



File Code: 1950

Date: November 8, 2024

Dear Friends and Neighbors of the Coronado National Forest,

The Coronado National Forest Nogales Ranger District, in cooperation with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), invites you to participate in our public comment period for the proposed Holden Canyon Connector Road Project Draft Environmental Assessment. The Holden Canyon Connector Road project (Proposed Action) proposes to improve, repair, and construct approximately 12.43 miles of unpaved road within the Nogales Ranger District, located in Santa Cruz and Pima counties, Arizona. Approximately 8.68 miles of the proposed Holden Canyon Connector Road consist of existing unpaved road and approximately 3.75 miles consist of undeveloped areas that would require new road construction. The Proposed Action also includes the decommissioning of 18 unpaved roads (3.57 miles). The purpose of this letter is to inform interested and affected parties of the Proposed Action, and to announce an opportunity to comment during a 30-day review period.

The Proposed Action has undergone environmental review in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 1501.7). The Nogales Ranger District, in cooperation with CBP, has prepared an Environmental Assessment that considers the issues previously identified during public and interdisciplinary team scoping. Maps and other project-related information can be accessed on the agency project webpages at:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=64326> or

<https://www.cbp.gov/about/environmental-management>

under “Documents Open for Comment.” The Proposed Action is an activity implementing a land management plan and is subject to the pre-decisional objection process at 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B. Information on how you can comment on this proposal or obtain further information is provided below.

PROJECT LOCATION:

The Proposed Action area is located within the Tumacacori Ecosystem Management Area of the Nogales Ranger District in Santa Cruz and Pima counties, Arizona. The proposed Holden Canyon Connector Road is approximately 12.43 miles located within Township 23S Range 10E: Sections 03, 04, 05, 07, 08, 09, 10, 15, 16, 22, 23, 24, and 25, and Township 23S Range 11E: Section 30, Gila-Salt River Meridian. The proposed decommissioned road segments are located within Township 23S Range 10E: Sections 08, 09, 15, 16, 17, 12, 22, 23, 25, and 26, and Township 23S Range 11E: Sections 30 and 32, Gila-Salt River Meridian.

PURPOSE AND NEED:

Congress has provided to the Secretary of Homeland Security a number of authorities necessary to carry out the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS's) border security mission. One of those authorities is Section 102 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, as amended (IIRIRA). In Section 102(a) of IIRIRA, Congress provided that the Secretary of Homeland Security shall take such actions as may be necessary to install additional physical barriers and roads (including the removal of obstacles to detection of cross-border violators [CBVs]) in the vicinity of the U.S.-Mexico international border to deter illegal crossings in areas of "high illegal entry" into the U.S. In Section 102(b) of the IIRIRA, Congress called on the Secretary of Homeland Security to construct reinforced fencing on the southwest border and provide for the installation of additional fencing, barriers, roads, lighting, cameras, and sensors on the southwest border.

DHS, through its constituent components, is statutorily mandated to control and guard the nation's borders and boundaries, including the entirety of the northern and southern land and water borders of the U.S. CBP is the DHS component that is primarily responsible for border security. The U.S. Border Patrol (USBP) is part of CBP. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), through its constituent bureaus (including the U.S. Forest Service [USFS]), is statutorily charged as a manager of Federal lands throughout the U.S., including USDA lands in the vicinity of international borders that are administered as wilderness areas, conservation areas, national forests, or wildlife refuges.

In 2006, USDA, including USFS, signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with DHS, including CBP. In the 2006 MOU, USDA recognizes that, pursuant to applicable law, CBP is authorized to access the Federal lands under USDA administrative jurisdiction and will do so in accordance with existing authorities. CBP may request, in writing, that the land management agency authorize installation or construction of tactical infrastructure, including roads, for detection of CBVs, on USDA-administered land in order to interdict CBVs as close as possible to the U.S.' international borders, in accordance with the USBP Strategic Plan. The 2006 MOU states that CBP will cooperate with USDA to identify routes and coordinate the placement of tactical infrastructure in order to limit resource damages while maintaining operational efficiency.

The Proposed Action would connect the area between Holden Canyon and Warsaw Canyon, near the U.S.-Mexico international border. This area is approximately 10 miles southeast of the town of Arivaca, Arizona, and is only accessible from the north by two main access National Forest System roads. Currently, there are no available east/west roads that connect the two canyon areas. The limited east/west road access north of the border in the Holden Canyon area has constrained USBP agents' abilities to respond to this area safely and efficiently. In order to access the eastern portion of the Holden Canyon area from the west, USBP agents must drive north on Tres Bellotas Road (Forest Road [FR] 216), south on Ruby Road, and south on California Gulch Road (FR 217), a distance of approximately 24 miles that typically takes approximately 60 minutes to complete. From California Gulch Road, agents may need to

continue on foot in order to patrol the area. This extended response time requires additional resources, additional manpower hours, and hampers agent effectiveness as they are delayed.

The few uneven, difficult-to-maintain, unpaved, ranch roads in the area have made CBV detection, response, and resolution extremely difficult. The purpose of the Proposed Action is to improve mobility and accessibility for USBP agents responding to and seeking to prevent illegal cross-border traffic, address emergencies involving public health and safety, and prevent or minimize environmental damage arising from occurrence of and response to CBV illegal entry on public lands. The need for the Proposed Action is to support CBP in meeting its mission objectives of providing border security, ensuring the highest probability of apprehending illegal entries, thus preventing terrorists and terrorist weapons from entering the U.S.; detecting, apprehending, and deterring smugglers of humans, drugs, and other contraband; and enhancing agents' response time. The Proposed Action would also provide a safer work environment for USBP agents. The need for the Proposed Action is also to improve safety concerns related to the use of nearby recreational and public use areas by CBVs for transportation and staging purposes.

The proposed improvement, repair, and construction of these 12.43 miles of road that would connect Holden Canyon and Warsaw Canyon east-to-west also addresses objectives, standards, guidelines, and desired conditions within the 2018 Coronado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) related to international border security, recreation and emergency access, and resource protections. Recreational uses that are likely to occur in the Proposed Action area include, but are not limited to, hunting, all-terrain vehicle use, and wildlife viewing. The proposed road would also provide USFS with improved access and response times when called upon to respond to fire and rescue events in the rugged canyon terrain of this roaded backcountry area. The proposed road would help to improve rancher relations as it would limit USBP's need to traverse areas further north and allow them to dedicate their efforts to the border area. The proposed decommissioning of 3.57 miles of road would offset the 3.75 miles of proposed new road construction and reduce CBP and public access into areas with sensitive resources.

PROPOSED ACTION:

Under the Proposed Action, CBP, in cooperation with the USFS Coronado National Forest Nogales Ranger District, proposes to improve, repair, and construct approximately 12.43 miles of road to provide enhanced access for USBP activities in the Holden Canyon area (see map on agency project webpages referenced above). The Proposed Action also includes decommissioning of approximately 3.57 miles of road segments no longer needed for patrol and access in the vicinity of the Holden Canyon area and the international border.

Holden Canyon Connector Road

The 12.43-mile road would consist of the following:

- Improvement and repair of approximately 8.68 miles of Mojonera Canyon Road (FR 216A), Sierra Canyon Road (FR 4168), Saucito Tank Road (FR 4169), Sentinel Peak Road (FR 4167), and currently decommissioned road and trail segments (closed road and trail segments would require significant improvement).
- New construction of a Maintenance Level 2 road of approximately 3.75 miles within an undeveloped area.

Equipment staging areas would be located within the existing road or disturbed areas, no staging areas would be created, and no new disturbance would occur for staging areas. Equipment needed to improve, repair, and construct the proposed road would include trackhoes, bulldozers, dump trucks, graders, compactors, loaders, and similar heavy equipment. A water tender would also be used for compaction of the road surface and dust abatement during construction.

Approximately three to five heavy equipment operators would be working at any given time.

Access to the area would be via existing roads and no temporary roads would be necessary for project implementation. Once the improvement, repair, and construction phases are completed, maintenance of the proposed road would be on an “as-needed” basis or in the event of emergency situations that require repair. CBP would fund road improvements, repairs, construction, and maintenance. USFS would be responsible for preparing the final road design, and conducting the improvements, repairs, construction, and maintenance work.

The proposed Holden Canyon Connector Road would be designated as open to public motor vehicle access (Maintenance Level 2 road for high-clearance vehicles). The proposed road would generally have low patrol traffic volume (averaging about two to three patrols per day) with low-speed use and low public use volume consisting primarily of hunters and all-terrain vehicles.

The timeline for Proposed Action activities, including improvement, repair, and construction, as well as road decommissioning, would be approximately six months over the fall/winter season (October 1 through March 30).

Existing Road Segments

The existing road segments (8.68 miles) would be improved and repaired to USFS Road Maintenance Level 2 standards. Maintenance Level 2 roads are intended for travel of high-clearance vehicles and not passenger vehicles. Based on the road engineering design, the approximate potential ground disturbance area for the proposed road improvement and repair segments (within existing or closed roads) would be approximately 14.60 acres, predominantly within the existing road use and disturbed area.

There is one avoidance area within an existing road segment with resources sensitive to disturbance (avoidance areas). Within this avoidance area, the road would continue to be used for

patrol and access; however, minimal road improvement or repair would occur to avoid potential impacts to the sensitive resource surrounding the existing road.

Road dips would continue to be used within the existing road segments as the preferred drainage treatment. Currently there are no low-water crossings (LWCs) with concrete mats or reinforced concrete or rock within existing road segments.

Proposed New Road Segment

The proposed new road (3.75 miles) would be engineered to conform to the USFS Maintenance Level 2 guidelines, native surfaced (constructed of on-site soil materials), and be suitable for high-clearance vehicles. The road would be approximately 14 feet wide in most areas (12-foot travel way with 1-foot shoulders). In areas requiring road switchbacks and cuts along slopes, a wider road area would be needed, and slopes may require reinforcement.

A cattle guard would be needed along FR 4169 to keep livestock from moving between allotments. The cattle guard would be a metal structure. Metal cattle guards are constructed over a pit, with treated timbers or concrete for the foundation, concrete or rock on either side, and open for drainage.

USFS developed a road disturbance area based on slopes and other topography along the proposed road alignment. Ground disturbance for the proposed new road segment construction area would be approximately 14.83 acres based on preliminary design. Calculations assumed a generally 14-foot-wide road plus fill and cut slopes as needed. Fills constructed with a 2:1 or flatter slope typically promote growth of vegetation and provide slope stability (approximate design). Final design of the road would determine road widths and shoulder reinforcements needed but would stay within the preliminary design disturbance area. Ground disturbance would be limited to the approximately 14-foot-wide road area.

One LWC would be needed where the proposed new road segment crosses the Holden Canyon drainage area. The LWC structure would be a concrete vented ford (crossing) that would have a driving surface elevated above the streambed with culverts (vents) that enable low flows to pass beneath the roadbed. The vents may be one or more pipes or box culverts. The vented LWC would be built to avoid upstream ponding. The LWC would ideally be made of reinforced concrete, downstream sill, native cobble reinforcement, and possible excavation of approximately 3 feet down may be needed (approximate design). Downstream armoring with a downstream sill and riprap would reduce erosion and downcutting. The LWC should be designed for flooding between the 25- to 100-year events which, based on preliminary modeling, would require a LWC length of approximately 140 feet. The road approach to the LWC would be built low across the flood plain and dip down toward the drainage channel to minimize any impairment of the flood plain process. The LWC width would be approximately 14 feet wide to match the proposed road. Ground disturbance for construction of the LWC would consist of approximately 0.08 acre of temporary disturbance surrounding the site (disturbance during construction activities) and 0.05 acre of long-term disturbance.

Proposed Road Decommissioning

CBP and USFS propose to decommission 18 existing unimproved road segments within the Nogales Ranger District, totaling 3.57 miles to offset the proposed approximately 3.75 miles of new road construction for access to the Holden Canyon area. The USFS requirement for the proposed road decommissioning would include barricading the roadway to prevent motorized vehicle travel onto the roadway. Barricades would include berms, boulders, slash, or logs across the roadway and several feet beyond the road edge to prevent access around the barrier.

The roadway surface would be tilled and seeded with a USFS-approved native seed mix along areas visible from decommissioned road end points (e.g., up to a turn in the road or a hill) to eliminate the visibility of the road segment. Each road segment would be reviewed for road condition and applicability of tilling. Tilling the roadway involves breaking up and loosening compacted road surfaces to a depth of approximately 4 to 6 inches. This allows for infiltration of rainwater, improves natural runoff patterns, and helps reestablish natural vegetation. Native material such as rocks and woody debris remaining on the roadway would provide some camouflaging materials and help discourage motorized use. No tilling would occur within areas with resources sensitive to disturbance or non-wetland drainage features (avoidance areas). Up to approximately 4.01 acres would potentially be temporarily disturbed for long-term closure of decommissioned road areas (calculations assumed a 14-foot-wide and road avoidance of all ephemeral drainages). Selected methods for a given road segment would depend on site-specific needs, according to the judgments of the road engineer and other staff.

Within decommissioned road segments with resources sensitive to disturbance, including ephemeral drainages, no decommissioning activities would occur within sensitive areas to avoid potential impacts to these resources (avoidance areas). Barricades would be installed across the road segment end points and several feet beyond the road edge to prevent motorized access around the barrier to further protect sensitive resources.

Decommissioning of these roads would contribute to the reduction of vehicle noise and increase the opportunities for quiet recreation, as emphasized in the Forest Plan. These road segments are duplicative of nearby roads that will continue to provide patrol and recreational access, no access would be lost.

DECISION TO BE MADE:

The Nogales District Ranger is the Responsible Official for the USFS decision. The Executive Director of the Program Management Office Directorate, USBP and the Deputy Director, Facilities Management and Engineering, Office of Facilities and Asset Management, CBP are the Responsible Officials for this CBP decision. Based on the results of the environmental analysis, the USFS Nogales District Ranger and CBP would issue decision documents that include a determination of the significance of the environmental effects and whether an Environmental Impact Statement would be prepared. The decisions would also include a determination of

consistency with the Forest Plan, National Forest Management Act, National Environmental Policy Act, as well as applicable laws, regulations, and executive orders.

If the Nogales District Ranger determines it is not necessary to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement, the Nogales District Ranger would decide whether or not to authorize the Proposed Action. If the Nogales District Ranger authorizes the proposed Holden Canyon Connector Road project, the Ranger would determine which management actions, mitigation measures, and monitoring requirements would be prescribed. Draft Avoidance, Minimization, and Mitigation Measures are included in Appendix B of the Draft EA. CBP's decision will also be based on the environmental analysis and its decision as to whether it is necessary to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement and/or move forward with the Proposed Action, which will be made in coordination with the Nogales Ranger District.

HOW TO COMMENT:

The Coronado National Forest and CBP value public input on the Proposed Action and the scope of this environmental review. We are now inviting you to submit comments during the review period. The purpose of this comment period is to provide an opportunity for the public to provide early and meaningful participation on the Proposed Action prior to a decision being made by the Responsible Officials.

Please make your comments as specific as possible. We want to hear your substantive comments on the Proposed Action and supporting documentation, along with supporting rationale that we should consider in finalizing the Proposed Action and its accompanying environmental analysis. Comments should be within the scope of the Proposed Action, have a direct relationship to the Proposed Action, and must include supporting reasons for the Responsible Officials to consider (36 CFR 218.2).

Specific written comments on the Proposed Action will be accepted for **30 calendar days** following publication of the legal notice in the *Nogales International*, the newspaper of record. If the comment period ends on a Saturday, Sunday, or Federal holiday, comments will be accepted until the end of the next Federal working day. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period. Those wishing to comment should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Specific written comments or requests for additional information can be submitted via U.S. mail to:

Proposed Holden Canyon Connector Road c/o Michelle Barnes,
U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Border Patrol Headquarters,
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, 6.5E Mailstop 1039
Washington, DC 20229-1100

Email comments can be sent to: holdencanyonconnectorroad@cbp.dhs.gov

Electronic comments including attachments should be submitted using the USFS Public Comment Form at <https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public//CommentInput?Project=64326> or submitted to CBP at holdencanyonconnectorroad@cbp.dhs.gov.

Only individuals or entities (as defined by 36 CFR 218.2) who submit timely and specific written comments (as defined by 36 CFR 218.2) about this Proposed Action or activity during this or another public comment period established by the Responsible Official will be eligible to file an objection. Other requirements to be eligible to submit an objection are defined by 36 CFR 218.25(a)(3) and include name, postal address, title of the project, signature, or other verification of identity upon request, and the identity of the individual or entity who authored the comments. Individual members of an entity must submit their own individual comments in order to have eligibility to object as an individual. A timely submission will be determined as outlined in 36 CFR 218.25(a)(4). It is the responsibility of the sender to ensure timely receipt of any comments submitted. Names and contact information submitted with comments will become part of the public record and may be released under the Freedom of Information Act.

Thank you for your interest in this project.

Sincerely,



JORGE ENRIQUEZ
DISTRICT RANGER
Nogales Ranger District
Coronado National Forest



PAUL ENRIQUEZ
Director
Infrastructure Program
Program Management Office Directorate
U.S. Border Patrol

cc: Lea Schram von Haupt, Jorge Enriquez, Ed Monin, Michelle Barnes, Jeff Coron,
Susy Morales