U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

May 2012

Proposed Decision Record and Finding of No Significant Impact

Soda Hills Travel Management Plan

DOI-BLM-ID-I020-2011-0065-EA

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
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NOTICE OF FIELD MANAGER'S DECISION

Decision

After a careful consideration of the comparative environmental analysis presented in EA# DOI-BLM-ID-I020-2011-0065-EA, it is my decision to implement Alternative B (Proposed Action) as the travel management plan for the Soda Hills planning area. Under this alternative, 19 miles of routes would be designated as open for motorized travel. No cross country travel would be authorized for wheeled motorized vehicles. The current system of designated routes will continue to open to motorized vehicles. Designating the Doe Alley Road will improve access, and serve as a connecting route between Swenson and Idaho Ranch Canyons. The Ridgeline Road will remain a designated route however will be limited to vehicles less than 50" wide.

The following actions and conditions also apply to this alternative:

- A system of designated routes have been identified below (total of approximately 19 miles), with motorized travel restricted to these designated routes. No motorized travel would be allowed off designated routes unless written authorization is provided by the authorized officer.

    - Idaho Ranch (Upper Valley) Canyon (4.9 miles)
    - Swenson Canyon (1.3 miles)
    - Ninety Percent Canyon (2.5 miles),
    - Ridgeline roads (4.2 miles, limited to vehicles 50" wide or less), and
    - Doe Alley road (1.4 miles).

- Motorized vehicle restrictions would be implemented from November 16 through May 14. During the seasonal closures, all motorized travel is prohibited on public lands beyond the gate locations. (Caribou County controls the lower gate in Idaho Ranch Canyon, and they may choose to open the gate earlier than May 15 following lighter winters if the area is free of snow and wintering deer have left the area).

- Implement the following closure dates for the six gates as follows:

Designated Route	Closure Dates	
	Lower Gate	Upper Gate
Idaho Ranch	January 5 – May 14 (County Controlled)	November 16 – May 14
Swenson	January 5 – May 14	November 16 – May 14
Ninety Percent Canyon	January 5* **- May 14**	November 16** - May 14

*** This proposed gate would be installed on the north end of Cedarview Road near the bus turnaround.**
**** This gate may be moved to the public/private boundary.**

- Due to the seasonal restrictions intended to protect wintering mule deer throughout the Soda Hills TMP, management direction for any tracked over-snow vehicle (snowmobiles) is separate

from wheeled vehicles under this TMP. The public lands within the management boundaries of the Soda Hills TMP would be closed to tracked over-snow vehicles.

- *Emergency Use*: Motorized emergency vehicle use would be available (i.e., in accordance with appropriate federal regulations) throughout the Soda Hills TMP regardless of the area or route designation. When possible, emergency vehicles (such as law enforcement, fire suppression, or other emergency response vehicles) would attempt to utilize existing routes, however there may be instances where traveling off-route would be necessary.

- The following county roads are included as designated routes, and would remain open year-round: Ten Mile Pass, Ten Mile Pass Cut-off, Oregon Trail, and Government Dam Roads. These county roads are excluded from any seasonal restrictions.

- The lower portion of the Idaho Ranch Canyon Road, located between the lower and upper gates, is a county road maintained by Caribou County. The county controls the gate and May choose to open the gate earlier in the spring if the road is clear of snow and the wintering deer are not utilizing the area.

- *Road-Side Use Limitation:* Pulling a motorized vehicle off a designated route (e.g., for parking, camping, and other dispersed recreational activities) would be allowed within a perpendicular distance of 100 feet from the edge of the designated route (no travel parallel to a designated route).

- *Game Retrieval*: Motorized use off of designated motorized routes (cross-country travel), including game retrieval, would not be allowed.

- *Parking Areas:* Parking areas may be developed outside of the seasonally restricted area as needed. Specifically, parking areas should be provided near gates to accommodate recreationists that use the area for non-motorized purposes during the seasonal restrictions.

- *Travel Variance*: The Authorized Officer may issue a written travel variance for any motorized vehicle whose use is expressly authorized by the authorized officer, or otherwise officially approved.

- *Methods of Unauthorized Route Closure/Reclamation:* A variety of closure methods for unauthorized routes would be considered depending on site-specific circumstances. In general, minimum closure techniques supporting resource needs would be used. Methods of closure may include one or more of the following activities: signing, natural rehabilitation, obscuring the road entrance, physically blocking the road entrance (e.g., rocks, fences, barriers) and or scarifying, seeding and or planting the road surface. A BLM-approved seed mix would be used when disturbances from route closures or rehabilitation are planted and seeded. Regardless of the method employed, closed roads would be monitored for the presence of weeds and treated as needed to prevent their spread.

- *Route Maintenance:* Designated routes would receive periodic maintenance including mechanized equipment for blading, removal of rocks or other obstacles, installation of rolling

dips or water bars, cleanout of water bars, and repair of gullies and rills on the route surfaces. In extreme cases, the designated routes may be slightly modified to minimize soil erosion and manage water run-off.

- *Gate Locations:* Gates have been installed to serve as vehicle barriers during the seasonal closures. The existing lower gates have been placed in the general vicinity of the entrance to public lands. The gates in Idaho Ranch Canyon and Ninety Percent Canyon are not located on the BLM/private property boundary. These gates may be re-located to place them closer to the entrance of BLM-administered public lands. If the existing Ninety Percent gate were to be relocated closer to the boundary of BLM and private lands, the existing gate may be replaced with a cattle-guard to provide for access during the season of use, while serving a barrier for livestock during the grazing season. Gates locations would serve as the entrance points to areas having seasonal restriction for motorized use.

- *Future closures, restrictions, or changes to designated routes:* Future closures or restriction to designated motorized routes to prevent resource damage or user conflicts would be evaluated and implemented as needed through separate individual environmental assessments or per emergency closure authorities provided under 43 CFR §8340 - Off-Road Vehicles. Future development of new routes would also be evaluated and implemented through separate environmental analysis.

- The BLM would pursue an easement for public access on the portion of the exiting Ninety Percent Road that passes through private property if there is a willing landowner.

The development and approval of this travel management plan constitutes a federal action subject to the provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). In the preparation of the Environmental Assessment (EA), the potential direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts associated with the Proposed Action and alternatives were been analyzed. Preparation of the document has been in accordance with the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations implementing NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] § 1500 et. seq.), BLM guidelines for land use planning in BLM Handbook H-1601-1, BLM guidelines for implementing NEPA in BLM Handbook H-1790-1, and the Idaho Falls District Guide for Implementing NEPA (IM-ID-300-09-004).

Rationale

The implementation of the Alternative B (the Proposed Action) will provide for quality motorized recreational access while improving the health and condition of vegetation, soils, and wildlife habitat, in the Soda Hills planning area. In the long-term, the implementation of Alternative B will provide management that is consistent with the BLM's obligation to manage the area for the benefit of wildlife.

Public Involvement

The PFO initiated the travel management planning process by mailing over 200 scoping letters on July 25, 2011 to interested parties such as the Tribes, adjacent landowners, local agencies and organizations, as well as individuals that had previously expressed an interest in management of the Soda Hills. This was followed by a BLM news release published on the front page of the Caribou County Sun on August 4, 2011 which invited the public to participate in the development of the EA by providing written comments.

The scoping period was intentionally scheduled during the summer months in an effort to provide interested parties an opportunity to get out on the ground during the most accessible time of the year to look at the existing and proposed routes to develop comments for consideration in the TMP.

The Idaho Falls District Resource Advisory Council formed a sub-committee to participate in the development of the TMP. Members of the sub-committee participated in field visits and attended the public meeting held in Soda Springs, ID. They provided comments that were considered in the development of alternatives.

On October 19, 2011, the PFO hosted an open house style meeting at the Forest Service Office in Soda Springs, ID. The BLM presented maps of four possible alternatives to address issues identified from written comments received following mailing of the scoping letter/notice. The open house was attended by 6 registered participants. A total of 48 written comments were received during the scoping period and were considered in the development of alternatives analyzed in this EA.

Issues

Once the comment period had concluded, the inter-disciplinary team (IDT) examined the comments to derive common threads that could be used to delineate issues to further refine the range of alternatives. A wide range of comments and concerns were expressed. Several respondents expressed support for an alternative that would not reduce the present level of access. Other respondents were concerned about keeping open or closing individual routes or route segments for which they had a personal interest. Below is a summary of issues raised during scoping:

The Fish and Game and Shoshone-Bannock Tribes were awarded BPA mitigation funding for the acquisition of 2,552 acres. These lands were converted to public lands managed by the BLM under cooperative agreement through an MOU between IDFG, Tribes, and BLM. BLM is obligated to manage these lands for the benefit of wildlife.

There was strong support to continue implementing seasonal restrictions for motorized vehicles, which protects wildlife and reduces resource damage.

These lands have significant value to wildlife that reach beyond the specific area under consideration.

The BLM should recognize county roads in the development of the plan, and should coordinate closely with Caribou County on actions that would affect county roads.

There is a demand for non-motorized hunting opportunities without the influence of motorized vehicles. There is also demand for providing motorized access into the Soda Hills for hunting and other

The BLM should provide motorized/ATV opportunities for disabled and/or elderly.

The BLM should analyze an alternative that does not include Doe Alley as a designated route.

The BLM should analyze an alternative that includes adding the Ninety Percent Spur and Swenson Spur as designated routes.

If Doe Alley is added as a designated route, the Ridgeline Road should be closed and reclaimed or impose width restriction of 50" or less. Doe Alley provides a much safer route to connect Idaho Ranch and Swenson Canyons. The Ridgeline Road is too steep and rocky in places to be maintained.

The BLM should allow access for mountain lions hunting, to be consistent with protecting mule deer.

The habitat found in Soda Hills cannot be replaced, and the value of this habitat increases as other lands become developed.

Issues Considered, But Not Further Analyzed

"Close Ten-Mile Pass Road and Ten-Mile Cut-Off Road." These recommendations were made in during scoping, but were dropped from consideration since these are established county roads and Caribou County did not express an interest in closing these roads.

"Eliminate Late Archery Hunt". This recommendation was not considered due to the fact that the Idaho Department of Fish and Game regulates hunting seasons, which is outside the scope of this document.

"Close Soda Hills to Livestock Grazing". This recommendation is outside the scope of this document.

"Close Lands Acquired Through BPA and LWCF to All Motorized Vehicles". This is not consistent with the purpose of the acquisitions, and would restrict motorized access to all public lands within the Soda Hills.

Designation and Closure Criteria

In order to develop the alternatives, the IDT compared the distribution of existing routes with various natural resource data layers in GIS. These resource data layers included: big game winter

range, sage-grouse priority and general habitat, steep slopes, public access, and erodible soils. Areas of overlap between existing routes and natural resource distributions provided the IDT with an idea of which routes were most likely to create adverse environmental impacts.

Environmental impacts associated with the use of individual routes were weighed against the perceived value of the route for transportation and access. By varying the perceived value of routes for transportation against the likelihood of environmental impacts, alternatives were created that designated different combinations of routes as either open or closed to motorized use across the planning area. For example, only existing roads and trails were analyzed for possible designated routes. If existing roads and trails passed through private property where public access was prohibited, those routes were dropped from consideration.

Similarly, user-defined routes (those resulting from ad-hoc cross country travel) may have been dropped from consideration due to steep side slopes, soil erosion concerns, or public safety.. On the other hand, routes that provided improved access between two designated routes, such as Doe Alley, were considered in the analysis.

Land Use Plan Conformance

Alternative B (the Proposed Action) was been reviewed for conformance with the Pocatello Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement. Alternative B is consistent with the RMP decision that:

"Public lands will be designated as open, limited, or closed to motorized vehicles. In making these determinations, BLM will consider the following:

1. Public safety.
2. Resolving conflicts between uses of public lands.
3. Resource Protection requirements.
4. Public access requirements for recreational use (BLM 1988:13)."

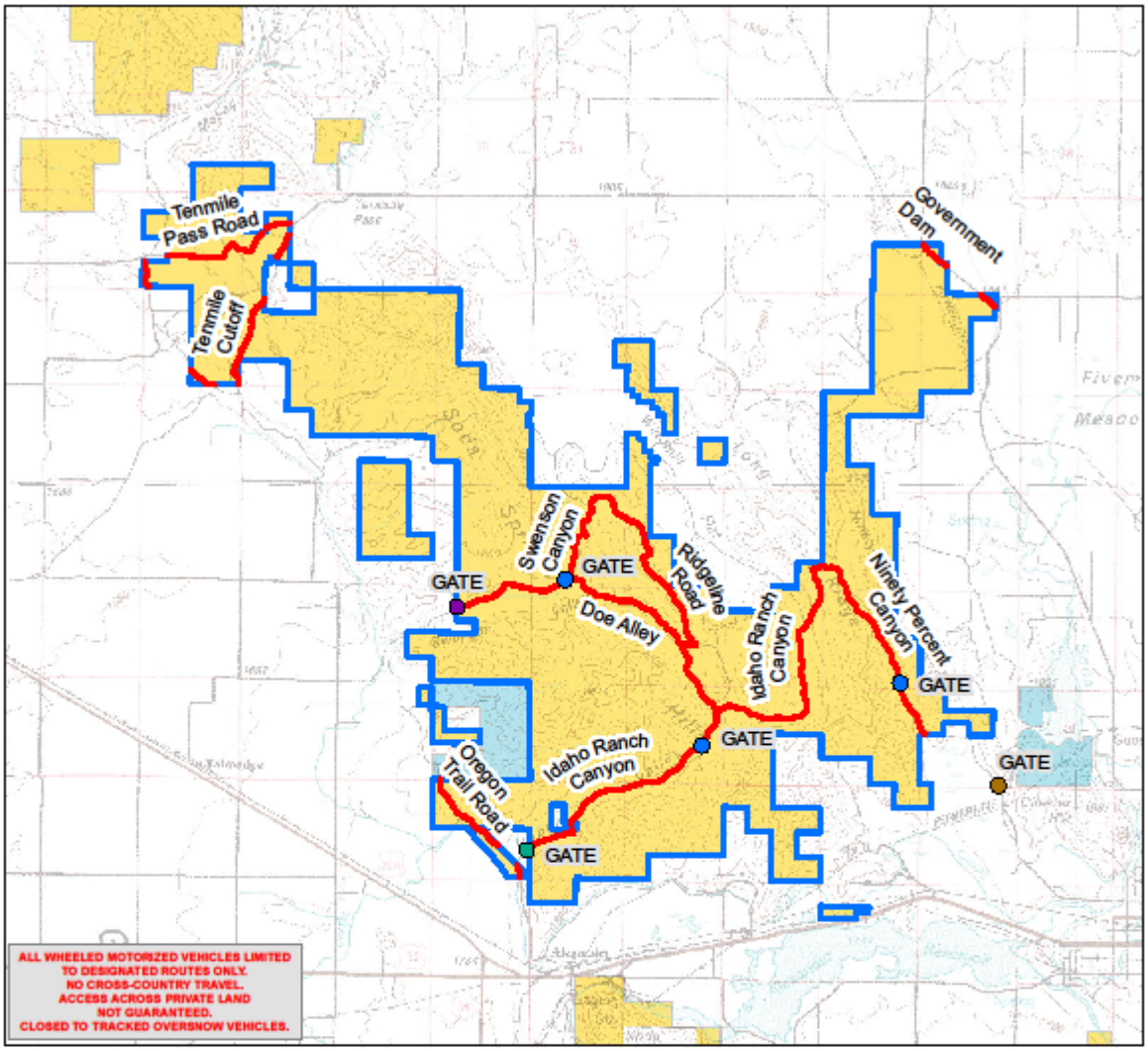
/s/ David A. Pacioretty 05/01/2012

David A. Pacioretty
Pocatello Field Office Manager

Date

BLM Soda Hills Travel Management Plan

Alternative B (PROPOSED)



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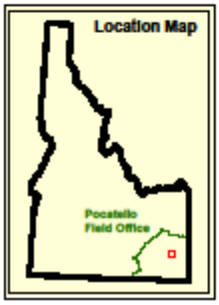

BLM Pocatello Field Office
4350 Cliffs Drive
Pocatello, Idaho 83204

Map Date: 27 April 2012

Data Source Statement
Alt. B Des.Routes; Project Boundary; Gates - Pocatello Field Office
Surface Management Agency - BLM Idaho State Office

Gate
- Closed Nov. 16 - May 14
- Closed Jan. 5 - May 14
- Closed Jan. 5 - May 14 (County Controlled)
- Closed Jan. 5 - May 14 (Proposed)
- Alternative B Designated Routes
- Travel Mangement Plan Boundary

Surface Management Agency
- Bureau of Land Management
- Private
- State of Idaho

No warranty is made by the Bureau of Land Management. The accuracy, reliability, or completeness of these data for individual use or aggregate use with other data is not guaranteed.

The following (map) cannot be made Section 508 compliant. For help with its data or information, please contact the BLM Idaho State Office Webmaster at 208-373-4000.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

I have reviewed the direct, indirect and cumulative effects of the alternatives documented in the EA (DOI-BLM-ID-I020-2011-0065-EA) for the Soda Hills Travel Management Plan. I have also reviewed the project record associated with this analysis and the effects of the Proposed Action and alternatives, as disclosed in the Affected Environment, Environmental Impacts, and Cumulative Impacts sections of the EA. I have determined the travel management plan designated as Alternative B (the Proposed Action) is in conformance with the 1988 Pocatello RMP relating to: Access, Invasive, Non-Native Species, Recreational, Soils, Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Animals, Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Plants, Tribal Treaty Rights and Interests, Vegetation, and Wildlife Resources.

Implementing regulations for NEPA (40 CFR 1508.27) provide criteria for determining the significance of effects. Significant, as used in NEPA, requires consideration of both context and intensity.

(a) Context. This requirement means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human, national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. For instance, in the case of a site-specific action, significance would usually depend upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Both short-and long-term effects are relevant (40 CFR 1508.27):

The disclosure of effects in the EA found the actions limited in context. Effects are local in nature and are not likely to significantly affect regional or national resources.

(b) Intensity. This requirement refers to the severity of impact. Responsible officials must bear in mind that more than one agency may make decisions about partial aspects of a major action. The following are considered in evaluating intensity (40 CFR 1508.27):

1. *Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.*
   The analysis documented in DOI-BLM-ID-I020-2011-0065-EA did not identify any individually significant short-or long-term impacts.

2. *The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.*
   No significant effects on public health and safety were identified in the EA.

3. *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.*
   No significant effects on unique characteristics of the geographic area, historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers or ecologically critical areas were identified in the EA.

4. *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.*
   Public and tribal comments gathered through the process did not identify effects on the

quality of the human environment that were likely to be highly controversial. The comments received were helpful in identifying relevant issues, desired routes and desired future conditions of the natural resources. No significant individual or cumulative impacts are anticipated as a result of this action.

5. *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

   The analysis did not identify any effects on the human environment which are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks. The use of off-highway vehicles on public lands has been well-established for decades, and has been documented on roads and trails throughout the field office.

6. *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

   The analysis showed how the alternatives would implement direction in the Pocatello RMP, and would not establish precedent for any future actions.

7. *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.*

   The analysis did not identify any known significant cumulative effects

8. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

   Consultation under the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966 (as amended) has been conducted in accordance with the BLM National Programmatic Agreement and the implementing Protocol agreement between Idaho BLM and Idaho State Historic Preservation Office. The analysis showed that the alternatives would not result in adverse effects to cultural or historical resources.

9. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.*

   The analysis revealed that there are no threatened or endangered species or their habitat within the travel management planning area.

10. *Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*

    The analysis in the EA shows that the alternatives are consistent with Federal, State, and local laws or requirements imposed for protection of the environment.

I have reviewed the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations (CEQ) for significance (40 CFR 1508.27) and have determined the actions analyzed in the EA would not constitute a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment; therefore an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

/s/ David A. Pacioretty

05/01/2012

David A. Pacioretty
Pocatello Field Office Manager

Date