



United States Department of the Interior



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

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Proposed Action: Big Bar Mokelumne River Access (CA-180-07-43)

Location: T5N, R11E, Section 1, Calaveras County (private land and CalTrans R/W)

1.0 Purpose of and Need for Action

1.1 Need for Action

BLM-administered land along the Mokelumne River between Electra Powerhouse and Big Bar is among the most popular recreation sites managed by the Folsom Field Office. Swimming, picnicking, fishing, whitewater boating, recreational gold panning, and nature viewing are the primary uses. Big Bar is a popular river access point on the Mokelumne River between the Electra Powehouse and Middle Bar. It serves as the take out for the Upper Electra run and the put in for the Lower Electra run. However, there is no public river access at Big Bar which causes boaters to trespass on private land to access the river. Furthermore, they park in unsafe areas along the road, which causes traffic congestion, increased fire risk and represents a safety hazard to pedestrians and motorists. Existing parking needs exceed the capability of the day use facilities at PG&E's day-use area near the powerhouse and EBMUD's facilities at Middle Bar. In order to provide public access, improve safety, reduce parking congestion and reduce fire risk, BLM proposes to construct a day use parking area and river access facilities at Big Bar.

1.2 Conformance with Applicable Land Use Plans

The proposed action is subject to the 1983 Sierra Planning Area Management Framework Plan (MFP). The proposed action is in the Mokelumne River Management Area. Objectives for that area are to "encourage and promote water based recreation opportunities for swimming, fishing, sunbathing, picnicking, kayaking and hunting." (MFP p. 20).

2.0 Proposed Action and Alternatives

2.1 Proposed Action

The proposed action involves the construction of boat put-in/take-out facilities on the Mokelumne River, just west of the Big Bar Bridge on Highway 49. The facilities would include two access roads, a parking area, toilet, kiosk, four picnic sites, a boat put-in/take-out, and associated foot paths. The proposed action would affect approximately two acres of private land as well as a small amount of land within the CalTrans right of way along Highway 49 (Map 3). The two acres would be leased to PG&E for up to 25 years. The site would be developed and administered by BLM.

Access roads and parking area

For safety reasons, access in and out of the parking area would be by right-hand turns only. Vehicles traveling south on Highway 49 would enter the parking area by turning onto an access road located on

the west side of Highway 49, approximately 0.17 miles south of the Big Bar Bridge. This access road would be built to current CalTrans standards for a commercial driveway including corner sight distance and taper. The road's intersection with Highway 49 would be designed to prevent left turns into or out of the parking area. A gate would be installed in order to close the area during flood events or for administrative purposes. The access road would wind down a moderately steep hillside to the parking area. Portions of the road with a gradient greater than 12% would be paved; the rest would be surfaced with aggregate.

Vehicles traveling north on Highway 49 would enter the parking area by turning onto an existing paved road near the south end of the Big Bar Bridge that accesses the Mokelumne River Lodge bed and breakfast. From here, the access road to the parking area would wind under the Big Bar Bridge along an existing dirt road that would be upgraded to meet CalTrans standards for a commercial driveway including corner sight distance and taper. Portions of the road with a gradient greater than 12% would be paved; the rest would be surfaced with aggregate. The driveway to the bed and breakfast off of Highway 49 would be designed to prevent left in/left out turns. The existing gate would be replaced.

The parking area would accommodate approximately 20 vehicles and would be built up to prevent motor oil and other vehicle lubricants fluids from draining into the river. Some oaks, pines, and other native trees and shrubs would be removed. Mature trees would be saved where possible.

From the proposed parking area, north bound vehicles would exit the parking area via the bed and breakfast driveway and would turn right onto Highway 49. South bound vehicles would exit the parking area via the other access road that intersects the highway 0.17 miles south of the Big Bar Bridge. Signs and barriers would guide vehicles leaving the parking area onto the correct access road. Signs along the highway would guide visitors to the correct access road to reach the parking area.

Highway 49 widening

To provide for a turn lane, 60' of the northbound lane of Highway 49 would be widened 6-8' south of the bed and breakfast driveway. To accomplish this, approximately 20' of hillside would be excavated and a retaining wall, constructed.

Picnic tables, toilet, kiosk, and footpaths

Little work would be needed to improve the existing river access at a large eddy just west of the Big Bar Bridge. Approximately four picnic tables would be installed along the river, west of the river access. The toilet and informational kiosk would be adjacent the parking area. Packed dirt or aggregate footpaths would connect the parking area to the picnic sites and river access. Camp fires would be prohibited.

2.2 Project Design Features

To prevent the introduction or spread of invasive weed species during project implementation, equipment would be cleaned before entering the site. Also, aggregate used for paving road surfaces would be weed-free. Weeds would be aggressively treated each year along all foot/vehicle traffic areas (parking area, foot paths, picnic areas, and river access) using manual or mechanical methods (pulling, grubbing, etc.). Herbicide use would be analyzed under a separate environmental analysis. Interpretive features such as kiosk displays would educate visitors about weed identification and prevention of weed spread.

An archaeologist would monitor project construction of the Big Bar put-in/take-out facilities. Although no cultural resources have been found in the project area, sites could be exposed during construction. These sites would be either avoided or evaluated before resuming work.

2.3 No Action

The access roads, parking area and facilities would not be constructed/improved.

3.0 Affected Environment

Soils in the project area are granitic. Vegetation is mixed oak woodland. No special status botanical species (or habitat) were found in the project area (surveyed July 2005). The project area contains a diversity of invasive, non-native weeds. Based on a May 2005 survey, there are no known special status wildlife species or their habitat in the project area.

The project area contains three known cultural resource sites: the Gold Rush era Big Bar (a state historic landmark), the 1952 Big Bar Bridge, and a short segment of the Mokelumne Hill-Jackson road. The portion of Big Bar that would be affected by the project has been determined to not be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The Big Bar Bridge would be unaffected by the project. A small portion of the Mokelumne Hill-Jackson road would be negatively affected by the project but this area is already disturbed.

Electra Road provides the only public access to BLM land along this stretch of the Mokelumne River. BLM manages approximately 1.5 miles of river frontage along Electra Road. Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) operates the Electra Powerhouse and provides a put-in near the powerhouse. East Bay Municipal Utilities District (EBMUD) has a take-out at Middle Bar, on Pardee Reservoir, 5.5 miles downstream. This stretch can be split into two runs: the Upper Electra run and Lower Electra run (Map 2). The runs are usually available in the spring and during controlled releases in the summer. The Upper Electra run extends from just below the Electra Powerhouse to Highway 49 at Big Bar. Used mainly by kayakers and rafters, this 3-mile Class II run is ideal for novice boaters improving their skills. The Lower Electra run extends from Big Bar to Middle Bar. This 2.5-mile Class I run is ideal for canoeists and boater-fishermen. Most kayakers and rafters take out at Big Bar and canoeists and fishermen often put in at the same large eddy, just west of the bridge. Use of this unofficial river access results in private land trespass, unsafe parking and traffic congestion.

4.0 Environmental Effects

The following critical elements have been considered for this environmental assessment, and unless specifically mention later in this chapter, have been determined to be unaffected by the proposal: air quality, areas of critical environmental concern, prime/unique farmlands, floodplains, water quality, threatened or endangered species, hazardous waste, cultural resources, Native American concerns, wetlands and riparian zones, wild and scenic rivers, wilderness, invasive/nonnative weeds, and environmental justice.

4.1 Impacts of the Proposed Action

Because no known special status plant or wildlife species (or their habitats) are known to occur in the project area, impacts to these resources are not anticipated. Weed spread in the project area and

nearby, in areas where river users accessed the river prior to development of this project, would remain unchanged or it would be reduced due to aggressive weed treatment and education in the project area.

Big Bar was designated a state historic landmark due to its association with early Gold Rush mining and settlement. The portion of Big Bar that is in the project area would be negatively affected. However, this portion of Big Bar has been determined to be not eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places because it has been altered over the past 50 years by the construction of an EBMUD building and the Big Bar Bridge. Also, this portion of Big Bar is in a floodplain, which does not appear to contain any cultural resources (prehistory through the present). The two remaining known cultural resources (a portion of the Mokelumne Hill-Jackson road and the Big Bar Bridge) would not be affected.

Providing public put-in/take-out facilities at Big Bar would help accommodate the public's use of this stretch of the Mokelumne River. On the upper run, boaters would be able to end their trip at Big Bar if they are uninterested in boating the slower waters further downstream. On the lower run, canoeists and fishermen would be able to use this slower section of the river, without having to put in at Electra and run the Class II stretch. The facilities would alleviate trespass, improve motorist/pedestrian safety, increase parking, and reduce wildfire ignition risk. A foot path connecting the proposed parking area and the put-in/take-out at a large, natural eddy would provide safe river access for boaters.

4.2 Impacts of the No Action Alternative

Without this project the public's ability to use this recreation resource would be limited. People would continue to trespass on private land at Big Bar and park unsafely on the shoulder of Highway 49 and Electra Road. Wildfires could be caused by vehicles parked inappropriately on roadside grasses during the high fire hazard season. Boaters unwilling to trespass would be forced to boat the Upper and Lower Electra runs, regardless of their goals, equipment, or abilities.

4.3 Cumulative Impacts

Because no site specific adverse impacts are expected to any resource, cumulative effects at a larger scale are not anticipated.

5.0 Agencies and Persons Consulted

5.1 BLM Interdisciplinary Team

- Jeff Horn, Recreation
- Jeff Babcock, Engineering
- Al Franklin, Soils and Botany
- Peggy Cranston, Wildlife and Fisheries
- James Barnes, Cultural Resources

5.2 Consultation with Native American Tribes

Various Native American tribes were contacted. BLM held an onsite meeting with representatives from the Jackson Rancheria and Ione Band of Miwok Indians. No issues were identified for the project.

5.3 Availability of Document and Comment Procedures

The EA, posted on Folsom Field Office's website (www.blm.gov/ca/folsom) under Information, NEPA (or available upon request), will be available for a 15-day public review period. Comments should be sent to the BLM at 63 Natoma Street, Folsom, CA 95630 or emailed to us at ca180@ca.blm.gov. Individual respondents may request confidentiality. If you wish to withhold your name and address from public review or from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, you must state this at the beginning of your written comment. Such requests will be honored to the extent allowed by law. All submissions from organizations and businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, will be available for public inspection in their entirety.