

Section I

Introduction



Sierra Ladron WSA

BACKGROUND

The Record of Decision for the Socorro Resource Area (SRA) Resource Management Plan (RMP) was signed by Larry Woodard, New Mexico State Director on January 29, 1989. This document sets in motion the decisions and management actions which address the unique resource values found in the SRA.

The SRA RMP has been prepared to provide a comprehensive framework for managing the public lands and for allocating resources during the next 20 years using the principles of multiple use and sustained yield. The RMP establishes areas for limited, restricted, or exclusive uses, levels of production, Allowable resource uses, resource condition objectives, program constraints, and general management direction.

This RMP sets forth the land-use decisions, terms and conditions for guiding and controlling future management actions on public lands in the SRA (see Appendix A). All uses and activities in the SRA must conform with the decisions, terms and conditions as described herein. This RMP was prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976 and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 for comprehensive land-use planning for public lands. The management objectives and philosophies developed in this plan will be applied only to the public surface and/or mineral estate. Section 3(3a) of the Federal

Coal Leasing Amendments Act of 1976 also requires comprehensive land-use planning prior to coal leasing.

In addition, court-ordered and statutory requirements were met as a result of two of the decisions in this document (see Appendix A). The first is the statutory requirement that public lands be designated as "open," "limited," or "closed," to motorized vehicle use. Second, this RMP lists decisions for livestock grazing on public lands in the SRA as required by the court-ordered settlement of a 1973 lawsuit filed against the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). Plan amendments, if necessary, will keep the RMP current with resource management needs and policies.

Between 1976 and 1981, the SRA prepared landuse plans, known as Management Framework Plans (MFP), for all public surface and minerals within its area of jurisdiction. Due to changing circumstances and conditions, including new legislation, changing policies, and new land-use conflicts and issues, an RMP was initiated. Writing of the document itself began late in 1986; however, a complex process of data gathering and other preparatory activities began 1985. In This process included resource inventory, public participation, interagency coordination, and then preparation of a Management Situation Analysis (MSA). The MSA is on file in the SRA office along with documentation of the public participation and interagency coordination. Consultation and coordination with agencies, organizations, and individuals occurred in a variety of ways throughout the planning process.

LOCATION AND SIZE

The SRA is located in the west-central portion of New Mexico. The SRA contains approximately 1.5 million acres of public surface and 2.2 million acres of Federal minerals. The lands are located in Socorro and Catron Counties. Generally, public lands are well blocked in the Quemado, Pelona Mountain, Ladron, and Stallion areas. However, in other large portions of the SRA public lands are isolated and scattered. Private lands are concentrated in the Rio Grande Valley, San Augustine Plains, Datil, and Bingham areas.

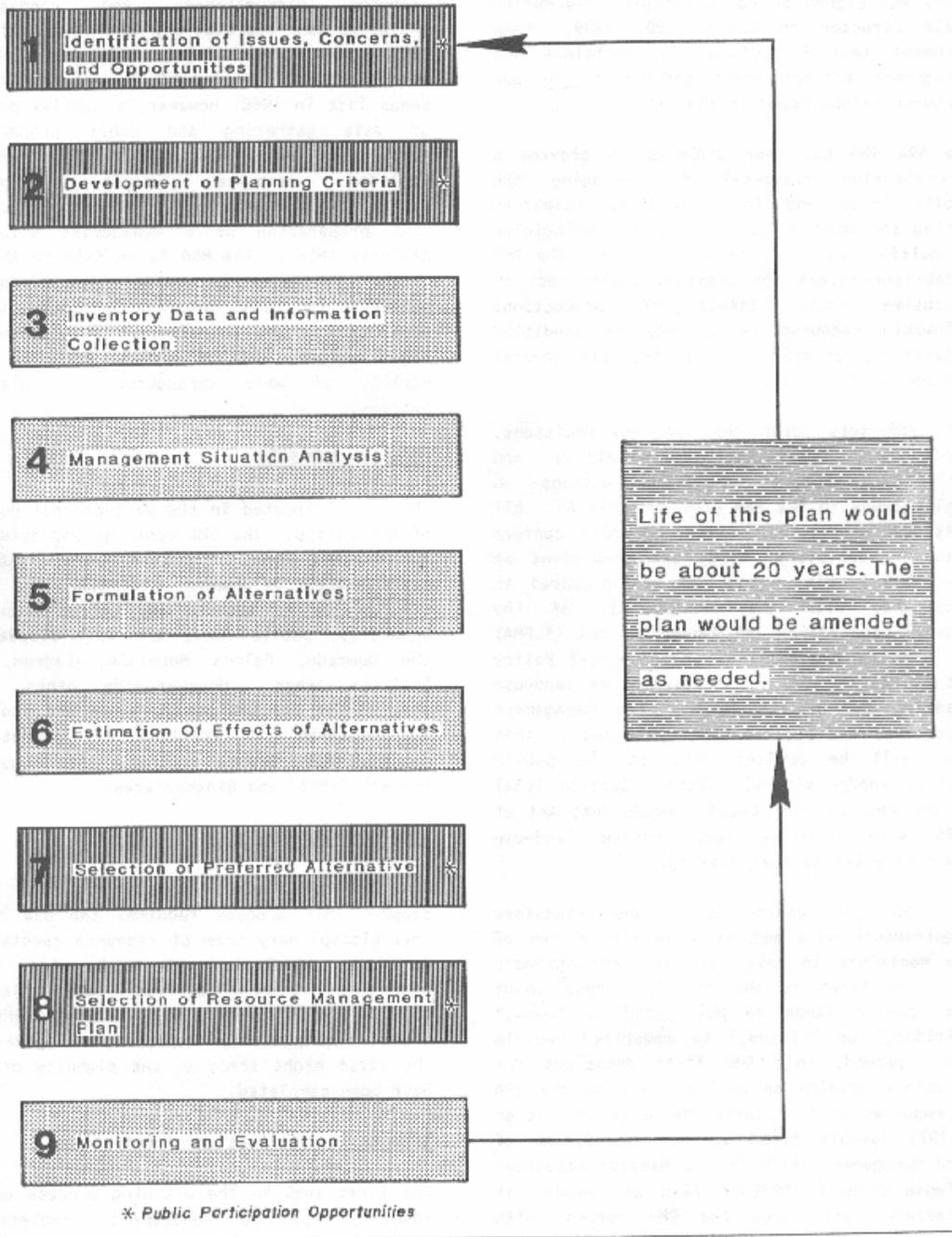
THE PLANNING PROCESS

The BLM RMP process consists of nine basic steps. This process requires the use of an interdisciplinary team of resource specialists for the completion of each step. The following steps describe the planning regulations followed in preparing this RMP and are also graphically displayed in Figure 1-1. The first eight steps of the planning process have been completed.

Step 1. Identification of Issues

The first step in the planning process was to identify resource management problems or conflicts that could be resolved through the planning process. These problems or conflicts (issues) were identified by the BLM and other agency personnel as well as members of the public. Seven issues were identified and considered in this document and are discussed in detail.

Figure 1-1
Steps in the Resource Management Planning Process



Step 2. Development of Planning Criteria

During this step, preliminary decisions were made regarding the types of information needed to clarify the issues, the types of alternatives to be developed, and the factors to be considered in evaluating alternatives and selecting a preferred RMP/EIS. As each issue was identified, a list of planning criteria was developed to help guide the resolution of that issue. The planning criteria are listed after each issue.

Step 3. Inventory Data and Information Collection

This step involved the collection of various types of environmental, social, economic, resource, and institutional data needed for completion of the process. This step included detailed field studies, literature studies or consultation with appropriate professionals. In most cases, this process was limited to inventories needed to address the issues.

Step 4. Management Situation Analysis (MSA)

This step called for deliberate assessment of the current situation. It included a description of current BLM management guidance, a discussion of existing problems and opportunities for solving them, and a consolidation of existing data needed to analyze and resolve the identified issues. The end result of this step was the development of an unpublished companion document known as the MSA. Chapter 2 of that document was used to develop the Continuing Management Guidance and Actions section of the RMP. The MSA was used as a basis for compiling the Affected Environment chapter of the RMP. Copies of the MSA are available for review in the SRA office.

Step 5. Formulation of Alternatives

During this step, several complete, reasonable resource management alternatives were prepared, including one for no action and others that strived to resolve the issues while placing emphasis either on environmental protection or resource production. This important section was incorporated into Chapter 2 of the RMP.

Step 6. Estimation of Effects of Alternatives

The physical, biological, economic, and social effects of implementing each alternative were estimated in order to allow for a comparative evaluation of impacts.

Step 7. Selection of the Preferred Alternative

Based on the information generated during Step 6, the District Manager identified and recommended a preferred alternative to the State Director. The Draft RMP/EIS document was then prepared and distributed for public review.

Step 8. Selection of the Resource Management Plan

Based on the results of public review and comment, the District Manager selected and recommended to the State Director various proposals and/or alternatives to comprise the RMP and publish it along with a final EIS. A final decision was made after a 60—day Governor's Consistency Review and a 30—day protest period on the Final EIS.

Step 9. Monitoring and Evaluation

This step will involve: 1. The mechanical tracking of the management actions and implementation steps to see that progress is being made to implement the plan decisions, 2. Measuring success of the actions taken in meeting the objectives and goals set forth in the plan, and 3. Evaluating the plan to see if it remains adequate and is still meeting BLM's needs.

PLANNING ISSUES, CRITERIA, AND MANAGEMENT CONCERNS

The BLM planning regulations (43 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR) 1600) equate land— use planning with problem solving and issue resolution. An issue is defined as an opportunity, conflict, or problem regarding the use management of public lands and resources.

Planning criteria are the standards, rules, and measures used for data collection and alternative formulation, which have led to the final plan selection. Planning criteria are taken from appropriate laws and regulations, BLM Manuals, directives, and concerns expressed in meetings, and consultations, both with the public and other agencies.

Management concerns are those nonissue—related procedures or land—use allocations which have proven to need modification. Management concerns focus on use conflicts, requirements or conditions that cannot be resolved administratively and did not, during initial public scoping, appear to meet the criteria to qualify as a planning issue.

The following planning issues and their associated planning criteria were identified for resolution in the Socorro RMP.

— **Issue No. 1 — Land Ownership Adjustments**

To resolve this issue, an answer is needed to the following question:

On which lands should ownership be adjusted (retained, disposed, and/or acquired) to facilitate more efficient management?

The planning criteria for this issue are:

- Public lands will not be disposed of if they provide access to large blocks of other Federal lands, unless access rights for the public can be reserved in the patent.
- Public lands identified for sale must be tracts which are not suitable for management by another Federal department or agency, tracts which are difficult and uneconomical for the BLM to manage, or tracts which would best serve important public objectives through their disposal. Public lands may also be sold if they were acquired for a specific purpose and are

no longer required for that or any other Federal purpose.

- Priority will be given to exchanging public lands identified for disposal for non—Federal lands that have been identified for acquisition to enhance BLM programs.
- Public land will be retained under management by the BLM in the following priority:
 - (1) Public land that has unusual or historic, cultural, mineral, recreational, natural hazard, or scenic value; that represents natural systems or processes; and which has significance and special worth, consequence, meaning, distinctiveness, or cause for concern.
 - o Acquire where possible non—Federal located in special management areas (SMA) that have high resource values or unique characteristics that would enhance management of the public land.
 - (2) Public land located in large blocks which does not require special management but should be retained due to the land ownership pattern and for multiple—use values.
 - o Improve land management potential by consolidating land ownership by exchange of public, State, and private lands. Only those parcels which will enhance overall consolidation of public land will be considered for exchange.
 - o In the retention area, public land will be considered for disposal for needed public purposes demonstrated by State and/or local municipalities, or to resolve unintentional unauthorized occupancy.
 - Public land will be considered for disposal in the following priority:
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 - (1) Entertaining State/private applications for land within the SRA.
 - (2) Public land to accommodate the demonstrated needs expressed by local, County, and State governments or individuals.

(3) Public land where size, location, or other physical characteristics make them difficult or uneconomical for BLM to manage.

(4) Public land which will resolve unintentional unauthorized occupancy.

— Public lands will not be disposed of if it would be contrary to State, County, or local land—use plans or zoning ordinances.

— Public lands will not be disposed of if it would significantly interfere with the development of mineral resources

— **Issue No. 2 — Vegetative Uses**

To resolve this issue, answers are needed to the following questions:

What are the correct levels of vegetative use for livestock, wildlife, and watershed production/protection outside of the area covered by the East Socorro Grazing Environmental Statement (ES) and the West Socorro Rangeland Management Program EIS?

What sites are potentially suitable for land or vegetative treatments throughout the SRA?

The planning criteria for this issue are to:

— Determine whether existing management categories need to be updated on allotments within the East Socorro Grazing ES and the West Socorro Rangeland Management Program EIS areas.

— Establish selective management categories [(M) Maintain, (I) Improve, or (C) Custodial] on the Chupadera Mesa Allotments based on the recent range inventory information and other site—specific criteria.

— Ensure that the proper use level of the vegetation is not exceeded.

— Monitor the Rangeland to evaluate the effectiveness of management actions and determine proper stocking levels.

— Improve or maintain ecological condition and vegetative productivity in the long term (10—20 years).

— Provide for the protection of wildlife habitat and the habitat of sensitive, State listed, and Federally listed threatened or endangered (T&E) plant species.

— Reduce runoff and soil erosion on public land by managing Rangeland resources and allocating vegetation to provide for watershed protection needs.

— Identify changes or additional projects and Rangeland management practices necessary to achieve resource management objectives.

— **Issue No. 3 — Off—Road Vehicle Use**

To resolve this issue, answers are needed to the following questions:

What public lands should be designated as “open, limited, or closed” to off—highway vehicles/off—road vehicles (OHV/ORV) use?

What special use areas should be designated for OHV/ORV use to meet specific user group and general public demand?

What OHV/ORV designations would result in minimum conflict between people and resources and in what areas?

The planning criteria to designate public land as “open”, “limited”, or “closed” to OHV/ORV use are to:

— Resolve conflicts between various users of public lands.

— Identify extreme natural or man—made hazards to human life or property.

— Protect significant cultural, historic, or natural features (i.e., visual resources, watersheds) which may be damaged.

— Eliminate harassment of wildlife or damage to significant wildlife habitat.

— Protect T&E species which may be adversely impacted.

— Ensure wilderness suitability of wilderness study areas (WSAs) are not impaired.

— **Issue No. 4 — Access**

To resolve this issue, answers are needed to the following questions:

What access to public lands should be acquired?

What transportation routes should be constructed, maintained, restricted to public use, or closed and rehabilitated?

The planning criteria for this issue are:

- Identify proposed roads needed for better management of public lands (through activity plans).
- Prioritize and provide public access to those areas of public land having significant resource values for which there is a high demand but insufficient legal or physical access.
- Identify those areas which are sensitive to or not suitable for the construction of new roads.
- Identify those roads which are unneeded and should be closed and rehabilitated for resource protection and public safety.

— **Issue No. 5 — Special Management Areas**

To resolve this issue, answers are needed to the following questions:

What areas and resource values should be identified for special management attention?

How should such areas and resource values be managed?

- Identify those areas that have unusual or historic, cultural, paleontological vegetative, fish and wildlife, mineral, recreational, natural hazard, or scenic values that represent natural systems or processes.

These areas could have greater than local significance consequences, or special local worth, meaning, distinctiveness, or cause for concern and should be managed to protect these values.

— **Issue No. 6 — Wild Horse Management**

To resolve this issue, an answer would be needed for the following question:

What is the best course of action for BLM to take to manage the wild horse herd?

The planning criteria for this issue are:

- Provide cost effective management of the wild horse herd.
- Provide for the maintenance of a healthy viable breeding population with a balanced sex ratio and age class structure.

— **Issue No. 7 — Coal Leasing Suitability Assessment**

To resolve this issue, an answer is need to the following question:

After application of the four land—use planning screens for coal, which lands should be carried forward for further consideration for coal leasing?

The planning criteria for this issue consists of the four coal screens listed below:

- Coal development potential will be used to identify areas acceptable for further consideration for leasing.
- The 20 unsuitability criteria specified by Federal regulations will be applied to identified lands to ensure environmental compatibility.
- Multiple land—use decisions may be made which will eliminate additional coal deposits from further consideration for leasing to protect other resource values of a locally important or unique nature not included in the unsuitability criteria.
- Qualified surface owner information will be used to obtain views on leasing Federal coal located under private surface.

— **Management Concern No. 1 — Fluid Leasing**

The fluid leasing concern was a result of management feeling that there were too many existing lease stipulations and that they were redundant or not serving the purpose for which they were intended.

To resolve the concern, answers are needed to the following questions:

Are the existing special oil, gas, and geothermal leasing stipulations accurate?

What are the proper special oil, gas, and geothermal leasing stipulations for public lands?

The planning criteria for this management concern is to apply special fluid leasing stipulations to public lands where resource values and uses cannot coexist with fluid leasing without more stringent environmental protection.

— **Management Concern No. 2 — Right—of—way Exclusion and Avoidance Areas**

The right—of—way concern evolved as a result of management feeling that existing right—of—way corridors were not adequate to meeting planning objectives.

To resolve the concern, answers are needed to the following question:

Which lands should be avoided and/or excluded for development of rights—of—way?

The planning criteria for this management concern is to:

— Identify areas where rights—of—way will be excluded from development.

— Identify areas where rights—of—way will be restricted by size and type to protect resource values on public lands.

CHANGING THE PLAN

The Plan may be changed, if necessary, through amendment. Monitoring and evaluation findings, new data, and new or revised policies will be evaluated to determine if there is a need for an amendment. Any change in circumstances or conditions which affect the scope, terms, or conditions of the RMP may warrant an amendment. In all cases, a proposed action that does not conform to the RMP and warrants further consideration before an RMP revision is scheduled would require an

amendment. Generally, an amendment is site specific or involves only one or two planning issues.

A plan revision, if necessary, would involve the preparation of a new RMP for the entire SRA.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL/ INTERAGENCY COORDINATION

Public participation in the Socorro RMP is a dynamic process occurring throughout the development of the plan and beyond. In addition to formal public participation steps, informal contacts have occurred frequently with public land users, grazing allottees, and interested persons through meetings, field trips, telephone calls or letters. All applicable public participation is documented and analyzed in the planning process and kept on file in the SRA.

A notice was published in the Federal Register on January 28, 1986, announcing the formal start of the, planning process, which was preceded by informal meetings with the Socorro and Catron County Commissions held on November 7, and December 8, 1985, to discuss planning issues and planning criteria that guided the development of the Draft RMP/EIS.

On February 6, 1986, the SRA published the “Socorro RMP Spotlight,” a newsletter/brochure to inform the public of tentative planning issues and criteria and to invite the public to comment on their concerns. Another “Spotlight” was published on May 28, 1986, to keep the public informed as to the progress of the RMP.

In addition to these mailings, the SRA conducted two public meetings to further discuss the formulation of planning issues and criteria. These meetings, one in Socorro on February 19, 1986, and the other in Quemado

the following day, discussed these issues and criteria and outlined procedures for introducing formal comments and how the (SRA) would respond to specific RMP comments.

The Draft RMP/EIS was filed with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on January 15, 1988. The 90—day comment period began on January 22 and ended April 22, 1988. A notice of availability was published in the Federal Register on January 15, 1988. During the comment period three public meetings were held: March 1 at the SRA Office, March 2 in Albuquerque, and March 3 in Quemado. These meetings were held to give the public an opportunity to ask questions or request clarification regarding the RMP/EIS. Public hearings were held in Quemado on March 23 and Socorro on March 24, 1988, to provide an opportunity for the public to present oral comments. The public was notified about the hearings in the Federal Register, local newspaper, and personal letters.

A total of 32 written comment letters were received during the 90—day comment period. Responses to written comments as well as those made at public hearings were published in the Proposed RMP/Final EIS.

Consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is required prior to initiation of any project by BLM that may affect any Federally listed threatened or endangered (T&E) species or its habitat. Consultation is required by Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973. This RMP/EIS is considered a major planning effort, and formal consultation has been completed. Letters of formal consultation are on file in the SRA Office.

The N.M. Department of Game and Fish (NMDG&F) and the N.M. Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department have been contacted in regard to State listed T&E wildlife and plant species. This plan is consistent with legislation protecting State listed species. Coordination and consultation with the State will be continued throughout the planning process and during implementation of the plan.

The BLM cultural resource management program operates in accordance with 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 800, which provides specific procedures for consultation between the BLM and the State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO). A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) NMSO—168 between the SHPO, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the BLM New Mexico State Office (NMSO) became effective October 19, 1982. This MOU

incorporates procedures for exchanging information with the SHPO concerning cultural resources on public and private lands. It defines activities requiring consultation and establishes reporting standards. Similarly, the Programmatic Memorandum of Agreement for the protection of cultural resources under the Federal coal management program establishes procedures and focuses on measures that protect the types of sites usually found on Federal land. The SHPO was consulted during the development of the Draft RMP/EIS.

In compliance with Section 8 of the Public Rangeland Improvement Act (PRIA) of 1978, all permittees and lessees in the vegetative use issue area have been contacted to initiate the required consultation, coordination, and cooperation process. Allottees were contacted by letter and informed of the selective management category assigned to the allotment and the implication of this designation. Consultation meetings with allottees were scheduled and held at their requests.

Preplanning efforts for the Socorro RMP included correspondence and informal consultation with livestock grazing permittees.

The notice of availability of the Proposed RMP/Final EIS was published in the Federal Register on September 20, 1988. The document was filed with EPA on September 16, 1988. The Federal Register notice specified a protest period ending October 24, 1988. The document was distributed to participating Federal, State, County, city, and tribal governments as well as many special interest groups and individuals.

One protest was received concerning the location of the Proposed Continental Divide National Science Trail (CDNST) in the northern part of the Resource Area. The protest was reconciled by postponing the designation of a trail route north of Pie Town in the Approved Socorro RMP. Through discussions with U.S. Forest Service, BLM Rio Puerco and Socorro

Area Managers, a recommendation was reached that the various routes will be re—evaluated and public input solicited before a final decision is made.

The Record of Decision was signed by Larry Woodard on January 29, 1989. It was mailed to the public on February 28, 1989, and a notice of the Record of Decision’s availability was published in the Federal Register on March 2, 1989. The Record of Decision approved the proposed decisions as described in the Proposed RMP/Final EIS except for a portion of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail and one specific land disposal area which will be retained in public ownership should the need for these lands be identified in support of management actions in El Malpais General Management Plan.

CONTINUING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The SRA intends to prepare an RMP summary update each year. The purpose of this summary is to inform the public of the progress made in implementing the RMP. The summary will also describe activity plans to be prepared during the following year so interested members of the public can request copies and comment. The BLM hopes this venture will enable the public to be involved in the specific land management actions resulting from implementation of this RMP.

CONSISTENCY WITH OTHER PLANS

The BLM planning regulations require that RMPs be “consistent with officially approved or adopted resource—related plans, and the policies and procedures contained therein, of other Federal agencies, State and local governments, and Indian tribes, so long as the guidance and RMPs are also consistent with the purposes, policies, and programs of Federal laws and regulations applicable to public lands . . . “(43 CFR 1610.3—2). In order to ensure such consistency, finalized plans were solicited from Federal, State, and local agencies as well as Tribal governments.

There are no identified inconsistencies between this RMP and officially approved and adopted resource—related plans of other Federal agencies, State and local governments, and Indian tribes.