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Shortfalls in BLM's Management of
Wildlife Habitat in the California
Desert Conservation Area

Statement of
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Before the
Subcommittee on Public Lands, National
Parks and Forests
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate



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Dear Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our June 1989 report on the management of wildlife habitat in the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) by the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM).¹ Our report dealt with the effectiveness of BLM efforts to protect and enhance wildlife and wildlife habitat under current legislative authority. It did not address the specific merits of S.11--a bill aimed at protecting the public lands in the California Desert and the focus of today's hearing.

Because we have not analyzed the many provisions of S.11 in depth, we have no overall position on it. Our work, however, suggests that a significant change in management philosophy will be needed if the wildlife habitat in the California Desert is to be effectively preserved.

CURRENT MANAGEMENT REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE CDCA

The CDCA, a 25-million-acre area in southeastern California, comprises about 25 percent of the total land in the state and is located within one of the country's fastest growing regions. About one-half of the total area is public land managed by BLM. The area has received increased attention because of competing demands on the desert's resources for wildlife habitat and economic development and recreation. The stakes are high because the desert environment is fragile and slow to heal once it has been damaged.

The Congress recognized these competing demands in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. To provide a

¹California Desert: Planned Wildlife Protection and Enhancement Objectives Not Achieved (GAO/RCED-89-171, June 23, 1989).

framework for balanced use of the area, the act required BLM to prepare a comprehensive land use plan for the CDCA structured around the concepts of multiple use and sustained yield. The act defined multiple use as the management of public lands and their various resource values, such as fish and wildlife, range, recreation, and watershed, so that they are used in the combination that will best meet the present and future needs of the public. Sustained yield requires the achievement and maintenance in perpetuity of a high-level annual or regular periodic output of various renewable resources of public lands, consistent with multiple use.

After a 4-year effort in which all major users of the California Desert's resources participated, BLM issued its comprehensive land use plan in December 1980. This plan set forth numerous principles to help guide BLM managers in their day-to-day efforts to balance the competing demands on the desert's resources. Concerning wildlife, the plan states that "immediate management is required to protect unique and sensitive habitats; sensitive, rare, threatened and endangered species; and representatives of more common desert habitats and ecosystems and the fish and wildlife resources they support."

To implement this overall wildlife protection and enhancement objective, the comprehensive plan required BLM to develop more specific plans for 57 wildlife habitat management areas and 28 wildlife-related areas of critical environmental concern. These implementing plans identify required tasks and associated milestones for completing them, as well as the monitoring necessary to measure progress. They also include estimates of the staff and financial resources required to complete the tasks.

CDCA WILDLIFE PROTECTION

OBJECTIVES NOT ACHIEVED

While BLM considered wildlife needs in its land use planning process and reflected concern for wildlife in establishing management objectives for the area, it has not done a good job of translating this broad expression of concern into tangible wildlife protection efforts and achievements. Many plans were completed behind schedule. Moreover, as of March 1989, almost a decade after the comprehensive CDCA plan was issued, 38 of the 85 required habitat management and area-of-critical-environmental-concern plans remained to be developed.

Even when plans have been developed, they have not always been effectively implemented. Of the 349 tasks in the 22 completed wildlife-related plans that GAO reviewed, work had been completed on only 33 percent, another 21 percent had been partially completed, and work on 46 percent had not started. An element often missing from plan implementation was systematic monitoring designed to tell managers how well plans are being implemented, their impact on wildlife, and whether plan changes should be made. The land managers we interviewed were almost unanimous that monitoring is an essential element of any wildlife plan but that such work was rarely, if ever, performed. They said monitoring is consistently assigned a low priority by BLM and is often delayed indefinitely.

BLM does not maintain current wildlife inventory and population trend data for the more than 635 vertebrate species and countless other species that live in the CDCA. Without such data it is not possible to broadly assess the practical effects of BLM's performance on the area's wildlife. However, available information indicates that the effects are not favorable. In particular, the desert tortoise--an important indicator species for

the overall health of the area's habitat--is declining rapidly. Available BLM monitoring data show that tortoise populations have decreased 50 percent or more since 1979 and, according to tortoise experts, the species may now be sliding irreversibly toward extinction.

Other information demonstrates that the problems with degraded habitat are not restricted to the desert tortoise. Several other species such as the Mohave ground squirrel and a population of Peninsular bighorn sheep have also experienced steep declines.

FUNDING SHORTAGES AND LAGGING COMMITMENT HAMPER BLM'S PERFORMANCE

The shortfalls in BLM's efforts to achieve the wildlife protection and enhancement objectives set forth in the CDCA plan stem from two main causes. First, spending levels called for in the comprehensive plan to facilitate development and implementation of wildlife plans have never been achieved. The CDCA plan called for total expenditures of about \$130 million during fiscal years 1982 through 1988. Actual spending totaled only \$53 million, or about 40 percent of the identified requirement. The shortfall in resources is further reflected in CDCA staffing levels. The BLM district responsible for CDCA plan implementation has never had what local BLM officials believe to be the minimum number of wildlife biologists needed to handle the assigned workload. As a result, we calculated that with 12.1 million acres managed by BLM in the CDCA, each of the eight BLM wildlife biologists currently assigned to the CDCA is responsible for wildlife-related work on an average of 1.5 million acres.

Second, BLM has generally allowed economic and recreational interests to take precedence over wildlife interests when conflicts have arisen. In a few instances, BLM has taken steps to emphasize

wildlife needs as it balanced the competing demands on the desert's resources. More often, however, it has resolved land use conflicts in favor of economic and recreational interests. For example, it has permitted motorcycle races and established off-highway vehicle "free play" areas in important desert tortoise habitat, has allowed livestock grazing that is harmful to various species, and has frequently not placed sufficient restrictions on mining operations to reduce adverse effects on wildlife. As an indication of its orientation to economic interests, BLM recently opposed a California Department of Fish and Game recommendation to place the tortoise on the state's list of threatened species. Such a listing could have imposed wide-ranging restrictions on sheep and cattle grazing and off-highway vehicle use in the tortoise's habitat. In stark contrast, soon after BLM opposed state listing, BLM's sister agency in Interior--the Fish and Wildlife Service--concluded that the threats to the tortoise were so severe that it placed the Mojave population of the species on the federal list of endangered species under emergency listing procedures.

PROSPECTS FOR WILDLIFE UNCERTAIN
UNDER BLM'S STEWARDSHIP

On the basis of our assessment of BLM's performance in managing wildlife habitat in the California Desert and considerable other work on BLM's stewardship of the public lands in general,² we are not optimistic about the future of wildlife and other conservation objectives on BLM lands in the California Desert unless the agency significantly alters the way it does business. Lasting broad-based improvement in BLM's wildlife protection and enhancement efforts in the California Desert probably cannot occur until BLM requests and receives funding and staffing sufficient to carry out the comprehensive CDCA Plan, and makes the institutional

²Related GAO reports and testimonies are listed in an attachment.

commitment to focus more on the long-term health of the land than on the immediate needs of special interest groups.

In previous testimony on BLM's management of the public lands, we called for a fundamental change in course for BLM directed toward more effective implementation of the principles of multiple use and especially sustained yield as mandated by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act. We recognize that such a basic change will take time. We believe, however, that substantive progress in this direction will have to be made if the long-term health of California Desert wildlife habitat under BLM's stewardship is to be ensured.

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.

RELATED GAO PRODUCTS

Change in Approach Needed to Improve the Bureau of Land Management's Oversight of Public Lands (GAO/T-RCED-89-23, Apr. 11, 1989).

Importance of Financial Guarantees for Ensuring Reclamation of Federal Lands (GAO/T-RCED-89-13, Mar. 7, 1989).

Interior Issues (GAO/OCG-89-24TR, Nov. 1988).

Management of Public Rangelands by the Bureau of Land Management (GAO/T-RCED-88-58, Aug. 2, 1988).

Public Rangelands: Some Riparian Areas Restored but Widespread Improvement Will Be Slow (GAO/RCED-88-105, Jun. 30, 1988).

Rangeland Management: More Emphasis Needed on Declining and Overstocked Grazing Allotments (GAO/RCED-88-80, Jun. 10, 1988).

Restoring Degraded Riparian Areas on Western Rangelands (GAO/T-RCED-88-20, Mar. 1, 1988).

Federal Land Management: Limited Action Taken to Reclaim Hardrock Mine Sites (GAO/RCED-88-21, Oct. 21, 1987).

Public Lands: Interior Should Recover the Costs of Recording Mine Claims (GAO/RCED-86-217, Sept. 10, 1986).

Public Lands: Interior Should Ensure Against Abuses From Hardrock Mining (GAO/RCED-86-48, Mar. 27, 1986).