travel plan and (b) even the areas that were limited to designated routes in 2003 were still not thoroughly inventoried or analyzed since the legal challenge at that time was inside of the Swell. The 2008 travel plan literally displays routes that are not connected to any other route, which in some cases can at least be attributed to routes crossing state land or areas that had been open to cross-country travel prior to 2003, but in other cases the isolation of these routes cannot be explained by state land or open-area designations.

To the BLM's credit, its 2008 RMP addressed these inadequacies by pledging to do a proper travel plan surrounding the Swell within five years. Indeed the BLM began a thorough route inventory of the SRD by 2013 and even invited scoping comments by 2015, but the settlement negotiations (spurred by a mixed ruling on the Richfield RMP) blocked the Price Field Office from finishing its work in the SRD. At present we still have a blatantly-incomplete travel plan with widespread use occurring across the SRD because, despite the BLM's consistent effort to follow through, the agency has been bogged down by legal challenges from wilderness-expansion groups for the past two decades. Hopefully all parties will recognize that developing a logical and enforceable travel plan, even if it appears to expand impacts on the map, would in fact be a step forward for conservation.

B. Considering the adversity that the BLM faced from legal challenges, the agency did a good job inventorying the SRD travel routes from 2013 to 2016. We generally accept the results as an adequate baseline but, for proper context, we'll point out that it's still not totally complete. Additional routes exist, such as the Butterfly Trail motorized singletrack southwest of Green River, more mining roads from the Jessies Twist to Acerson Mine areas, and motorcycle-race courses permitted by BLM in the 1970's and 1980's for the Green River Jeep Posse and Pathfinders Motorcycle Club to operate in the southwest quadrant of the SRD TMA. We recognize that the Butterfly Trail is partly on private property, the Jessies Twist routes may have redundancy, and the motorcycle courses had sandy soil that's hard to stabilize. While we are not insisting that these routes be included in the action alternatives, they do possess recreational value, so additional routes like these should be acknowledged by the BLM's forthcoming analysis.

C. The vast majority of public comments submitted in 2015 during scoping were from OHV riders advocating continued access to the SRD, and most of those comments were personalized rather than simply submitting a form letter. Sometimes the results of public comments are a function of which stakeholder used the most scare tactics to engage their base. In this case, however, most comments seemed to derive from a firsthand

appreciation and concern for the recreational opportunities specifically found in the SRD. While notable non-motorized recreation opportunities exist within the recently-designated Labyrinth Canyon Wilderness, in the rest of the SRD outside of that wilderness area, the most common recreational use is clearly OHV riding. Please note that, for the current comment period, we have not solicited comments from constituents and instead attempted to capture their perspectives in this joint letter.

D. The SRD will become increasingly important for OHV riding as this activity is displaced by the Labyrinth Canyon Wilderness and seventeen other wilderness areas designated by the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act of 2019. The designation of Labyrinth Canyon Wilderness alone prevents the mechanized use of roughly one-hundred miles of existing routes, 80 miles of which were inventoried and verified by BLM, and nearly half of that 80 miles were Class D roads as claimed by Emery County and the State of Utah. Since the Labyrinth Canyon Wilderness is within the SRD TMA, the effects of this designation should be included in the BLM's forthcoming analysis. The other seventeen wilderness areas prevent mechanized use of roughly another one-hundred miles of existing routes so, even though they're outside of the SRD TMA, their designation will displace more OHV use to the SRD TMA.

Now that we've established how Alternative D is balanced, let us suggest six modifications to refine Alternative D. Please refer to the enclosed map in order to locate the following modifications:

1. The spur (and Class D) road that reaches the head of Keg Spring Canyon (SD494) should be left open for another 0.3 miles in order to reach a SITLA section, where the spur extends for another mile to a terminus on SITLA property. The spur has recreational value by reaching a flat slickrock area (see Photo 1a), a shallow alcove (Photo 1b), and hiking access to nearby Keg Spring Canyon (Photo 1c). The SITLA section may be traded to become federal wilderness, but we are working with SITLA to obtain an easement prior to trading out so that public use of the spur may continue. In the meantime, public access to the SITLA section across BLM land should continue.
2. The spur (and Class D) road immediately north of Three Canyon (SD679a) should be left open for another 0.1 miles to reach the overlook of Trin-Alcove Bend. The overlook is quite scenic (Photo 2a) and provides multiple campsites (Photo 2b). It is suitable for recreation due to the slickrock surface and natural barrier of the cliffs surrounding its terminus. It would be much easier to gain compliance by having the turn-around at the viewpoint rather than making it 0.1 miles short. Millions of Americans with physical disabilities would need vehicular access to the overlook since, due to the rugged nature of the road, it is not feasible for them to haul in an all-terrain wheelchair in order to cover the last 0.1 miles.
3. The spur (and Class D) road further north of Three Canyon (SD681a) should be left open for another 0.2 miles to reach the overlook of Bull Bottom. The overlook is quite scenic and reveals a historic stock trail (Photo 3). Like the other spur listed above, it is suitable for recreation, would be easier for the BLM to gain compliance, and is the only feasible way for the millions with physical disabilities to actually see the river view. Sponsors of the Dingell Act like Rep. Curtis and Sen. Romney, along with supporters like Emery County, assured the public that the Bull Bottom Road would remain open for motorized travel. We hope you can get their help to follow through.

4. The through-going (and Class D) road that climbs from the San Rafael Valley to the Acerson Mine (SD984), should remain open to the general public, not limited to administrative use. While a short spur to a cattle pond in a flat area might be appropriate for excluding public use, this route is long and goes through interesting terrain with no pond. Its lack of current use doesn't necessarily indicate a lack of future value. Sometimes lack of use simply results from an obscured intersection. In fact it's one of only two through-going roads that are northeast of the Gillis Ranch Road, and the other one follows a wash bottom, thereby adding variety to a rider's options or riding both as a small loop.

5. The through-going (and Class D) road up Dry Lake Wash (SD810) should remain open to the general public, not limited to administrative use. Like the other through-going route listed above, it has recreational value by following a non-riparian wash bottom, and current use actually follows Dry Lake Wash all the way to its upper end (SD819). Allowing public use along all of Dry Lake Wash is also the only way for the nearby motorized singletrack (SD 812) to continue being a through-going route. Allowing public use would maintain the connective value of each route, and make it easier for the BLM to gain compliance.

6. Even Alternative D misses important segments of routes across the SRD TMA. The link between Dry Lake Wash (SD810) and its upper end (SD819) mentioned above is just one example. Your forthcoming analysis should clearly state that overlooked route segments may be considered by subsequent amendments to the final travel plan. Further, while the designation of a San Rafael Swell Western Heritage and Historic Mining Recreation Area allows for the development of additional trails for bicycling, it prohibits development for motorized use. Fortunately potential remains in the SRD for enhancing the current network of trails, whether to provide higher-quality day loops or a town-to-town backcountry route. Such development could greatly benefit Green River, which has a tourism economy with OHV riding as a key component. So, along with pledging to consider any route segments that were overlooked, your forthcoming analysis should acknowledge that the area may warrant new trail development, even if such development is outside the scope of the current process.

Finally, we should state our interpretation of the "designation" attributes for each route through the interactive map on the BLM's ePlanning website. Designations that pertain to width (e.g. "motorized singletrack" and "50 inches or less") would be actual restrictions in the final plan to conserve the narrow character of those routes. In contrast, designations that pertain to the capability of a full-size vehicle (e.g. "high ground-clearance vehicles" and "modified 4WD") would not be actual restrictions in the final plan, as these things are subject to change based on the ground conditions, maintenance activity, and driver skill. While these full-size vehicle attributes are useful descriptions, they should not be used prescriptively as rules, although it may be appropriate to post equipment suggestions or difficulty ratings as a form of education.

We applaud the BLM for developing a viable alternative, and hope to eventually assist your implementation.

Sincerely,

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Clif Koontz
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Map of suggested modifications to Alternative D.





Photo 1a

Photo 1b





Photo 1c

Photo 2a





Photo 2b

Photo 3

