



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
MEDFORD DISTRICT OFFICE
ASHLAND RESOURCE AREA
3040 Biddle Road
Medford, Oregon 97504



FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

FOR THE

SODA MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS STEWARDSHIP PLAN

(DOI-BLM-OR-M040-2011-001-EA)

INTRODUCTION

The Soda Mountain Wilderness was added to the National Wilderness Preservation System by the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 (Public Law 111-11, March 30, 2009). Public Law 111-11 designated 24,100 acres of the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument (CSNM) as wilderness. The Soda Mountain Wilderness (SMW) is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Medford District Office. The Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Soda Mountain Wilderness Stewardship Plan (DOI-BLM-OR-M040-2011-001-EA) documented the environmental analysis conducted to estimate the site-specific effects on the human environment that may result from the implementation of the SMW Stewardship Plan. In response to public comments received during the EA review period, minor revisions were made to the Proposed Action. The Final Soda Mountain Wilderness Stewardship Plan will be posted to the Medford District BLM website (<http://www.blm.gov/or/districts/medford/plans/index.php>).

CONTEXT AND INTENSITY

The *Final SMW Stewardship Plan* provides the primary guidance for managing the resources and activities within the wilderness over the next 10 years. The plan would implement a set of site-specific actions within the SMW. These actions are designed to meet the wilderness management goals and objectives and respond to those wilderness specific issues which were identified through scoping. All actions are supplemental to and consistent with wilderness laws, regulations, and policies.

The *Final SMW Stewardship Plan* focuses on enhancing wilderness character and values through a combination of actions that would include active and passive restoration as well as providing opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation including some roads to trails conversions. Restoration activities would include culvert removals; former vehicle route recontouring; removal and restoration of water developments; and removal of selected structures, fences, cattleguards, and other evidence of human influence.

Based on the context and intensity of the impacts analyzed in the EA (pages 94-126), I have determined that my decision to implement the proposal, as described in Decision Record for the Soda Mountain Wilderness Stewardship Plan, is not a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the general area. I considered the following criteria, suggested by CEQ (40 CFR 1508.27), for evaluating intensity or severity of the impact of the implementation actions in the *Final SMW Stewardship Plan*.

The *Final SMW Stewardship Plan* will:

1. Not result in significant beneficial or adverse effects.

The EA has considered both beneficial and adverse impacts of the proposed management for the SMW. Actions to protect one element of wilderness character may result in the diminishment of another element of wilderness character. For example, the treatment of noxious weeds enhances the naturalness and primeval character of the wilderness, but may conflict with the goal of leaving the wilderness untrammelled. The proposed management focuses on preserving and enhancing wilderness character by carefully balancing between activities that may have beneficial effects to one character and adverse effects to another. The long-term outcome of the proposed management maintains or improves the wilderness resource overall.

The beneficial effects of implementing the *Final SMW Stewardship Plan* would be the overall enhancement of wilderness character. Proposed activities such as roads to trails conversions; restoration of former vehicle routes and water developments; and removal of human effects would enhance outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined recreation; undeveloped character; naturalness; and unique values of the SMW.

Adverse effects of implementing restoration activities in the *Final SMW Stewardship Plan* would include short-term negative effects to aquatic habitat (culvert removals), wilderness character (short-term human manipulation during restoration work), and terrestrial and aquatic wildlife (short-term disturbance, short duration pulses of sediment). Actions would be limited in scope and intensity and long-term benefits to wilderness character would be achieved as sediment inputs would be reduced, aquatic connectivity would improve, and visitor experience would be enhanced.

2. Not result in significant impacts on public health and safety.

No aspects of the *Final SMW Stewardship Plan* have been identified as having the potential to significantly and adversely impact public health and safety. The proposed management provides some features that enhance public health and safety. Roads to trails conversions will aid visitors in safe travel and reduce the chance of getting lost. Repairing and maintaining the water source at the former Bean Cabin site would continue to provide the only year around water source accessible along the PCNST through the wilderness. Written information provided to visitors will include safety topics. However, visiting a wilderness includes a certain amount of risk and self-reliance, and that is an important component to a wilderness experience. The proposal will make no attempt at eliminating the risk that is inherently present to a visitor in a wilderness setting.

Project design features associated with the implementation actions would be required to ensure public safety in areas of concentrated recreation use:

- Trail maintenance activities on the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (PCNST) would be temporarily signed to alert trail users.

- The reroute of the Pilot Rock Trail would be temporarily signed during trail construction activities for public safety.

3. Have no significant, adverse effects on unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

The Soda Mountain Wilderness is congressionally designated for protection as a unit of the National Wilderness Preservation System. The *Final SMW Stewardship Plan* will provide for the use and enjoyment of the area in a manner that will leave it unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness and for the preservation of its wilderness character. There are no prime farmlands, wild and scenic rivers, or parks within the SMW. There are two existing Research Natural Areas (RNAs) within the SMW.

Monitoring and project design features will be implemented during restoration work, trail maintenance, trail reroute, roads to trails conversions, trailhead development, repair and maintenance of the Bean Cabin water source, and removal of human effects to minimize the potential for adverse impacts to wilderness resources.

The *Final SMW Stewardship Plan* also preserves some structures and installations at the former Box O Ranch Complex to provide a flavor of the rural ranching lifestyle during the late 19th century until the last decade of the 20th century. Restoration activities proposed generally involve sites that have previously been disturbed (e.g., road prisms, water impoundments, etc.). Each project area would be reviewed by a BLM archeologist prior to implementation and consulted if a cultural/archeological resource is discovered as the project is implemented. No negative impacts to cultural resources are expected from this plan.

4. Not have highly controversial environmental effects.

Although the designation of wilderness is a controversial process, the management of a wilderness area, once designated, has fewer issues of controversy. No significantly controversial management issues were identified for the SMW.

The anticipated effects of implementing restoration, roads to trails conversions, developing trailheads, trail construction for the Pilot Rock Trail reroute, repair/maintenance of Bean Cabin water source, and trail maintenance, documented in the EA, are well known, consistent with the Wilderness Act and BLM wilderness regulations, and no highly controversial effects have been identified.

Public input regarding the SMW plan has been solicited during an extensive planning process initiated two years ago. The EA was released for a 45-day public review and comment period ending on November 8, 2011.

Concerns were raised about the proposed number of roads to trails conversions; the number of proposed trailheads, helispots, and water sources for fire suppression; proposed access to maintain power lines; proposed access for private property owners whose only access is through the wilderness; animal stock use in the RNAs; group size limits; preservation of some features and structures at the former Box O Ranch; and repairing and maintaining the water source at the former Bean Cabin site. Based on the number and content of the comments received from the public, the effects on the quality of the human environment are not considered highly controversial.

5. Not have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or unique or unknown environmental risks.

The analysis does not show that this action will involve any unique or unknown risks.

6. Not establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects.

The *Final SMW Stewardship Plan* neither establishes a precedent for future BLM actions with significant effects nor represents a decision in principle about a future consideration. Designation of wilderness is solely the prerogative of Congress with Presidential approval. The SMW plan was designed to be consistent with the following laws, regulation, and policy:

- The Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009, Public Law No. 111-11, Section 1405 (March 30, 2009).
- Wilderness Act of 1964.
- Code of Federal Regulations 43 Parts 6300 and 8560 (Management of Designated Wilderness Areas).
- BLM Manual 8560 (Management of Designated Wilderness Areas).
- BLM Manual 8561 (Wilderness Management Plans).
- The *Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument Record of Decision and Resource Management Plan* (USDI 2008).
- The *Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument Proposed Resource Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement* (USDI 2005).

Many of the issues resolved by this plan will be revisited in wilderness management plans prepared in the future for other wilderness areas. Though many similarities exist with other wilderness areas, and many management actions proposed here may be similar in subsequent wilderness management plans, future plans will not be guided by this plan. Future plans for other wilderness areas will be based on the site specific issues relative to those areas.

7. Not result in significant cumulative environmental effects.

Cumulative environmental effects are “the impact on the environment which results from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions” (See definition of “cumulative impact” in 40 CFR § 1508.7).

Analysis was performed at multiple scales, and included the consideration of past actions, as reflected in current conditions, current actions, and foreseeable future actions on both private and federal lands (EA, Environmental Consequences: Effects of Implementation, pages 94-126). The proposed management of the wilderness is unrelated to other actions that have been, are, or will be taking place in the area. The proposed action does not contribute significantly to the effect of any of the past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future actions within the geographic area. No significant cumulative impacts were identified.

Also refer to criteria number one above for determination of presence of significant adverse or beneficial effects that could contribute to significant cumulative effects. None were identified.

8. Have no significant effects on scientific, cultural, or historical resources, including those listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

The proposed action will not cause the loss or destruction of any significant scientific, cultural or historic resources. Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) requires federal agencies to take into account the effects of their undertakings on historic properties; those listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The former Box O Ranch Complex (the largest known cultural site within the SMW) was extensively surveyed in 2010 (USDI 2010) in order to evaluate the cultural resources at this site. The BLM survey results indicated that none of the structures, features, or elements of the former Box O Ranch Complex met any of the four criteria for eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. In view of the considerations noted in the Cultural Resource Survey of the Box O Ranch (USDI 2010), the BLM recommended the former Box O Ranch Complex (BLM Site #OR110-1584) as not eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The report was sent to Oregon State Historic Preservation Office for review. They concurred with BLM's recommendation.

Potential impacts to cultural sites in the SMW include direct and indirect damage from pedestrian traffic, vandalism, removal of artifacts, and unauthorized excavations. Restoration activities proposed under the *Final SMW Stewardship Plan* generally involve sites that have previously been disturbed (e.g., road prisms, water impoundments, etc.). Each project area would be reviewed by a BLM archeologist prior to implementation and consulted if a cultural/archeological resource is discovered as the project is implemented. No negative impacts to cultural resources are expected from this plan.

9. Have no adverse effects on species listed or proposed to be listed as Federally Endangered or Threatened Species, or have adverse effects on designated critical habitat for these species.

Ground-disturbing activities identified in the wilderness plan include: trail construction, maintenance, and restoration; construction of trailheads; removal of human-made structures and effects; restoration actions; repair and maintenance actions; and fire suppression and rehabilitation actions. Project areas where ground-disturbing activities are proposed would be surveyed prior to beginning work to identify listed or sensitive plant or animal species. Where proposed projects would endanger any of these species, mitigation actions would be included to redesign the project or cancel the action.

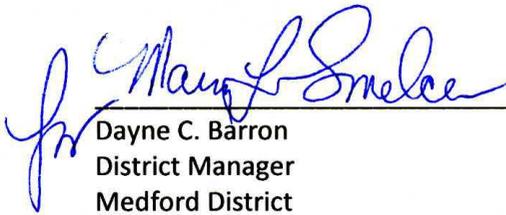
There are no federally designated threatened or endangered fish species in the SMW. As such, there is no designated critical habitat. It is expected that the actions proposed in the SMW plan and the associated impacts would have no effect on *Fritillaria gentneri* (Gentner's fritillary), *Strix occidentalis caurina* (northern spotted owl), *Martes pennant* (Pacific fisher), or *Rana pretiosa* (Oregon spotted frog) and will not trend any special status species towards listing under the ESA. All disturbing activities would be subject to seasonal and spatial restrictions to protect northern spotted owl and other known raptor sites.

10. Not Violate a Federal, State, Local, or Tribal law, regulation or policy imposed for the protection of the environment.

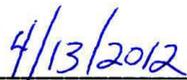
Through analysis documented in the EA, the BLM has determined that with implementation of required project design features, the proposed implementation actions would not threaten a violation of any federal, state, or local environmental protection laws.

FINDING

Based on a review of the EA and supporting documents, I have determined that the actions in the Final Soda Mountain Wilderness Stewardship Plan do not constitute a major federal action and will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the general area. No environmental effects meet the definition of significance in context or intensity, as defined at 40 CFR 1508.27 and the analysis of effects documented in the EA has been completed within the context of multiple spatial and temporal scales and within the context of the 2008 *Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument Record of Decision and Resource Management Plan* and associated *Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument Proposed Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement* (2005). The anticipated effects are within the scope, type, and magnitude of effects anticipated and analyzed in those plans. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not necessary and will not be prepared.



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Medford District
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Date