

Finding of No Significant Impact
Priest Hole Site Plan DOI-BLM-OR-P040-2011-0022-EA
US Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management
Prineville Field Office, Oregon

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has completed an Environmental Assessment (EA), No. DOI-BLM-OR-P040-2011-0022-EA that analyzes the effects of three action alternatives to improve camping and day use opportunities, improve water quality, and improve neotropical bird breeding habitat conditions and deer and elk forage in the Priest Hole area. The EA is incorporated by reference in this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI).

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations state that the significance of impacts must be determined in terms of both context and intensity (40 CFR 1508.27).

Context

The Priest Hole area is in a stretch of the John Day River designated Wild & Scenic for values including recreation, scenery, fish and wildlife. The BLM is obligated to protect these “outstandingly remarkable values” (ORV).

The area is popular for recreation activities including camping, fishing, boating, floating, hiking, sightseeing, wildlife viewing and hunting. However, there are no campsite amenities (e.g., parking pads, picnic tables), no hiking trails, and no boat ramp. Litter (trash and human waste) along the river banks is sometimes prevalent enough to affect the quality of the recreation experience. Scenery or visual resource values are an important part of the quality recreational experience in the area.

Water quality in this segment of the John Day River is compromised by low flows. There are two fields covering about 70 acres on BLM managed public land in the Priest Hole area. For the past 20 years or more, these fields have been planted with alfalfa or row crops, flood irrigated through the summer, and commercially harvested in the fall. Fertilizer and pesticide runoff from these fields can affect water quality in the adjacent John Day River. Low water flows in the river during the summer also contribute to reduced water quality.

The area is important for wildlife. Concentrated human activity along the river is impacting riparian vegetation important to neotropical birds. Habitat for these birds has been declining across their range, making the remaining areas more important. Mule deer and elk frequent the area, and have benefitted from the high protein forage available in the irrigated fields.

Intensity

I have considered the potential intensity and severity of the impacts anticipated from implementation of a Decision on this EA relative to each of the ten areas suggested for consideration by the CEQ. With regard to each:

1. Would any of the alternatives have significant beneficial or adverse impacts (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(1))? No.

Rationale: None of the effects are potentially significant. Benefits of the proposed action (Alternative 3 effects analysis, Chapter 3 of EA) include increased recreation opportunities (campsites with amenities, upgrades to the boat launch, and hiking trails); increased high nutrition forage for deer and elk; improved neotropical bird habitat; and increased instream water.

2. Would any of the alternatives have significant adverse impacts on public health and safety (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(2))? No.

Rationale: The only potential impact on public health and safety is from human waste near campsites. The adverse impact is greatest in Alternative 1, which does not include a new vault toilet. Even in this alternative the effects are not expected to be significant. A summary of Alternatives is presented in Table 1 in the EA.

3. Would any of the alternatives have significant adverse impacts on unique geographic characteristics (cultural or historic resources, park lands, prime and unique farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, designated wilderness or wilderness study areas, or ecologically critical areas (ACECs, RNAs, significant caves)) (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(3))? No.

Rationale: The project area is in a Wild and Scenic River corridor and a State Scenic Waterway; the alternatives have been designed to protect and enhance these river values. There is a potential cultural resource site in the vicinity of the project, but the project includes design features (Chapter 2 of EA) that ensure no impacts to the site. The area includes irrigated fields, but no prime or unique farmlands. There are no wetlands, wilderness, wilderness study areas, or ecologically critical areas within or near the project area that would be affected by the proposed action or any other alternative.

4. Would any of the alternatives have highly controversial effects (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(4))? No.

Rationale: The limit on vehicle access on roads leading to the riparian areas is likely to be controversial (some would like to continue to have access), but the effects of vehicle use on vegetation, and the subsequent effects of vegetation loss on neotropical birds, are not controversial. The analysis of effects on neotropical birds is in Chapter 3 of the EA,

“Neotropical migratory birds use these areas for raising young in the spring and summer, after which they migrate south for the fall and winter months. Sixty percent of migratory birds in the northwest use riparian areas for breeding or stop overs during migration

(Cooke and Zack, 2009). Additionally, these habitats are of value because loss of riparian habitat has been noted as the primary factor for declines in many landbirds (Cooke and Zack, 2009). Structural complexity of riparian areas is positively correlated with species richness and abundance (Altman and Holmes, 2000; Cooke and Zack 2009). Factors contributing to this complexity include width, height, and connectivity / fragmentation of the riparian corridor. Ideal habitat would have a large width and height and low fragmentation. Although there are 1.5 miles of riverine riparian habitat in the project area, disturbance by human activity on about ½ mile of this habitat has caused plant mortality. As a result, the habitat is fragmented and increasingly narrow, and no longer optimum habitat. Degradation to the plant community has been primarily caused by motorized vehicles, tent pads, and beach and trail creation.” – page 18 of EA.

5. Would any of the alternatives have highly uncertain effects or involve unique or unknown risks (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(5)? No.

Rationale: There are no uncertain effects or unique or unknown risks associated with this project. All effects are described in Chapter 3 of the EA.

6. Would any of the alternatives establish a precedent for future actions with significant impacts (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(6)? No.

Rationale: The proposed actions (including installing a toilet and campsites, closing roads, creating hiking trails, and phasing out commercial agriculture) and actions in other alternatives are common on public land, and would not set a precedent for future actions with significant impacts.

7. Are any of the alternatives related to other actions with potentially significant cumulative impacts (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(7)? No.

Rationale: The proposed action and actions in the other alternatives are not related to other actions. There are no potentially significant cumulative impacts, as described in Chapter 3 of the EA.

8. Would any of the alternatives have significant adverse impacts on scientific, cultural, or historic resources, including those listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Resources (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(8)?

Rationale: There are cultural resources in the project area, but the proposed action and alternatives include design features to prevent effects on these resources. There are no scientific or historic resources therefore there are no effects on them.

9. Would any of the alternatives have significant adverse impacts on threatened or endangered species or their critical habitat (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(9)?

Rationale: The proposed action and alternatives would have no effect on threatened or endangered species.

10. Would any of the alternatives have effects that threaten to violate Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(10)? No.

Rationale: None of the alternatives would have effects that threaten to violate any laws.

Finding

On the basis of the information contained in the EA, the consideration of intensity factors described above, all other information available to me, it is my determination that: (1) implementation of the alternatives would not have significant environmental impacts beyond those already addressed in the Two Rivers Resource Management Plan EIS; (2) the alternatives are in conformance with the Two Rivers Resource Management Plan; and (3) none of the alternatives would constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, an EIS or a supplement to the existing EIS is not necessary and will not be prepared.

***An unsigned FONSI is issued during the EA comment period.
The FONSI will be signed after the EA comment period and issued with the Decision Record.***

H.F. "Chip" Faver

Date

Field Manager, Central Oregon Resource Area