



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
PACIFIC WEST REGION
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IN REPLY REFER TO:

L7617 (PWRO-P)

APR 02 2019

Memorandum

To: Superintendent, Joshua Tree National Park

From: Regional Director, Pacific West

Subject: Environmental Compliance for Visitor Facilities at the
Cottonwood Area

The *Finding of No Significant Impact* (FONSI) for replacement of the temporary visitor center and installation of related interpretive facilities is approved.

To complete this particular conservation planning and environmental impact analysis effort, at the time when the park announces the decision, a copy of the FONSI should be made available to all individuals and organizations that received or commented on the supporting environmental assessment.

Stan Austin

Attachment

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Improvement of Visitor Facilities at the Cottonwood Area

U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Joshua Tree National Park
California

March 2019

INTRODUCTION

The National Park Service (NPS) prepared this finding of no significant impact (FONSI) for the *Improvement of Visitor Facilities at the Cottonwood Area Environmental Assessment* at Joshua Tree National Park (park) in accordance with the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and NPS NEPA guidance in Director's Order 12: *Conservation Planning, Environmental Impact Analysis, and Decision-making*. The finding of no significant impact, combined with the environmental assessment, comprise the full and complete NEPA record of the analysis of environmental impacts and the NPS decision-making process on the park's plan to accommodate increased visitation in the visitor access areas of the Cottonwood area of the park.

The finding of no significant impact summarizes the alternatives presented to stakeholders and interested members of the public for review and comment, and includes the rationale for selecting "Alternative B: NPS Preferred/Proposed Action" from the environmental assessment for implementation. The document also lists the specific actions the National Park Service will follow when implementing the selected alternative and explains the reasoning behind the statement that the alternative will result in no significant impacts on the environment as defined by NEPA regulation (42 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] Parts 1500-1508) and NPS NEPA guidance in Director's Order 12.

BACKGROUND

Cottonwood is one of the three main entrances to the park and is the primary way visitors enter Joshua Tree National Park from the south. The existing visitor center, which is about 5 miles north of Interstate 10, is part of the Cottonwood area. The district is the focal point for visitor and park support facilities for the eastern portion of the park and is the primary area for experiencing the Colorado Desert. The Cottonwood Mountains are located west of the visitor center and the Pinto Basin plateau extends to the north.

This plan is needed to address both immediate and long-term issues concerning resource protection, visitor use, and administration of the Cottonwood Visitor Center area and associated trails.

The park has needed a new visitor center in the Cottonwood area for some time. The existing modular structure was never intended to be permanent, is poorly engineered for the environment, and has reached end of its useful life. It is also too small to adequately manage current visitation to the Cottonwood area, both in terms of space for educational and interpretive programs and waysides, as well as parking.

Within the Cottonwood area, the park recently completed a Determination of Eligibility (DOE) to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) for the Cottonwood Spring Mission 66 Historic District. The Determination of Eligibility considers the mid-20th-century modern architecture and landscape design of the original Mission 66 layout of Cottonwood's developed areas. The district's central feature is the visitor contact station in the Cottonwood visitor area, which is in a condition that allows for its restoration to period appearance; however, the existing temporary visitor center and modern restroom building detract from the district's significance.

Concurrently, the park completed a Determination of Eligibility to the National Register of Historic Places for the Cottonwood Springs Archeological District (CSAD). Early in the planning process, archeological site evaluations were prepared for the park, and the resulting report detailed a number of individual sites proposed as eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. During later consultation with the park's

traditionally associated tribes, the tribes recommended applying the NRHP District concept to these archeological sites and features. The district relates primarily to the period from 600-1400 AD, and was assessed as eligible for its ability to provide information about patterns in human history.

PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

The project purpose is to improve the park's Cottonwood area visitor facilities near Highway 10 to accommodate growing visitation and crowding in the visitor access areas of the district (facilities, building, parking). In 2016, Joshua Tree National Park set a record for annual visitation with more than 2.5 million visitors. Visitation for March 2016 alone was 327,072; in March 2017, visitor numbers increased to 404,545, which is the largest monthly visitation in the park's history.

A plan is needed to evaluate opportunities for rehabilitation, relocation, expansion, or replacement of existing facilities—including the visitor center, parking area, trails and trail parking, and office space—and to address necessary infrastructure upgrades. Visitor access and improved accessibility, safety issues, and the quality of the visitor experience also need to be addressed.

Under the *NPS Management Policies 2006*, the National Park Service must determine if improvement to the visitor facilities in the Cottonwood area would cause unavoidable conflicts with the park's mission.

Cottonwood Spring Historic District

Under alternative B, the National Park Service would improve visitor facilities in the Cottonwood Spring historic district. All of the proposed actions identified here would be carried out in conformance with Secretary of the Interior's Standards to ensure that new development is appropriately designed to protect the character-defining features of the Mission 66-era historic district.

The existing modular visitor center would be removed and replaced with a new building designed specifically for the climate and site, and to blend with the architectural character of the Mission 66 district. The new visitor center would have space for sales and visitor contact information, new

exhibits, a classroom/meeting room, office space, storage, and an indoor restroom facility. The existing Mission 66-era ranger contact station would be retained to serve as a visitor contact station or repurposed for other uses, its exterior restored to its historical appearance. The adjacent noncontributing restroom buildings would be removed.

These measures would result in long-term beneficial impacts on the integrity of the historic district and its contributing historic buildings and cultural landscape features. Although limited adverse impacts would occur from the introduction of new constructed buildings and features that were not included in the original Mission 66 site design, compatible architectural designs would help to mitigate the potential adverse visual impacts associated with new construction, resulting in an improvement of the historic scene over current conditions.

Prehistoric Archeological Resources

Under alternative B, several proposed actions have the potential to disturb unknown archeological resources in the project area. The park has surveyed the project area for archeological resources. The outcome of the survey effort was a determination for a NRHP eligible district, the Cottonwood Springs Archeological District. The siting of the proposed visitor center building was selected to avoid all known archeological resources, with no potential to disturb known resources.

Under alternative B, proposed new construction and development activities have the potential to disturb unknown archeological resources. National Park Service archeological staff and tribal monitors will be present during construction to ensure that archeological resources, should they be identified, are avoided or adequately protected and documented.

Because limited adverse impacts could also occur from visitor use, erosion, and other factors that could diminish resource integrity, the National Park Service would continue to monitor, and coordinate with tribal monitors, to protect archeological resources in the Cottonwood Spring area as feasible under existing laws and policies.

Groundwater

Because alternative B includes an increase in visitor capacity at the visitor center (to meet current visitor needs), this alternative could eventually result in a commensurate increase in visitation at Cottonwood over time. However, as part of this alternative, water use efficiency measures would be built into the visitor center design in pursuit of a zero net gain in water demand for the proposed expansion. These measures, which would include low-flow toilets and other water-efficient appliances, would help minimize adverse effects from drawing down Cottonwood sub-basin aquifer as visitor use continues or increases at the Cottonwood visitor center.

Despite potential increases in visitor use at the proposed visitor center expansion, the application of water use efficiency measures built into the visitor center design would minimize increases in water demand as visitation increases.

Visitor Information and Circulation

The improvements to the visitor center under alternative B would support park managers' goals for the Cottonwood area by improving visitor information, education, and circulation resulting in beneficial impacts to the visitor experience. The new and enhanced infrastructure would provide space for visitor education about on and off-trail travel, natural and cultural resources in the area, and opportunities for comprehensive park stewardship education. In addition, visitor experience would be improved through a reduction in wait times for initial visitor contact and fee collection.

Alternative B would reduce the congestion at a primary access point for key visitor experiences in the Cottonwood area. Specifically, the expansion of the visitor center and parking lot are likely to reduce congestion and wait times by adding capacity to accommodate additional visitors seeking information about the Cottonwood area. Overflow parking at the Oasis trailhead would be formalized, providing 15 additional spaces. Decreases in congestion often result in beneficial impacts to the visitor experience as the availability of visitor opportunities increase with the decrease in congestion.

Additional visitor education about park stewardship, and specifically low impact principles such as Leave No Trace, are likely to decrease the impact of human waste and result in beneficial impacts to the visitor experience.

Visitor safety would also be beneficially impacted by the action to move the restrooms and water source indoors, which would greatly reduce visitor interaction with bees attracted to outdoor water fountains.

Diversity of Visitor Experience and Opportunities

Alternative B would result in overall beneficial improvements to the diversity of visitor experience and opportunities. Connectivity would be achieved by improving the existing short nature interpretive trail in the visitor center area. This would beneficially impact the range of available visitor experience in Cottonwood and simultaneously provide additional settings for visitor education. The action to expand the shaded picnic area would accommodate additional visitors and contribute to beneficial impacts to the visitor experience, especially during the very warm days at the park. The park also examined the impacts associated with establishment of the nature trail between the campground and visitor center. This would enhance visitor flow within the Cottonwood area and further expand the range of available visitor opportunities, though the park does not plan to implement this trail segment at this time.

RESOURCE PROTECTION MEASURES

To prevent and minimize potential adverse impacts associated with the preferred alternative, best management practices and resource protection measures will be implemented during construction and post-construction phases of the project. Please refer to table 1, with respect to the topics analyzed.

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Table 1. Resource Protection Measures

Resource Protection Measure	Responsible Party
<p>General Measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction limits would be clearly marked with stakes prior to beginning ground-disturbing activities. No disturbance would occur beyond these limits. • All contractor employees and subcontractors would attend an orientation session(s) regarding park regulations focused on minimizing impacts on resources, human health, and safety. Sessions would include specific education on the status and protection of desert tortoises and laws regarding archeological resources. • All tools, equipment, barricades, signs, surplus materials, and rubbish would be removed from the project area work limits upon project completion. Construction debris would be hauled from the park to an appropriate disposal location. 	NPS Project Manager
<p>Groundwater</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Park staff would collect and record groundwater withdrawal measurements and groundwater level data at the existing water supply well and the proposed well, respectively. These data, along with monthly visitation data, would be used to inform management of water supply withdrawals so as to comply with state water quality standards in the sub-basin. 	NPS Project Manager and JOTR Physical Scientist
<p>Wildlife and Species of Concern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction personnel would be instructed on appropriate behavior in the presence of wildlife and on proper storage and handling of food, garbage, and other attractants. • The following additional conservation measures would be taken to protect the desert tortoise: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ A desert tortoise education program will be presented to all project personnel in to avoid negative affects to this species. ○ Preconstruction surveys for tortoise burrows would be conducted within ¼ mile of the project area prior to construction activities. ○ Tortoise exclusion fences would be installed around all active work areas ○ The park would continue all appropriate recovery plan actions per consultation and agreement with the US Fish and Wildlife Service. 	NPS Project Manager and JOTR Wildlife Ecologist
<p>Vegetation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disturbance to vegetation would be avoided as much as possible and contained to as small a footprint as possible while meeting project objectives. • All equipment, tools, and vehicles would be cleaned before entering the park to minimize the transportation of exotic seeds to the site. All equipment entering the park would be inspected and may be required to be pressure washed to remove foreign soil, vegetation, and other materials that may contain nonnative seeds or vegetation. • Revegetation and recontouring of disturbed areas would take place following construction and would be designed to minimize visual intrusions. Revegetation 	NPS Project Manager and JOTR Vegetation Program Manager

Resource Protection Measure	Responsible Party
<p>efforts would use native species to strive to reconstruct the natural spacing, abundance, and diversity of native plant species. All disturbed areas would be restored as closely as possible to preconstruction conditions shortly after construction activities are completed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nonnative invasive plant infestations near disturbed areas would be treated on a yearly basis for a minimum of three years following project completion. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Soil, duff, and litter from work areas would be salvaged prior to disturbance. ○ These materials would be stored in a pile under a tarp in the shade and reapplied as soon as work is completed. ○ Introduced seed or plant materials (even named native species) from commercial sources would not be used. The landscape planting plan includes specific plant species and locations. The park plant nursery will grow plants as specified in plans from local genetic material, as native (unassisted) revegetation will not be sufficient for areas around the visitor center and along the nature trail. If the park biologist determines additional plant material is needed, it would be collected from local native seed and salvaged plant material. • Rare plant species including Hall's tetracoccus (<i>Tetracoccus hallii</i>; a flowering shrub) and thorny milkwort (<i>Polygala acanthoclada</i>) located in the project area would be flagged and avoided. • Succulents including yuccas and cacti that must be disturbed by construction activities would be salvaged and transplanted in an appropriate location. 	
<p>Soils</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disturbance to soils would be contained to as small a footprint as possible while meeting project objectives. Any soils severely compacted during construction will be restored by ripping or imprinting at project conclusion. • Topsoil would be salvaged, stored under cover, and used to restore temporarily disturbed areas following construction. Topsoil salvage would be limited to the upper 5-10 centimeters of soil and would not be diluted with deeper subsoil. • Topsoil would be stored for as short a period as possible before restoration. • Any topsoil temporarily disturbed during construction would be aerated and replanted with native vegetation to reduce compaction and prevent erosion. 	NPS Project Manager and JOTR Vegetation Program Manager
<p>Cultural Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No ground disturbance would occur in areas not previously evaluated for the presence of archeological resources. • Known historic sites and isolated occurrences would be flagged and avoided during construction. A NPS archeologist and tribal archeological monitor would be on site during ground-disturbing activities associated with well installation and along new trail construction. • Should construction unearth undiscovered cultural resources, work would be stopped in the area of any discovery and the park superintendent would consult with the State Historic Preservation Office, consulting tribes, and others as necessary, according to §36 Code of Federal Regulations 800.13, <i>Post Review</i> 	NPS Project Manager and JOTR Cultural Resource Program Manager

Resource Protection Measure	Responsible Party
<p><i>Discoveries.</i> In the unlikely event that human remains are discovered during construction, provisions outlined in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990) would be followed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Park staff would ensure that all contractors and subcontractors are informed of the penalties for illegally collecting artifacts or intentionally damaging paleontological materials, archeological sites, or historic properties. Contractors and subcontractors would also be instructed on procedures to follow in case previously unknown paleontological or archeological resources are revealed during construction. 	
<p>Visitor Use and Experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signs, press releases, and other communication methods would be used to inform visitors about construction, trail access, and traffic delays. • A temporary facility (limited in size but including portable restrooms and alternative parking locations) would be established within the visitor center area adjacent to construction activities while work is proceeding on the new visitor center. Alternatively, construction could be phased so that existing facilities could be used as new ones are constructed. • Construction activities would be scheduled to coordinate with lowest months of visitation in the park. 	NPS Project Manager and JOTR Chief of Interpretation and Resource Education
<p>Air Quality and Soundscapes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All construction motor vehicles and equipment would have mufflers conforming to original manufacturer specifications that are in good working order to prevent excessive or unusual noise, fumes, or smoke. • To reduce noise and emissions, construction equipment would not be permitted to idle for longer than 5 minutes when not in use. 	NPS Project Manager and Physical Scientist

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Resource Protection Measure	Responsible Party
<p>Public Health, Safety, and Park Operations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate barriers and barricades would be used to clearly delineate work areas and provide for safe visitor travel through construction areas. • Construction workers would wear appropriate attire such as hard hats, gloves, and goggles to protect themselves from natural hazards. Visitors would not be allowed into construction zones. Park staff would also be required to wear protective gear when they are in the construction zone. • Trucks hauling debris and other loose materials would be covered to maintain adequate freeboard to prevent spillage to paved surfaces. • Emergency response protocols would be developed for implementation during construction. Construction activities would be conducted in accordance with established safety protocols. • Employees and construction crews would be required to park their vehicles in designated locations. • Construction workers and supervisors would be informed about the special sensitivity of park values, regulations, and appropriate housekeeping. 	<p>NPS Project Manager and Chief of Facilities Management</p>

OTHER ALTERNATIVE ANALYZED IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Alternative A. No Action Alternative

Under alternative A, there would be no changes to the existing double-wide trailer that serves as the visitor center. The existing Mission 66 historic contact station would serve as a ranger contact station. Existing facilities would continue to have limited space for interpretive exhibits and provide limited opportunities to orient visitors to the backcountry. Space for outside interpretive and educational programs would remain small with inadequate shade for larger groups. There would continue to be a staffed information desk in the visitor center. No improvements, beyond current maintenance operations, would be made to the parking area, ranger contact station, or restroom building. A small, shaded area with picnic table, information panels, and a short interpretive trail would be available for visitors. No change would occur in wayfinding throughout the district or in the management of trailheads or interpretive exhibits, and visitors would continue to have difficulty navigating crowded developed areas in the Cottonwood area.

Please refer to the *Improvement of Visitor Facilities at the Cottonwood Area Environmental Assessment* to review the details for the existing infrastructure and conditions.

SELECTED ALTERNATIVE AND RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

Based on the analysis presented in the environmental assessment, the National Park Service selected “Alternative B: NPS/Preferred/Proposed Action” —to improve visitor facilities in the Cottonwood area. There are no modifications incorporated in the selected alternative; the approved project will be detailed as described in the EA.

This alternative was selected because it best meets the purpose and need for the project objectives without causing significant impacts to park resources. The objectives of the selected alternative include the following:

- Improve visitor safety, orientation, recreational opportunities, and experiences.
- Avoid impacts to wildlife and associated natural habitat during the improvement process to reduce impacts to endangered wildlife species, and other species of special concern.
- Restore and preserve the viewshed of the desert and historic landscape through appropriate architectural design of a new visitor center.
- Preserve and/or rehabilitate, as appropriate, prehistoric and historic sites that are individually eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.
- Protect prehistoric archeological sites from excessive disturbance through preparation of construction and rehabilitation plans, while improving visitor education and visitor flow.
- Manage forecasted impacts to the park’s hydrological resources (groundwater) with well-designed, water-conserving facilities and utility features.

ALTERNATIVES NOT ANALYZED IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

No other alternative was identified during the internal scoping, agency scoping, public scoping, or tribal consultation.

WHY THE SELECTED ALTERNATIVE WILL NOT HAVE A SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

The National Park Service used the following NEPA criteria defined in 40 CFR 1508.27 to evaluate whether the selected alternative would have a significant effect on the environment:

Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the federal agency believes that, on balance, the effect will be beneficial.

No major adverse or beneficial impacts were identified under the selected alternative that would require analysis in an environmental impact statement. Whether taken individually or as a whole, the impacts of the selected alternative do not reach the level of a significant effect because most adverse impacts associated with implementation of the selected alternative will be temporary, lasting only as long as the improvements are implemented and while construction would occur. However, the overall beneficial impact to visitor services, visitor safety, and resource protection will be long term.

Degree of effect on public health or safety.

The selected alternative considers public health and safety in the plans and in the design to improve visitor experience. Visitor safety will be beneficially impacted by providing indoor and outdoor structures and facilities designed to increase visitor satisfaction and to moderate visitor exposure to the warm desert conditions; through improvement of park communications for the visitor (safety communications, park orientation, emergencies); and through improving visitor circulation (pedestrian, motorized) as a consequence of trail and parking improvements. Visitor safety will also be beneficially impacted by the action to move the restrooms and tap water source indoors, which will greatly reduce visitor interaction with bees attracted to outdoor water fountains. Therefore, the overall effect of the selected alternative on public health and safety will be beneficial.

Degree to which effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

Plans to improve visitor services and increase capacity were not highly controversial, nor are the effects expected to generate future controversy. No identified environmental effect from implementation of the project was highly controversial and there is no indication of future controversy over the nature of the effects. Given the substance of public comments, there is no evidence that the effects on the quality of the human environment will be highly controversial.

Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

There are no highly uncertain effects or unique or unknown risks to the quality of the human environment from the selected alternative. Mitigation measures and best management practices will minimize risk to the human environment. Increased capacity and improvements to visitor services will meet project objectives by implementing strategies to expand visitor opportunities to experience the park's unique resources while still preserving sensitive natural and cultural resources.

Degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

The selected alternative will not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. No significant effects have been identified, and all future actions will be analyzed and considered independently from the selected alternative. The impacts associated with the selected alternative would have limited adverse impacts on analyzed topics.

Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.

Because the scope of this project is relatively small, the geographic and temporal scope of the cumulative analysis is also small. The geographic scope for this analysis includes actions within the park's boundaries, while the temporal scope includes projects over approximately 10 years. The environmental assessment considered the cumulative impacts of the

selected alternative with several past, present, and future actions. No individually or cumulatively significant impacts were identified.

Degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

The National Park Service initiated consultation with the California Office of Historic Preservation on December 18, 2015 to inform them of the project planning and document preparation, as well as to invite their participation in the project planning. The National Park Service received concurrence from the California Office of Historic Preservation on December 24, 2018, that the selected alternative will not adversely affect historic districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in, or eligible for listing in, the National Register of Historic Places.

The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Habitat for the federally endangered desert tortoise exists in the project area; however, this topic has been dismissed from further analysis in the environmental assessment for multiple reasons that aim to avoid or mitigate impacts to the tortoise and its habitat. These include the following: (a) the National Park Service has concluded consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The US Fish and Wildlife Service concurs that this project is “Not Likely to Adversely Affect” the listed Mojave population of desert tortoise, with specific conservation measures in place; (b) the National Park Service will continue to follow the tortoise management guidance outlined in the 2011 USFWS tortoise recovery plan; (c) the National Park Service will further enhance or expand the existing education and interpretation program and displays about the desert tortoise to improve public awareness of this sensitive species and its protection needs; and (d) the National Park Service will conduct additional site-specific tortoise surveys prior to construction, monitor for tortoises during construction, and continue surveying the area for tortoises after the facilities are developed and operational. Following the above approach, it is not expected that there will be any measurable impacts to tortoise habitat or populations. There is no critical habitat in the project area.

Whether the action threatens a violation of federal, state, or local environmental protection law.

The plan was developed in accordance with the park's enabling legislation; management plans; NPS policies; and applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations.

PLANNING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Internal Scoping

An interdisciplinary team of professionals from the park and NPS Denver Service Center Planning Division conducted the internal scoping. Team members met multiple times during 2015, 2016, and 2017 to establish the purpose and need for the project, and outline issues, discuss various alternatives, potential environmental impacts, reasonably foreseeable actions that may have cumulative effects, and resource protection measures. The team also gathered background information and discussed public outreach for the project. Over the course of the project, team members conducted numerous individual site visits to view and evaluate the proposed development areas within the Cottonwood area.

External Scoping

External scoping began with a public scoping notice released on February 8, 2017, describing the preferred alternative and soliciting comments or concerns with the proposal to construct a new visitor center and make other related improvements. The park communicated information about the proposed project to individuals; businesses; organizations; state, county, and local governments; federal agencies; and traditionally associated Native American communities. During the 30-day scoping period, the public was given an opportunity to comment on the proposed project using the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/jotr> or by mailing comments to the park. No substantive comments from the public were received on the PEPC website during the scoping period.

Review of the Environmental Assessment

The park published a news release and notification letter on November 26, 2018, indicating the availability of the environmental assessment for

comment. These documents were published on the park website at <https://www.nps.gov/jotr/learn/news/drafteacottonwood.htm>, as well as the Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/projectHome.cfm?projectID=65537>. The public comment period closed on February 19, 2019. Three comments were received on the environmental assessment during the comment period. A detailed breakdown of the comments is found in appendix A.

Most comments received were in favor of the park's plan to provide improved and expanded visitor use spaces to mitigate increased visitation. One responder was concerned that the improvements were not needed due to the perception that the Cottonwood area is getting little use at present.

AGENCY CONSULTATION

Tribal Consultation

On December 18, 2015, the National Park Service initiated consultation with 15 traditionally associated Native American partners: Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, Augustine Band of Mission Indians, Cabazon Band of Cahuilla Mission Indians, Cahuilla Band of Mission Indians, Chemehuevi Indian Tribe, Colorado River Indian Tribe, Fort Mojave Indian Tribe, Los Coyotes Band of Mission Indians, Morongo Band of Cahuilla Indians, Ramona Band of Cahuilla Indians, San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, Santa Rosa Band of Cahuilla Indians, Soboba Band of Luiseño Indians, Torres-Martinez Band of Desert Cahuilla Indians, and Twentynine Palms Band of Mission Indians.

In the initial consultation, the park informed its traditionally associated Native American communities of the proposed project. The tribes were consulted to determine if any ethnographic resources are in the project area and if the tribes wanted to be involved in the environmental compliance process, and the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) process. The park received three responses (from Twentynine Palms Band, Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, and Augustine Band of Mission Indians) acknowledging the project and their desire for continued consultation as the compliance work progressed.

In a letter dated November 16, 2018 to the 15 affiliated tribes, the park provided updates on the project status and their determination of a Finding of No Adverse Effect to archeological sites and historic properties, and committed to tribal monitoring, NPS archeological monitoring, development of an Inadvertent Discovery Plan (per the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990), and development of an Archeological Resource Inadvertent Discovery Plan. As of the date of this document, the park has not received any additional response from its traditionally associated Native American communities.

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires federal agencies to consider the impacts of their undertakings on historic properties. Compliance with section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act was carried out separately, but concurrently, with the planning process. The National Park Service initiated consultation with the California Office of Historic Preservation (State Historic Preservation Officer) on December 18, 2015 to inform the office of the project planning and document preparation, as well as to invite their participation in the project planning. The letter described the park's undertaking of the project and identified the area of potential effect, which includes the entire landscape from the existing visitor center to the campground. The letter further described that the park would conduct surveys to identify previously unidentified archeological resources, evaluate Mission 66 buildings, conduct a Mission 66 cultural landscape survey, and implement archeological testing to support preparation of a Determination of Eligibility of these resources to the National Register of Historic Places.

In December 2016, a Determination of Eligibility was prepared and submitted to the park detailing the analyses and recommendation for eligibility of these resources to the National Register of Historic Places. Using this information, the park found that their undertaking would have No Adverse Effect on the historic properties evaluated, and detailed this finding in correspondence to the State Historic Preservation Officer on November 15, 2018. The National Park Service received correspondence from the California Office of Historic Preservation on December 24, 2018, stating that the State Historic Preservation Officer had no objection to the finding of No Adverse Effect from project actions.

Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act

Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act requires federal agencies to consult with the US Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure that any action it authorizes, funds, or carries out is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of a listed species or result in the destruction or adverse modification to critical habitat. The desert tortoise is a federally listed species known to occur 1 to 2 miles southwest of the project area (listed as threatened in 1990). Critical habitat for the desert tortoise is designated within the park, as well. The US Fish and Wildlife Service developed a final recovery plan for the tortoise in 1994 and a revised recovery plan was released in 2011 (USFWS 2011). The National Park Service has adopted the management recommendations of the initial and updated recovery plans for the tortoise and applies them to park management actions. The National Park Service entered into informal consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service on September 5, 2018, describing the proposed project, as well as the intent to adopt the management recommendations described in the 2011 USFWS desert tortoise recovery plan, and asked for USFWS concurrence on the described plan and actions to protect the desert tortoise. On December 17, 2018, based on the information provided by the National Park Service, the US Fish and Wildlife Service agreed on the avoidance and minimization measures listed, and concurred that the proposed project is not likely to incidentally take or otherwise adversely affect the desert tortoise.

CONCLUSION

As described above, the selected alternative does not constitute an action meeting the criteria that normally requires preparation of an environmental impact statement. The selected alternative will not have a significant effect on the human environment in accordance with section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act.

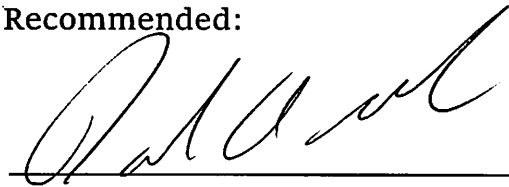
Based on the conservation planning and environmental impact analysis documented in the environmental assessment, with due consideration of the nature of the public comments and consultations with other agencies, and given the capability of the mitigation measures to avoid, reduce, or eliminate impacts, the National Park Service has determined that the selected actions do not constitute a federal action that normally requires preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS). Environmental

impacts that could occur are limited in context and intensity, with generally adverse impacts that range from localized to widespread, short- to long-term, and negligible to moderate. The selected actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment or the park's cultural resources or natural resources, and with implementation of conservation measures, the proposed project is not anticipated to result in any take, in the form of mortality or injury, of adult or sub-adult desert tortoises.

There are no unmitigated adverse impacts on public safety, sites, or districts listed in, or eligible for listing in, the National Register of Historic Places, or other unique characteristics of the region. No highly uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, cumulative effects, or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the selected alternative will not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection law.

Based on the foregoing, the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act have been satisfied and preparation of an environmental impact statement is not required. Joshua Tree National Park will implement the selected alternative.

Recommended:

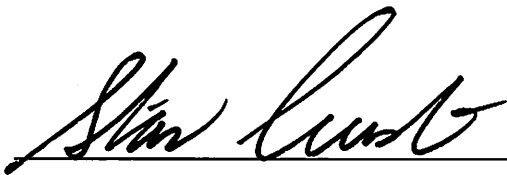


3/14/19

David Smith

Date

Superintendent, Joshua Tree National Park



4/1/19

Stan Austin

Date

Regional Director, Pacific West Region, National Park Service

Appendix A

PUBLIC COMMENT SUMMARY

The park released a newsletter in January 2017 outlining the purpose and need of the project. The purpose of this project is to rehabilitate or replace facilities at the Cottonwood Visitor Center in order to address a number of site-related issues. One correspondence was received in support of the second proposed location for the upgraded visitor center.

During public review (December 3, through February 19, 2019) three correspondences were received through the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website. None was sent directly to the park. Comments were received from two states—two from California and one from North Carolina.

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

Primary terms used in the document include the following:

Correspondence. A correspondence is the entire document received from a commenter. It can be in the form of a letter, written comment form, note card, or open house transcript.

Comment. A comment is a portion of the text within a correspondence that addresses a single subject or issue. It could include such information as an expression of support or opposition to the use of a potential management tool, additional data regarding the existing condition, or an opinion debating the adequacy of an analysis.

Comment Summary. A comment summary is a grouping that is centered on a common subject. Comment summaries combine similar comments. Example quotes from the comments used to create a comment summary may also be presented to highlight the type of sentiments that went into the comment summary.

COMMENT ANALYSIS

The public was asked to provide general input on the environmental impacts associated with proposed alternatives described in the environmental

assessment online on the PEPC website. Feedback was solicited via media releases (December 3, 2018 through February 19, 2019).

The comments that the agency received included support of the plan, suggestions for alternative management actions, and recommendations for implementation of other possible actions. Two correspondences were in favor of the project due to the need for visitor use spaces to mitigate increased visitation. Comments and suggestions on the issues and actions are summarized below and have been organized by topic.

Visitor Use

Study Area. One comment indicated that if there is more classroom space, there could be more educational programs to offer. Another urged that visitors need to have more points of contact to orient individuals to the park and educate them on the cultural and natural resources in the park. The correspondents noted that expanding the visitor center will help achieve this goal.

Response: We agree that the external components of the proposed visitor center is for the benefit of educational groups. In addition, adding a small classroom setting at the contact station will benefit the educational programs and visitors.

Increased Visitation. One correspondence believed that since the proposed visitor center is closer to a center population, it may attract more people. Another thought that with the recent exposure associated with the government shutdown, there will be a need for a larger facility with the possibility of more guests due to the media exposure. One correspondence felt that there is no need for an updated visitor center because they perceive it as getting very little use now.

Response: The expense associated with developing a visitor center closer to Indio would be unreasonable for the National Park Service to develop and maintain. The National Park Service has developed the visitor center size and design to address the current visitation trends and in consideration of visitor capacity decisions for the area that allow the park to maintain and achieve desired conditions in the Cottonwood area.

Visitor Conflicts and Safety

Study Area. One comment agreed that the suggested shade structure would be beneficial for visitor safety due to the high heat and winds that frequent the area.

Response: Thank you for the comment.

Purpose and Need

Park Purpose and Significance. One correspondence felt that there is no need for an updated visitor center because of the perception of low visitor use. In contrast, other comments considered the changes to the visitor center essential because it is a primary way to contact/orient visitors to the park and educate them on the importance of the natural and cultural resources. Also, with a possible increase in park visitors, there is need for increased accommodations.

Response: Park visitation numbers indicate a need for improved and expanded facilities. Park visitation has increased 130% over the last 5 years based on public use statistics reported on the NPS Visitor Use Statistics public-facing website.

Air Quality

Study Area. One comment reasoned that with the proposed visitor center, classrooms will be closer to a center population and will theoretically reduce travel time and therefore reduce vehicle emissions.

Response: Thank you for your comments. We agree that shorter distances traveled to attend educational programs would save fuel and associated emissions, which would continue to contribute beneficially to air quality concerns in the area.

DETERMINATION OF NO IMPAIRMENT

Improvement of Visitor Facilities at the Cottonwood Area

U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Joshua Tree National Park
California

March 2019

The National Park Service (NPS) *Management Policies 2006* requires analysis of potential effects to determine whether actions would impair park resources. The fundamental purpose of the national park system—established by the Organic Act and reaffirmed by the General Authorities Act, as amended—begins with a mandate to conserve park resources and values. NPS managers must always seek ways to avoid or minimize, to the greatest degree practicable, adverse impacts to park resources and values.

However, the laws do give the National Park Service the management discretion to allow impacts to park resources and values when necessary and appropriate to fulfill the purposes of a park, as long as the impact does not constitute impairment of the affected resources and values. Although Congress has given the National Park Service the management discretion to allow certain impacts within the park, that discretion is limited by the statutory requirement that the National Park Service must leave park resources and values unimpaired, unless a particular law directly and specifically provides otherwise. The prohibited impairment is an impact that, in the professional judgment of the responsible NPS manager, would harm the integrity of park resources or values, including the opportunities that otherwise would be present for the enjoyment of these resources or values. An impact to any park resource or value may, but does not necessarily, constitute an impairment, but an impact would be more likely to constitute an impairment when there is a major or severe adverse effect upon a resource or value whose conservation is

- necessary to fulfill specific purposes identified in the establishing legislation or proclamation of the park,

- key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park, or
- identified as a goal in the park's general management plan or other relevant NPS planning documents.

An impact would be less likely to constitute an impairment if it is an unavoidable result of an action necessary to pursue or restore the integrity of park resources or values and it cannot be further mitigated. The park resources and values that are subject to the no-impairment standard include the following:

- The park's scenery, natural and historic objects, and wildlife, and the processes and conditions that sustain them, including—to the extent present in the park—the ecological, biological, and physical processes that created the park and continue to act upon it; scenic features; natural visibility, both in daytime and at night; natural landscapes; natural soundscapes and smells; water and air resources; soils; geological resources; paleontological resources; archeological resources; cultural landscapes; ethnographic resources; historic and prehistoric sites, structures, and objects; museum collections; and native plants and animals.
- Appropriate opportunities to experience enjoyment of the above resources to the extent that can be done without impairing them.
- The park's role in contributing to the national dignity, the high public value and integrity, and the superlative environmental quality of the national park system, and the benefit and inspiration provided to the American people by the national park system.
- Any additional attributes encompassed by the specific values and purposes for which the park was established.

Impairment may result from NPS activities in managing the park, visitor activities, or activities undertaken by concessioners, contractors, and others operating in the park. The National Park Service's threshold for considering whether there could be an impairment is based on whether an action would have major (or significant) effects.

Impairment findings are not necessary for visitor use and experience, socioeconomics, public health and safety, environmental justice, land use, or park operations because impairment findings relate back to park resources and values, and these impact areas are not generally considered

park resources or values (according to the Organic Act) and cannot be impaired in the same way that an action can impair park resources and values. After dismissing the above topics, the topics remaining to be evaluated for impairment include groundwater, the Cottonwood Spring historic district, and prehistoric archeological resources.

Fundamental resources and values for Joshua Tree National Park are identified in the enabling legislation for the park and the Foundation for Planning and Management Statement. Based on a review of these documents, the fundamental resources and values for the park come from its scenic, natural, and cultural resources representative of the Colorado and Mojave Deserts' rich biological and geological diversity, cultural history, wilderness, and recreational values, and outstanding opportunities for education and scientific study.

Resources carried forward for detailed analysis are considered necessary to fulfill the specific purposes identified in the establishing legislation of the park, are key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park, and/or identified as a goal in relevant NPS planning documents. Accordingly, a non-impairment determination is made for each of these resources.

This non-impairment determination has been prepared for the selected alternative, as described in the *Finding of No Significant Impact for Improvement of Visitor Facilities at the Cottonwood Area of Joshua Tree National Park*.

Groundwater

Included among the Fundamental Resources and Values identified for the park are groundwater resources, which are closely integrated with the park's geological resources. The ecological connection between these resources fundamentally contributes to the sustained ecosystem function of the park's oases and riparian areas—resources that are additionally identified as Fundamental Resources and Values for the park.

There are two groundwater aquifers associated with the park. The smaller Cottonwood sub-basin aquifer (22,200 surface acres), which lies to the north of the park's developed area, is the primary water supply source for all development and visitor use and is associated with the proposed action. This small aquifer is perched over the much larger Pinto Basin groundwater

aquifer (407,400 surface acres), which extends north and east of the Cottonwood Visitor Center. Both aquifers are generally fed by precipitation within the surface watershed.

Under the selected alternative, the smaller Cottonwood aquifer would continue to be the primary water supply source for all development and visitor use associated with the proposed action. In an analysis completed by the NPS Water Resources Division, the groundwater storage in the Cottonwood sub-basin aquifer is estimated to range from 56,000 to 84,000 acre-feet, depending on the assumptions built into the estimates. In addition, the groundwater dynamics between the small Cottonwood sub-basin and the larger Pinto Basin aquifer are not fully understood and will be researched further by the National Park Service.

Under the selected alternative, there is an anticipated increase in visitor capacity that would eventually result in a proportionate increase in visitation at Cottonwood over time. However, as part of the planning process and with a zero net gain in water use as the goal, water-use efficiency measures (e.g., low-flow toilet fixtures) would be built into the proposed visitor center design. Based on analysis of groundwater inflow and outflow under the selected alternative, the anticipated groundwater pumping would have a minimal effect on the Cottonwood sub-basin aquifer because even the potential worst-case annual net loss in groundwater storage would be a very small fraction of the entire aquifer volume. In turn, the effects of the selected alternative would not likely alter the long-term sustainability of the aquifer. In addition, under the selected alternative, given the very small area of paved surfaces relative to the surrounding groundwater basins, the effect of the existing and proposed increases in paved (impervious) surfaces and the associated altered surface hydrology would have a negligible effect on groundwater. Please refer to the NPS technical memo in the appendix of the related *Improvement of Visitor Facilities at the Cottonwood Area of Joshua Tree National Park* Environmental Assessment document for details on this analysis.

Under the selected alternative, groundwater extraction for uses within the project area would result in minimal, long-term, adverse impacts to the Cottonwood sub-basin aquifer. However, despite potential increases in visitor use, the application of water-use efficiency measures built into the

visitor center design would help minimize increases in water demand as visitation increases. Cumulative impacts on groundwater, including the effects of the selected alternative, would also be on a long-term, minimal, and local, sub-basin scale. Accordingly, the selected alternative would have a negligible effect on the current level of groundwater, and would not result in impairment of the groundwater resources, as the impact contributed by the selected alternative would be small.

Cottonwood Spring Historic District

Joshua Tree National Park recognizes as Fundamental Resource Values those historic resources relating to establishment of the park, and the amenities that continue to provide educational and recreational opportunities for park visitors. Of particular significance is the Cottonwood Spring historic district, which consists of buildings and facilities constructed as part of the NPS Mission 66 initiative that occurred between 1955 and 1966. The Cottonwood Spring historic district is determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance, evaluated as a representative area associated with the park's primary period of development, and determined to have value as the most intact and significant example of the Mission 66 developmental activity taking place at Joshua Tree during that era. Through development of the visitor services at Cottonwood Spring historic district, the park could, from a remote desert location, provide accessible and diverse experiences for visitors and large urban populations. The association of these characteristics met at least two of the criteria for NRHP eligibility: by association, the context of the district links directly to the natural and cultural resources contained within the parklands, and the original resource setting in which the district is located remains intact.

Construction activities associated with the selected alternative include restoration and/or rehabilitation of the contributing resources. All related improvement activity in the district would be limited to the current area of disturbance. For example, the existing Mission 66-era ranger contact station would be retained, and the exterior restored to its historical appearance. For those non-historical elements that would be retained, the essential qualities of Mission 66 design would apply to the composition of these features. For example, the current modular visitor center would be replaced

with a Mission 66-compatible structure designed to accommodate growth in visitation and would include energy- and resource-efficient features.

Related improvements to enhance visitor experiences are also planned, such as trail and parking area improvements. Although weathering of features due to exposure to natural elements would continue, the National Park Service would maintain the character-defining features of the district.

Long-term, beneficial impacts would result from NPS efforts to preserve and maintain historic buildings and cultural landscape features contributing to the Mission-66 character of the historic district. All new construction and improvements to existing facilities would be carried out in a manner to protect character-defining features of the historic district and would be compatible with the district's Mission-66 character. The compatible architectural designs would reduce unfavorable visual impacts associated with new construction and would generate an improvement of the historic scene over current condition. Thus, the selected alternative would not result in impairment of historic elements that contribute to the NRHP eligibility of the Cottonwood Spring historic district.

Prehistoric Archeological Resources

Joshua Tree National Park identifies the existence of prehistoric sites and related ethnographic resources as Fundamental Resources and Values. The presence of these resources meaningfully describe prehistoric occupation and use, and are essential in cultivating awareness and connection with the region's early inhabitants. Abundant prehistoric evidence is present in the area now encompassing the park, and is documented in the archeological record. Among the earliest identified sites are those associated with the Pinto Culture, a nomadic hunter-gatherer people who seasonally frequented the California desert 7,000 to 10,000 years ago during a period of wetter climatic conditions.

Included within the project area is a late prehistoric archeological site. Although the site is assessed as being adversely impacted by erosion, past visitor and administrative activities, and other disturbances, sufficient integrity of the site remains. Therefore, this site was determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places in 2016.

Under the selected alternative, proposed new construction and development activities have the potential to disturb archeological resources in the project area. However, all project areas would be surveyed to ensure that archeological resources, should they be identified, are avoided or adequately protected and documented. Ground disturbance associated with these undertakings would also entail possible monitoring during construction to avoid and protect significant sites.

Because limited adverse impacts could also occur from visitor use, erosion, and other factors that could diminish resource integrity, the National Park Service would continue to monitor and protect archeological resources in the Cottonwood area as feasible under existing laws and policies. Thus, the selected alternative would not result in an impairment of prehistoric archeological resources, as long-term, localized, beneficial impacts on archeological resources would occur from continuing agency efforts to monitor and protect archeological resources in the project vicinity.