



National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Pacific West  
Regional Office  
Oakland

1111 Jackson Street  
Suite 700  
Oakland, CA 94607  
510-817-1300 phone  
510-419-0197 fax

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## PACIFIC WEST REGIONAL OFFICE Memorandum

L7617 (PWRO-P)

Memorandum

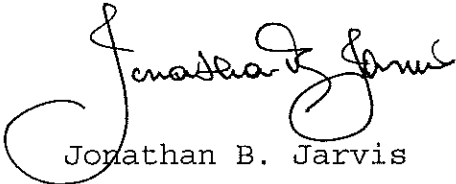
To: Superintendent, Mojave National Preserve

From: Regional Director, Pacific West

Subject: Environmental Compliance for Rock House-Rock Spring  
Visitor Education and Access Improvements

The *Finding of No Significant Impact* (FONSI) for constructing a foot trail linking the Rock House to the Rock Springs historic sites, installing a gate and wayside exhibits, and other site improvements, is approved.

To complete this particular compliance effort, at the time when implementation of the project is announced, the FONSI should be made available upon request by those who reviewed the supporting environmental assessment.



Jonathan B. Jarvis

Attachment

**Finding Of No Significant Impact  
Rock House and Rock Spring Visitor Education  
and Accessibility Improvements, Mojave National Preserve**

**Purpose and Need**

The National Park Service proposes to improve the visitor experience at the Rock House and Rock Spring. Both of these features are points of interest for visitors to Mojave National Preserve. There are few destination points in Mojave National Preserve that are easily accessible. Mojave National Preserve has identified a great need to offer more accessible activities to its visitors, as provided for in the park's enabling legislation.

Rock Spring was a US Army post in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is a popular destination point for visitors to the Mojave. Rock House is thought to have been constructed in the 1920's. It has been used as a residence and as a clubhouse for area cattlemen. These sites both have historical significance and are unique attractions against the arid landscape.

A series of actions will make the Rock House more accessible to visitors with special needs; clean up debris and illegal fire rings; install wayside exhibits at both Rock House and Rock Spring, treat the wood features of the Rock House to extend its life; and connect Rock House and Rock Spring with a trail.

**Alternatives Evaluated**

Alternative A is the "No Action" Alternative. Under this alternative, no action would be taken clean up the Rock House site, preserve the Rock House building, or provide better access and educational wayside exhibits for visitors. Without a designated trail for visitors to use between the Rock House and Rock Spring, there would be a greater probability of adverse impacts from visitors walking and hiking throughout to the local habitat. The wayside exhibit for Rock Spring would continue to be located apart from this outstanding feature and to have minimal benefit to visitors.

Alternative B with Trail Option B is the Environmentally Preferable Alternative. Environmentally preferable is defined as "the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in the National Environmental Policy Act's Section 101. Ordinarily, this means the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative which best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources" (Forty Most Asked Questions Concerning Council on Environmental Quality's National Environmental Policy Act Regulations, 1981)." Alternative B will improve the Rock House and surrounding area, contain visitors on a designated trail between two popular destination points, and, overall, have less of an impact to the local environment.

Alternative B with Trail Option A is less environmentally preferable. Trail Option A requires greater disturbance to the landscape, and part of its loop exceeds the recommended grade for trails as defined in NPS trails standards.

There are several arguments against Trail Option A. The loop proposed in the environmental assessment involves new disturbance through currently undisturbed habitat; it would cut through a modest cactus garden. Visitors walking through would adversely affect the vegetation. Moreover, the landscape is not unique. The plant community here can be found throughout the wider corridor of Cedar Canyon Road and Watson Wash, all of which is easily accessible to visitors. At the point where Option A meets the wash leading to Rock Spring, the steepness of the grade is not advisable for visitors. The path would need to be rerouted to a shallower section to comply with NPS trail standards. The upper portion of the loop leads visitors along a ridge and a view of Cedar Canyon Road below and the New York Mountains in the distance. While these views are pleasant, they are not outstanding enough to outweigh the adverse impacts to the local habitat. These views of the New Yorks can be enjoyed from any number of points, including the Rock House and from Cedar Canyon Road.

Alternative B with Trail Option B is the Selected Alternative. This alternative implements the proposed actions to improve the visitor experience at the Rock House and Rock Spring. The Rock House site will be cleared of debris and illegal fire rings. A hiker gate will be installed in the fence surrounding the structure, and a picnic table will be installed at the edge of the parking area. Bees infesting the Rock House will be exterminated, and wood features of the Rock House will be treated with a light preservative. Wayside exhibits will be installed at both the Rock House and Rock Spring, and a trail will be formalized so that visitors may easily travel between the two features.

Option B is the selected trail. It achieves the purpose of connecting the Rock House and Rock Spring with minimal new disturbance. This option follows an existing deer/cattle path between Rock Spring and the Rock House. The disturbance already exists and the grade along this path falls within NPS trail standards. Some work would be required to formalize a trail along the path, but it would be less than that required to achieve Trail Option A.

Other alternatives were carefully considered but rejected:

(1) The National Park Service previously considered the Rock House for use as seasonal or volunteer housing or as a backcountry cabin, but determined that the structure was incompatible with NPS housing standards.

(2) Another option was to improve the sandy 4x4 road that leads to Rock Spring. This road follows the drainage that leads from Rock Spring to Watson Wash. Because the area is periodically flooded, it presents safety hazards for concentrated visitor activity and was, therefore, dismissed from further consideration.

## **Mitigation Discussion**

The Selected Alternative has very few actions that will result in adverse impacts to the natural and cultural resources of the Rock House and Rock Springs sites. The following steps will be taken to avoid or minimize potentially adverse impacts.

The selected trail must comply with NPS trails standards, meeting grade requirements, in particular. The Pacific West Region's historic preservation specialist has approved the use of Murphy's Oil Soap to clean and mildly treat the wood features of the Rock House. The bee infestation of the Rock House will be exterminated prior to the beginning of the project. A dumpster will be placed temporarily at the parking area of the Rock House, to hold solid waste cleared from the site and to remove it from the park. The hiker gate to be installed in the Rock House's enclosing fence will allow visitors with disabilities to access the Rock House.

## **Discussion of Significance Criteria**

The Selected Alternative, Visitor Education and Accessibility Improvements (Proposed Action) with a Connecting Trail (Option B), was found to have minimal to no impacts on threatened and endangered species, wilderness, vegetation, soils, water resources, prehistoric, historic, and cultural resources, visitor experience, development and public health and safety, and park operations.

The Rock House and Rock Spring are located outside of both desert tortoise critical habitat and wilderness. There are no threatened or endangered species, or species of concern, in the vicinity.

Vegetation and soil conditions will improve with the removal of solid waste debris around the Rock House, and the formalization of a connecting trail between the Rock House and Rock Spring. The latter will contain human traffic to a designated corridor, thereby minimizing compaction and erosion to the surrounding area.

The sole water resource in this area, Rock Spring, will not be affected by the actions of the Selected Alternative.

The park archeologist has surveyed the location of the Selected Alternative. He found no adverse impacts to prehistoric, historic, or cultural resources. The principal cultural resource, the Rock House, will benefit from treatment to its wood features.

The Selected Alternative will enhance the visitor experience at the Rock House and Rock Spring. Improved access to the Rock House, a more pleasing visual experience once debris removal is complete, a connecting trail between the two features, and self-guided interpretation at both sites will increase the attractiveness of these features as a noteworthy destination point in the Preserve.

The Selected Alternative does not alter the long-term risks to public health and safety in Mojave National Preserve. There is a temporary benefit to the public from the eradication of the bee population in the Rock House, and the hiker gate will make it easier for visitors to access the structure. Both sites are, otherwise, low public health and safety risks.

Park operations will not be affected by the Selected Alternative. The proposed activities will be carried out by volunteers with supervision by Mojave National Preserve staff and the trails crew from Joshua Tree National Park.

The Selected Alternative has a low likelihood of controversy or debate. Impacts and risks from the project are relatively certain. The proposed activities will benefit both the cultural and natural resources of the area, and will enhance the visitor experience. No future actions are planned that would be accelerated by the implementation of the Selected Alternative; it is not part of a greater proposal.

The NPS is in compliance with all applicable Federal, State, and local laws.

## **Impairment**

### **Background**

The National Park Service must consider the potential impacts of each alternative and the implications for impairment to the resources of Mojave National Preserve. The Organic Act of 1916, which established the National Park Service, and its amendments state:

[The National Park Service] shall promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments, and reservations hereinafter specified... by such means and measures as conform to the fundamental purpose of the said parks, monuments, and reservations, which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. (16 USC 1)

NPS managers must always seek ways to avoid or minimize to the greatest degree possible adverse impacts on park resources and values. Through this law and the General Authorities Act, NPS managers have the 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 NPS management discretion to allow certain impacts within parks, that discretion is limited by the statutory requirement that the NPS 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 opportunities that otherwise would be present for the enjoyment of those resources or values. An impact to any park resource or value may constitute impairment. However, an impact would more likely constitute impairment to the extent it affects 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 to opportunities for enjoyment of the park; or
- identified as a goal in the park's general management plan or other relevant NPS planning documents.

Impairment may not result from NPS activities in managing the resources, visitor activities, or activities undertaken by concessionaires, contractors, and others operating in the park.

### **Selected Alternative**

The impacts identified as resulting from the implementation of the Selected Alternative are temporary in nature and can be mitigated or recovered. In general, the Rock House site and Rock Spring will benefit from the proposed actions. The formalization of a deer/cattle path between these two features, while making more permanent a line of disturbance to the habitat, will benefit the greater area, protecting the soils and vegetation from trampling. The Rock House will be accessible to visitors with disabilities, and the scenic values of the site will improve with the removal of unsightly debris. The Selected Alternative will further the purpose of the park both by offering recreational activities visitors may enjoy and by maintaining the natural and cultural resources of the area.

None of these or any other impacts identified in the Environmental Assessment will result in significant or irreparable damage to the resources of Mojave National Preserve. It is, therefore, concluded, that impairment will not result from implementation of the Selected Alternative.

### **Public Review and Consultations**

The Environmental Assessment (EA), Rock House and Rock Spring Visitor Education and Accessibility Improvements, Mojave National Preserve, was released for public review March 11, 2009; it was on formal public review for 30 days, until April 10, 2009. A press release announcing the public review period was sent out on March 10, 2009. No public meetings or hearings were conducted. The EA was mailed to 39 libraries, and posted online. Zero requests for EAs were received during the public review period.

The Selected Alternative does not contribute any impacts to the cultural or historic resources of Mojave National Preserve. The Park's cultural resources management staff determined that no consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer was needed for this project.

**Conclusion**

Based on the analysis in the EA, the capability of mitigation measures to reduce or eliminate potential adverse impacts, and with due consideration for public comment, the NPS has determined that the proposed action does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, in accordance with the national Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and the regulations of the Council of Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1500-1508) and environmental impact statement will not be prepared and the proposed action may be implemented at any time in the future.

**Recommended:**

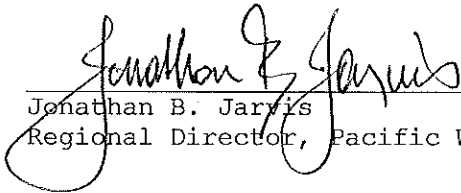


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Dennis Schramm  
Superintendent, Mojave National Preserve

4-13-09

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Date

**Approved:**



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Jonathan B. Jarvis  
Regional Director, Pacific West Region

4/16/09

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Date