

**SIMILKAMEEN TRAIL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT  
DOI-BLM-OR134-2009-EA-0023**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Okanogan County and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) propose to create a 3.5-mile non-motorized recreation trail (Similkameen River Trail) parallel to the Similkameen River along the discontinued historic Great Northern Railroad right-of-way between Oroville and Enloe Dam in northern Okanogan County, Washington. This 3.5-mile trail segment is part of a larger Okanogan County proposal to connect the towns of Oroville and Nighthawk, Washington via a 12.5-mile trail. However, as described in the Background section, funding and easements for the entire trail have not yet been acquired; at this time, the county and the BLM are proceeding with the design, planning, and environmental review of the 3.5-mile segment only.

Of the total 3.5 miles proposed, approximately 1.7 miles would be located on BLM-managed lands administered by the BLM's Wenatchee Field Office. Without the 1.7-mile segment crossing BLM lands, the county would not pursue the remaining 1.8 miles at this time. For the purposes of environmental review, the 1.8 miles of trail located on non-federal lands is considered to be a connected action to the 1.7-mile trail segment located on BLM land. Therefore, an environmental review of the entire 3.5-mile proposal under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is required. Additionally, Okanogan County is required to review the proposal under the Washington State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA). As defined by a 2008 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), Okanogan County Planning and the BLM are acting as co-lead agencies for purposes of these environmental reviews.

For analysis purposes, the project area is limited to the immediate 3.5-mile trail corridor, including the trailbed itself. The legal description of the immediate vicinity of the proposed improvements is: T40N, R27E, Secs. 19, 20, 28, 29 and T40N, R26E, Sec. 13.

**BACKGROUND**

Just west of Oroville, the abandoned Great Northern Railroad right-of-way passes through the scenic Similkameen Gorge. When the rail line was discontinued in 1985, various local groups and agencies including Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), the Oroville chapter of the Pacific Northwest Trail Association, the Okanogan Chapter of the Backcountry Horsemen, and the City of Oroville considered creating a trail along the abandoned rail route.

A portion of the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail (PNT), a 1,200-mile hiking trail running from the Continental Divide in Montana to the Pacific Coast of Washington's Olympic Peninsula, crosses Okanogan County at the City of Oroville. The current PNT alignment is located along an existing county road from Oroville to Nighthawk. The proposed action would relocate the PNT from the county road to the abandoned railroad grade along the south side of the Similkameen River.

In 2005, Okanogan County obtained grant funding to acquire property (or easements) to begin construction of a non-motorized recreational trail from the City of Oroville to the unincorporated village of Nighthawk. The entire trail, as proposed, would be approximately 12.5 miles in length and would largely follow the bed of the abandoned Great Northern Railroad along the Similkameen River. Because negotiations with the property owners from the tunnel at Shanker's Bend to Nighthawk have been unsuccessful to date, the project has been divided into several phases.

Phase 1, the subject of this Environmental Assessment, includes the area extending west approximately 3.5 miles from Oroville to a proposed viewpoint (or overlook) located east of Enloe Dam. At this time Okanogan County has an agreement with the Public Utilities District (PUD) to stop Phase 1 below the PUD's Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) project area. Subsequent phases would continue the trail from Enloe Dam to Nighthawk. Completion of additional phases will depend on securing future funding sources.

In 2010, one-half mile of trail was developed on the perimeter of an adjacent landowner's property (Taber) to decrease trespassing that was occurring through Taber's Vineyard. The trail was rerouted at the property line railroad right-of-way, skirted the perimeter of Taber's property, and merged with Loomis-Oroville county road to the site of a future trailhead location. Taber has provided Okanogan County with an easement on his property for this future trailhead development. At this junction, the trail construction descended to the railroad right-of-way at the girder bridge and connected back to the abandoned railroad.

In addition to the one-half mile of trail construction, the Similkameen River Railroad Bridge (girder bridge), originally reconstructed in 1952, was converted from a single-track railroad bridge to a non-motorized trail bridge in the fall of 2009. The railroad ties were removed and replaced with a reinforced concrete surface that supports AASHTP HS-20 vehicle loads for emergency vehicle access. Dark-colored chain link fencing was also installed along both sides of the length of the bridge as a safety feature and fence railings were erected just beyond the bridge along an existing concrete barrier that presented a hazard to trail users. The bridge is 375-ft. long and is 86-ft. above the surface of the Similkameen River. Okanogan County has an easement and agreement with Okanogan County PUD #1 for use of the bridge and their portion of the trail upriver from the bridge (approximately 1,380-ft.).

### **SUMMARY OF THE PROPOSED ACTION**

Although the entire Similkameen River Trail would ultimately encompass approximately 12.5 miles, the BLM's Proposed Action is limited to the 3.5 miles of trail proposed under Phase 1. Of the total 3.5 miles included under Phase 1, approximately 1.7 miles are located on BLM managed lands within the Similkameen Gorge. The BLM proposes various trail and facility improvements including, but not limited to, trailbed hardening and trail maintenance, improved signage, emergency access points, wayside benches, and interpretive exhibits. The proposed action would relocate the PNT from the county road to the abandoned railroad grade along the south side of the Similkameen River as a safe-travel non-motorized trail, improving the overall experience for non-motorized recreationists. Additionally, further trail development and maintenance would occur on the remaining 3.5-mile segment as well as developing a trailhead and installing interpretive exhibits and park benches. (The Proposed Action Alternative is described in detail below.)

## **PURPOSE AND NEED**

Currently, comparable recreation opportunities are nonexistent in proximity of the population centers in northern Okanogan County. The BLM's proposed action is needed to provide valuable recreation infrastructure to both Okanogan County residents and visitors as well as to provide an important trail segment and link for subsequent phases of trail development.

Additionally, undesirable conditions and/or issues that exist or have occurred in the project area include open campfires, littering, vandalism, wildlife violations, graffiti, unpermitted hydraulic violations, unpermitted mining violations, trespassing, noxious weeds, and illegal dumping. The project is intended to help curtail these unauthorized uses in this area.

Ultimately, the purpose of the BLM's action is to:

- Create new recreation opportunities, including Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) access
- Improve overall recreation experience
- Manage current and future recreation use at the site
- Provide facilities to support current and anticipated increased recreational use
- Provide outreach and education to the public on the cultural and natural resources of the area.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

During the internal and public scoping process, the following issues related to the proposed action were identified. These issues were considered in defining the purpose and need, development of alternatives, and to focus the environmental analysis.

1. Existing facilities are not sufficient to support current or anticipated future recreational use, which may threaten natural resources including riparian vegetation, wildlife, and geological resources, as well as cultural resources.
2. Concerns for future funding for trail construction and maintenance and operation of trail and trailheads, particularly in current economic times. For example, the Oroville trailhead: lighting, hours, facilities, maintenance, and enforcement.
3. Concerns for trespassing on adjacent private property, spread of noxious weeds, fire risk, and water sources on range land. There is also concern for livestock grazing to become unfeasible because of public access since it may conflict with recreational experience of visitors.
4. Ability for law enforcement to patrol trailheads and the trail for safety. In addition, there is safety concern from private landowners on liability where easements cross their property or in the event of unintentional trespassing and someone gets hurt.
5. Concern for water quality with discharge of storm water runoff and if the road bed is disturbed by installing culverts then toxic material could enter the river.
6. Cultural resource surveys and consultation in regards to research methods, findings, and potential mitigation strategies need to be completed. Seek tribal input during the planning stages for any interpretative signs that may be placed along the trail.
7. Consider protection of rare plants and high quality native wetland and terrestrial ecosystems.

8. 24-hour public access to Enloe Dam construction site (during construction) for security and vandalism problems. There is a need for the girder bridge to be able to provide access for heavy loads.

### **LAND USE PLAN CONFORMANCE**

The Proposed Action is in conformance with the Record of Decision for the 1987 Spokane District Resource Management Plan (RMP) and the Spokane RMP Amendment (1992). The Proposed Action would advance one of the general management objectives of the RMP (1987): “Manage public lands and keep access routes open for a variety of recreational opportunities/experiences, including motorized and non-motorized recreation activities.”

The proposed project is consistent with the Okanogan County Comprehensive Plan (currently under revision) and underlying zoning, the goals and objectives of the county recreation plan (2005), and is identified as a project in the Capital Facilities Plan adopted by Resolution 047-2004.

### **ALTERNATIVES**

Two alternatives were considered: Alternative 1 (Proposed Action) and Alternative 2 (No Action). A description of each alternative is provided below.

#### **Alternative 1 – Proposed Action**

The Phase 1 Proposed Action extends west approximately 3.5 miles from Oroville to a proposed viewpoint (or overlook) east of Enloe Dam. Of the total 3.5 miles of trail included under Phase I, approximately 1.7 miles are located on BLM managed lands. However, unless otherwise noted, the following Proposed Action description applies to the entire 3.5-mile trail corridor.

The Proposed Action would relocate the PNT off the Oroville-Loomis county road and onto the nearby abandoned railroad grade as a safe-travel non-motorized trail. The Proposed Action also includes various trail and recreational improvements such as trailheads, interpretive signing, and overlooks.

#### *Trail, Trailbed, and Trail Routing Activities*

On the existing railroad right-of-way, the trailbed would be hardened with 2-3-inches of decomposed granite or other comparable surface material which would be graded and compacted to meet ADA guidelines and standards. Trail width would vary from 8 to 10 feet on the trailbed to allow safe travel for emergency access vehicles.

Culverts on drainages along this 3.5-mile segment of trail are adequate and would not be improved at this time; however, ongoing maintenance and/or future replacement of culverts may be necessary.

#### *Trail Management on BLM Lands*

Currently, dispersed camping occurs on BLM managed lands in the project area. However, under the Proposed Action, camping and campfires on the trailbed itself would be prohibited. Additionally, for the safety of visitors along the trail, shooting and hunting on the trailbed itself would be prohibited.

Access to the trail would be limited to non-motorized uses during daylight hours only. Motorized vehicles would be prohibited in the trail corridor except for emergency or administrative access.

#### *Recreation Facilities on BLM Lands*

At the west end, where Phase 1 ends, a short spur trail would lead hikers off of the railroad right-of-way to a view point of Enloe Dam and Similkameen Falls. This junction would include a gate, limited fencing, and signage to stop trail users from accessing the railroad right-of-way beyond this point until subsequent project phases are completed. This site would still allow for a spectacular view of the dam and falls. The trail provides several other overlook opportunities but the terrain is such that railings and barriers beyond those described above are not anticipated to be necessary.

Interpretation is a primary focus of the proposed trail project. Okanogan County, Borderlands Historical Society, Oroville High School, and the Colville Confederated Tribes have expressed interest in developing panels depicting historic interests through photos and text. The panels would be displayed at multiple locations along the trail. Other interpretive and educational opportunities also exist in the project area.

Other recreation facility improvements would include the installation of benches along the trail and informational and directional signage.

#### *Other Phase I Improvements on non-BLM Lands*

Phase 1 of the Proposed Action includes construction of a trailhead (with vault toilet, picnic facilities and equestrian vehicle parking area) within the Oroville City limits which would include an information kiosk. A second parking area would be located two miles east of Oroville near the girder bridge and Taber's Vineyard, with access from the Loomis-Oroville county road.

#### *Implementation and Ongoing Maintenance*

Okanogan County completed Phase 1 improvements for the railroad bridge and Taber Vineyard trail re-route in 2009 and 2010. It is anticipated that construction of Phase 1 improvements on BLM managed lands would be completed by fall of 2011. Additional phases would be completed as funding and easements are acquired.

In the future, ongoing maintenance of the trail and improvements would consist of activities such as clearing the trail of overgrown vegetation, replacing signs, ensuring the trail is maintained to tread standards, picking up litter, and treating weeds. These actions would be carried out by BLM, Okanogan County, and various volunteer groups.

#### *Project Design Features*

If historically significant resources, traditional cultural properties or sacred areas cannot be avoided, consultation with the Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (DAHP) and tribes would be conducted to identify appropriate measures for mitigation of adverse effects to historic properties.

If significant cultural or paleontological resources are located during project implementation, the disturbing activity will be halted and a BLM archaeologist will be notified for appropriate action. If

the project cannot be redesigned to avoid the resource, it will be evaluated and mitigation will be conducted in consultation with DAHP, consulting tribes, and other interested parties.

The proposed trail would be built on an existing rail bed. Any new construction activities would occur away from the river shoreline or well above the river. Silt screens would be used during construction to minimize the potential for sediment to enter the river during runoff events.

Construction activities would occur in summer and fall to minimize effects to overwintering birds and bald eagles as much as possible.

#### *Subsequent Phases*

It is anticipated the remainder of the trail or additional improvements would be completed in subsequent phases as additional funding is secured. Future improvements would be subject to site-specific environmental review prior to implementation.

#### **Alternative 2 – No Action**

Under the No Action Alternative, the BLM would make no improvements on the 1.7-mile segment of trail on the abandoned railroad bed that crosses BLM-managed lands. No change in the level or type of recreational services, facilities, or maintenance would be provided. In addition, no new signing or educational information would be provided.

## **AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES**

### **ASSUMPTIONS**

It is anticipated that improving the trail, trailhead, and constructing the new trail on the Taber property would improve public access and increase the public's use of the trail corridor. The following analysis is based on the assumption that the number of people using the trail would increase if Alternative 1 (Proposed Action) is implemented.

It is assumed that Alternative 2 (No Action) would not trigger any new or expanded effort to restrict access to the area of proposed phase 1. This analysis then assumes current level of usage would increase over time.

### **WATER QUALITY**

#### **Affected Environment**

The Department of Ecology monitors Similkameen River water quality from a station at Oroville's 12th Street bridge. Overall water quality at this station is listed as being of moderate concern. Similkameen River water quality is heavily influenced by runoff periods when large amounts of suspended solids are carried downstream.

Pre-construction baseline samples below Enloe Dam included one site that exceeded the CCT criteria for arsenic and copper, at the most-upstream of the sampling locations below the dam. These trace metals are understood to have entered the Similkameen River from mining operations upstream in the watershed and they have been transported through the general project area for many decades by river flows.

## **Environmental Consequences**

### Direct and Indirect Effects

Under the Proposed Action alternative, which would likely result in increased recreation use, development of trailheads and installation of vault toilets, would have a negligible or no effect to the water quality of the Similkameen River. The hardened trail bed would better withstand increased recreational use and would subsequently diminish the potential for increased sedimentation. The proposed silt screens would limit the potential for direct effects to water quality during construction.

Under the No Action alternative, no measurable impacts to water quality are expected to occur.

### Cumulative Effects

Given the limited potential for direct or indirect effects under either of the alternatives, cumulative effects to water quality as a result of this project are unlikely in the Similkameen River corridor.

## **RIPARIAN HABITAT AND FISHERIES**

### ***Affected Environment***

The Similkameen River is designated a water of the state. Several anadromous fish species (those which spawn in freshwater and migrate to salt water as part of their life cycle) and resident fish species (which complete their life cycle in fresh water) are found in the Similkameen River, including sections below Enloe Dam.

Native anadromous fish species include Chinook salmon, sockeye salmon, and summer steelhead trout. Native resident species found in the Similkameen River in the vicinity of the project include chiselmouth, peamouth, rainbow trout, suckers, sculpins, whitefish, longnose dace, burbot, and northern pikeminnow. In addition to native fish species, a number of introduced (non-native) species occur in the project vicinity including large and small mouth bass, crappie, perch and carp (IEC Beak 1984, Public Utility District No. 1 of Okanogan County 1991, ENTRIX 2007a, WDFW 2005b).

From its beginning in Oroville, the proposed Similkameen River Trail follows the river canyon for 12.5 miles to Nighthawk. The trail is located above the river and, in most areas, is removed from the river by 100' or more at an elevation above the river that varies from 30' in Oroville to more than 80' in the Similkameen Canyon. Three existing unimproved shoreline access trails have been identified in Phase 1.

### ***Environmental Consequences***

#### Direct and Indirect Effects

Under the Proposed Action alternative, it is anticipated that trail users and fishermen would seek access to the shoreline below the trail. Some riparian vegetation may be disturbed in the immediate vicinity of these existing access points because of increased use. As river access points are limited by the steep cutbank, the creation of additional access points is not expected. Due to confined

nature of these existing access points, these limited impacts to riparian vegetation are not expected to result in measurable impacts to fish habitat.

Under the No Action Alternative, riparian vegetation surrounding existing informal access points would continue to be disturbed.

#### Cumulative Effects

Given the limited potential for direct or indirect effects under either of the alternatives, cumulative effects to riparian habitat and fisheries as a result of this project are unlikely in the Similkameen River corridor.

### **VEGETATION / SPECIAL STATUS PLANT SPECIES**

#### ***Affected Environment***

The Project Area is located in the Similkameen River valley, within the Okanogan Highlands Province (Franklin and Dryness, 1988). This valley is a transitional zone between the Cascade Mountains to the west and the Okanogan Highlands to the east. Columbia Basin steppe vegetation reaches its northernmost extent in this valley. The existing vegetation is a complex mosaic of three steppe vegetation units, including the big sagebrush/bluebunch wheatgrass association, the bitterbrush/Idaho fescue community, and the threetip sagebrush/Idaho fescue community (Franklin and Dryness, 1988). Soil, slope, aspect, topography, fire, and grazing practices influence the distribution of these communities within the valley.

Previous botanical studies in the vicinity of the Project Area include a vegetation mapping study conducted along the Similkameen River in 1984 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and vegetation studies conducted for the 1991 Enloe Dam license application (Okanogan County Public Utility District, 1991). Additional vegetation mapping and riparian vegetation studies were conducted for the PUD in 2006. The 2006 studies were completed in consultation with state and federal agencies responsible for the management of terrestrial biological resources in the Similkameen River (Okanogan County PUD 2008).

#### Sensitive Species

One special-status plant species, Ute ladies'-tresses (*Spiranthes diluvialis*), was identified as potentially occurring in the Project Area vicinity.

An additional special-status plant species, Snake River cryptantha (*Cryptantha spiculifera*), has since been documented in the Similkameen watershed.

#### ***Ute Ladies'-tresses***

Ute ladies'-tresses is federally listed as threatened (FR 1992) and is state-listed as endangered (WNHP 2006). Having received information that supported the delisting of this species, USFWS initiated a status review in 2004 (FR 2004). This review has been completed (Fertig et al. 2005), however, USFWS has not yet issued a determination on that review.

This species is a perennial terrestrial orchid that flowers from mid-July through August in Washington (WNHP 2005). It is found in early to mid-seral vegetation in wet meadows, stream or

river banks, irrigated hay meadows, and wetlands associated with wet meadows, springs, streams, lakes, irrigation ditches, and reclaimed gravel and peat mines (Fertig et al. 2005).

No individuals of Ute ladies'-tresses have been recorded in the project area.

#### *Snake River Cryptantha*

Snake River cryptantha is a State Sensitive species. This cryptantha is a perennial that is recognizable from May to July. It is found on dry, open, flat or sloping areas, generally in relatively unvegetated areas in stable or stony soils (WDNR 2000).

No occurrences of this species have been recorded in the project area.

### ***Environmental Consequences***

#### Direct and Indirect Effects

Under the Proposed Action Alternative, Phase 1 construction would be limited to the existing railroad bed with the exception of a view point to be created at the end of the project area on BLM land (0.5 acres or area of native habitat would be converted to accommodate the viewpoint). Minor disturbance to vegetation by foot, bike, and equestrian traffic, would likely increase in the vicinity of the trail. Vegetation would be maintained at a safe distance from the trail tread for safe user travel (e.g., cutting back of branches, limbing, etc.). Minor disturbance would occur within the trail corridor with the installation of benches and interpretive exhibit mounting stands.

No sensitive plant species have been identified in the project area and therefore no adverse effects are anticipated.

Under the No Action alternative, the vegetation would continue to experience disturbance from ongoing uses, such as grazing, and increasing recreation visitation. However, as noted above, no sensitive plant species have been identified in the project area and therefore no adverse effects are anticipated as a result of the No Action Alternative.

#### Cumulative Effects

Given the limited potential for direct or indirect effects under either of the alternatives, cumulative effects to vegetation as a result of this project are unlikely in the Similkameen River corridor. Because no sensitive plant species have been identified in the immediate project area, this project would have no incremental contribution to cumulative effects on sensitive plant species in the area.

### **WILDLIFE / SPECIAL STATUS WILDLIFE SPECIES**

#### ***Affected Environment***

The project area is inhabited by a variety of general wildlife species, most of which are of interest to visitors to the Project Area. Recreational use occurs throughout the year, and is highest in the spring through fall. Hunting is restricted to the fall and winter. Game species include mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), waterfowl, and upland game birds such as California quail (*Callipepla californica*) and the introduced chukar partridge (*Alectoris chukar*).

The reservoir west of the project area supports waterfowl, aquatic furbearers, and amphibians. Prominent waterfowl include mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*), common mergansers (*Mergus merganser*), and scaups (*Aythya marilla*, *A. affinis*). Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*) are resident in the project vicinity and small numbers may nest along the water in the Project Area. Beaver (*Castor canadensis*) are the most prevalent aquatic furbearer, feeding primarily on willow found in the riparian shrub and tree habitats bordering the reservoir.

Amphibian observations have not been reported in the project area, but they are likely present along the reservoir and river. Amphibian species that may be present in the project vicinity include Pacific tree frog (*Pseudacris regilla*), Columbia spotted frog (*Rana luteiventris*) and western toad (*Anaxyrus boreas*).

Riparian habitat, generally recognized as having a high diversity of wildlife species, supports a number of song birds best represented by the western flycatcher (*Empidonax difficilis*), eastern king bird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*), American robin (*Turdus migratorius*), Bullock's oriole (*Icterus bullockii*), cedar waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*), and various species of warblers, sparrows, and woodpeckers. The upland area contains habitats dominated by sagebrush, bitterbrush, service berry, and rock outcrops, which support mule deer, yellow-bellied marmot (*Marmota flaviventris*), black-billed magpie (*Pica pica*), and ground-nesting species such as chukar partridge and California quail.

Townsend's big-eared bats (*Plecotus townsendii*) are abundant in steppe and a variety of forest types, chiefly at low or sometimes mid-elevation. This bat can forage in almost any habitat and is one of the few bat species that forage more often in upland habitats than over water. This bat is relatively widespread but there is concern over its future because hibernating and breeding colonies are very sensitive to disturbance. Maternity colonies are usually in caves and females readily abandon their young if the colony is disturbed.

The spotted bat (*Euderma maculatum*) is one of the few bats with a call audible to humans, an insect-like, high-pitched metallic click. It inhabits western North American deserts but was not known from Washington until 1991 because of its apparent rarity, its selection of high, sheer cliffs for roosting, and its high altitude foraging. Its presence is most dependent on the availability of high, sheer cliffs, but it forages over a wide variety of habitats adjacent to cliffs. (WDFW) Range limits include the deepest canyons and steep cliffs along the Okanogan River. The steppe zones within its range limits were core and the Ponderosa Pine zone was peripheral. All habitats except closed forest and high to mid-density development were good. Detailed study has not been conducted in the Similkameen River drainage.

Reptiles are also common in these habitats including western rattlesnakes (*Crotalus viridis*), racers (*Coluber constrictor*), and gopher snakes (*Pituophis melanoleucus*).

Wildlife species that use a wider variety of habitat types in the Project Area include swallows, vultures, raptors, coyotes (*Canis latrans*), cougar (*Puma concolor*), American black bear (*Ursus americanus*). Common swallow species in the Project Area vicinity are barn swallows (*Hirundo rustica*), bank swallows (*Riparia riparia*), and violet-green swallows (*Tachycineta thalassina*). Vultures and raptors are primarily represented by turkey vultures (*Cathartes aura*). American

kestrels (*Falco sparverius*), red-tailed hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*), sharp-shinned hawks (*Accipiter striatus*), golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*), and bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) are also present in smaller numbers. Except for swallows, these species may occur in the Project Area vicinity year-round. (Swallows only occur in the summer months.)

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) is currently a monitor species in Washington State with status intended for the protection of nesting locations (WDFW 2004). The osprey is not federally listed. There is one identified nest site in the vicinity of Osoyoos Lake. Ospreys roost and nest on poles or snags; they build massive and conspicuous stick nests immediately adjacent to fish-bearing waters (Henny et al. 1978). Ospreys feed almost exclusively on live fish captured at or near the water's surface (Bent 1937). Individual pairs show variation in the ability to tolerate human activity (Van Daele and Van Daele 1982). Water bodies such as Osoyoos Lake and the Okanogan River usually provide excellent foraging opportunities for piscivorous (fish-eating) birds such as bald eagle and osprey.

Use of the Project Area by most of these species, as well as other less common species, is greatest in the spring and summer and lowest in the winter, when many species migrate, move upslope away from the river, or hibernate. Prominent exceptions include mule deer and bald eagles (see below) which winter in the project area and remain active in this season. (OCPUD1 2008)

### **Sensitive Species**

The project area provides suitable habitat for a wide variety of sensitive species of birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians. The bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) is the only state-listed wildlife species likely to make extensive use of the project area. State and Federally listed gray wolf and grizzly bear may be occasional transients in the Project Area, but would be unlikely to establish denning or rendezvous sites or make extensive use of the area due to the proximity to human disturbance factors. Sharp-tailed grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*) may occasionally use the project area. While the project area is within the historical range of the state-listed sage grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*), the nearest existing population of this species is over 60 miles to the south (Stinson et al. 2004).

#### ***Bald Eagle***

The bald eagle was recently delisted as a species protected under the federal Endangered Species Act (USFWS 2007, FR 2007). The Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (BGEPA) is now the primary federal law protecting the species. This eagle is still state-listed as threatened in Washington, although it has been recommended for down-listing to sensitive by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW 2007).

Bald eagles occur along the Similkameen River during most of the year, but they are most abundant from approximately October to April. Very small numbers may occur during summer, but no nests have been located along the river, below Palmer Lake, since 1989. It appears that most bald eagles observed in the project area are recorded as they cross the area and fly up- or downriver. When present, eagles range widely within the area depending on water conditions, prey availability, perch site locations, and human disturbance (PUD1 2008).

### *Golden Eagle*

The golden eagle is listed as a state candidate species. The Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (BGEPA) is now the primary federal law protecting the species. Golden Eagle habitat is identified on the WDFW Priority Habitat Species layers as existing within the Similkameen River drainage but outside of the project area.

Major trail use is expected to occur during warmer temperatures, between April and September while most presence of bald eagles is between October and April.

### ***Environmental Consequences***

#### Direct and Indirect Effects

The expected increase in recreational non-motorized traffic to the area would result in increased human/wildlife interaction. However, resident wildlife have been conditioned to activity by the existing Oroville – Nighthawk highway and dispersed recreation that is currently occurring along the Similkameen River. There are no bald eagle or golden eagle nests or communal roosts within ½ mile of the project. Increased visitor traffic would be confined to the existing abandoned rail road bed. The project trail does not access habitat used by roosting bats. Wildlife impacts associated with increased recreational traffic are therefore expected to be minimal.

Under the Proposed Action, the primary impact would be associated with noise and human activity associated with trail construction. Bald eagles and other wildlife may be temporarily displaced from the immediate project area. Bald eagles may avoid perching or feeding near the project area during construction activities. Since most perch trees are located considerably upriver from the project, the impact would be minimal. Other birds and mammals also may avoid the area around the project, particularly during intensive construction activity. Most would be expected to return to the project area habitats once activities diminish and work is completed. Because there are no unique or rare habitats in the project area, most wildlife may temporarily occupy nearby similar habitats. Most habitats in the project area are already affected by some level of human disturbance, due to existing informal recreational access. Construction activities would occur in summer and fall to minimize effects to over wintering birds and bald eagles as much as possible.

Under the No Action alternative there would be no additional effects to wildlife. Recreation use would continue at lower levels than expected under the Proposed Action.

#### Cumulative Effects

As discussed, the primary direct/indirect effects of the Proposed Action Alternative, disturbance or displacement during trail construction activities, are temporary. Given the temporary nature of these effects and the past and present (ongoing) human influence, activities, or disturbances in this corridor, the Proposed Action Alternative is not anticipated to measurably contribute to cumulative effects on wildlife or wildlife habitat in the Similkameen River corridor.

## **GRAZING**

### ***Affected Environment***

The Similkameen Trail project area includes the lands within the BLM's Similkameen grazing allotment.

The season of use is April 15 to October 30. There are approximately 480 acres of BLM land in the lease and the authorized use is for 45 AUMs of use per grazing season. The parcels are fenced in with much larger blocks of private lands.

### ***Environmental Consequences***

#### Direct and Indirect Effects

The Proposed Action alternative would not exclude livestock from the proposed trail surface. The length of trail in Phase 1 is located in rock cuts along a steep sided canyon and offers limited access to water, pasture is also unavailable along this portion of the trail. Therefore, infrequent interaction is anticipated between livestock and trail users.

There would be no change in authorized use on the allotment. Therefore, no adverse impacts to the existing grazing use are expected to occur under the Proposed Action alternative.

The No Action alternative would have no effect on the current grazing authorization and livestock utilization of the allotment.

#### Cumulative Effects

Given that there are no direct or indirect effects under either of the alternatives, there is no potential for cumulative effects.

## **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

### ***Affected Environment***

Ethnographic and historical records document the use of lands in present-day Okanogan County by a number of culturally and linguistically distinct Native American peoples. As with other Native Americans in the Columbia Plateau, these groups were highly mobile, traveling across the region to gather roots, salmon, and other important resources as they became seasonally available. Several ethnographic and archaeological studies have been conducted over the past twenty years for the viability of hydroelectric production in the Similkameen Canyon. Archaeological resources indicate Native American use of the canyon and river system. Occupation sites have been recorded within both the Similkameen drainage and the Oroville Area. Certain lands in the region continue to be used by Native Americans today for root-digging and other traditional activities. One archaeological site (45OK1410) consisting of lithic flakes and a tool was recorded during intensive cultural resources inventory of the project's area of potential effect. The site is potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

As early as the 1860s large numbers of Euro-Americans had begun to pass through the Okanogan River Valley and vicinity, following Native American trails. The Hudson Bay Company's Brigade Trail,

an important historic travel route dating from the 1814s to the 1850's, is located along the Okanogan River. One branch of the Brigade Trail passed through the Similkameen drainage to Fort Hope, British Columbia.

Steamboats were supplying the mines of the Okanogan region by 1895 and a few were able to navigate the rapids below Tonasket and steam to the Town of Oroville. One boat the "Oro" was built to dredge for gold on the Similkameen, iron rings are still evident in the canyon from this operation. About 1900 an early power generator was in use on the Similkameen. This was followed in 1905 with construction of a more efficient structure and by 1917 construction was started on Enloe Dam (45OK380) and a new powerhouse (45OK368) across the river. Enloe Dam and the Powerhouse are State and National listed historic places. The powerhouse has deteriorated over time and vandalism of the site (primarily graffiti) is occurring.

By 1906 the Victoria – Vancouver & Eastern Railroad (VV&E) had been constructed into Oroville. The following year construction began west to Nighthawk and Chopaka, allowing local farmers and ranchers to ship their agricultural products to distant markets. The 1906 railroad bed (45OK1427) and reconstructed Similkameen River Railroad Bridge (45OK1415) are historic features and are eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

The railroad was followed by irrigation projects; a diversion and flumes along the Similkameen brought water to the agricultural land in the Okanogan Valley. A six foot wooden pipe crossed the river at the western city limits of Oroville. The concrete support structure is still evident near the Oroville trailhead as are telltale signs and remnants along the canyon walls for the distance of the trail. The foundation of the 1930's Stewart and Calvert Epsom Salt Mill (45Ok1412) plant is evident near the Taber Vineyard. Just below the Similkameen River Railroad Bridge is a wing dam (45OK1413) built by Samuel Gjerde. Both features are eligible to the National Register of Historic Places.

### ***Environmental Consequences***

#### Direct and Indirect Effects

No adverse impacts to historic properties are expected with implementation of the project design features previously described for the Proposed Action.

Recreation use is expected to primarily occur on the railroad bed and is not expected to degrade its historic character. The river access points do not impact cultural sites.

Under the No Action Alternative, much would remain unchanged. Vandalism would continue unchecked at the historic powerhouse.

#### Cumulative Effects

Cumulative effects resulting from the proposed Similkameen River Trail development and new recreational facilities to be developed by the Okanogan County PUD at Enloe Dam are expected to increase with expanded access and visitor use in the area. Historic properties, particularly structures associated with Enloe Dam and Powerhouse, would likely be visited more frequently with improved access. Vandalism would be expected to increase in frequency in some areas, particularly

those visible and accessible from the trail, potentially leading to increased degradation of cultural resources. Increased recreational opportunities would be expected to increase visitor use particularly off-trail and may lead to erosion and exposure of sites with archaeological or cultural significance. Installation of fencing and signs may discourage off trail impacts to some cultural resources identified along the trail. Prior abandonment and removal of the historic rails have impacted the historic Great Northern Railway route. Resurfacing of the historic railroad grade and Similkameen River Railroad Bridge will further impact the historic feel of these properties but the impacts are not expected to be significant. Some of the cumulative impacts to historic properties would be mitigated by development of historic interpretation providing opportunities for the public to learn and experience some aspects of the historical and cultural values of the region.

## **NOXIOUS WEEDS**

### ***Affected Environment***

The primary noxious weed species within the Similkameen River valley include: hoary alyssum, dalmatian toadflax, leafy spurge, musk and Scotch thistle, mirabilis, puncturevine, Russian and diffuse knapweed), houndstonge. The spread of noxious weeds throughout the area is influenced by livestock and wildlife movement, human disturbances, windborne seed dispersal, and vehicle dispersal.

All BLM noxious weed treatments are implemented in accordance with the Record of Decision for the Final Vegetation Treatments Using Herbicides on Bureau of Land Management Lands in 17 Western States Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (BLM 2007) and all applicable State of Washington laws, rules and regulations.

### ***Environmental Consequences***

#### Direct and Indirect Effects

Under the Proposed Action, the spread of noxious weed populations may increase as a result of increased recreational and administrative uses and surface disturbances. Increased awareness, education and cooperation with trail partners may help reduce current weed problems on BLM managed lands, Okanogan County lands, and private lands. Trail development will also improve access for administrative treatment of weeds (as well as other resource management projects). Furthermore, trail improvements may encourage more users to stay on the designated trail which would help to limit off-trail use and subsequent weed seed transport into adjacent areas.

Under the No Action alternative, noxious weeds would continue to spread by recreational and administrative uses of the area and by surface disturbances. Opportunities for public education and awareness and cooperation with other partners may be limited. Furthermore, administrative access for weed treatments or other resource management projects would remain limited.

#### Cumulative Effects

Other activities and actions contributing to the spread of noxious weeds include livestock use on the parcel, wildlife movement, potential wildfires, climatic effects (i.e., wind, rain, flooding), improvements in the Enloe Dam area and windborne seed distribution from adjoining lands.

Although some increased use is expected under the Proposed Action alternative, the use patterns and destinations are anticipated to remain generally the same. Because the Proposed Action is anticipated to encourage more users to stay on the trail and improve administrative access for weed treatments, it is unlikely that the Proposed Action would incrementally contribute to cumulative effects.

## **FIRE AND FUELS**

### ***Affected Environment***

Recent wildland fires have occurred on BLM lands in the Similkameen River drainage. Seasonal fire restrictions and limited vehicle access are the predominant protection strategies. This risk is elevated when area grasses become tinder dry during summer/fall seasons. There is some history of open campfires in undeveloped areas along the proposed trail.

### ***Environmental Consequences***

#### Direct and Indirect Effects

Under the Proposed Action alternative, camping and campfires would be restricted. Lightning is a major cause of wildland fires and would continue to occur. Under the Proposed Action, access for controlling fire would be improved. Dispersed camping occurs on BLM managed land adjacent to the trail, however camping and campfires along the trail itself would be prohibited (or restricted). The trail would be posted open during daylight hours only. Picnicking use would be concentrated within the setting of well-defined areas. Eventually, as improved facilities attract increased visitation, even with the benefit of this controlled setting, the chance of wildland fires being started by recreational use would increase proportional to the amount of increased use. Trailhead improvements would improve access for emergency vehicles and may increase the ability to quickly control wildfire, thus reducing the risk of large or catastrophic fires.

Under the No Action alternative, fire would most likely originate wherever dispersed recreation campsites are created by visitors, and are more likely to occur along roadsides where people camp, or close to, their vehicle, and park hot vehicles in tall dry grass.

#### Cumulative Effects

When combined with other recreation and access improvements in the region (e.g, Enloe Dam, Whistler Canyon Trailhead, and Columbia Basin water trail), the Proposed Action would incrementally contribute to increased potential for human-caused wildland fires. As described above, the likelihood of human-caused fires would increase proportional to the amount of increased use. Although the Proposed Action would offer improved administrative access for fuels management or fire suppression activities, the Proposed Action does still contribute to a minor overall risk increase.

## RECREATION

### ***Affected Environment***

The Spokane District BLM RMP allows for multiple-uses, including dispersed recreation, wildlife habitat and grazing activities. Public use along the trail is currently limited due to lack of developed trail access points and a mix of private and public land. All recreational access and resources within the project area are primitive, and have been established through by recreational users, over time. There are no existing facilities, other than limited signage, nor are there facilities designed to meet the needs of people with physical disabilities. The BLM-managed land within the Similkameen River canyon is accessible only on foot from the left bank (facing downstream), via game and user trails. Access to the right bank is limited because the old rail bed crosses private land and is gated at Nighthawk to the west and at the Taber Vineyard and Kernan Orchard to the east. Local access from urban centers is nonexistent in the Okanogan Valley except by permission from local land owners.

During spring, summer, and fall, recreation activities in the Similkameen River corridor include fishing; hunting; swimming; paddle sports such as canoeing, kayaking, and river rafting (the Similkameen River has been designated a Greater Columbia Water Trail System); picnicking; camping; hiking; biking (road touring and mountain biking); ATV riding; horseback riding; gold prospecting; bird and wildlife watching; photography; scenic driving; and fishing. Snowshoeing, snowmobiling, and cross-country skiing are possible uses in winter. In general, horseback riding, mountain biking, and hiking are popular recreational activities throughout the county.

There are no existing public developed recreational facilities or public access points in the project vicinity. The developed campground nearest the Project Area is Osoyoos Lake State Veteran's Memorial Park on Osoyoos Lake in the City of Oroville. River Oaks RV Park, a privately owned park, is adjacent to the Oroville trailhead. Miners' Flat Camp is located on BLM-managed land approximately three miles upstream of Enloe Dam. Recreational users have developed several fire rings on the flat. Several trails and a rough road provide access to the river. Similkameen Camp is a primitive campground maintained by the BLM approximately five miles upstream from Enloe Dam. The campground is used by an estimated 1,000 visitors per year (Priebe 2006). All existing BLM facilities listed are located on the east bank of the river.

The Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail (PNT), which traverses the Similkameen River corridor, is a 1,200-mile multi-use non-motorized recreation trail from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. The PNT was designated a National Scenic Trail in March 2009. Currently, the Loomis-Oroville Road in the vicinity of the project area is designated as a segment of the PNT. The Proposed Action would relocate 3.5-miles the PNT off of the Oroville-Loomis county road and onto the nearby abandoned railroad grade, as a non-motorized trail between Oroville and Nighthawk (the remaining 8.5 miles would be completed in subsequent phases and is outside the scope of this document).

The Greater Columbia Water Trail Steering Committee (GCWTSC) is developing a work plan for a water trail catering to canoes and kayaks in the Columbia Basin. The route of the proposed water trail would include the Similkameen River from the Canadian border to the confluence with the Okanogan River at Oroville. The GCWTSC, working with federal, state, and local partners, proposes

to develop infrastructure including launch sites, directional signs, educational signs, sanitary sites, and campsites.

Okanogan County's 2004 Outdoor Recreation Plan describes the proposed trail under the heading "Oroville to Nighthawk Trail." The Outdoor Recreation Plan states:

This project entails development of pedestrian/non-motorized trail on the old Great Northern Railroad corridor. The project starts at the town of Oroville and crosses the Similkameen River on a 370-foot span steel girder bridge, passing through a 1,832-foot tunnel and ending in Nighthawk. The 12.4-mile trail is in the planning and preliminary design stage with funding being sought from a variety of sources to complete the estimated \$1,200,000 project," (Okanogan County 2004).

Okanogan County succeeded in obtaining grant funds in 2005 from the State Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation (IAC) for trail construction. Okanogan County PUD #1 has provided Okanogan County with a right-of-way over PUD lands along the trail corridor. In the future, Okanogan County plans to extend the trail past the Phase 1 project area; however, to date, agreements have not been executed with private owners of land upstream of the lower end of the PUD FERC Project Boundary.

### ***Environmental Consequences***

#### Direct and Indirect Effects

The Proposed Action alternative would not adversely impact any recreational activities or quality of recreational experience, except for prohibiting hunting, campfires and camping along the trailbed itself to reduce safety hazards for trail users. Under the Proposed Action alternative, adding improved facilities including a trailhead with picnic areas, permanent vault toilet, and an equestrian vehicle parking area would:

1. Increase the number of recreation opportunities available and improve the overall quality of recreation experiences. This could lead to increased recreational visitation, but would provide ample capacity for current and future use;
2. Provide handicapped accessible facilities (permanent toilet and picnic tables);
3. Improve equestrian visitor facilities with capacity for current and future use;
4. Increase visitor presence along the trail such that it would discourage vandalism and unauthorized uses;
5. Increase access for emergency vehicles;
6. Improve current management and future recreation use at the site;
7. Increase management oversight through BLM and Okanogan County agreements and local volunteers, which will provide additional staff presence on the ground.

The Proposed Action alternative would enhance recreation opportunities not only in the project area where legal access has been limited, but county-wide. The Similkameen River Trail is already being publically promoted through local and national organizations. Non-motorized visitation is expected to increase on the trail, including sanctioned equestrian and mountain biking trail ride events.

Under the No Action alternative, non-motorized use would continue to be limited due to lack of public access. However, unauthorized use in the project area, including trespassing across adjacent landowners, would continue to occur. The BLM would continue to provide limited management to public lands in this area.

Vandalism, open campfires, littering and illegal dumping, wildlife and mining violations would continue to occur. The Similkameen River Trail has been acknowledged and advertised by local and national recreation organizations, who continue to promote use of the lands in this area, including on BLM-managed public lands. The opportunity for a long-distance non-motorized trail, accomplished by relocating the PNT trail off of the Oroville-Loomis county road would not be provided.

#### Cumulative Effects

When combined with other recreation improvements in the county, such as Enloe Dam rec site improvements, Whistler Canyon Trailhead, and the Greater Columbia Water Trail, the Similkameen River Trail would result in an overall beneficial cumulative effect on recreation opportunities and amenities in Okanogan County. Collectively, the non-motorized recreation opportunities are expected to result in increased tourism, and subsequently increased tourism expenditures in the local economy.

### **CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION**

This EA was prepared by an interdisciplinary team of resource specialists from Okanogan County and BLM.

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#### **Consultation**

Washington State Department of Recreation and Conservation  
Washington State Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation  
Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife

Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation  
Borderlands Historical Society  
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Okanogan County Historical Society  
Okanogan County PUD #1  
City of Oroville  
Yakama Indian Nation

## **ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment 1            Project Location Map

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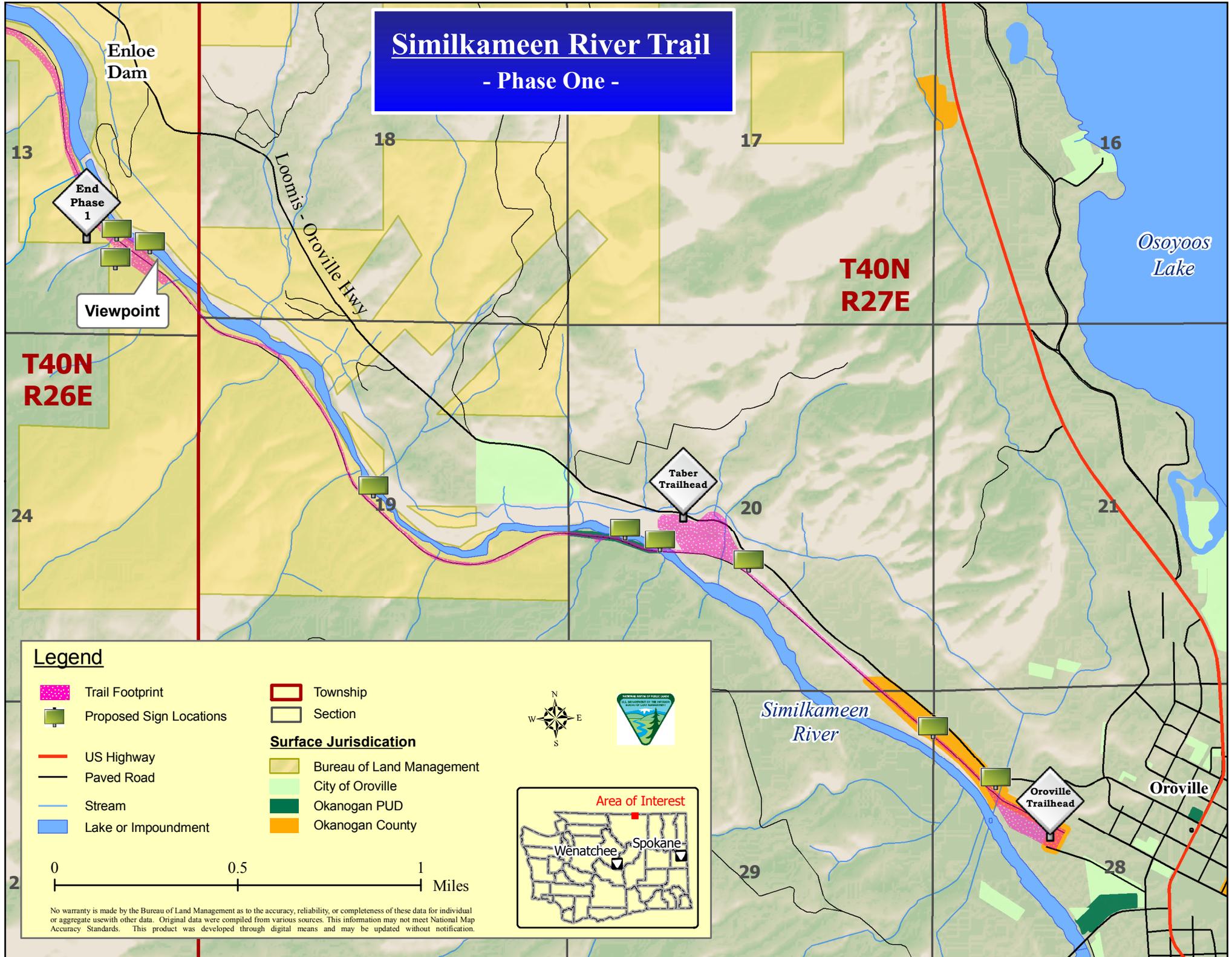
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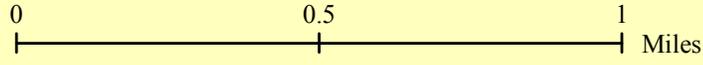
# Similkameen River Trail

- Phase One -



## Legend

- |  |   |
|--|---|
|  Trail Footprint         |  Township                  |
|  Proposed Sign Locations |  Section                   |
|  US Highway              | <b>Surface Jurisdiction</b>   |
|  Paved Road              |  Bureau of Land Management |
|  Stream                  |  City of Oroville          |
|  Lake or Impoundment     |  Okanogan PUD              |
|  |  Okanogan County           |



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