

Planning Nuts and Bolts: Preferred Alternative

Previously we've talked about the development, the evaluation, and the comparison of alternatives. Now, we're going to talk about the identification of the preferred alternative. Once we're complete with this discussion, you should have a thorough understanding of how the alternative is developed and how it's presented in the draft plan, EIS.

The legal requirements for the preferred alternative are found in NEPA. NEPA requires the identification of the preferred alternative if it exists at the draft EIS stage. And the BLM also requires the identification of the preferred in the draft plan.

Factors that we use to identify the preferred alternative include legal requirements that are found in FLPMA and in NEPA and other legal requirements such as Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and other federal and state requirements. It's also found in our purpose and need and our planning criteria and how well we meet the goals and objectives that are found in our plan. And I'll ask Ken to elaborate on that a little bit.

Well, you're looking at setting up a screening process, if you will, on what alternatives should be included in your EIS. Once you get past that, you're really weighing how well these particular alternatives and segments or components of the alternatives meet these screening criteria, if you will, the goals and objectives that you've set out.

So, you're saying, well, yes. All the alternatives need to meet the goal and objective, but some of them may meet them better than others. Some may have more emphasis on a particular resource issue. And it's those kinds of considerations as you're moving through the ---trying to identify the preferred alternative, how do these components of a particular alternative, how do they best meet the goals and objectives in the planning criteria that they've been set at. How do they best move through BLM's planning goals through the development of how they are considering things like consistency to different programs; state program, local programs, tribal considerations. And it's those kinds of things that are important.

Now, remember there's going to be a part at the end of the process in a different segment, we'll talk about the governors of the state you're in, they're going to do a consistency analysis. So, identifying that preferred alternative as being something that might be considered inconsistent with, for instance, state programs, well, that's an important component that may come up later. So you want to be thinking about that now as you're trying to identify, looking at these different alternatives, which is the preferred alternative, which best addresses the goals and objectives that we've laid out in our planning criteria and which, based on the collaborator input, are consistent with the particular programs, policies, local requirements that are there related to the environmental issues and other land use issues.

Of course, also, environmental impacts, Bobby, is an important component in doing your comparison of alternatives. If some have unacceptable effects or have

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major effects related to a particular resource area, you want to make sure that's part of the consideration, too.

You also want to balance the environmental impacts and the legal requirements with your, potentially with your administrative policy initiatives that you may have, BLM national strategies that may exist, the state director's guidance and the vision that your state may have for the environment. And don't forget the collaborator input. Collaborator input is key here and when and where the collaborators are going to provide input on the selection, on the identification of the preferred alternative is key.

So the process for which the preferred alternative is identified, the BLM interdisciplinary team actually makes a recommendation to the field office manager with a rationale behind the identification of the various components. And how the components of the preferred alternative identified is that they are selected, individual components of each of the other alternatives can be mixed and matched, so to speak, to create a new alternative called the preferred alternative.

And I might ask Ken if he has anything to elaborate on that.

Well, sure. So you have all of these different factors that you're considering that were identified in the planning handbook and we had a couple slides on that. So you have all of these things, it's a very complex soup that you're trying to weed through for the different alternatives, how do they best meet all of these different criteria? And then, the ID team is getting together and saying, well, there might be an alternative (a) that does some things really well, but some other components that don't do things like we'd like it. But alternative (b) really addresses some of those things.

So what you can do is basically take parts of (a), parts of (b), parts of (c), all your different alternatives, and then create one preferred alternative at the end of the process, if you will, the development of the draft EIS and the development of these alternatives so that when you're issuing your draft EIS, it has this preferred alternative. It's analyzed within the impact analysis, basically, the bookends of all the different alternatives create this one alternative. You want to make sure that that's the case. But you can mix and match, combine them all together, or components of them together, to make this one preferred alternative and that, again, is what the ID team is going to then work with the field office manager to say, this is what we think the preferred alternative is.

Thanks. So once the IDT, basically, recommends the preferred alternative to the field office manager, the field office manager is then going to take that recommendation to the state director. The BLM state director then approves the selection and it's really important to remember that the entire process needs to be transparent. It needs to be something that the collaborators and the cooperating agencies can see why and how things happened and follow the process from start to finish.