
Alternative 1: Proposed Action

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Impacts on Natural Environment

Soils. When burros are removed from Death Valley National Park, the damage caused by burros to the soil, from compaction, trail formations, and wallowing should begin a slow, probably decades-long, recovery process.

If grazing allotments are phased-out or reduced there would also be a concomitant reduction disturbed soils.

A Saline Valley site management plan that would delineate camping and parking areas, would reduce impacts on soils and would provide a better opportunity for the disturbed soil's recovery.

Vegetation. Vegetation consumption and trampling would diminish with the removal of burros and the removal of cattle if grazing is phased-out or reduced. This would provide more forage for the natural wildlife.

During burro capture operations there could be some localized, short-term disturbance to vegetation from the capture crews and their equipment during the capture operation.

A Saline Valley site management plan that would delineate camping and parking areas, would reduce impacts on vegetation and would provide a better opportunity for the recovery of the areas natural vegetation.

Water. The removal of burros from the park would eliminate their impacts on the park waters. Springs and creeks would no longer be contaminated by burro wallowing, defecation, or urination. Cattle's impacts on the park's waters would also be reduced if grazing is phased-out.

Wildlife. As burros are removed from the park and if cattle grazing is phased-out or reduced, wildlife populations would benefit from less competition for resources. More forage and less interactions at watering sites would be expected to benefit wildlife populations and would increase their numbers.

As natural water sources are restored, wildlife populations would adjust to more natural condition. Studies would be undertaken to determine if guzzlers have contributed to unnaturally high wildlife populations and possible overuse of native vegetation.

Localized populations of wildlife may be disturbed for short periods of time during the burro capture operations. No long-term impacts would on wildlife from these operations would be expected.

Impacts on Cultural Resources

Archeological sites, historic properties, cultural landscapes, and ethnographic resources in Death Valley

National Park would benefit from the proposed action through an expanded systematic and integrated inventory, research, and preservation program to manage, protect, preserve, and interpret properties listed on, or determined eligible for listing on, the National Register of Historic Places. The program, which would protect the documented values of the properties, would be developed through collaborative partnerships with government agencies and public and private organizations that have cultural resource management or research capabilities/expertise.

The potential for burros and cattle to trample and destroy cultural resources would diminish if this alternative is implemented.

Although increasing public visitation could adversely affect cultural resources by vandalism or inadvertent damage, actions to reduce these impacts, including increased ranger monitoring to detect vandalism and illegal collection, and visitor education programs, would be increased. A site management plan to be prepared for the Saline Valley area would include a program to identify cultural resources and recommend methods to protect and restore them.

Additional mining-related cultural resources important to the historical development of the park could be acquired and protected by stabilization efforts and regular enforcement patrols. Bringing historic resources into public ownership would increase visitor opportunities for enjoyment of these resources.

Impacts on Native American Interests

Implementation of the proposed action and a resolution to the land suitability study would provide the Timbisha Shoshone Tribe and the National Park Service with greater opportunities for government-to-government collaboration and cooperation on a wide variety of matters.

There would be significant advantages and improvements to the park by the institution of these measures. Implementation of collaboration and cooperation would improve relations and communications between the National Park Service and the tribe. Both NPS staff and tribal members would be more exposed to each other's perceptions and areas of interest. This process would result in improved understanding of matters of agreement and differences. This would make issues easier to resolve.

Tribal involvement in resource management and visitor interpretation would provide park visitors with a more complete and more appropriate range of perspectives on park prehistory, history, and contemporary life.

Impacts on Visitor Use and Facilities

Visitor aesthetics would be affected by burro removal and the potential elimination or reduction of grazing and guzzlers. As a result of burro removal, habitat would slowly recover, providing a long-term aesthetic benefit. Some visitors would consider the absence of burros an adverse impact, but others would regard it as a positive impact. If the third stage of the burro removal plan results in the killing of the last few burros, some people would be displeased.

The possible elimination of grazing and guzzlers within the park would eventually affect visitors' aesthetics. People who would find cattle and ranching activities an inappropriate use or guzzlers an inappropriate feature within a unit of the national park system would be pleased if allotments were purchased or guzzlers removed. People who enjoy seeing ranching activities and guzzlers would be less

pleased.

The changes proposed for the Saline Valley area, may seem too structured to the Saline Valley Warm Springs advocate groups. They might not enjoy their camping experience as much as they did in the past with the proposed action's changes. However, NPS management in the Saline Valley Warm Springs area could help maintain its qualities by protecting it from random and increasing visitor activities. With the implementation of this alternative, visitors would find a well-maintained campground by the National Park Service and advocate groups, a less disturbed natural desert environment, and a rare desert camping experience — warm spring bathing. Closing the Chicken Strip airstrip would adversely affect the people who visit the area by plane. (There are an estimated at 3–4 flights every week, with less frequent summer flights. David Bybee, pers. comm.).

Backcountry roads would receive minimal maintenance from the National Park Service to prevent road-braiding (widening of a road by people trying to drive on a smoother surface to avoid the road's poor surface condition). This would prevent future destruction to the desert environment and allow the vegetation to recover.

As private land, state land, and mining properties are purchased more public lands would be available for visitor use and less incompatible development activities would occur in the park. Visitors would encounter less active mining operations or mining traffic on park roads.

Impacts on Socioeconomic Environments

A separate analysis of socioeconomic conditions in the planning area and the effects of the proposed action was conducted by Dean Runyan Associates under contract to the NPS. That analysis concluded that no significant effects would occur in the NEMO planning area as a result of the proposed action. There would be some loss of grazing related jobs if allotments were acquired, but the overall effect would be offset by an increase in tourism jobs. See that report for more details.

Acquisition of private lands would remove those properties from county tax rolls. However, the federal government provides payments to the counties in lieu of taxes to compensate them for their loss of taxes. This program is coordinated by the Bureau of Land Management and payments are made annually for entitlement lands and every five years for acquired lands. Payment is computed based on 1% of the amount paid for the property.

Impacts on Administrative Operations and Facilities

The cost for initial live capture and adoption of the burros would be high. Using BLM figures (\$1,200/burro) removing a target population of 300 burros would be about \$450,000 including planning costs. This cost is a one-time expense. However, there would be long-term expenses of fencing and capture of burros that migrate into the park from adjacent BLM and military lands.

This would be the most expensive alternative for Saline Valley. Funding would be needed to make campsite improvements, to provide facilities and resource protection measures, to develop site management plans, and for increased maintenance costs.

If the relocation of some park services and employees to an area outside the park occurs, then an expected increase in housing availability and choice in the relocated area should improve employee morale. As park services and employees are relocated, the availability of park housing for the

remaining employees would increase. Housing maintenance costs for the park would level off. No housing maintenance cost would be incurred for areas outside the park.

With the proposed relocation of some NPS services outside of the park, increased transportation time and expenses would result for employees needing to work in the park. It is about a one-hour drive to Pahrump and two hours to Lone Pine from Furnace Creek.

There would be an initial administrative workload and cost to acquire properties. However, this workload would diminish over time as nonfederal lands and interests are brought under public ownership. Properties acquired may require the park to undertake restoration or stabilization activities to restore native vegetation and wildlife, or to preserve historic features. Any such activities would be considered in separate detailed plans.

Impacts on Land Ownership and Use

This alternative would probably result in operation changes in the grazing management program. Under NPS management, grazing fees might be increased. The change in grazing management operations with the chance of more grazing limitations and higher grazing fees might influence the future value of the grazing allotments. No new range developments would be allowed under this alternative.

The receiving communities of new NPS offices and employees may see an increase in property values and an increase in demand for community services and utilities.

Impacts on mineral development activities would be the same as the existing management alternative.

Cumulative Impacts

The acquisition of grazing allotments on a willing-seller willing-buyer basis and removal of most of burros in Death Valley National Park would contribute to the overall restoration of the desert's vegetation, soils, waters, and wildlife to more natural conditions. There would be less overall development of desert habitat and resources on a regional basis.

This alternative's implementation (and a similar one for Mojave National Preserve) would result in a noticeable reduction in the burro populations within the California Desert area's public lands. The population management levels would be reduced to 334 burros and 252 horses from the Bureau of Land Management's former targeted population (843 burros and 267 horses) for their herd management areas prior to the passage of the California Desert Protection Act of 1994. This would be a reduction in the California desert of 60% of the burro and 6% of the horse populations.

Impacts to burros from the potential loss of habitat and a possible increase in the number of injuries or deaths may result from the increased activities at two sites near the park. These sites are the proposed expansions at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin and the expected expansion of the Briggs Mine. The number of animals impacted at these locations is expected to be small but they would add to the proposed reduction at the National Park Service units.

Throughout the desert, the Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service are pursuing exchanges of state school sections in parks and wilderness areas. The potential reduction in tax dollars is partially mitigated by payments in lieu of taxes that are paid to the counties for lands acquired by the federal government. Additionally, occupancy and sales taxes have and would continue to grow. The

potential for increased visitor use in the region and the consequent dollars spent on food, lodging, transportation and other items have grown significantly over the past 5–8 years. This growth in tourist dollars expended in the area is expected to continue.

The existing withdrawal of some park land from mineral entry over the last twenty years by the Mining in the Parks Act, the Bureau of Land Management for wilderness study areas or other purposes, and by the California Desert Protection Act, has removed some areas of the desert from potential mineral development except for valid existing rights in those areas. Depending on the commodity, small regional price increases could result from increased transportation or development costs in other areas. The price of gold, the primary mineral sought, would not be affected by any actions in the planning area. Any loss of jobs in one sector is expected to be offset by stable and sustainable growth in jobs in the service and tourist industries.

There would be no adverse cumulative impacts on cultural resources under this alternative.