

BLM backtracks on proposed shooting ban at Ariz. national monument
Phil Taylor, E&E reporter

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The Interior Department this afternoon backed off on a proposal to ban recreational shooting at a half-million-acre national monument southwest of Phoenix, a move that drew praise from sportsmen.

Under pressure from the National Rifle Association and a sportsman advisory council, the Bureau of Land Management said target shooting would continue at the Sonoran Desert National Monument. The diverse desert landscape protected by President Clinton in 2001 includes 63 shooting sites, according to the NRA.

"We plan to identify this option as the preferred management decision in the final environmental impact statement, with accompanying management and administrative actions to minimize the impacts of shooting to the monument values and objects," Robert Towne, acting director of the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System, told the Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council in a teleconference.

Towne said the Sonoran plan could be a model for how BLM designs best management practices for recreational shooting on other agency lands. He emphasized the need for public education and resource monitoring.

The decision breaks from the agency's draft proposal last August, which cited concerns over noise, public safety and resource impacts in the monument, which is marked by woodlands, cacti, creosote and rare desert grasslands.

A month later, BLM unveiled a separate proposal to ban shooting on 129,000 acres of Arizona's Ironwood Forest National Monument near Tucson after several incidents of vandals shooting saguaros and palo verde trees, neither of which can survive damage from gunshots (Land Letter, Jan. 5).

Both decisions drew protests from groups including Safari Club International and NRA, which accused the Obama administration of harboring an anti-hunting bias by punishing the majority for the actions of a few.

"BLM managers have been open about this discriminatory and anti-gun attitude in the press," Susan Recce, NRA's director of conservation, wildlife and natural resources, said in testimony in January to the House Natural Resources Committee.

The Sonoran decision comes in a state many consider a battleground in the presidential election, in part because Sen. John McCain, who won his home state by 9 points in 2008, won't be the GOP nominee. The hook and bullet crowd is a strong voting bloc in many Western states.

"We're very pleased to hear this is the recommended course of action for the Sonoran that BLM is making in this regard," said Jeff Crane, president of the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation and a member of the federal wildlife council.

The 18-member council today also approved a draft letter to BLM Director Bob Abbey warning that recent closures on BLM, Forest Service and county lands have limited opportunities for sportsmen. The chance to shoot on public lands, particularly near urban areas, is crucial for new hunters, the letter said.

Sportsmen's access garnered national attention in mid-April when the House passed a bill designed to strengthen hunting and angling rights on public lands, over the objections of many environmentalists and Democrats (E&E Daily, April 18). Opponents included the Wilderness Society, Center for Biological Diversity and National Parks Conservation Association.

The package included a bill by Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) that would limit BLM shooting bans at national monuments to six months, after which only Congress could authorize a permanent ban. BLM opposed the bill (H.R. 3440), citing threats to the environment and the fact that 95 percent of the agency's 245 million acres is open to recreational shooting.