

**McGregor Range Land Withdrawal  
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## **4.1 LAND USE**

Assessment of impacts on land use resulting from withdrawal actions defined for each alternative considered:

- potential effect of withdrawal action on land use and environmental resource management planning;
- potential effect of continued military and nonmilitary activities on existing land uses and users of military withdrawn lands in the future; and
- effect that return of lands to the public domain would have on land use management under the public land laws.

It is assumed that withdrawn public lands would continue to be managed under the existing White Sands RMP and RMPA (BLM, 1986a, 1988b), and the MOU (BLM, 1990b) between the Army and the BLM. These documents would be revised or amended, as necessary, to reflect any changes in withdrawn area. Any future revisions to this management framework to improve management practices or to redefine responsibilities would need to be agreed to and implemented cooperatively between the Army and the BLM. Because these types of actions have not been identified, environmental impacts of amendments or changes, if any, would need to be assessed in the future. It is also assumed that there would be no military use of land not included in the withdrawal renewal, except through specific agreements similar to the existing cooperative-use agreement between the Army and the USFS. However, no new co-use arrangements have been included in the definition of actions in the LEIS. It is also assumed that new legislation enacted by Congress, authorizing continued military withdrawal (as defined for each alternative), would provide for priority military use of withdrawn lands as under PL 99-606 (MLWA, 1986).

Public lands throughout the west have differing value and resource potential. These variations are reflected in local RMPs that identify management priorities and actions to achieve the greatest benefit for the public. The White Sands RMP provides the overall planning framework for the withdrawn lands on McGregor Range. The RMPA provides further information identifying the resources that are found on McGregor Range and for understanding their value. The following sections use the White Sands RMP and RMPA framework for discussing potential effects on land use and land users for each alternative.

Land use affects management of other biophysical and cultural resources; these effects are addressed more fully in other sections of this document. Additional information is found for the following resources: soil (Section 4.5.2); mineral and energy resources (Section 4.5.7.1); water (Section 4.7.2); and air (Section 4.6.2); habitat, wildlife, and water and fire management (Section 4.8.2); and cultural resources (Section 4.9.2).

### **4.1.1 Alternative 1**

Under Alternative 1, there would be no change in boundaries of the withdrawal area (size of the withdrawal, 608,385 acres), and no change in the management status of the lands included in McGregor Range. As described in Section 2.1, military activities could vary from the same as currently conducted, to an expanded range of capabilities and intensified use.

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4.1.1.1 Effects on Land and Resource Management Plans for McGregor Range

*BLM*

No changes to the existing RMPA (BLM, 1990a) would be anticipated for withdrawal renewal of McGregor Range. Currently, management activities address potential multiple uses for several resources (such as minerals and vegetation), and any nonmilitary use and access must be approved by the Army. The Army would be responsible for military activities on withdrawn lands, or on public lands as specified in the existing MOU (BLM, 1990b). Some ongoing surveys and inventories of resources on McGregor Range could provide new information for deciding appropriate management actions. Where these may be different from existing RMPs, they could be incorporated into focused activity plans such as coordinated RMPs or habitat management plans.

The Army's natural and cultural resource management plans and activities would continue to address actions to minimize impacts from military uses within the MOU management framework. The existing White Sands RMP (BLM, 1986a), RMPA (1988b), and activity plans would continue to be the primary resource planning documents for withdrawn public land.

If Congress does not designate Culp Canyon WSA as wilderness, then an amendment to the RMPA or new activity level plan may be required in the future. This is not directly related to the proposed withdrawal renewal. Military use of this area would not be different from current activities, but nonmilitary uses could be different if the area is no longer managed to preserve wilderness qualities. These activities are compatible with interim management objectives to preserve wilderness qualities. It is anticipated that future ground troop activity uses would be compatible with wilderness management. Noise from possible increased low-level helicopter flights could be annoying to some recreationists. Because visitation to this area is extremely low, and operations would be relatively infrequent and short in duration, impacts to wilderness resources would be minimal.

*Otero County*

The Draft *Otero County Comprehensive Land Use Policy Plan* has not been adopted. It is, therefore, not known to what extent the implementation of county plans may differ with federal resource management's goals and objectives. Preliminary draft components indicate land uses of value to county residents and county policy to protect the interests of private property owners. However, the renewal proposal would not affect private property rights or interests since the area of concern is within the public domain. Of the several cultural and customary uses of land in the county, McGregor Range has been used primarily for hunting and gathering of food, cattle grazing, and more recently, recreational activities such as hiking, observing nature, and enjoyment of the area's isolation. Also, the county maintains access for remote rural communities on New Mexico Highway 506. The county's primary interest is maintaining access for these customary uses.

Although constrained by Army procedures for access and periodic closures for military activities, these customary uses have continued, and will continue in the future. Expanded training operations could reduce access for ranching activities and recreation. However, the grazing program will continue, and recreational access will be available intermittently, and can frequently be accommodated at some location on the range at the time access is requested. Access for rural residents around Timberon and Piñon may be inconvenienced by additional closures of New Mexico Highway 506, but these areas have more direct routes to Alamogordo, the county seat to the north.

Preliminary reports provided by Otero County to reflect their current policy and interests in public lands indicate that extensive military uses on WSMR and Fort Bliss are important in defining land uses for Otero County. These uses provide an important economic base for the county. Overall, continued withdrawal is considered consistent with county land use policy and planning.

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4.1.1.2 Effects on Land Uses and Land Users of McGregor Range

**Military Use.** Full renewal of the current withdrawal of 608,385 acres, plus 1,010 acres of previously state-owned land (609,395 acres), would allow the U.S. Army to continue its current air defense mission. This withdrawn area, the 71,083 acres of Army fee-owned land, and the MOA for existing military use of USFS lands in Lincoln National Forest (18,004 acres) would provide flexibility to support the existing mission activity and expanded operations, if required in the future. Most areas of McGregor Range would continue to have the same kind of military activities, while the level of use could increase from new capabilities. Development of a target complex on Otero Mesa would expand military use of TAs 17 and 21 to include surface impacts. The impact area would be cleared regularly, limiting build-up of potentially hazardous material or debris from training ordnance. Use of associated safety areas for this facility would require coordination of missile firings, ground troop uses, and use of FTX sites on Otero Mesa. Because of this, the number of hours for military use may increase, and therefore, decrease the time available for other purposes. Effects of restricted use on nonmilitary uses is described below.

**Nonmilitary Use.** Provisions for nonmilitary uses of the land would remain largely the same as under PL 99-606. In about 271,000 acres coincident with 14 grazing units, the primary nonmilitary uses would continue to be livestock grazing, hunting, and dispersed recreational use such as hiking and observing nature, managed in accordance with the White Sands RMP (BLM, 1986a) as amended by the McGregor Range RMPA (BLM, 1990a). Depending on which future military developments are implemented, there could be some reduction in the acreage available for these uses or reduction in time that access is permitted. Some areas on McGregor Range (such as Culp Canyon WSA and McGregor Black Grama Grassland ACEC) would continue to be protected for their special resource qualities.

In general, with the exception of the USAF tactical target complex (see *Access and Realty* and *Livestock Grazing* below), continuation of current levels and types of military activities would result in no change to current users. Intensification and increased military activities in training areas in the Tularosa Basin, south of New Mexico Highway 506 (including potential helicopter gunnery and combat aviation training facilities), would generally have little effect on current public uses (such as grazing and recreation), since this area is already being used more or less exclusively for military purposes. Proposed and envisioned actions that would expand use of the remainder of the range (271,000 acres within the designated grazing areas) have the greatest potential for affecting current uses.

**Access and Realty.** There would be no change in conditions affecting access to withdrawn lands or real estate on McGregor Range. New Mexico Highway 506 would continue to be open for public access without requiring an Army permit. Periodic closures for missile firings would continue and may increase slightly in frequency. The closure schedule would continue to be publicly distributed on a regular basis to local residents. Closures may continue to be inconvenient for rural residents when the road is closed for a few hours on missile firing days (Appendix B). However, alternate access routes exist, and helicopter services are available for emergencies. Use of the GAF target complex is expected to reduce access of 60,000 acres on Otero Mesa for up to 60 hours per week (USAF, 1998).

Location of possible future facilities would need to be sited to avoid existing ROWs, particularly the existing commercial 345 kV powerline.

The installation initiative to potentially pave a roadway to Meyer Range may affect existing natural gas and electric line easements between McGregor Range Camp and the El Paso County line. Similarly, siting of a potential rail spur line could affect existing utility supply lines serving McGregor Range Camp and SHORAD/Orogrande complex.

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**Energy and Minerals.** The Army does not propose to change the procedures for exploration or extraction of minerals presented in the McGregor Range RMPA (BLM, 1990a). The range would continue to be withdrawn from public mining laws. The RMPA provides for access to certain resources with Army concurrence. Under the McGregor Range RMPA, the range would remain closed to locatable minerals; therefore, no change in mineral activity would result. Due to limited potential for viable commercial mineral reserves on the withdrawn land, this would have little impact on mineral resources in the region (U.S. Army, 1998g). The Army, in coordination with BLM, may develop and use geothermal resources in the south part of the range for heating of facilities in McGregor Range Camp, and possibly, to provide a local power source for a desalination plant. Due to the relatively low temperatures of the geothermal resource, there is limited potential for commercial power generation using currently available technology.

Oil and gas resources on McGregor Range would continue to be available as described in the RMPA. The RMPA states that 100,000 acres on McGregor Range are open for oil and gas and geothermal leasing with Army concurrence. The remainder of the range would be closed to leasable mineral and energy resources. New interest in oil and gas exploration on McGregor Range and immediately to the east has been expressed to BLM resulting from recent discoveries of commercial quantities of gas in the area outside the range. In all cases, continuing military activities would not result in depletion of locatable mineral, leasable mineral, or oil and gas resources. Over 287,000 acres would continue to be open for salable minerals such as sand and gravel, building stone, and caliche.

**Water Use.** Water demands could increase as a result of potential military activities based upon installation capabilities and construction of several facilities to support these future activities. Sources for additional water would likely be from public suppliers via pipeline or truck, depending on where the supplies are needed. No additional water appropriations are anticipated, but use of water from regional aquifers is implied. Construction of a USAF tactical target complex on Otero Mesa would require relocation of some of the existing water lines, which support wildlife and livestock south of New Mexico Highway 506.

Army-owned water would continue to be available for preservation of fish and wildlife, and livestock on withdrawn and Army fee-owned land through a BLM-maintained water distribution system. The maintenance of this system would continue to be the responsibility of BLM and funded by the grazing program.

**Livestock Grazing.** Livestock grazing would continue in currently defined grazing areas. Potentially about 5,000 acres of grazing lands could be removed from existing grazing units 9 and 13 (TAs 17 and 21) for use as a USAF air-to-ground impact area. This would reduce 1998 grazing areas on McGregor Range by about 2 percent, with an equivalent reduction of about 450 AUMs.

In addition, training activities on the new target complex would reduce time available for BLM and ranchers to tend livestock and maintain grazing areas and water lines within the safety area surrounding the target complex. This larger area affects portions of seven grazing units and includes about 60,000 acres that could sustain about 430 animal units (under current grazing levels). Closures would be up to 60 hours per week. Implementation of several actions identified in the environmental documentation for the proposed target complex would reduce potential adverse effects on grazing (USAF, 1998).

Periodic use of existing and proposed controlled access FTX sites could reduce forage on less than 4 percent of the grazing areas on McGregor Range and resulting disturbance to acreage. About 8 square miles of additional sites being considered could potentially affect about 5,120 acres of grazing land from periodic military use. The overall impact to grazing from use of controlled access FTX sites would be

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minimal. The U.S. Army will monitor trends in vegetative cover at these sites using a rotational system to minimize degradation of rangeland.

**Wildlife and Habitat Management.** There would be little change in wildlife and habitat management as a result of continued or expanded training. The Army would be responsible for compliance with the *Endangered Species Act* in areas where military activities cause impacts. The Army would manage biological resources through its ITAM program and INRMP for military activities.

The McGregor Black Grama Grassland ACECs would continue to be managed under Cooperative Agreement between the Army, BLM, and New Mexico State University. No military or civilian activities would occur within the ACECs.

**Recreation.** Availability of McGregor Range for recreational activity could be reduced by expanded hours of military operations in the future. This would mostly affect seasonal game bird hunting, which is one of the most frequent public recreational uses. Hours available for recreation on some areas of Otero Mesa may be limited to early morning, later afternoon, and some weekends. Given the low number of requests for public access to McGregor Range, and specifically, Otero Mesa, the relative effect of reduced access from continuing or expanded military uses would be minimal. Licensed hunts scheduled by NMDGF would continue; therefore, this use would not be affected. Additional and improved roadways to new facilities could reduce the amount of land with semi-primitive, unmotorized recreational opportunities on McGregor Range, but could improve access for other types of recreation.

**Wilderness.** No change in the use of Culp Canyon WSA is anticipated. Culp Canyon WSA would continue to be managed under the *Interim Management Policy and Guidelines for Lands Under Wilderness Review* (BLM, 1987) until a congressional determination on its wilderness status is made. Current military use for ground troop maneuvering and as a safety buffer during missile firings would not impair long-term preservation of wilderness qualities.

**Cultural Resources.** Construction of new facilities, impacts from inert training ordnance, and increased foot and vehicular traffic could potentially affect cultural resources. Fort Bliss is developing procedures in its cultural resource management program that will make compliance with Section 106 of the NHPA proactive in the approval process for any new activity or location for military use. This would minimize potential impacts to cultural resources.

To the extent practicable, new construction and activities would be located to avoid areas that are listed on the NRHP or that have been identified as eligible or potentially eligible for the NRHP. These have been specially designated for avoidance in the SOP for weapons firing and training area use (U.S. Army, 1996b).

Continued control of public access to McGregor Range would help protect cultural resources from vandalism and damage.

#### 4.1.1.3 Effects on Surrounding Areas

Continued withdrawal of McGregor Range for military use would have minimal effect on surrounding areas. The most likely source of impact on surrounding areas would be noise from military activities and closure of New Mexico Highway 506 that provides access to communities on the east and north side of the range. Overflights in the vicinity of some ranches and the community of Timberon may increase noise from aircraft operations for a new tactical target complex. Noise would not be expected to increase over Culp Canyon WSA due to the flight patterns associated with training. Increased HIMAD missile

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firings could result in a few additional road closures each year. Closure schedules would continue to be circulated to local residents in advance. Emergency services would continue to use alternate access routes.

#### 4.1.1.4 Effects on Aesthetics and Visual Resources

Most of McGregor Range has been classified as VRM Class IV and III due to the undistinctive visual attributes and low sensitivity. Construction and activities from continuing and expanded military activities would be subordinate to the middle and distant natural landscape and not conflict with management objectives for Class IV and III resources. As necessary, specific proposals could incorporate methods that minimize the extent of visual modifications. Some visible changes to the foreground would need to be evaluated when specific project actions are known. However, unless extensive land disturbance or very large, new facilities or equipment are involved, visual changes are likely to be consistent with the level of recommended modifications. The existing classifications consider the area's primary purpose for military activities and the relatively low number of public visitors who see the area.

The visual quality of Culp Canyon WSA (VRM Class II) would be unaltered.

#### 4.1.2 Alternative 2

Under Alternative 2, the withdrawal area would encompass about 40,000 acres less than the current configuration. Of this, 29,000 acres would revert to control by BLM under the public land laws, and about 11,000 acres comprising Culp Canyon WSA would continue to be managed by BLM under the Interim Guidelines. It is assumed that BLM would continue to manage the 29,000 acres as under the RMPA. Public access to returned areas would be in accordance with DOI and Army consideration of the clean-up of ordnance and explosive hazards. Under this alternative, the potential for dangerous debris in the area that would be returned is extremely low, and most public uses are already permitted in the area. It is, therefore, unlikely that there would be any delay associated with preparing the property for return to the public domain.

About 22,000 acres of Army fee-owned land within this area would continue to be used for specialized training and would be managed by BLM for nonmilitary use on a noninterference basis with military activities. About 568,385 acres would be withdrawn and continue to be managed under the existing RMPA and MOU. Army fee-owned land, 49,000 acres, remains within the withdrawn area and would be managed similar to existing arrangements for grazing and other nonmilitary use. The total land upon which military operations could be conducted (including USFS land) would be about 658,480 acres.

##### 4.1.2.1 Effects on Land and Resource Management Plans for McGregor Range

###### *BLM*

This alternative would result in little change in the status of most of the lands currently under PL 99-606, and therefore few changes to the existing RMPA or MOU would be required (except to adopt changes in withdrawn land areas). Use and management of the small portion of land that would revert to exclusive BLM management under the public land laws would generally be similar to the current situation. BLM will continue to use the existing RMPA as the general management framework. A draft *Coordinated RMP* for grazing units 4 and 5 has been prepared by BLM and could be adopted for focused management actions in this area.

###### *Otero County*

Additional availability of a small portion of land for multiple uses and recreational access would be consistent with policies and customary uses outlined in Otero County's interim *Land Use Policy Plan*. Not withdrawing the land would have no effect on private property rights. Actual changes in use of the

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area is projected to be minimal under the public land laws, based on relatively low resource value and access conditions.

#### 4.1.2.2 Effects on Land Uses and Land Users of McGregor Range

**Military Use.** Under this partial withdrawal scenario, the Army would be able to continue its current air defense mission and implement most of its proposed and envisioned programs and expanded missions. The reduced land area would restrict the range of HIMAD missile firing profiles that could be accomplished on McGregor Range. This is likely to reduce the number of annual firings by one third and slightly limit flexibility for training. Ground troop training would no longer occur in the returned lands in the Sacramento Mountains foothills or Culp Canyon WSA. Since the Army would retain their fee-owned holdings in the foothills, limited ground troop training could continue on those parcels. Under the Army co-use agreement with Lincoln National Forest, a variety of terrain conditions would continue to be available for special operations forces.

**Nonmilitary Use.** Provisions for both military and nonmilitary use of withdrawn land and Army fee-owned land (about 640,480 acres) would be similar to uses under PL 99-606 described in Section 4.1.1.1. Return of 40,000 acres to management under the public land laws would have the potential to affect grazing activities on McGregor Range. Under this withdrawal alternative, other multiple-use objectives that would be affected include recreation, wilderness resources, access, and mineral and energy resources. Potential issues and impacts to these uses are identified below.

**Access and Realty.** Access along New Mexico Highway 506 may benefit slightly due to fewer road closures resulting from fewer missile firings under this alternative. Roads and trails that provide access to the Sacramento Mountains foothills from New Mexico Highway 506 would continue to pass through withdrawn land in TAs 11, 12, 14, and 15, that would be periodically off-limits during missile firings. Military activities would cause periodic closure of these roadways during missile firings, restricting access, at times, into lands returned to the public domain. Alternate roadways from U.S. Highway 54, through Lincoln National Forest, or small roads and trails from the north and east could be used to reach some locations, but tend to be less direct and difficult to travel. Selective road improvements may be needed to provide access to allow more use of lands returned to the public domain.

BLM would be able to issue permits, licenses, leases, and ROWs on lands returned to the public domain without the consent of the Army. Construction of new structures or equipment installation such as antennas or towers in returned land areas would be under restricted airspace, and as such would need to be coordinated with FAA and Army airspace managers.

**Energy and Minerals.** Under Alternative 2, the BLM would be able to open up 29,000 acres for leases and permits under the mineral and mining laws for exploration, extraction, or production of locatable minerals. Leasable and salable mineral and energy resources would continue to be managed as described in Alternative 1.

**Water Use.** Army-owned water would still be made available for grazing uses on McGregor Range and BLM would continue to maintain the water distribution system.

**Livestock Grazing.** Lands returned to the public domain would continue to be managed under the public land laws or Congress could provide specific grazing authorization for these lands. For the most part, grazing activities on the withdrawn lands are anticipated to be similar to current conditions under PL 99-606 and the existing MOU (BLM, 1990b). However, there are inter-related issues arising from returning land to the public domain that can affect these areas. The following issues and concerns have

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been identified that could affect future grazing uses on both lands returned to the public domain and withdrawn land:

- effect of differentiating the management and financing structure of the existing grazing program on withdrawn land from the units that would no longer be withdrawn;
- effect of potentially reduced revenues on the existing grazing program if land returned to the public domain reverts to the *Taylor Grazing Act*; and
- selection of permittees on lands returned to the public domain.

Ranchers could need more access to lands returned to *Taylor Grazing Act* provisions, because they would need to spend more time performing tasks that BLM's range management team currently performs on McGregor Range. Consequently, leasee ranchers would need to coordinate their access with range control to avoid unanticipated inconvenience resulting from road closures during missile firings. This would be most necessary in the fall to ensure adequate time and flexibility to bring cattle onto the range.

Army water would continue to be available for wildlife and grazing operations on withdrawn, fee-owned, and public domain lands.

If the current RMPA management structure is not maintained, BLM may be faced with segregating the management and revenues from grazing operations on McGregor Range under the current grazing program, and those on returned lands managed under the *Taylor Grazing Act*. It is not known how BLM would financially or logistically manage the segregation of the two grazing programs that are dependent on the same water system. Under the *Taylor Grazing Act*, selected future permittees would maintain a long-term interest in the grazing units (at least through the typical 10-year permit period). Use of the returned land for grazing would be limited to one or two ranchers, rather than provide potential use to many ranchers in a competitive market environment. The *Taylor Grazing Act* defines criteria that would be used in selecting future permittees (43 USC 315). These include landowners engaged in livestock business in the district who are bona fide occupants or settlers, and who have water or water rights that permit proper use of the land. It has not been determined whether any ranchers have the prerequisite base property (as defined by 43 USC 315) that would qualify them to acquire the grazing privileges on McGregor Range.

Fees collected by BLM on land returned to the public domain could decline under the *Taylor Grazing Act* compared to current and recent past revenues under the current auction system (see Sections 3.1.2.2 and 4.10.2). If the current auction system were not retained on those lands, the operating revenues of the grazing program would be reduced in proportion to the AUMs associated with the returned land. If the BLM were to maintain the water infrastructure in the lands returned to the public domain, the costs could be passed on to ranchers.

Agreements would be needed between the BLM and the Army concerning management and reimbursement for grazing of fee-owned in-holdings within the lands returned to the public domain.

The BLM is likely to implement range management actions, such as controlled burns, on returned land as a method to improve forage and manage fire hazards. Specific actions are not defined, but are likely to benefit grazing, soil cover, watershed, and wildlife habitat.

Overall, given the relatively small area that would be returned to the public domain under this alternative, the potential impacts to grazing operations discussed above would be insignificant.

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**Recreation.** Under the public land laws, the lands returned to the public domain are expected to be available for recreation. In theory, access for recreation would increase for returned areas, including Culp Canyon WSA. However, roadways and trails into the returned areas would pass through withdrawn land. Some alternate routes may be available using forest roads (off U.S. Highway 54) leading into Grapevine Canyon in the Lincoln National Forest. Access to returned areas through withdrawn areas would still need to be coordinated with the Army to ensure that recreationists are aware of times when roadways could not be used. This would effectively limit access to these areas to the same periods as under Alternative 1 (full withdrawal): that is, closed for portions of 2 to 3 days per week during missile firings from September through November.

Much of the land within the area returned to the public domain is Army fee-owned property. Since the Army would retain its fee-owned lands within the area returned to the public domain, ground troop activities could still be conducted in the vicinity of other users. It has not been indicated that ground troop activities have directly affected recreational uses, largely because ground troops try to avoid detection and most recreationists would be unaware of their presence. Therefore, no impact is anticipated. It is not known if BLM would determine areas that are suitable for off-road recreational vehicle (ORV) use on the lands returned to the public domain. ORV use on withdrawn lands would continue to be limited to established roads and trails.

**Wildlife and Habitat Management.** Management of Sacramento Mountains foothills under the public land laws would allow the BLM to implement management actions in these areas without the consent of the Army. Many of the management actions in the existing RMPA have been accomplished or are outdated. A draft Coordinated RMP for grazing units 4 and 5 is being prepared by BLM. However, it has not yet been adopted. Until then, specific actions have not been identified, although it is likely that BLM would use controlled burning practices to reduce build-up of fire fuels and to stimulate production and reduction of certain vegetation types. This could benefit short-term productivity for grazing. Potential for multiple use objectives to compete with wildlife and habitat management objectives are addressed in Section 4.8. BLM would have the authority to expand its definition of critical environments to protect sensitive environments in lands returned to the public domain.

**Wilderness.** Culp Canyon WSA would continue to be managed under the *Interim Management Policy and Guidelines for Lands Under Wilderness Review* (BLM, 1987). The area would continue to be available for public recreational use, but access constraints (see *Access and Realty*, above) may continue to limit actual use. Although ground troop training has not impaired wilderness qualities, there would no longer be potential for disturbance to wilderness users from unanticipated military activities. Low-level helicopter overflights in the overlying restricted airspace may still occasionally interrupt the natural quiet and cause annoyance for any recreationists in the WSA.

**Cultural Resources.** Increased public access to potentially important sites could increase the potential for vandalism and damage. However, BLM could promote the interpretive and educational opportunities of some cultural sites for recreational enjoyment. The extent of the resource value in lands returned to the public domain is addressed in Section 4.9.2.

#### 4.1.2.3 Effects on Surrounding Areas

Conditions affecting surrounding areas would be essentially the same as described in Section 4.1.1.3. No effects are anticipated.

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4.1.2.4 Effects on Aesthetic and Visual Resources

There would be little change in conditions affecting visual resources under this alternative. Potential siting of mining or energy facilities would need to consider effects on vistas from viewing locations in the WSA (U.S. Army, 1986b). BLM would be responsible for consistency of modifications to the landscape with recommended VRM objectives.

**4.1.3 Alternative 3**

Under Alternative 3, the withdrawal area would encompass about 180,000 acres less than the current configuration. This returned land area includes about 169,000 acres that would revert to management under the public land laws and about 11,000 acres comprising Culp Canyon WSA. A few areas are identified as possible historic impact areas on Otero Mesa and may require additional investigation and clearance. Public access to returned areas would be in accordance with DOI and Army consideration of the clean-up of ordnance and explosive hazards.

About 36,000 acres of Army fee-owned land within this area would continue to be used for specialized training and presently existing nonmilitary uses such as grazing. About 428,385 acres would be withdrawn and continue to be managed under the RMPA. Army fee-owned property (35,080 acres) within the newly defined boundary, plus 18,004 acres of USFS land, would result in an area of 518,490 acres being used for military activities.

The same process for clean-up of the relinquished lands would be required under this alternative as described in Section 4.1.2. This area is currently available for nonmilitary uses.

4.1.3.1 Effects on Land and Resource Management Plans for McGregor Range

*BLM*

Changes in use of Otero Mesa and the Sacramento Mountains foothills made possible under the public land laws would require revisions to the RMPA for specific resources. The RMPA would need to reflect changes in the withdrawn area. Some actions identified in the previous RMPA may need to be updated to more accurately reflect recent surveys, studies, and district-level priorities. Particularly, livestock uses and potential interest in oil and gas exploration could result in defining different management objectives for one or more competing resource areas. Habitat and wildlife resource management planning and actions may also be updated. Agreements between the Army and BLM regarding use of water would be required if grazing and wildlife management is to be maintained at current levels. Areas returned to the public domain would be managed under the framework set in the 1986 White Sands RMP, which includes McGregor Range. Local values and new opportunities for public access and use could influence management objectives for one or more resources.

*Otero County*

Effects on land use policies and plans of Otero County would be similar to those described in Alternatives 1 and 2. Because no official land use planning documents have been finalized or adopted by Otero County, it is not possible to identify impacts to county plans. In general, this alternative would increase access to returned lands for a variety of customary uses, and as such, is consistent with interim land use policies of Otero County. About 65 percent (or as much as 75 percent) of the current grazing area on McGregor Range would be managed under public land laws, the tenets of which are supported by the county's policy plan. Grazing management and levels are assumed to continue at current levels.

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4.1.3.2 Effects on Land Use and Land Users of McGregor Range

**Military Use.** Under this alternative, HIMAD missile firings would be severely constrained. The Army would also lose access and use of several existing and proposed controlled access FTX sites located on land returned to the public domain. Operations at the tactical target complex on the Otero Mesa portion of McGregor Range by the USAF would not occur and could result in additional use of the Class C Bombing Range in TA 10. Some missile training profiles used at SHORAD and Orogrande Complex would also be constrained by reduced land area. Most activity on McGregor Range would be focused on short-range scenarios for missile firings from the McGregor Launch complex in the Tularosa Basin, continuing and expanded activity at Meyer Range, and limited off-road training in TA 8. These changes in land resource would seriously affect the Army's capabilities to support air defense training.

**Nonmilitary Use.** Provisions for both military and nonmilitary use of withdrawn and Army fee-owned land (about 500,480 acres) would be similar to uses under PL 99-606 described in Section 4.1.1.1. The return of 169,000 acres to management under the public land laws would have greatest potential to affect access, mineral and energy resources, and recreational use. Effects on current and existing nonmilitary land uses and users are addressed below.

**Access and Realty.** Because the reduced withdrawn area would not support a full range of HIMAD missile firings, access along New Mexico Highway 506 would be improved due to fewer closures. Permits would not be required to access lands returned to the public domain. BLM would be able to issue permits, licenses, and ROWs on land returned to the public domain without the consent of the Army. Construction of new structures or equipment installation, such as antennas or towers, in returned areas would be under restricted airspace, and as such, would need to be coordinated with FAA and Army airspace managers.

**Minerals and Energy.** Under Alternative 3, the BLM would be able to open up 169,000 acres for leases and permits under the mineral and mining laws for exploration, extraction, or production of locatable minerals. Leasable and salable mineral and energy resources would continue to be managed as described in Alternative 1.

**Water Use.** The Army would continue to hold the water rights and make water available to the BLM for wildlife and livestock.

**Livestock Grazing.** As described for Alternative 2, the land returned to the public domain (169,000 acres) could be managed according to congressional authorization or continue under the public land laws. If that occurs, grazing units 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and portion of unit 3 (Figure 3.1-2) may no longer be contracted under the public auction process provided under the RMPA. This area currently supports about 18,000 AUMs (including about 3,200 AUMs on Army fee-owned land within these units). Potential impacts to livestock grazing under this alternative would be similar to Alternative 2, and could include:

- Increased access to returned grazing lands would greatly increase the time available for ranchers and BLM to perform ranching tasks.
- Army-owned water would still be available for livestock, but the cost of the water and of maintaining the water distribution system could be passed on to new permittees (either as fees paid to BLM, or operating costs to the rancher) if the grazing program returned to the *Taylor Grazing Act*. If the current grazing program continued, there would be no change to grazing activities.

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- It is possible that the remaining withdrawn public grazing areas in the Tularosa Basin could be auctioned, but the revenues would not support a full-time management team. Therefore, the quality of grazing in units 1, 2, and part of 3 could also decline, causing the potential for auctioned value of AUMs to decrease.

**Wildlife and Habitat Management.** Management of wildlife and habitat would be similar to Alternative 2. Management of the McGregor Black Grama Grassland ACEC would revert to exclusive BLM management. Activities in these areas are likely to be similar to current conditions, with slightly more potential for pressures from increased public access to affect the grasslands.

**Recreation.** Availability of lands returned to the public domain for recreation, including Otero Mesa and the Sacramento Mountains foothills, would increase. These areas are relatively remote and based on current user patterns and availability of other quality recreational land in the area, a high level of use is not anticipated. These areas would generally be used by local residents who know about particular features of the area. These may include specific locations for hiking and observing nature, and use of areas that provide good game bird hunting opportunities. Lack of water would still limit its potential attractiveness for camping and recreation.

In the RMPA, BLM retained the option to review roads and trails that may be available for ORV use. It is possible that, with public input, some roads would be available for this purpose in the future under BLM management.

**Wilderness.** Conditions affecting Culp Canyon WSA would be similar to those described in Alternative 2 (Section 4.1.2.1). However, because fewer roadways and trails would be closed for military uses, the area would be more accessible for public use.

**Cultural Resources.** The affects of returning Otero Mesa and the Sacramento Mountains foothills to the public domain would be similar to those described for Alternative 2. BLM would be responsible for managing access and preserving the integrity of cultural resources in lands that return to public domain that may receive increased public use.

#### 4.1.3.3 Effects on Surrounding Areas

Effects on land use in surrounding areas from this alternative would be minimal. Fewer closures of New Mexico Highway 506 under this alternative may increase the reliability and use of this access roadway for local residents. Noise for some rural residents to the north and east of Otero Mesa would be less because the tactical target complex on Otero Mesa would no longer be used and the number of overflights in the vicinity would be reduced.

#### 4.1.3.4 Effects on Aesthetic and Visual Resources

Most public activities that could occur on the returned lands would be consistent with existing visual management objectives. Natural fires and future use of controlled burns on returned areas would have the greatest potential to affect short-term changes to the landscape. Potential for new mining and oil and gas drilling facilities could be highly visible in the foreground and middle distances (3 to 7 miles). Grassland areas on Otero Mesa have been identified as having high quality and value to the public.

### 4.1.4 Alternative 4

Under Alternative 4, the McGregor Range boundary would encompass about 244,000 acres less than the current configuration. This area includes about 233,000 acres that would revert to management under the

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public land laws and about 11,000 acres comprising Culp Canyon WSA. Public access to returned areas would be in accordance with DOI and Army consideration of the clean-up of ordnance and explosive hazards. Like Alternatives 2 and 3, the relinquished area is currently available for nonmilitary uses. A few areas, including possible historic impact areas on Otero Mesa and the existing bombing range in TA 10, may require additional investigation and clearance to allow specific activities.

About 44,000 acres of Army fee-owned land within this area would continue to be used for limited military use and existing nonmilitary use. About 364,385 acres would be withdrawn and continue to be managed under the RMPA and MOU. An additional 27,080 acres of Army fee-owned property within the newly defined boundary would result in a total military use area of about 454,480 acres including USFS lands.

#### 4.1.4.1 Effects on Land and Resource Management Plans for McGregor Range

##### *BLM*

Land management effects under this alternative would be similar to Alternative 3. Specific to this alternative is the return to the public domain, land in TA 10 that is currently used by HAFB for air-to-ground training in the Tularosa Basin. Although live ordnance is not used at the Class C Bombing Range as with all land returned to the public domain, this area would need to be cleared of ordnance and explosive hazards prior to reversion to BLM. Possible changes to the RMPA required for this alternative would be similar to those described for Alternative 3.

##### *Otero County*

Effects on land use policies and plans of Otero County would be similar to Alternative 2 and 3 (see Sections 4.1.3.2, *Otero County*). Under this alternative, the additional lands returned to the public domain would provide more immediate access for county residents to use the land for a variety of customary uses such as recreation.

#### 4.1.4.2 Effects on Land Use and Land Users of McGregor Range

Military Use. In addition to missions that would no longer be supported under Alternative 3, the Class C Bombing Range would no longer be available for air-to-ground training, and there would not be sufficient land area for the envisioned TBM target for Patriot training under this land configuration. Some profiles for missiles at SHORAD and Orogrande Complex would not be contained within the reduced land area. Most activity on McGregor Range would be focused on short-range scenarios for missile firings from the McGregor Launch Complex in the Tularosa Basin, continuing and expanded activity at Meyer Range, and limited tracked vehicle and off-road training in TA 8. These changes would further reduce the Army's current capabilities to support air defense training.

Nonmilitary Use. The return of 233,000 acres to management under the public land laws would have similar effects on current nonmilitary land uses and land users as described for Alternative 3. The following section focuses on differences in effects on land uses that would result from this land configuration.

Under this alternative, BLM would have control of management actions for all the areas in the currently defined grazing areas on McGregor Range, including portions of the Tularosa Basin. This essentially corresponds to areas that have been available for public access on a noninterference basis under the current withdrawal.

**Access and Realty.** Access and use of New Mexico Highway 506 and all roads and trails north of the highway and on Otero Mesa would be unconstrained by military activities. BLM would control the entire

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ROW for the 345 kV powerline. The configuration of the returned land would allow BLM to utilize or issue permits for uninterrupted corridors across the north part of the current range. The existing bombing range in grazing unit 2 would need to be cleared of any ordnance and explosive hazards before it could be opened up for multiple use and public access. It is unlikely that clean-up activities in this area would delay return of land for public use, since the USAF clears this facility twice annually of bombing debris and detonates any unignited spotting charges that may be found.

**Minerals and Energy.** Under Alternative 4, the BLM would be able to open up 233,000 acres for leases and permits under the mineral and mining laws for exploration, extraction, or production of locatable minerals. Leasable and salable mineral and energy resources would continue to be managed as described in Alternative 1.

**Water Use.** BLM would gain management control of all the land served by and traversed by the water pipeline system (except for any Army fee-owned holdings) and would continue to maintain the water distribution system. The Army would maintain its water rights. In the meantime, Army-owned water would be available for BLM through agreement.

**Livestock Grazing.** As described for Alternatives 2 and 3, lands returned to the public domain would continue to be managed under public land laws or Congress could provide specific grazing authorization for these lands. Potential impacts to livestock grazing under this alternative would be similar to Alternatives 2 and 3.

Increased access opportunity would greatly increase the time available to BLM and ranchers to perform management tasks.

**Wildlife and Habitat Management.** Conditions for wildlife and habitat management would be similar to Alternative 3 (see Section 4.1.3.1).

**Recreation.** This alternative would allow unconstrained access along New Mexico Highway 506. Although land in the Tularosa Basin returned to the public domain has lower visual value, it is easily accessible to residents that would be in Alamogordo and small communities along U.S. Highway 54, and it provides quiet settings for outdoor recreation. Accessibility would benefit the use of the area's good dove hunting opportunities in the north part of grazing unit 1. ORV use of roads and trails in the basin areas would be likely to increase.

**Wilderness.** Unrestricted access to Culp Canyon WSA from roads and trails off New Mexico Highway 506 could provide additional access for recreationists. Minimal changes in wilderness use would result.

**Cultural Resources.** The effects of returning 233,000 acres to the public domain would be similar to those described for Alternative 2. BLM would be responsible for managing access and preserving the integrity of cultural resources in lands that return to the public domain that may receive increased public use.

#### 4.1.4.3 Effects on Surrounding Areas

Effects on surrounding areas would be similar to those described in Section 4.1.3.3. Assuming that BLM would continue to distribute water in the pipeline that serves the community of Oro Grande, there would be no effect on residential use.

#### 4.1.4.4 Effects on Aesthetic and Visual Resources

Although changes in land use could occur, resulting modification of the landscape from potential mining or quarry operations would be managed by BLM under its VRM guidelines. Potential impacts would be similar to those described in Section 4.1.3.4.

#### **4.1.5 Alternative 5 – No Action**

Under this alternative, no land would be withdrawn for continued military use. The Army's fee-owned lands, an additional 71,083 acres, would be exchanged for public lands in TAs 8 and 32. The resulting BLM public domain area would remain about 608,385 acres.

Public access to returned areas would be in accordance with DOI and Army consideration of the clean-up of ordnance and explosive hazards. This area includes the portions on McGregor Range that have had the most consistent military use over 50 years. The potential for hazardous conditions within current and historic impact areas in the Tularosa Basin is high and may require considerable effort to clean up. Areas requiring extensive clean-up may cause delays in final return of the land to public domain.

The following sections focus on effects of reversion of lands to the public domain on land use and land users. Both current uses and resource value and potential value are considered. Where applicable, potential effects from delays in returning land are noted. Additional information regarding effects of land use and changed management status under Alternative 5 is included under specific resource sections.

##### 4.1.5.1 Effects on Land and Resource Management Plans for McGregor Range

###### *BLM*

Under this alternative, BLM would have the opportunity to open additional land for specific multiple uses that were not considered possible under military withdrawal. For example, some portions of the Tularosa Basin may be found suitable and made available for mineral actions, grazing, or recreation. The existing White Sands RMP (BLM, 1986a) may be amended or the RMPA (BLM, 1988b) revised to reflect changed opportunities, or changes in management priorities based on new information from ongoing surveys and studies for McGregor Range. Alternatively, coordinated RMPs could be prepared to address specific geographic areas or resources. A revised RMPA could be used to identify areas with higher value due to specific resource potential (such as geothermal or minerals). The resource planning process would include environmental assessments and public participation. Input from this would help identify priorities for use of lands returned to the public domain.

###### *Otero County*

The increased area available for multiple-uses under this alternative would be consistent with county policies and goals that emphasize access to land for a variety of customary uses by county residents.

##### 4.1.5.2 Effects on Land Use and Land Users of McGregor Range

Military Use. Military use would be confined to TAs 8 and 32, which include the McGregor Range Camp, McGregor ASP, and the Meyer Range Complex. Activity by the Army for ordnance and explosive hazards removal from lands would continue as funding became available. The effect of this action on the Army's air defense mission would be great. Some facilities and functions on McGregor Range might be relocated to other areas of Fort Bliss resulting in areas with intensified use. These land use adjustments would require additional land and environmental resource planning to ensure consistency with other mission requirements and with Fort Bliss natural and cultural resource management. Future

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construction actions and resulting operations would require appropriate environmental analysis in the future.

**Nonmilitary Use.** A variety of land uses would be possible over almost the entire extent of McGregor Range. Under the public land laws, the returned lands would be managed by BLM for multiple use and sustained yield. The following section summarizes potential effects on land use and land users from no action to renew the withdrawal.

**Access and Realty.** Public access to portions of the land would be delayed by ordnance removal activities, effectively precluding use until ordnance removal is complete. Some areas, which would be too costly to clean up, may remain permanently inaccessible for public use. This could affect the ease of establishing ROW corridors in the future. BLM encourages the use of existing corridors when feasible, and both New Mexico Highway 506 and the 345 kV power line would provide uninterrupted corridors that could be used for future infrastructure.

**Minerals and Energy.** Except for any permanently inaccessible lands (due to ordnance and explosive hazards), an area of about 598,400 acres under BLM management (excluding Culp Canyon WSA) would be available under the mining and mineral laws and geothermal leasing laws. However, future productive use would depend on the quality and extent of commercially available products. For example, geothermal reserves have been identified, but the quality of the resource may not provide a commercial opportunity with current technology.

Because of the ground disturbing activities involved in developing mineral and energy resources, higher clean-up standards might apply for areas proposed for these uses. This could cause delays in the availability of specific areas. To the extent that off-limits areas coincided with mineral or energy resources, potential for these land uses could be limited.

**Water Use.** Water rights would be exchanged with the Army fee-owned land. Water would therefore continue to be available for wildlife and livestock.

**Livestock Grazing.** Livestock uses would be similar to Alternative 4. It is anticipated that grazing management would be consistent with actions analyzed by the BLM in 1980 and the RMPA, and that additional land in the Tularosa Basin would be used for grazing. Potential livestock uses in most of the Tularosa Basin would be limited by water availability, vegetation, and areas containing ordnance and explosive hazards.

**Wildlife and Habitat Management.** The RMPA and any future revisions would identify actions that reflect BLM's current priorities for managing resources within the multiple-resource framework. Impacts to these resources are addressed in Section 4.8.5 and 4.1.4.2.

**Recreation.** In addition to increased recreational opportunities described for Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 (see Sections 4.1.2.1, 4.1.3.1, and 4.1.4.1, *Recreation*), additional areas would be available for recreation. Some locations in the Tularosa Basin have value for game bird hunting. Except for areas that remain inaccessible, most of the Tularosa Basin would provide opportunities for ORV use on designated roadways. Similarly, the Otero Mesa escarpment has good potential for deer hunting, but it is likely to remain off-limits for public use due to potential hazards from ordnance and explosive usage.

**Wilderness.** There would be no change in use or management of Culp Canyon WSA resulting from this alternative.

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**Cultural Resources.** Under this alternative, BLM would have exclusive management responsibility for cultural resources on lands returned to the public domain. Sites along playa edges in the Tularosa Basin would increase the quantity and variety of cultural resources open to interpretive and educational uses that could benefit public enjoyment. Potential effects to these resources from public access are addressed in Section 4.9.5.

#### 4.1.5.3 Effects on Surrounding Areas

Return of McGregor Range to the public domain would not be likely to affect surrounding areas. There may be slight benefits from the availability of the larger land area and for public uses such as oil and gas industries and recreation. However, this should not alter existing uses.

Assuming that BLM would continue to distribute water in the pipeline that serves the community of Oro Grande, there would be no effect on residential use.

#### 4.1.5.4 Effects on Aesthetics and Visual Resources

Public uses primarily for grazing and recreation (excluding ORV use) would not change the overall features or forms of the natural landscape and would be consistent with current management objectives. Effects of activities such as mining operations, construction of energy facilities or new roadways, new utility corridors, and ORV use, could noticeably modify the landscape. BLM would be responsible for ensuring consistency of modifications with recommended VRM objectives.

### **4.1.6 Alternative 6**

This alternative could be implemented with the military withdrawals in Alternatives 3 and 4 or the No Action Alternative. Army fee-owned in-holdings within land returned to the public domain would be exchanged for public land elsewhere. The NCA would be comprised of 216,000 acres, including about 169,000 acres of previously withdrawn land, 11,000 acres in Culp Canyon WSA, and 36,000 acres of Army fee-owned land.

#### 4.1.6.1 Effects on Land and Resource Management Plans for McGregor Range

##### *BLM*

The planning process would identify management goals, multiple land resource potential, and define proposed uses and special management actions for the proposed NCA. This could result in amendments to the White Sands RMP (BLM, 1986a), revisions to the RMPA (1988b), revisions to existing activity plans, or preparation of a coordinated RMP for the NCA. It would also include environmental analysis and public participation. BLM would coordinate with local governments and citizen groups to identify the management objectives that the NCA would promulgate. Management actions for areas not contained in the NCA would be similar to those described in Alternatives 3, 4, or 5.

##### *Otero County*

Otero County ordinances state the county's desire to be included in planning of uses on federal lands. Development of the NCA would provide an opportunity for county participation in a land management planning process that could have relevance and benefits for a variety of diverse values of county residents.

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4.1.6.2 Effects on Land Use and Land Users of McGregor Range

Military Use. Military uses would be as described for Alternatives 3, 4, or 5 (see Sections 4.1.3, 4.1.4, and 4.1.5) for withdrawn areas. There would be no military land use on fee-owned in-holdings within areas returned to the public domain.

Nonmilitary Use. The designation of an NCA on land returned to the public domain would not affect nonmilitary use of withdrawn land, which would be the same as described for Alternatives 3, 4, or 5.

The purpose for designating an NCA is to provide additional statutory protection for an area with special resources, features, or qualities that in combination have national interest or value. A land management plan would reflect this purpose through resource objectives and planned actions that promote these values for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations. The framework for managing competing resources would prioritize actions that promote the purpose and goals of the NCA.

The concept for the Otero Mesa and Sacramento Mountains foothills NCA would be to preserve and protect the area's cultural and ecological resources and to emphasize the customs and culture of the region. The types of land uses that would occur within the NCA may be similar to existing uses excluding current military uses. The public would be able to use the area for a variety of recreational, scientific, and educational uses. Other traditional uses of the land, such as grazing, will also be included. This suggests that the goals of the management framework would be concerned with preservation of resources rather than for managed productive uses and sustained yields of renewable resources. It is likely that the NCA would include discrete areas (sometimes overlapping) with special management needs and provisions (such as arroyos, ACECs, wilderness) that would impose restrictions on some uses that would not otherwise apply. The NCA has the potential to be managed as a grazing management showcase.

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The NCA designation might change and affect land use and land users of the public domain land in the following ways:

- It is assumed that the congressional designation of the NCA lands would not affect the provisions of the mining and mineral leasing and geothermal leasing laws, except that patents would not be used on any mining claim.
- It is assumed that the current grazing programs would continue; however, lower grazing levels or use of other techniques, such as rotating the use of grazing units to maintain desired grassland conditions in accordance with management objectives, could be adopted. These could potentially reduce the overall number of cattle grazed in the NCA over current numbers.
- Wildlife and habitat management are likely to be a priority in resource management planning for the NCA. BLM might designate additional ACECs based on multiple values. These areas could be restricted from access for a variety of uses to meet the specific needs of the area.
- Recreational use, including associated educational and interpretive activities, would be allowed in the NCA.
- Camping could be allowed in designated areas where concerns with fire hazards and littering can be controlled. Camping might increase without the scheduling constraints resulting from priority for military uses. Similarly, hunting could be allowed in designated areas and at certain times to ensure the safety of other public users of the area.
- Designation of Culp Canyon as a wilderness area would not likely alter its current public use, but it would be permanently unavailable for mineral and energy uses.

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- Cultural resources are identified as a key resource for this area. Archaeological sites are known to exist throughout the area, and a rich history is evident in the grazing infrastructure on the land. Features in the NCA could be connected with other cultural sites in the region, such as Oliver Lee State Park, Guadalupe Mountains National Park, and Three Rivers Petroglyphs ACEC. The BLM has identified a potential NRHP-eligible historic rural landscape that includes the NCA area.

#### 4.1.6.3 Effects on Surrounding Areas

Effects on land use in surrounding areas would be similar to those described in Sections 4.1.3.3, 4.1.4.3, and 4.1.5.3. The NCA might benefit real estate conditions in the community of Timberon that is primarily seeking to attract seasonal vacation residents and retirees. It is not known whether the creation of an NCA would affect game populations and/or affect hunting opportunities in the surrounding areas.

#### 4.1.6.4 Effects on Aesthetic and Visual Resources

Creation of an NCA could affect BLM's visual management objectives and influence the review criteria of future proposals in the area. Similarly, BLM's range management actions might also be affected. For instance, potential visual effects of prescribed burns, range improvements, and grazing levels on vegetative cover might be evaluated differently under NCA status.

It is anticipated that BLM would re-inventory the visual resources in the NCA to account for increased visual sensitivity of more accessible areas and lack of military use. Protection of special grassland habitat could increase the visual distinctiveness of the Otero Mesa landscape.

Because the precise nature and extent of the congressional action cannot be determined, detailed land use analysis of this alternative is deferred until a more specific proposal could be developed by the DOI.

### **4.1.7 Cumulative Impacts**

No specific future actions are currently defined for WSMR that would change the use of the wide range of facilities or programs on the installation. Pending and possible actions at HAFB include deactivation of units at the base. A long-established military presence in the region has played a major role in defining local land use patterns and policies. In general, continuation of military activities on McGregor Range in combination with actions at WSMR and HAFB would not substantially change the effect of military use on land use and land users under any alternative.

Recent decisions have changed grazing standards in some areas to protect the Mexican spotted owl and Northern Goshawk. Proposed standards will be used as a default where local activity-level or allotment plans do not exist, and in general, are less restrictive than local plans, except in certain areas. The potential effect of adopting new grazing standards to affect grazing is being evaluated by the USFS. However, it is expected that the new standards will result in minimal overall changes in grazing levels in the region (Sire, 1998).

New interest in oil and gas resources to the east of McGregor Range could precipitate exploration and production in the area. Due to the sensitivity of this industry to market conditions, it is not possible to predict the extent of operations or construction that might occur. About 30,000 acres of public land have recently been nominated for oil and gas leases, but both a resource planning and environmental impact analysis process must be completed before licenses and permits would be issued.

A wilderness determination by Congress for Culp Canyon WSA would not result in appreciable changes to current use and protection. If Congress acted not to designate a wilderness, it could become available

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for multiple-use under the public land laws. In that case, the area may be used for mining and mineral activities. Increased use and access to the area may reduce qualities of isolation, but may increase recreational uses.

BLM has just designated several ACECs outside McGregor Range in Otero County, and has proposed an NCA for the Organ Mountains, directly west of Doña Ana Range–North Training Areas (of Fort Bliss). These actions would provide protection of valued regional resources and provide special opportunities for recreation and enjoyment of the natural environment in the region.

Establishment of an NCA under Alternative 6, in combination with possible designation of an NCA in the Organ Mountains, and ACECs in resource areas of the BLM Las Cruces Field Office, could have a positive affect on preservation of a range of exceptional or sensitive resources. Wilderness resources would benefit from these cumulative initiatives and increase recreational opportunities regionally. Some grazing is likely to continue in the NCAs (at or below current levels), so overall impacts on grazing would be minimal. There would be restrictions on future mining activities in both areas, limiting future opportunities.

#### **4.1.8 Mitigation**

Potential adverse effects from future military uses on public land use could be reduced by, to the extent practicable, selecting sites for new facilities and infrastructure that do not interfere with existing ROWs, cultural sites, or sensitive habitat.

#### **4.1.9 Irreversible and Irretrievable Commitment of Resources**

No irreversible and irretrievable commitment of land use resources would occur.