
1.0 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE ACTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This environmental assessment (EA) has been prepared to analyze Bill Barrett Corporation's (BBC's) proposed West Tavaputs Plateau Drilling Program (WTPDP) and is a site-specific analysis of potential impacts that could result from the implementation of the Alternatives. This EA will assist the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in project planning and will ensure compliance with the *National Environmental Policy Act* (NEPA) by making a determination as to whether any significant impacts could result from the analyzed actions (significance, as defined by NEPA, is found in 40 *Code of Federal Regulations* [C.F.R.] 1508.27). The EA provides evidence for determining whether preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS) is necessary. This EA is not a decision document. The decision document is the Decision Record (DR), a document that briefly presents the reasons why implementation of the Alternatives will or will not result in significant environmental impacts beyond those already addressed in the *Price River Management Framework Plan and Summary* (Price MFP) (BLM 1984a). If, following the analysis in the EA, the decision-maker determines that this project has significant impacts, an EIS would have to be prepared prior to the project's going forward. If the EA discloses that no significant impacts would result from the project, a DR that includes a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) statement may be signed and the selected alternative approved.

1.2 BACKGROUND

BBC proposes oil- and gas-related development activity in four exploratory units--Jack Canyon Unit (7,185 acres), Nine Mile Unit (640 acres), Peters Point Unit (10,080 acres), and Prickly Pear Unit (25,468 acres) in portions of Townships 12 and 13 South, Ranges 14-17 East (T12S-T13S, R14E-R17E) in Carbon and Duchesne Counties, Utah, approximately 30 miles east-northeast of Price, Utah (Figure 1.1). Surface ownership in the 43,373 acres that are included in these four units is approximately 90.4 percent federal (managed by the BLM), 9.1 percent State of Utah (managed by State of Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration [SITLA]), and 0.4 percent private (Figure 1.2). Mineral ownership is 92.6 percent federal and 7.4 percent SITLA. In addition to the four units, the West Tavaputs Plateau Project Area (WTPPA) includes development of roads, pipelines, and compressor stations on lands outside unit boundaries (Figure 1.2). BBC proposes the following actions:

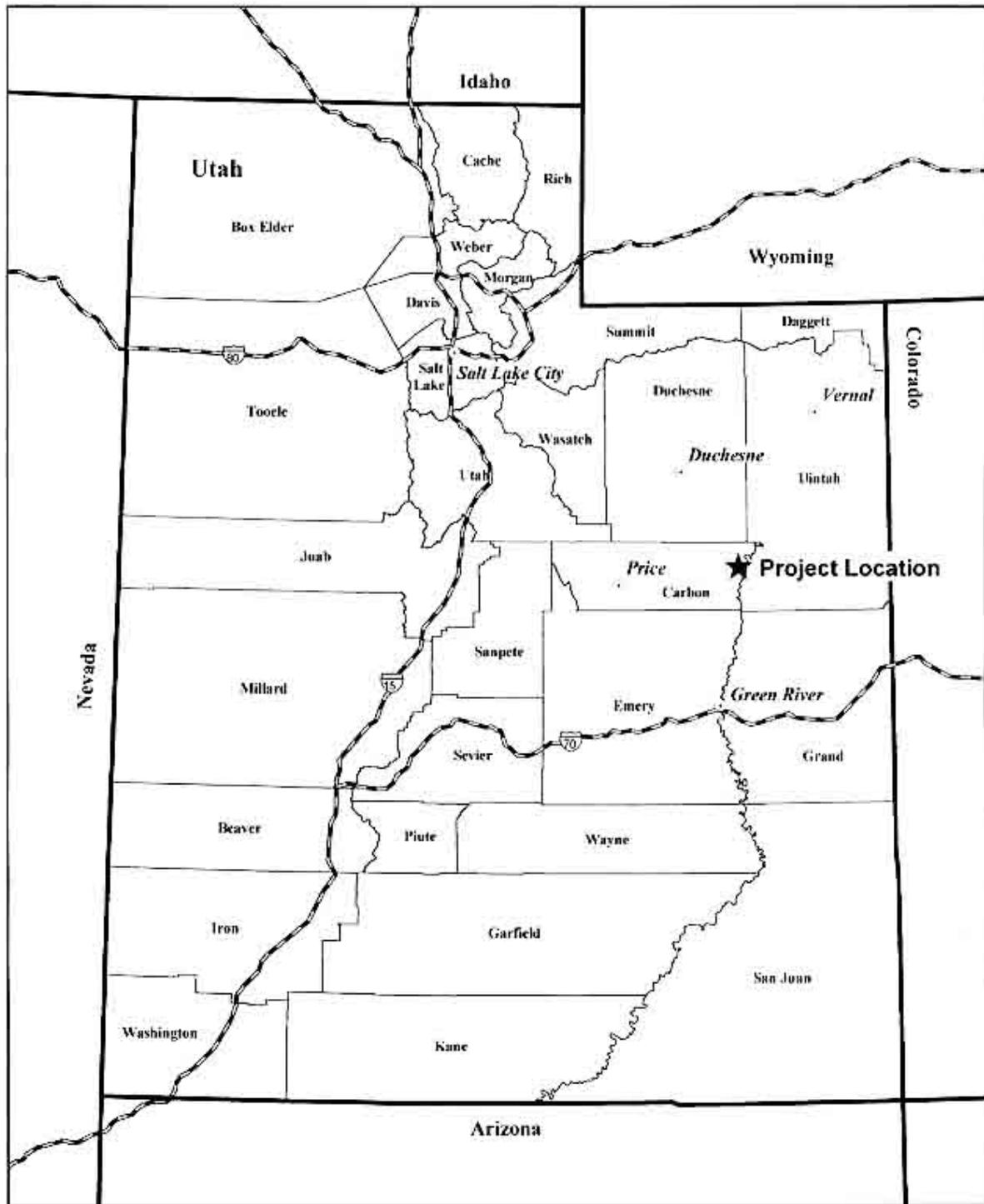


Figure 1.1 Project Location.

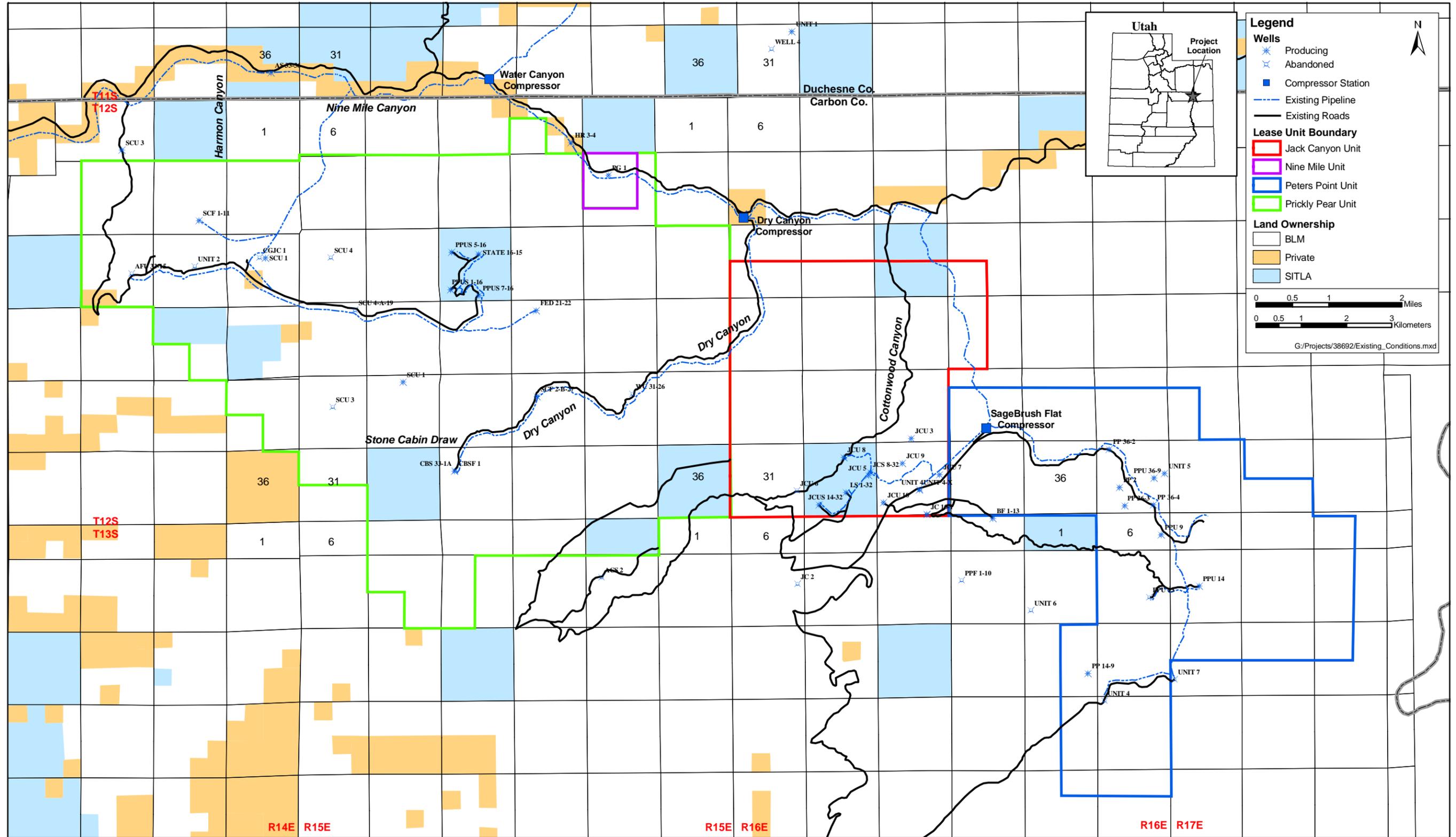


Figure 1.2 Project Area.

- 12 vertical federal wells, three of which would be drilled from previously drilled but presently reclaimed well pads;
- up to 10 vertical wells on new well pads on SITLA lands;
- utilization of four well pads (either new well pads included in this analysis or existing well pads) to accommodate up to four directional wells each, depending upon the feasibility of directional drilling;
- construction of 6.4 miles of new road on federal surface and 0.35 mile of new road on SITLA surface to access proposed federal wells;
- construction of 1.1 miles of new road on federal surface and 1.2 miles of new road on SITLA surface to access proposed state wells;
- upgrading of 2.6 miles of road on federal surface to access proposed federal wells;
- upgrading of 2.1 miles of road on federal surface and 2.0 miles of road on SITLA surface to access proposed state wells;
- construction/replacement of 23.7 miles of pipeline on federal surface and 7.3 miles of pipeline on SITLA surface; and
- additional compression of 1,500 horsepower (hp) at each of the three compressor sites-- Dry Canyon, Sage Brush Flat, and Water Canyon.

Drilling would begin as soon as allowed after necessary approvals are obtained from BLM. BBC anticipates the life of the project (LOP) would be 35-50 years.

1.3 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

The underlying need for the Proposed Action is to develop BBC's federal oil and gas leases by drilling for and, if successful, production of commercial quantities of oil and/or gas under the terms and stipulations of their federal leases. Private exploration and production from federal oil and gas leases is an integral part of BLM's oil and gas leasing program under authority of the *Mineral Leasing Act of 1920*, the *Mining and Minerals Policy Act of 1970*, the *Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976*, and the *Federal Onshore Oil and Gas Leasing Reform Act of 1987*. The continuing policy of the federal government in the national interest is to foster and encourage private enterprise in the orderly and efficient development of domestic oil and gas under principles of multiple-use management. Drilling and production from the existing leases is allowed under the multiple-use decisions of the current BLM land use plans for the proposed project area.

1.4 CONFORMANCE WITH BLM LAND USE PLANS

The Proposed Action involves public lands administered under the Price MFP (BLM 1984a) and the *Diamond Mountain Resource Area Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Record of Decision (Diamond Mountain RMP)* (BLM 1994). It is subject to decisions in the BLM's Price MFP (BLM 1984a), as amended. The decision in the Price MFP pertaining to oil and gas development states: "Establish oil/gas production as the priority land use for Known Geologic Structures which have been identified." The BLM has reviewed the Price MFP and determined that the Proposed Action is in conformance with terms and conditions as required by 43 C.F.R. 1610.5, with exceptions regarding floodplains and visual resources as disclosed and discussed in Section 4.2.1 of this document. The project lands were leased with standard lease terms and special stipulations.

Three activity plans overlay portions of the WTPPA: the BLM *Recreation and Cultural Area Management Plan: Nine Mile Canyon Special Recreation and Cultural Management Area* (SRCMA) (BLM 1995a); the BLM *Range Valley Mountain Habitat Management Plan* (September 30, 1991); and the *Range Creek Wild Horse Management Area (HMA) Plan* (EA UT-066-94-10), dated May 9, 1994. Numerous oil and gas leases were issued prior to and subsequent to the three activity plans.

Principal access to the area's existing oil and gas development and to the WTPPA is through Nine Mile Canyon along the county road that has been designated as the federally recognized Nine Mile Backcountry Byway (Byway) for its scenic and cultural values. The Nine Mile Canyon road through Duchesne and Carbon Counties is held by these counties as a Class B road. Lands crossed by the Byway, but located outside the WTPPA, include private and BLM-administered lands. Portions of the BLM-administered lands have special management objectives under the Diamond Mountain RMP (BLM 1994) as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). Because the Proposed Action would use the existing county road for access only to the WTPPA, with no additional surface disturbance for road improvements, it would be in conformance with the Diamond Mountain RMP.

All operations proposed by BBC would be conducted in full compliance with the terms and conditions of the appropriate federal leases included in the WTPPA, with applicable Onshore Oil and Gas Orders, with 43 C.F.R. 2800 and 2880 regarding right-of-way grants, and with oil and gas leasing regulations in 43 C.F.R. 3100 (specifically with subpart 3162 concerning Requirements for Operating Rights, Owners and Operators).

1.5 RELATIONSHIP TO STATUTES, REGULATIONS, OR OTHER PLANS

The WTPDP would be consistent with various federal, state, and local laws and regulations and would procure any required permits or easements (Table 1.1). The proposed wells would be developed in accordance with the *Mineral Leasing Act of 1920* (Title 30; *United States Code* [U.S.C.] 181-287) and 43 C.F.R. 3100 (*Onshore Oil and Gas Leasing*). Under this authority, BBC has the right to drill for oil and gas on their valid leases and to produce oil or gas.

The *Carbon County Master Plan* of 2004 set a goal that resource development activities on public lands within the county be fully bonded for all estimated reclamation costs (separate from federal performance bond). This area of Carbon County is regulated as M&G-1, Mining and Grazing, and has been reviewed and approved for Non-Conditional Use by Carbon County Planning and Zoning; therefore, the Proposed Action would not require any county permits for surface occupancy or road use and would not conflict with the *Carbon County Master Plan*. The Proposed Action would be in compliance with the Duchesne County plan (now being revised) (personal communication, March 5, 2004, with Teresa Nielsen, Planning Administrator for Duchesne County, Roosevelt, Utah).

The WTPDP is one of two separate and independent oil- and gas-related operations/actions in the general area of the WTPPA. The other action is the Stone Cabin 3-D Seismic Survey Project analyzed in an EA (UT-070-2003-15) and approved by BLM on April 2, 2004. That EA evaluates impacts from seismic exploration designed to identify oil and gas resources within the area. In addition, BBC previously proposed a plan for drilling seven wells within the WTPPA (BLM 2003a). The EA on the seven-well proposal was made available for public comment, but the BLM never issued a DR. That EA is superceded by this document. Information contained in these other NEPA documents, including public comments, are incorporated into this document by reference.

1.6 IDENTIFICATION OF ISSUES

Potential issues were identified for the Proposed Action based on internal issue identification by BLM resource specialists and from public comments on other projects in the WTPPA. Appendix A summarizes the issues and identifies those that have been dismissed because they are not present or, if present, would clearly not be affected. Appendix A also identifies those resources that would potentially

Table 1.1 Major Federal, State, and Local Permits and Approvals for the West Tavaputs Plateau Drilling Project.

| Agency | Permit, Approval, or Action |
|---|--|
| Bureau of Land Management (BLM) | <p>Permit to drill, deepen, or plug back on BLM-managed land (APD process)</p> <p>Right-of-way grants and temporary use permits for pipelines on BLM-managed land</p> <p>Right-of-way grants for access roads on BLM-managed land</p> <p>Authorization for flaring and venting of natural gas on BLM-managed land</p> <p>Plugging and abandonment of a well on BLM-managed land</p> <p>Modification of Category 2 lease stipulations</p> <p>Antiquities and cultural resource permits on BLM-managed land</p> <p>Approval to dispose of produced water on BLM-managed land</p> |
| U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) | Section 404 permits for placement of dredged or fill material in area waters and adjacent wetlands |
| U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) | Coordination, consultation, and impact review on federally listed threatened and endangered (T&E) species |
| U.S. Department of Transportation | Conformance with regulations for pipelines (49 C.F.R. Parts 191 and 192) |
| Utah Division of Wildlife Resources | Coordination on impacts to wildlife and state-sensitive species |
| Utah Department of Environmental Quality, Division of Water Quality | Storm water discharge permits |
| Utah Department of Environmental Quality, Division of Air Quality | Approval order for compressors |
| Utah Department of Transportation | <p>Conformance with applicable size and weight limits for trucks</p> <p>Permits for utility crossings of state roads</p> |
| Utah Division of Water Rights | <p>Stream alteration permits</p> <p>Change in use of water</p> |
| Utah State Historic Preservation Office | Consultation for cultural resource inventory, evaluation, and mitigation |
| Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration | Right-of-way easements on state sections |
| Utah Division of Oil, Gas, and Mining | Permits for oil and gas wells |
| Carbon County | <p>County bond</p> <p>Permits for use of county roads for heavy commercial purposes</p> |

be affected and are evaluated in detail in this EA. Issue identification for the Proposed Action utilized an interdisciplinary process and was conducted in January 2004. Public notice of the project was posted on the BLM Electronic Notification Bulletin Board for public comments on February 26, 2004. Issues identified include those natural resources, resource values, natural processes, and other components of the human environment having the potential to be affected directly, indirectly, or cumulatively by the Proposed Action. Those resources and associated resource issues identified potentially affected by the WTPDP are summarized below.

Impacts to Air Quality

Issue 1. Fugitive dust from construction and traffic.

Issue 2. Emissions from vehicles and equipment, well production, and compressors.

Impacts to Cultural Resources/Native American Religious Concerns

Issue 1. Direct impacts to cultural sites.

Issue 2. Increased public access would increase likelihood of vandalism.

Issue 3. Impacts to Native American religious concerns.

Impacts to Floodplains

Issue 1. Construction in floodplains and changes in floodplain function.

Issue 2. Compliance with Price MFP.

Impacts to Threatened, Endangered, Candidate, and Sensitive Species (TESS)

Issue 1. Direct impacts to TESS.

Issue 2. Impacts to TESS habitat.

Impacts to Water Quality

Issue 1. Increased sediments in streams due to project-related soil erosion.

Issue 2. Introduction of toxic substances into surface or ground water.

Impacts to Wetlands/Riparian Zones

Issue 1. Impacts from sedimentation.

Issue 2. Direct impacts to riparian vegetation.

Impacts to Wild and Scenic Rivers

Issue 1. Impacts to free-flowing condition and outstandingly remarkable values, which make Nine Mile Creek eligible for designation.

Impacts to Vegetation

Issue 1. Direct impacts to native vegetation.

Issue 2. Lack of reclamation success.

Impacts to Wildlife Resources

Issue 1. Direct loss of habitat due to removal of vegetation.

Issue 2. Reductions in habitat function due to disturbance.

Issue 3. Direct mortality caused by project-related activities.

Impacts to Soils

Issue 1. Increased wind and water erosion.

Issue 2. Lack of reclamation success.

Issue 3. Impacts to biological soil crusts.

Impacts to Recreation

Issue 1. Change in recreation opportunity and experience.

Issue 2. Changes in opportunity for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation on lands with wilderness characteristics.

Impacts to Visual Resources

Issue 1. Non-conformance with Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class II standards.

Issue 2. Reductions in scenic values in Nine Mile Canyon.

Impacts to Geology/Minerals

Issue 1. Recovery of natural gas resources.

Impacts to Wild Horses and Burros

Issue 1. Direct and indirect mortality caused by project-related activities.

Issue 2. Direct loss of habitat due to vegetation removal.

Issue 3. Reductions in habitat function due to disturbance.

Issue 4. Impacts to manageability of the HMA.

Impacts to Non-Wilderness Study Area (WSA) Lands with Wilderness Characteristics

Issue 1. Impacts to non-WSA lands with wilderness characteristics.

1.7 SUMMARY

This chapter has presented the purpose and need for the proposed project, as well as relevant issues (i.e., those elements that could be affected by the implementation of the WTPDP). Alternative A (the Proposed Action), Alternative B (the No Action Alternative), and Alternative C are described in Chapter 2.0. The existing environment in the WTPPA is presented in Chapter 3.0, and potential environmental impacts to that environment resulting from the implementation of each of the Alternatives are analyzed in Chapter 4.0 for each of the identified issues.
