

Prineville District Priest Hole Site Plan – Frequently Asked Questions

Why are you proposing to do anything in this area?

We have received complaints from the public and from our recreation maintenance staff regarding human waste in the Priest Hole area for many years, with indications that the problem is increasing as use increases.

Currently, the area is popular for recreation activities including camping, fishing, boating, floating, hiking, sightseeing, wildlife viewing and hunting; however, there are few campsite amenities (e.g., parking pads, picnic tables) and no hiking trails. Based on information provided by our recreation staff, use is increasing and issues are becoming more common.

We also have more litter – our staff have removed more than 2,000 pounds of trash during the peak season (approximately 6 week period) from a variety of sources. We remove household trash, tires, camping related trash and other debris. Without the service provided by our recreation maintenance staff, the trash would noticeably accumulate – affecting everyone’s enjoyment of the area. In addition, as reported to the BLM by members of the public and the county, all of the waste impacts the water quality on this stretch of the John Day River where people raft and play in the water. When the waste is near water it can impact swimmers and water quality.

BLM has also received complaints about access/camping conflicts. Users report difficulty removing day-float gear because the take-out site is blocked by campers.

From a federal management level, the Priest Hole area is in a stretch of the John Day River Congressionally-designated Wild & Scenic for values including recreation, scenery, and fish and wildlife habitat. In particular, the vegetation along the river supports a high number of wildlife including neo-tropical breeding birds. The BLM is obligated to protect these "outstandingly remarkable values" of the river.

Why are you proposing changes to the agricultural fields?

In 2001, the John Day River Plan eliminated commercial agriculture on these fields. Although a local landowner has worked with the BLM to have a mutually beneficial agreement that allows the landowner a commercial crop in exchange for planting a wildlife cover crop, this EA now implements the decision in the John Day River Plan to end commercial agriculture. At the current rate of harvest, this agreement no longer meets the needs of the landowner. Depending on the decision in the EA, a volunteer group, Oregon Hunters’ Association, may partner with the BLM to continue planting the area with plants beneficial to wildlife and assisting with limited irrigation.

Removing or reducing the irrigation on these fields can help water quality. Water quality in this segment of the John Day River is impacted by seasonal “low flows,” and more than 95,000 cubic feet per second are withdrawn throughout the mainstem of the John Day for irrigation; BLM irrigates two fields totaling 70 acres on BLM-managed public land in the Priest Hole area. Currently, this section of the river fails to meet state water quality standards for temperature and returning irrigation water to the river can help lower the temperature of the water, in turn, improving habitat for steelhead and other fish and reducing the potential for algal blooms. These blooms can be toxic and have closed Priest Hole in the past and caused the death of a dog.



For the past 20 years or more, the fields have been planted with alfalfa or row crops, flood irrigated through the summer, and commercially harvested in the fall. Fertilizer runoff from these fields can also affect water quality in the John Day River and promote the types of algal blooms described above.

What's in the EA?

The Proposed Action in the Priest Hole Site Plan EA considers the following options:

- Installing camping facilities, a parking area, campsites, and a vault toilet.
- Permanently closing about two miles of road, and convert about ¾ mile of closed road to hiking/biking/equestrian trail.
- Implementing a 2001 John Day River Plan decision to convert two fields (70 acres total) currently used for commercial agriculture to wildlife food and cover plots; periodically replanting these fields.
- Switching from the existing flood irrigation on the two fields to a more efficient sprinkler irrigation system; and,
- Planting up to 100 acres of grass, shrubs and/or trees in areas damaged by off road vehicle use or otherwise susceptible to weed invasion, and for shade around proposed campsites.

What changes are proposed for camping?

Proposed changes for camping in the EA range from “no change” (continue the way it is) to installing up to 15 designated dispersed campsites and planting shade trees around the campsites.

Are you going to charge a fee for camping?

There are no fees currently for this area, and this EA does not address fees for camping in either dispersed sites.

Are you proposing to close motorized access to the gravel bar?

In Alternatives 1 – 3, people would be able to drive to the river's edge on the northeast side of the Priest Hole field. One option would limit access to the gravel bar to non-motorized camping only.

Why are you proposing to build campsites away from the river?

Some options in the EA would limit motorized access to dispersed camping along the river, and in some alternatives, walk-in camping in along the river is allowed. Camping would still be available at Priest Hole and in the (up to) 15 new sites that will be located in various locations around the fields, including sites within 500 feet of the river. The goal is to keep access clear for watercraft pick-up and drop-off and to protect important riparian habitat along the river.

Are you going to be putting in an RV park?

There are no plans to establish an RV park. While RVs can use dispersed sites in this area, they would be required to dry camp.

Why would you decide to establish a concentrated campground?

If BLM selects an alternative to construct campsites, the details and design of the campsites still have to be worked out. However, campsites would be placed and designed to avoid critical resources and improve access and traffic flow. The sites would be placed around the fields in a dispersed manner, as close to the river as possible, while staying outside of the flood plain and riparian areas.



How will you manage vehicles and use during the busy season?

The EA looks at alternatives to manage camping and vehicle access. Vehicle use could be prohibited on the spur road west of the west end of the Priest Hole field, except for watercraft pick-up and drop-off. This alternative was developed in response to complaints that campers sometimes block the take-out spot. In Alternatives 2 & 3, BLM proposes adding a parking lot and vault toilet on the west end of the Priest Hole field to help manage access.

What changes are being proposed for the Priest Hole agricultural fields?

Some changes vary by alternative, and here's a quick summary:

Alternative 2 - Irrigation would be phased out within five years, and the 70 acres currently planted would be changed from alfalfa to a mix of plants that would not need irrigation after establishment. Flood irrigation might be changed to sprinkler irrigation; although the irrigation equipment would be removed after the plants are established.

Alternatives 3 & 4 – Irrigation would switch from flood to sprinkler irrigation, and the two fields would switch from commercial crops to vegetation designed to benefit wildlife. Up to 45 acres total in the two fields would be irrigated in the long term to water plants (possibly alfalfa) designed to benefit wildlife including wintering deer and elk. The other acres would be planted to vegetation that wouldn't need irrigation once established or will be the previous year's planted crop left fallow for wildlife cover.

What will changes to the commercial agriculture affect the economy?

Agriculture lands on BLM-administered lands in Wheeler County account for less than 150 acres of available agricultural land and make up less than 1.5 percent of the county's available crop land. BLM does not believe that removal of these acres will impact the economy of Wheeler county, particularly since discussions with the current operator indicate that planting this area is not commercially viable under the current two-harvest system (minimum 3 harvests would be needed). The county will continue to receive payment in lieu of taxes (PILT) for the acres.

What will the benefit be to the local community?

Depending on the alternative selected, local sources could be used for materials and maintenance. Local garbage service is often the most cost effective due to travel costs. Labor and equipment to construct the parking area, rehabilitate sites and install a new CX Toilet (CXT) would likely come from BLM employees and maintenance staff. Many items, such as a CXT are not available in the local community.



Example of human waste removed from 1 visit to Priest Hole