

**PROJECT PLAN II AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
FOR THE MEADOWOOD SPECIAL RECREATION MANAGEMENT AREA**

Log # ES920-09-01

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the attached environmental assessment, I have determined that impacts are not expected to be significant. Therefore, the preparation of an environmental impact statement is not required.

DECISION RECORD

It is my decision to approve the proposed action from Project Plan II and Environmental Assessment for The Meadowood Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA). The proposed action includes measures to protect the environment, and reduce any potential impacts to less than significant levels. Therefore, no further mitigation measures are necessary.

RATIONALE

Approval of the proposed action would provide for the safe and enjoyable public use of Meadowood SRMA. It would also provide for protection of natural and cultural resources in accordance with Federal, State, and local laws.

PREPARED BY:

_____/S/_____
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_____/8/30/2009_____
Date

REVIEWED BY:

_____/S/_____
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Natural Resource Specialist
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_____/9/3/2009_____
Date

APPROVED BY:

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Este Stifel
Field Station Manager
Eastern States-Lower Potomac Field Station

_____/9/3/2009_____
Date

INTRODUCTION

This Environmental Assessment and Project Plan for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Meadowood Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) analyzes the potential impacts of constructing two trails and a trailhead parking area. The trailhead parking was outlined in the Meadowood Farm Proposed Planning Analysis Environmental Assessment, November 2002 (PA/EA) and subsequent Integrated Activity Management Plan/Environmental Assessment, September 2004 (IAMP). Although these documents provided a general analysis of the management direction the BLM has taken with management and development of the property, analysis of detailed site-specific impacts was deferred to later, more detailed project plans. This document is the second of those project plans. The proposed project action consists of three elements: rerouting of the Chicken Coop Trail and removing and revegetating the old alignment, a new trail to provide a connection between Meadowood and Pohick Bay Regional Park at the Camp Wilson entrance, and construction of a universal access parking area for the Hidden Pond Trail and Hidden Pond fishing dock.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

The actions in this project plan would enhance use of the Meadowood Recreation Area for fishing, nature observation, and trail-based activities.

CONFORMANCE WITH EXISTING PLANS

The proposed action is designed to conform to the PA/EA, providing for on-the-ground implementation of IAMP decisions made by the BLM to allow for public recreation and enjoyment of the natural resources of the property.

DESCRIPTION OF ALTERNATIVES

Proposed Action. This alternative would implement the decisions made in the November 2002 PA/EA Decision Record by managing the site for non-motorized recreation, and maximizing opportunities for visitors to appreciate and enjoy the natural and cultural resources at Meadowood. See Appendix 1 for a map of the project locations.

1. Camp Wilson connector trail. This new trail would be an 1800 foot long, 4 foot wide gravel surfaced trail with a six foot corridor width to allow for hikers and equestrians to easily and safely use trail systems at both Meadowood and Pohick Bay Regional Park, crossing at the Camp Wilson entrance to Pohick Bay. There would also be a trail connection adjacent to the existing horse pastures to the Meadowood Admin Compound/Barn Area. Most of this trail surface would be covered with a 6" layer of aggregate consisting of fine and coarse material up to 1 ½ inch in size, to allow the native soils to withstand horse use.
2. Chicken Coop trail reroute. This project would involve constructing a 3000 foot long, 4 foot wide gravel surfaced equestrian/hiking trail with a six foot corridor width from the Wood Thrush Trail to the Thompson Creek Trail, and removing and revegetating the existing trail, which has steep eroding, and poorly drained sections. Most of this trail surface would be covered with a 6" layer of aggregate consisting of fine and coarse material up to 1 ½ inch in size, to allow the native soils to withstand horse use.

3. Hidden Pond trailhead. See Appendix 2 for the design and location of the trailhead. This project would consist of a six car accessible parking at the 10705 Belmont Boulevard driveway entrance to Meadowood, which would allow for universal access to the previously constructed fishing pier and Hidden Pond Trail. The lot would have three spaces along either side of the driveway, and be built just inside the existing driveway gate, which would be moved back towards the building at the site. The lot would be 1600 square feet in size, of which 1200 square feet would be new disturbance, and approximately 400 square feet would incorporate the existing driveway. There would be 18 inch high heavy timber vehicle barriers around the parking lot to keep vehicles from damaging surrounding tree and soils, and a gate to prevent unauthorized vehicle access to the building area.

The proposed action incorporates the following practices and guidelines.

1. BLM would protect all disturbed areas with a layer of straw or leaf mulch, and reseed where appropriate. To control the invasive species on the property, BLM would carry out early detection, mechanical control, replacement, and monitoring at every site of surface disturbance. BLM would create additional landscaping at the Hidden Pond trailhead site using native grasses, forbs, shrubs, and woody plants.
2. BLM would plan trails so that no healthy trees larger than 10 inches in diameter would be removed, no trail grades exceed 15%, and all trails are out sloped 3-8%. BLM would take all vegetation removed from trails and either mulch it or distribute it evenly on the forest floor at least 20 feet from the edge of the cleared trail corridor.
3. As stated in the Meadowood Activity Plan, all potential ground-disturbing activities (undertakings) would be considered under the authorities of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended (NHPA). As such, field surveys, site evaluations, and mitigating potential Adverse Effects to historic properties and sites are considered on a case-by-case basis. Within the context of this EA, the BLM-Eastern States Cultural Heritage Program would review the results of archaeological surveys and determine if the use and maintenance of the trail corridors could have an adverse impact on known or suspected historic properties. If the BLM archaeologist determines, after studying the survey data, that there is a potential for adverse impacts, then BLM would reroute trails so as not to adversely affect other resources, while maintaining trail standards. If this is not possible, then an archaeologist would do evaluations to determine the significance of the sites located within trail corridors, and BLM would consult with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (DHR) to seek their concurrence of the agency's opinion regarding the potential for effects, prior to initiating ground-disturbing activities.
4. The BLM would construct these facilities during the next year using contractors, BLM personnel, volunteers, and partners as funds and staffing allow. Construction in Northern Virginia can take place throughout the year, but precipitation and temperature patterns can cause delays and setbacks, with freeze-thaw cycles in December - March creating the biggest constraints. Because of fairly even precipitation throughout the year, all construction activities must incorporate erosion control measures to protect surface water quality at all times of the year. For parking areas, workers would use construction equipment such as tractors, graders, and rollers to remove all organic materials from parking lot and trail surfaces to a minimum depth of four inches; however, workers might need to grade more earth to achieve slopes of 1% to 5% to allow for proper drainage. BLM would use the removed material as fill in other locations within this project plan to achieve proper drainage.

5. BLM would use the vegetation cleared at project sites either as onsite mulch for use in landscaping or for spreading onto forest floors to decompose. BLM would make every effort to remove invasive weeds from construction sites during this process. For trail construction, workers would use a combination of small mechanical equipment, such as mini-excavators, trail dozers, compact tractors, and hand labor.
6. The parking areas would be surfaced with aggregate to allow water to filter into the ground. Workers would apply straw or leaf mulch to disturbed areas, to protect bare soils and allow for seeds to germinate. The amount of disturbance during construction would be the minimum necessary to accomplish objectives. BLM would grade disturbed areas and then reseed promptly upon completion of the grading.
7. The BLM proposed new trails are designed to avoid proximity to streams, and neither of the proposed trails is within 200 feet from a perennial stream channel. Any stream crossings would be designed to minimize impacts to stream banks through construction of bridges, or armored fair-weather crossings, and hardening approaches to stream banks. BLM does not expect any significant sediment from trail construction or use to enter stream channels, because the undisturbed areas between the proposed disturbances and the receiving waters acts to slow any surface runoff, allowing sediments to dissipate and surface runoff to filter into the soil before it enters receiving streams.
8. The Hidden Pond trailhead has an existing sign on a stone base at 10705 Belmont Blvd. There would also be a wood barrier to act as a vehicle barrier, and guide visitors to trails, and an information board with information about the site and events, visitor use rules, contact information, and information about protecting cultural resources.

No Action Alternative.

This would be a continuation of current management, and provides a baseline to which other alternatives can be compared. The Meadowood SRMA would continue operations however the chicken Coop trail would continue to degrade, and trail users would create alternate trails around wet and eroded areas, spreading impacts. There would be no trail connection to Camp Wilson, and trail users would have to travel along Gunston Road approximately 150 yards to travel between the two recreation areas. There would be no accessible parking for the trail or fishing opportunity at Hidden Pond, and the site would not meet federal accessibility standards. Maintenance such as grading, pruning, and culvert cleaning on existing trails would continue, to minimize erosion of trail surfaces, provide for safe use, and protect water quality. Visitors would continue to park at the 10705 Belmont Boulevard driveway entrance.

Other Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis.

The BLM considered several locations for the trailhead parking area on Belmont Boulevard, however they were not pursued following public objections about excessive tree removal at the site, or BLM concerns about lack of visibility and security at the site.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The affected environment for this proposal was more fully described in the PA/EA document. BLM determined that the following critical elements were not present or present and not affected by either alternative: Air Quality, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, Prime or Unique Farmlands, T&E

Species, Hazardous or Solid Waste, Wilderness, Environmental Justice, Native American Religious Concerns, and Coastal Zone.

The following critical elements are present within the area affected by the alternatives and could potentially be affected: Noxious and Invasive Weeds.

Vegetation

The affected environment for the Hidden Pond parking area Meadowood Parking lots can be described as an early-mid seral stage forest covered with sweet gum, white oak, American holly, Virginia pine, and beech trees. The proposed trails would run almost entirely through the forest interior, which contain the species above, as well as Virginia pine, black locust, honey locust, mountain laurel, various species of maple, and other hardwoods common to Northern Virginia forests. The forest traversed by the new trails is also in early-to-mid seral stages of development.

Wildlife

Deer, small mammals, amphibians, and birds are abundant within the Meadowood SRMA. Deer populations have grown considerably since BLM acquired the property. The Meadowood subpopulation of deer residing on Mason Neck are part of a population that is more than three times that of the objective deer population for the area. The objective (15 deer per square mile) is largely to help minimize vehicle / deer collisions and to protect habitat for other wildlife from over-consumption by deer.

Because diversity (up to more than 30 species) and numbers of songbirds have increased since BLM acquired the property, BLM assumes that the diversity of species of neotropical migratory land birds is increasing at Meadowood. However, since Meadowood represents a small fraction of the species' range in the Mason Neck / Northern Virginia Area, their use of Meadowood is not statistically significant enough to provide insight into the health or trends of these populations.

Cultural Resources

Beginning in 2004, the BLM entered into a cooperative agreement with the Fairfax County Park Authority Archaeology Program, to complete a comprehensive, Phase I, archaeological survey across the 800-acre BLM tract. The intensive field methods employed by the County Archaeology Program met or exceeded those prescribed by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and the Secretary of the Interior. The proactive surveys identified several archaeological, historical, and cultural resources, and the survey team has filed all sites, forms, and data with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

The Eastern States Cultural Heritage Program Archaeological Program conducted surveys of the Chicken Coop Trail Reroute and the Hidden Pond Trailhead. These surveys identified no new or previously recorded archaeological or historic properties at either of these sites. BLM-Eastern States provided an opinion that undertaking the construction of these projects would result in No Historic Properties Affected, as per 36 CFR 800.11(d). The Virginia Department of Historic Resources concurred with the agency opinion. BLM would conduct a pedestrian cultural resources survey of the Pohick connector trail before beginning construction.

Noxious and Invasive Weeds

The BLM has identified the following invasive species within the areas of the proposed action: Japanese stiltgrass *Microstegium vimineum*, and Mile-a-minute *Polygonum perfoliatum*. Although there are numerous other invasive exotic plants on the property, these species have the greatest potential for increasing from disturbance in the project areas.

Water Quality

The perennial streams on the Meadowood SRMA fall within the Mill Branch watershed and the Kane Creek watershed. These watersheds are two of only three watersheds in the County that are designated for "Watershed Protection" - a designation given to only the healthiest watersheds which are found in areas with low development density and contain streams with healthy biological communities.

The watershed divide or topographic high point between the Mill Branch and Kane Creek watersheds roughly follows Belmont Boulevard, which also divides the Western and Eastern Meadowood parcels. Thompson Creek, on the Eastern parcel, lies within the Kane Creek watershed. The primary stream in the Eastern parcel, Thompson Creek drains through forests and wetlands into Belmont Bay.

Visual Resources

The entire Meadowood SRMA is designated as a Visual Resource Management Class III area, which means that BLM should plan development to partially retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be moderate. The landscape within and surrounding the Meadowood SRMA consists of tree-lined residential and rural roads, hardwood forest, and open fields.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

This section provides the evaluation of direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts of the proposed action. Impacts might be to society, the economy, or the biological or physical environment. Any issues or concerns raised by BLM staff, other agencies, or the public are discussed below. This section also discusses any measures to mitigate the environmental impacts that resulted from those concerns. Finally, this section identifies any residual impacts to the environment, despite application of mitigation measures.

Vegetation

Proposed Action

Impacts

New trail development would clear mostly understory vegetation (including small trees and shrubs) from approximately 0.4 acres of forest, and 0.05 acres of fescue pasture grass. Parking lot development would remove approximately square feet (.04 acres) of understory shrubs, and approximately 40 trees, with 5 of those having a diameter at breast height (dbh) of 10 inches up to a dbh of 18 inches.

The removal of vegetation in this area would not change the visual character of the setting, as a forest of the same composition would remain as a backdrop for the site. Loss of forest canopy and hardening of the forest floor with the parking area would result in water draining from these areas in large storm events where it had infiltrated the forest before construction.

No Action Alternative

Impacts

BLM would endeavor to keep Meadowood in its current state. BLM would continue to maintain trails by hand-pruning vegetation to trail edges, and clearing saplings as they emerge along trail shoulders. BLM

would continue to maintain pond vegetation to eliminate woody vegetation on dams and fishing access areas, and remove invasive species on pond shorelines. The poorly drained soils at the driveway entrance to the property would continue to remain bare, and continue to displace over time.

Wildlife

Proposed Action

Impacts

The construction of the parking areas and trails might cause temporary displacement (during daylight hours when construction takes place, generally over a period of several weeks) of wildlife in the immediate vicinity of project sites. At this time, there are no projected significant impacts to wildlife by construction or increased human use. BLM and partners would monitor the displacement of wildlife due to construction and subsequent visitor use.

No Action Alternative

Impacts

Current impacts to the affected environment and mitigation measures are identified in the Meadowood PA/EA November 2002 under the proposed action alternative (alternative 3). Existing trails and parking areas identified in the plan would have a similar temporary displacement of wildlife due to human use, however not due to the construction activities proposed here. There would be no significant impacts.

Cultural Resources

Proposed Action

Impacts

There would be a small possibility of damaging subsurface cultural resources during trail and parking area construction, based on the surveys already completed and the location of cultural sites identified by Fairfax county archaeologists working for the BLM. There would also be a possibility that visitors might find and disturb cultural artifacts on the ground along trails. Illegal artifact hunters might use metal detectors and excavate historic sites in order to find and steal artifacts. Because of the presence of BLM staff and the public onsite, and the difficulty of locating and excavating these artifacts, these impacts would not be significant.

No Action Alternative

Impacts

Current impacts to cultural resources and mitigation measures are identified in the Meadowood PA/EA November 2002 under the proposed action alternative (alternative 3). They would be essentially the same as for the proposed action, although on fewer trails. Over the past eight years that BLM has managed the property, there have been no cases or evidence of visitors disturbing cultural resources.

Invasive Exotic Species

Proposed Action

Impacts

Trail and trailhead development would create disturbances and openings for invasive species recruitment, if reseeding is not carried out promptly. Invasive exotic species covering the disturbed soil would crowd out native plants and native plant diversity, and provide poor quality food and cover for wildlife.

Mitigation

By covering all disturbed areas soon after constructions with either straw or leaf mulch as appropriate, spread of invasive plants should be minimal.

No Action Alternative

Current impacts to the affected environment and mitigation measures for Invasive Exotic Species are identified in the Meadowood PA/EA November 2002 under the proposed action alternative (alternative 3).

Visual Resources

No elements of the proposed action would result in more than minor changes in the existing landscape character, and no contrast rating worksheets are required.

Cumulative Impacts

Proposed Action

The zone of influence of this proposal is defined as the two watersheds covered by Meadowood. Surrounding land use is not expected to change from its rural/residential character because of current zoning, based on a lack of sewage treatment in the area, and the limited effectiveness of septic systems. The PA/EA calls for maintaining roughly the same developmental “footprint” at Meadowood in terms of vegetative cover. The PA/EA states that five acres of forest clearing needed for new trails and parking areas. The residual impacts of carrying out the proposed action are the loss of approximately 0.44 acres of forest cover of the 640 acres present at Meadowood. Previously BLM approved clearing 1.7 acres of forest cover for the Mason Neck Wayside project in 2006. If the proposed action were implemented, the total amount of 2.14 acres cleared for public access trails is still within the original target of the PA/EA. Over the past five years, BLM expects no significant cumulative impacts from the proposed action.

No Action Alternative

Current impacts to the affected environment and mitigation measures are identified in the Meadowood PA/EA November 2002 under the proposed action (Alternative 3). There would be no residual impact from the loss of 0.6 acres of forest cover due to implementation of this plan. However allowing the Chicken Coop Trail to stay in its present alignment would, over time create more impacts as users created alternate routes to avoid steep and poorly drained areas.

COORDINATION AND CONSULTATION

Below is a list of consultation and coordination activities carried out by BLM Lower Potomac Field Station (LPFS) staff:

February 17, 2009, BLM LPFS meeting room: The scope of the proposed action was introduced at a Friends of Meadowood (FOM) meeting at the LPFS office attended by twelve FOM members. Several members raised concerns about the initially proposed location of the Hidden Pond trailhead parking area.

March 24, 2009, BLM LPFS meeting room: LPFS staff held a public project plan scoping meeting. 13 members of the public attended. Several citizens again raised concerns about the initially proposed location of the Hidden Pond trailhead parking area.

May 26, 2009, Hidden Pond Trailhead site: A public site visit of the Hidden Pond Trailhead Parking site was held, and the proposed action was collaboratively changed to accommodate concerns residents in the Belmont Park Area. 11 people attended from the surrounding community.

LIST OF PREPARERS

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**Appendix 1
Meadowood Project Plan #2
Proposed Actions
8/2009.**



