



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

Arizona
2021: Annual Manager's Report

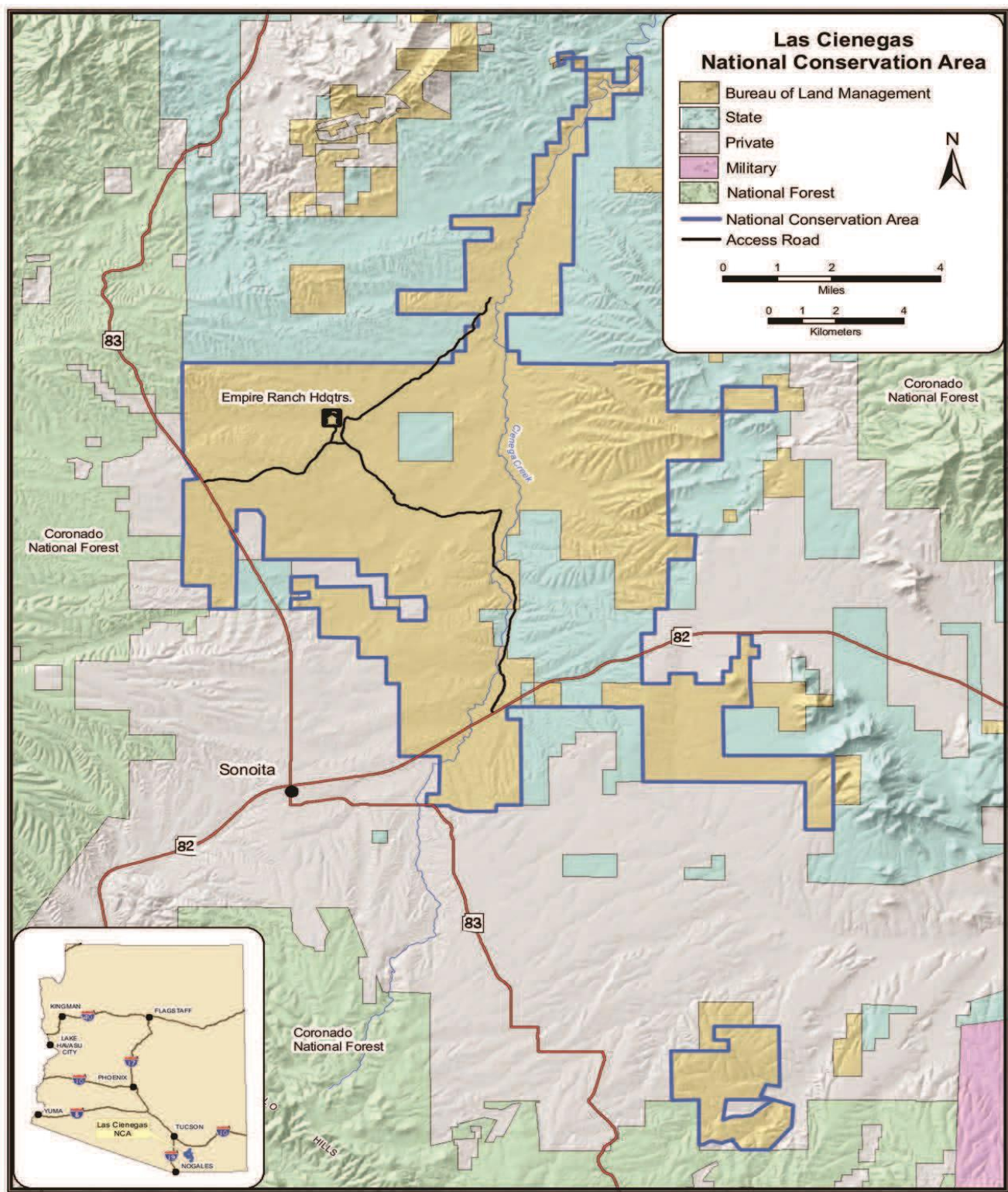
Las Cienegas

National Conservation Area



U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Map



Accomplishments

To assist in getting information regarding recreation opportunities for the National Conservation Area to the public, the Tucson Field Office (TFO) successfully secured multi-year funding to support the new Agents of Discovery (AOD) platform. AOD is an educational, Global Positioning System (GPS)-based mobile application (app) that engages kids of all ages to explore the natural and cultural environment. By using the app at select sites, app-users can find quizzes and challenges, and even win prizes.

Our Empire Ranch Foundation (ERF) partners developed fact sheets about the Empire Ranch AOD missions, and information on the AOD app as well as a virtual tour of the property and historical ranch house complex can be found on the ERF website. Partner and user feedback have been incredibly positive!



Figure 1. Agents of Discovery LCNCA Empire Ranch Mission.

Other significant accomplishments include:

- Mapped perennial surface water along 12 miles of the Cienega Creek and tributaries.
- Administered 23 Special Recreation Permits (SRPs) in the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area (LCNCA). The SRPs included equestrian rides, all-terrain vehicle (ATV) tours, bird dog field trials, guided hunting trips, and recreation events.
- Initiated recreational site improvements including:
 - Delineated Airstrip Group Site boundaries with the placement of ~1mile of

- post and cable fence line
- Installed new information kiosks at the Airstrip Group Site, Cieneguita Camp Area, and Maternity Well Group Site for improved public messaging about recreation opportunities and scheduled special recreation permit activities
- Arizona Game and Fish Department personnel completed pronghorn surveys in southeastern Arizona. More than 350 pronghorns were observed over two days, with fawns in most groups. There were 39 fawns per 100 does and 101 bucks classified; an increase from 14 fawns per 100 does last year.
- The Los Posos mesquite thinning project was surveyed for non-native invasive plants. Approximately 300 acres were surveyed, and 9 invasive species were documented. Lehmann lovegrass was the most common non-native invasive species documented in the survey area.



Figure 2. Slash piles remain from a mesquite (*Prosopis velutina*) removal treatment amongst a dense field of Lehmann's lovegrass (*Eragrostis lehmanniana*).



Figure 3. Installation of the Maternity Well Group Site information kiosk by BLM staff and ACE youth crews.

Challenges

Primary challenges include the threat of wildfire and damage to both cultural and natural resources from inappropriate recreational use of the landscape, unpermitted activities, and over-use due to unprecedented numbers of visitors and recreational vehicles.

Visitors

In 2021, approximately 60,611 visitors came to the LCNCA. However, due to visitor center closures and lack of docent tours due to the pandemic, visitor data was limited to traffic counter hits, limited numbers of authorized SRPs, and historically low visitor data provided by our ERF partners. Partner data indicated that LCNCA had 240 education participants, 2,000 interpretive participants, and a total of 8,000 volunteer hours.

Partnerships

Cienega Watershed Partnership

<http://www.cienega.org>

Formed in 2006, the Cienega Watershed Partnership (CWP) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to coordinate and help resource landscape stewardship initiatives for the landscape region that runs from Saguaro National Park and the Rincon Wilderness to the Canelo Hills south of Sonoita, and from the crown of the Santa Rita Mountains east to the crown of the Whetstone Mountains. The CWP also coordinates the activities of two *ad hoc* organizations: the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership and the Cienega Corridor Conservation Council. CWP projects include YES!, FROG, Oral History, and Back Then. The CWP supports the annual Science on the Sonoita Plain Meeting, the State of the Watershed Workshops, and the Biological Planning meetings. The CWP has been instrumental in assisting with monitoring leopard frogs, removing bullfrogs and crayfish on BLM and adjacent private lands, maintaining water supplies at wildlife waters, and reintroducing Chiricahua leopard frogs grown from University of Arizona grown stock.

Empire Ranch Foundation

<http://www.empireranchfoundation.org>

The ERF is a non-profit volunteer organization established in 1997. Acting in cooperation with the BLM, ERF's purpose is to protect, restore, and sustain Empire Ranch historical buildings and landscape as an outstanding western heritage and

education center. The beneficial relationship between the BLM and ERF was formalized through an Assistance Agreement. To ensure mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities, a Memorandum of Understanding (non-monetary agreement) is in the process of being completed between BLM and ERF. The ERF receives funding through the support of its members, individuals, and businesses, through public donations, corporate and foundation contributions and grants, and through the proceeds of special fundraising activities.

The ERF provides staffing for the Empire Ranch Visitor Contact Station at the Empire Ranch Headquarters several times a year. Under non-pandemic situations, docent tours are offered twice monthly, in addition to cultural events such as the annual Empire Ranch Roundup, which typically brings over 2,000 visitors to the LCNCA. Volunteer workdays are held every month to support maintenance and preservation efforts. Despite the limitations of COVID-19, ERF provided approximately 2,000 hours of volunteer service during 2021.



Figure 4. Empire Ranch House Virtual Tour for public viewing.

Science

Several research and or study initiatives are occurring within the LCNCA. Current research efforts conducted within the LCNCA under BLM authorizations are Summarized below.

The three research and or study initiatives identified for 2021 address cultural resources, plant conservation, and bird studies. The cultural resources study works on verifying locations and evaluating early agricultural period archaeological sites (Cienaga

Watershed Partnership). The plant conservation project includes reintroduction of Arizona Eryngo into Las Cienegas Wetlands. And the bird studies project, which is in development and collaboration with the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies will enable the NCA to gain knowledge on bird intensity, frequency, and seasonality of use at Las Cienegas NCA.

Events

All normally scheduled events were cancelled in 2021 due to COVID-19 pandemic concerns.



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Gila District Office
Bureau of Land Management
Tucson Field Office
3201 E. Universal Way
Tucson, AZ 85756
Phone: 520-258-7200

Report compiled by: Colleen Bergmanis, Assistant Field Manager, Nonrenewable Branch

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