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NATURAL RESOURCES

Lessons Learned Regarding
Public Land Withdrawn for
Military Use

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our recent report on Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Interior management of lands withdrawn for military use¹ as well as prior reports. This report addressed resource management and military operations at withdrawn sites and identified whether opportunities exist to improve resource management programs.

RESULTS IN BRIEF

Military operations had not been hampered at the six withdrawn sites we visited in Alaska, Arizona, Nevada, and New Mexico, but these operations had constrained resource management activities. Military commanders at five of the sites said that they changed some training activities to accommodate concerns for wildlife, and at one site, officials expressed concern about meeting future training needs because of environmental constraints. However, DOD restricted access to three sites, which made it difficult for Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to carry out resource management activities. Such restrictions and the overall military presence have led BLM to assign a low priority to resource management on military lands. A lack of information on resource conditions prevents an overall assessment of the impacts.

The six sites could improve resource management by enhancing interagency cooperation and by strengthening systems to monitor resource management actions. Resource management at the Goldwater Range in Arizona was an example of effective cooperation between a BLM office and the military.

Two of our prior reports dealt with the impact of secondary uses, including the military, at national wildlife refuges² and the Army's land requirements determinations.³

BACKGROUND

Natural resource management includes activities such as wildlife and habitat protection, recreation and hunting programs, evaluation and protection of historic and prehistoric properties, and granting of grazing and mineral leases.

We reviewed the experiences of DOD and Interior in jointly managing six sites withdrawn under the Military Lands Withdrawal Act of 1986

¹Natural Resources: Defense and Interior Can Better Manage Land Withdrawn for Military Use (GAO/NSIAD-94-87, Apr. 26, 1994).

²National Wildlife Refuges: Continuing Problems with Incompatible Uses Call for Bold Action (GAO/RCED-89-196, Sept. 8, 1989).

³Army Training: Various Factors Create Uncertainty About Need for More Land (GAO/NSIAD-91-103, Apr. 22, 1991).

(P.L. 99-606). The act removes from public use more than 7 million acres of land until the year 2001 and devotes them to the military services for training and weapons and equipment testing purposes.

As shown in figure 1, the six sites, which have been under military control since the 1940s and 1950s, are the following: (1) Fort Greely Maneuver Area and Air Drop Zone, Alaska; (2) Fort Wainwright's Yukon Maneuver Area, Alaska; (3) Goldwater Air Force Range, Arizona; (4) Nellis Air Force Range, Nevada; (5) Bravo-20 Bombing Range, Nevada; and (6) McGregor Range, New Mexico.

Figure 1: Locations of Lands Withdrawn Under Public Law 99-606



Under the 1986 law, DOD may establish military uses on the lands without consulting with Interior. Interior is required to develop resource management plans after consultation with DOD. Also, Interior and DOD are supposed to enter into agreements to implement these resource management plans. BLM has primary resource management responsibilities at all six sites. Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) manages two national wildlife refuges that have airspace under military control near two of the sites.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES
DID NOT CONSTRAIN MILITARY OPERATIONS

DOD officials at each site--including officials responsible for training, operations, airspace, and environmental management--

expressed no concerns about the effects of resource management activities on current military operations. These officials said that all current training objectives were being met and training missions had not been adversely affected by adjustments to accommodate resource management.

A primary reason why military operations were not constrained by resource management activities is that the act allows the military to restrict public access without the concurrence of the Department of the Interior or local land-managing agencies. Such restrictions are based on a determination by the Secretary of the Army, Navy, or Air Force that military operations, public safety, or national security require restricted access.

Military officials in charge of training operations said they had adjusted operations to enhance or protect resources at most locations. For example, some sites had established special flight altitude restrictions to reduce wildlife and habitat disturbances. In addition, aircraft routes had been developed to avoid sensitive areas, such as wildlife habitat. At the Alaska sites, the number of training flights had been reduced during prime moose calving and hunting seasons. At the Goldwater Range, where military airspace overlies the Cabeza Prieta Refuge, Marine Corps pilots flew specific low-level routes, but the refuge manager authorized them to fly at low altitudes only during a biannual training course.

Current military operations notwithstanding, officials at the McGregor Range in New Mexico expressed concern about meeting future training needs. For example, McGregor officials are planning to expand the active training area within the McGregor Range. This would include a grassland area called Otera Mesa, which contains sensitive habitat for plants and wildlife. However, the Army's assessment of the possible environmental impacts from a 1993 training exercise involving wheeled vehicles on the mesa received negative public comments, mainly because of the lack of data on the cumulative environmental effects of military operations. Army officials say their goal is to have essential data available for future McGregor Range environmental impact statements.

MILITARY OPERATIONS HAVE CONSTRAINED RESOURCE MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

The military presence at the sites has strongly affected BLM's strategy for resource management. BLM efforts in planning and implementing projects to enhance protection and use of site resources for non-military uses, such as recreation, grazing, and mining, were often restricted by the military. For example, BLM area managers said that, among all lands they managed, the sites had a relatively low funding priority because of BLM's lower expectations for resource management in those areas. The military programs coordinator at BLM headquarters told us that because of the complications brought about by the military presence, BLM has

preferred that the military services, rather than BLM, manage the sites' resources.

Resource management was limited by access restrictions, which varied in degree from site to site. For example, the entire 41,000-acre Bravo-20 Range was off limits to BLM staff due to hazardous unexploded ordnance. At the 3-million acre Nellis Range, BLM officials cited several difficulties in visiting areas crucial to management of a wild horse and burro program. To enter the area without an Air Force escort, managers were required to obtain DOD security clearances. Even with those clearances, their access generally was limited to weekends and excluded certain site areas. Resource management activities constrained by military operations included both the planning and implementation of resource management actions.

Developing and Implementing Resource Plans

BLM prepared the required resource plans for five of the six sites. The agency did not prepare a plan for the Bravo-20 Bombing Range because military restrictions on access and the quantity of unexploded ordnance on the site made resource management activities inappropriate. The Goldwater, Nellis, and McGregor ranges have resource plans in place with agreements between the military and BLM offices on plan implementation. The plans for the Fort Greely and Yukon maneuver areas were in draft form as of November 1993.

The resource plans for the five sites contained a total of 225 decisions on resource management. Of these, 100 decisions (44 percent) were general goals that did not require further BLM action.

Of the 125 decisions requiring further action, 63 had been started or completed, and 62 had not--due to access restrictions and a lack of available funding, according to BLM managers. Examples of deferred actions are conducting wildlife surveys on the Alaska ranges, developing and implementing habitat management plans on portions of the McGregor Range, and taking inventory of water resources on the Goldwater Range. Implementation was underway for updating a vegetation map for a portion of the Goldwater Range, resolving issues regarding an historical cabin on an Alaska range, and monitoring areas bordering on water on the Nellis Range complex.

Completed actions included the following:

- On the McGregor Range, BLM continued past practices to monitor its grazing program.
- On the Nellis Range, BLM designated a landmark as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern, providing additional protection from damage or use.

- On the Alaska ranges, BLM established fire management areas and designated fire suppression sites.
- On the Goldwater Range, BLM surveyed cultural sites and constructed fencing to protect ancient designs called petroglyphs on the desert floor.

BLM officials said that due to military restrictions on site activities, BLM has been reluctant to devote funding to the sites. Although comparable data were not available at all sites, we found that BLM had spent a relatively small portion of its funds on some military sites. For example, the Alaska sites accounted for almost 12 percent of the land managed by the Steese/White Mountains District Office, but BLM allocated those sites only about 1 percent of the fiscal year 1992 area budget. At the McGregor Range, BLM spending on withdrawn lands was proportional to its spending on other federal lands. McGregor Range represents about 23 percent of the land managed by the Caballo Resource Area Office, and BLM allocated it about 21 percent of the area office's funding in fiscal year 1992. The military also funded resource management activities on the sites, in part to meet the requirements of environmental laws such as the National Environmental Policy Act.

OVERALL IMPACT OF MILITARY OPERATIONS ON RESOURCE CONDITIONS IS UNKNOWN

Military operations can affect the physical condition of the sites' natural and cultural resources. However, the limited data on the effect of military operations fall short of baseline data required to measure changes in resource conditions. The largely anecdotal information on resource conditions at the six sites indicates that military operations benefited some resources, harmed others, and had unknown effects in other cases.

BLM and military officials said that certain resources benefited from the military's presence. For example, BLM officials said that reduced public access on the Goldwater Range and other restrictions on off-road vehicles have resulted in less vandalism and damage to sensitive soils than would have occurred otherwise.

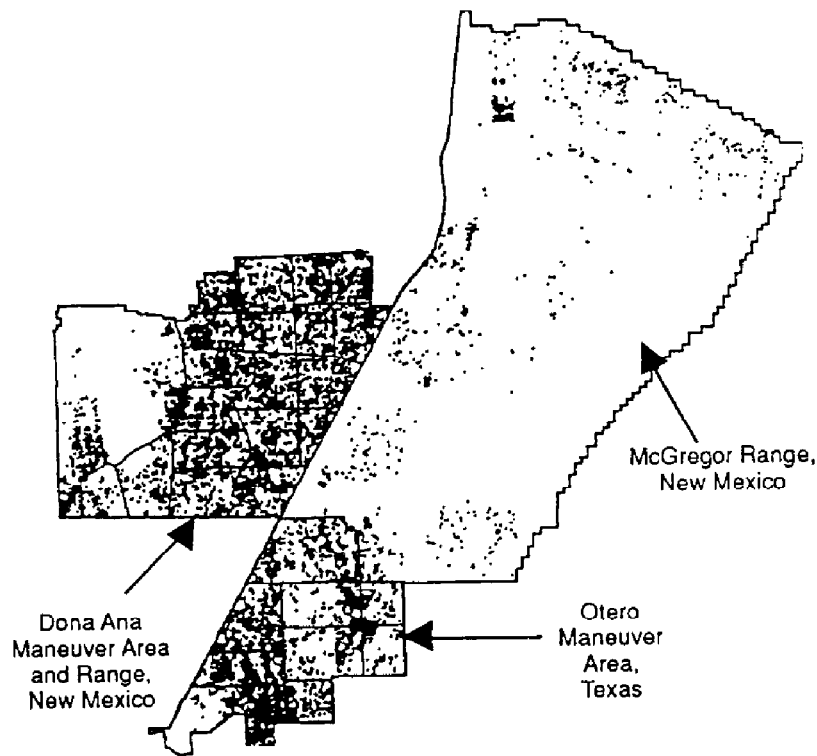
In contrast, soils and vegetation were adversely affected in the sites' various bombing range impact areas that contain unexploded ordnance and are generally not available for recreation or other secondary uses. The most extreme case was Bravo-20, considered so hazardous due to unexploded Navy ordnance that virtually no resource management has occurred.

The impact of military operations on certain threatened or endangered wildlife species is unknown. For example, the Sonoran Pronghorn Antelope and the Lesser Long-nosed Bat, both endangered species, are present on the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, which underlies the Goldwater Range's airspace. Concern about the

effects of aircraft noise from overflights on these species' habitat areas has prompted assessment studies by FWS and the Air Force, but as of November 1993, the studies had not shown harm.

Figure 2 shows the location of cultural artifact sightings, such as pottery and tool fragments, in and around McGregor Range and illustrates the potential risks to cultural artifacts at that site. A Fort Bliss archaeologist said the large number of identified cultural artifacts outside the site reflects extensive surveys in those areas. He said little survey work has occurred on McGregor Range, but he expects the same density of cultural artifacts within McGregor site boundaries.

Figure 2: Reported Cultural Site Density (Fewer Surveys in McGregor Range)



Impact on Resource Management at Other Locations

Our past work and follow-up by FWS showed nationwide impact by secondary users of national wildlife refuges, including the military. In September 1989, we reported that secondary uses of refuges, such as boating, mining, and recreational vehicles, were often considered harmful by refuge managers. Although the military was not the most frequent user of refuges, a significant percent of the refuge managers reported in our questionnaire that military use of the refuges was considered harmful.

- Of 428 managers responding, 55 (13 percent) said military air exercises occurred over their refuges and 36 (65 percent of refuges with occurrences) said the use was considered harmful. Only 29 managers reported military ground exercises (7 percent), and considered 10 (34 percent of occurrences) harmful.
- A June 1990 FWS survey report to the FWS Director included more detailed information from refuge managers and found greater incidence of harmful impact from military air exercises, but less impact from ground exercises. Our follow-up discussions with and documents from Interior and FWS officials indicated efforts underway to minimize these impacts.

OPPORTUNITIES EXIST FOR IMPROVING INTERAGENCY
COOPERATION AND AGENCY-SPECIFIC MANAGEMENT

Interagency Cooperation

The Military Lands Withdrawal Act requires that DOD and Interior agencies consult and agree on plans to manage resources. Despite this requirement, we found little evidence that top managers of military services and Interior agencies had taken steps to ensure effective cooperation in managing resources at the six sites. However, the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Environmental Security) has testified that DOD wants to create environmental partnerships to help ensure responsible environmental performance in defense operations.

We found many instances of interagency difficulties in implementing resource management plans. The McGregor Range plan calls for BLM to manage eight different resources, such as wildlife, vegetation, and cultural resources. However, the Chief of Fort Bliss' Directorate of Environment said Fort Bliss officials viewed BLM's role as limited to managing the cattle grazing program, assisting with fire suppression if requested, and helping to administer recreation activities. The range planner at Fort Bliss said the Army is reluctant to share authority with BLM because of concerns that BLM's plans could restrict future military training activities at the McGregor Range.

FWS officials at Nellis Range said that the military was generally uncooperative in resource management. They said that the Air Force constructed military roads, targets, and facilities on the refuge without informing the refuge manager. FWS officials also said that Air Force bombing outside of approved areas, which has occurred three times since 1979, damaged a rainwater catchment for bighorn sheep. In addition, they said that, without consulting with FWS managers, the Air Force had stored on the refuge some tank targets contaminated by depleted uranium.

We found little interaction or cooperation between the military and BLM at the Alaska sites. For example, an Army Range Manager said

that he had a good working relationship with BLM, but this relationship was based on only two telephone calls with BLM in 6 years. BLM officials said they saw little reason to work closely with the military since the ranges did not represent unique resource values, considering the abundant resources in Alaska and low public use at the sites.

The most cooperative relationship between the military and BLM occurred on the eastern section of the Goldwater Air Force Range, where BLM Lower Gila Resource Area and Air Force officials worked together on several projects, sharing both funds and expertise. BLM conducted archaeological projects with Air Force financial support. BLM's archaeologist said that archaeological surveys on the range outnumbered those off range because of the Air Force's financial support. Together, the Air Force and BLM also put up visitor information signs on the state highway crossing the site and fences along the range boundary to control livestock. Air Force and BLM managers used a videotape to publicly promote their "partnership in the desert."

BLM and Air Force environmental managers said that their joint work took more time than working independently. Air Force officials said that the public would be more likely to accept resource management strategies on military ranges if agencies like BLM were involved.

Individual Agency Efforts

Efforts to Develop Information on Resource Conditions

None of the sites we visited had comprehensive information about resource conditions and the effects of military operations on those conditions. Although the National Environmental Policy Act requires agencies to evaluate the environmental effects of their major operations, the site environmental impact statements and assessments we reviewed discussed resource conditions in only general terms. Military officials at three sites (Nellis, Goldwater, and McGregor) agreed that more information on resource conditions was needed. At most of the six sites, however, officials said that developing more comprehensive information was either too costly or had not been a priority.

The Army has known of the importance of developing information on resource conditions since before the Military Lands Withdrawal Act was passed in 1986. For example, the Army's Environmental Impact Statement, prepared in 1977 for the eventual withdrawal of the McGregor Range, acknowledged the need to develop information on resource conditions. However, not until 1993 did officials at the site begin planning for the development of baseline data on the McGregor Range. In May 1993, Army officials met with several agencies to reach agreement on what baseline data should be

developed on the McGregor Range for future environmental impact statements.

Our 1991 report focusing on Army land needs for training recommended improving the Army's approach to determining and requesting land. Following this and other reports, the Army canceled its plans to acquire land at one of its other training bases.

Controls Over Implementing Resource Plans

Several BLM offices lacked formal mechanisms to monitor the progress of planned resource management actions. Although lack of formal monitoring does not preclude BLM offices from making progress, such monitoring can provide greater assurance of successful resource management. At the Goldwater, Greely, and Yukon sites, BLM staff had no formal mechanism to monitor work. Alaska site BLM officials said that they are awaiting approval of the sites' resource management plans before implementing a formal monitoring system at Greely and Yukon. At Goldwater, BLM officials said they did not see a current need for an implementation schedule or tracking system.

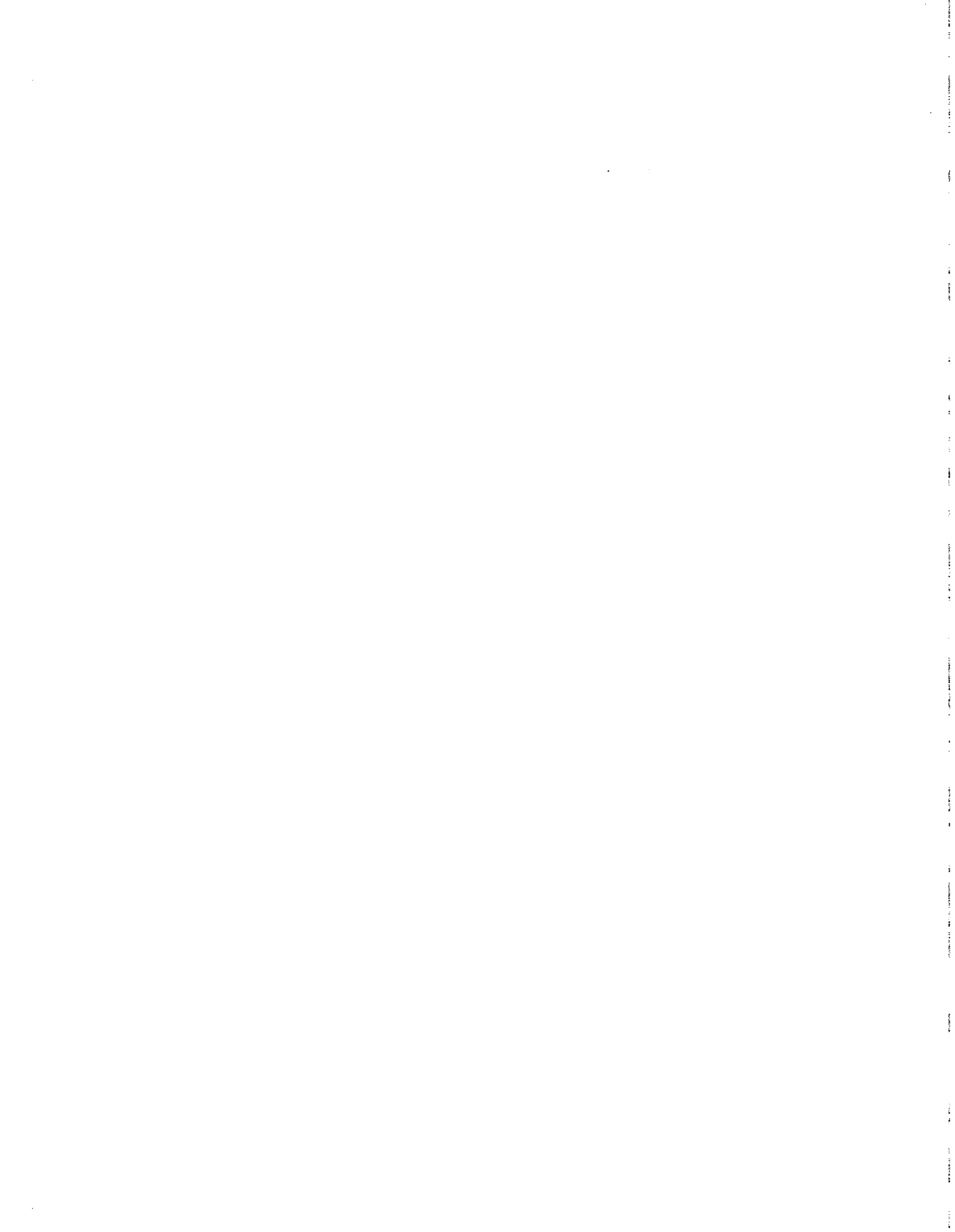
More formal controls existed at the Nellis and McGregor sites, including the use of priorities for implementing actions and preparing funding requests and periodically summarizing resource management accomplishments. For example, the Nellis implementation schedule allowed managers to track accomplishments and included, for many actions, a measuring system defining units of accomplishment, such as miles of fence built or number of wild horses removed. These approaches appeared to recognize accomplishments and areas requiring greater effort.

DOD and civilian agencies have taken action on our prior recommendations, including the 1989 and 1991 reports discussed a moment ago. In reference to our April report, it is still too early to determine DOD and Interior actions. They generally agreed with our recommendations aimed at (1) DOD improving its relationship with Interior agencies and developing baseline data on resource conditions and (2) Interior establishing schedules for resource plan actions and more closely monitoring accomplishments.

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

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