AN OVERVIEW OF CULTURAL RESOURCES ON PAHUTE AND RAINIER MESAS ON THE NEVADA TEST SITE, NYE COUNTY, NEVADA

by

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Since the early 1960's, Pahute and Rainier mesas, situated in the northwestern portion of the Nevada Test Site, southern Nye County, Nevada (Figure 1), have been used by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) for nuclear weapons testing. In accordance with the Limited Test Ban Treaty signed in August, 1963, this testing has been restricted to underground. Nevertheless, construction activities which accompany underground nuclear tests have resulted in the disturbance of the surface terrain around each test. In compliance with Federal legislation (National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and National Environmental Policy Act of 1969), the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), Nevada Operations Office, has required that cultural resources studies must precede all land disturbing activities on the Nevada Test Site (U.S. Department of Energy 1983). These studies, depicted in Figure 2, usually consist of archaeological surveys that are conducted immediately prior to the scheduling of the land disturbing activity. The intent of these surveys is the identification and evaluation of all cultural resources which might be adversely affected by the proposed construction activity. If cultural resources do not occur in the proposed project area, then the U.S. Department of Energy documents that a cultural resources reconnaissance was conducted and allows the project to proceed. If, on the other hand, cultural resources occur in the zone of direct impact of a scheduled activity, each identified cultural resource must be evaluated for its scientific and/or historic worth (significance) and plans must be devised to mitigate any potential adverse impact to those archaeological sites found eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

This sort of "preconstruction survey" is the most direct and reliable means for DOE to determine the affects of its projects on significant cultural resources and has worked well in areas on the Nevada Test Site where only limited areas of land have been subjected to minor disturbance and archaeological site density has been relatively low. However, this has not been the case with preconstruction surveys on Pahute and Rainier mesas. In both areas, archaeological site density is unusually high (average of 15 sites per square kilometer) and most archaeological sites are of a complex nature. Furthermore, these areas have been and will be repeatedly used for intensive nuclear testing. Consequently, it has become increasingly difficult to avoid adverse impacts to significant cultural resources. Nevertheless, as outlined in the U.S. Department of Energy's (1983:3) "Environmental Compliance Guide," DOE may establish an overall cultural resources management plan, formalized in a "Process Memorandum of Agreement", that is focused on the entire portion of Pahute and Rainier mesas that is used for nuclear testing. The establishment of such a "Process Memorandum of Agreement" may avoid the need to go through separate determinations of eligibility