

**Environmental Assessment**

**for**

**Killpecker Sand Dunes  
Recreation Site Facility Improvement**

**WY-040-EA13-98**

**March 2013**



The BLM's multiple-use mission is to sustain the health and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. The Bureau accomplishes this by managing such activities as outdoor recreation, livestock grazing, mineral development, and energy production, and by conserving natural, historical, cultural, and other resources on public lands.

**BLM/WY/PL-13/009+1220**

**WY-040-EA13-98**

**Environmental Assessment**

**for**

**Killpecker Sand Dunes  
Open Play Area  
Expansion**

**Bureau of Land Management**

**Rock Springs Field Office**

**Wyoming**

**March 2013**

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

*Title:* Killpecker Sand Dunes Recreation Site Facility Improvement.

*EA Number:* DOI-BLM-WY-P040-2013-098-EA

*Type of project:* Recreation site facilities improvement

*General location of proposal:* T 23 N R 103 W sec 16 W ½ SW ¼ SW ¼

*Name and location of preparing office:* Rock Springs Field Office

*Real Property Number:* 9400.0000

### 1.1 Background

The Sand Dunes Open Play Area is part of the Rock Springs Field Office located in Sweetwater County and includes portions of T. 23 N., R. 102 W.; T. 23 N., R. 103. W.; T. 23 N., R. 104 W.; and T. 24 N., R. 103 W. (see Maps 1 and 2). The 10,500-acre Open Play Area is also a portion of the 38,650-acre Greater Sand Dunes Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC).

The Open Play area is located within the Killpecker Dune Field which is one of the largest active dune fields in North America. The Killpecker Dune Field is approximately 109,000 acres extending 55 miles east from the Green River Basin across the Continental Divide into the Great Divide Basin and includes the Sand Dunes and Buffalo Hump Wilderness Study Areas. This dune field in turn is part of the Greater Sand Dunes System which extends across the United States north to south from Canada to Mexico.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Visitors</b>
2003	38,841
2004	38,786
2005	39,142
2006	38,447
2007	37,876
2008	35,973
2009	37,192
2010	32,741
2011	35,963
2012	30,718

Visitation at the Killpecker Sand Dunes averages 37,218 visitors per year.

### 1.2 Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action

*Purpose:* The purpose of the proposed action is to improve facilities at the site to improve public health and safety, protect the nearby riparian area and the Crookston Ranch Cultural Site, providing for controlled access and promoting responsible visitor use through improved facilities

*Need Statement:* The site is not being utilized in a safe and environmentally responsible fashion. The current use is degrading the adjacent riparian area and cultural site. Visitor satisfaction of the current facilities is low.

*Decision to be Made:* The BLM will decide whether or not to improve the access road and install fire rings and picnic tables to manage visitor use during average use days.

### **1.3 Relationship to Statutes, Regulations, Plans or Other Environmental Analyses**

Decisions in the Green River Resource Management Plan (1997) provided direction for the BLM to develop recreation management plans to accommodate recreational uses and correct resource degradation problems in the Greater Sand Dunes ACEC and the associated Special Recreation Management Area.

This proposed action is in conformance with the Jack Morrow Hills Coordinated Activity Plan (2006).

Section 102 (a) (8) of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 states, “the public lands be managed in a manner that will protect the quality of scientific, historical, ecological, environmental, air and atmospheric, water resource, and archaeological values: that, where appropriate, will preserve and protect certain public land sin their natural condition; that will provide food and habitat for fish and wildlife and domestic animals; and that will provide for outdoor recreation and human occupancy and use.”

The Architectural Barriers Act of 1968, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1976 (as amended in 1978), and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 directed the BLM to accommodate persons with disabilities with appropriate facilities on BLM-administered sites. An agency may not discriminate or deny a person with disabilities the opportunity to participate in a service based on their disability.

The Greater Sand Dunes ACEC management plan (1983) was prepared to protect unique resources values in the area while providing for off-road vehicle activity. This plan also serves as the Recreation activity Management Plan.

Executive Order 11989 (1977) directed federal agencies to (1) close areas or trails to OHVs causing considerable adverse effects and (2) designate lands as closed to OHV use unless the lands are specifically designated as open to OHVs.

### **1.4 Scoping, Public Involvement and Issues**

In 2008 a Visitor Satisfaction Survey at the Sand Dunes Open Play area was completed by University of Idaho Park Studies Unit for the BLM. The overall satisfaction rating for quality of recreation experience was 79%. Visitors were also asked to rate the site based on the following factors:

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Rating %</b>
Quality of Visitor Information	49
Condition of Developed Facilities	58
Visitor and Recreation Management	81
Protection of Natural and Cultural Resources	82
Performance of BLM Staff	86
Interpretation and Education Programs	53

This study indicates that while visitors are satisfied with the management of the area, visitors are dissatisfied with the facilities.

## **2.0 PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES)**

### **2.1 Alternative II – No Action Alternative**

The no action alternative would be a continuation of existing management. The unstructured nature of this use is not adequate to provide for public health and safety, reduce natural resource degradation, direct visitor use and reduce congestion in the parking area, reduce resource conflicts, meet Bureau accessibility standards and provide long term protection of the site. Under this alternative, the BLM would not be complying with Executive Order 11989, section 102(a)(8) and section 102(a)(11) of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Resource degradation would continue and positive benefits would not be realized.

### **2.2 Alternative I – Proposed Action**

#### Parking and camping areas:

Actions would include: expand the parking and camping area from 80' x 200'; to 150' x 500' and install picnic tables and fire rings in specific areas to better manage visitor use during the average use days; place a trash facility in a centralized location; improve the access and day-use parking areas; install informational kiosks; develop and deploy safety related information for the public to mitigate exposed pipelines in the open area; and place information/interpretive signs at the site.

#### Family and group camping area:

Actions would include: construction of 10 pullouts approximately 150 yards to the east of the existing parking area; place picnic tables and fire rings at each site; install stop signs, speed limit signs and other safety related signs throughout the site.

#### Supplemental Rules:

Actions would include posting and implementing the following supplemental rules for the site:

- 1) **SAFETY FLAGS ARE REQUIRED ON ALL VEHICLES IN THE KILLPECKER SAND DUNES RECREATION AREA (This includes two-wheeled motorcycles.)**  
All vehicles shall be equipped with a whip mast and a 6x12 inch red/orange flag. Flags may be of pennant, triangle, square, or rectangular shape. Masts must be securely mounted on the vehicle and extend 8 feet from the ground to the mast tip. Safety flags must be attached within 10 inches of the tip of the whip mast with club or other flags mounted below safety flag or on another whip.
- 2) **A 15 MPH SPEED RULE EXISTS ON THE SAND HIGHWAYS.** No person shall operate an OHV in excess of 15 mph on public lands within 500 feet of access roads within the Killpecker Sand Dunes Open Play area.

- 3) FIRES. The burning of potentially hazardous materials such as; pallets, treated lumber, gas, oil, plastic, and magnesium is prohibited.
- 4) NO GLASS BEVERAGE CONTAINERS ARE ALLOWED. Possession or use of any glass, cup or bottle, empty or not, used for carrying any liquid for drinking purposes is prohibited. Persons may pick up glass beverage containers discarded by others to remove for deposit in approved trash receptacles.

BLM committed measures:

Before any construction begins at the parking areas a survey will be conducted for Blowout penstemon *Penstemon haydenii* and for Cultural Resources. If construction occurs between May 1 and June 15, a survey will be conducted for nesting Mountain Plovers.

**2.3 Alternatives considered but not Analyzed in Detail.**

No additional alternatives were identified.

**3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT**

**3.1 Introduction**

The Sand Dunes Open Play area is located within the Greater Sand Dunes ACEC in the area west of the Steamboat Special Management area, north of the Checkerboard Lands, east of the Sand Dunes Wilderness Study Area and within the Jack Morrow Hills Planning Area. It has historically been used by Off Highway Vehicle enthusiasts to operate OHVs in an open-play fashion. The proposed action includes only the parking area and directly associated facilities (approximately 20 acres). The site will become even more important in future years because federal agencies are implementing off-road vehicle use designations to protect other resources.

**Resources Considered**

<b>Determination<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Resource</b>	<b>Rationale for Determination</b>
NI	Air Quality/ Green House Gas Emissions	The WDEQ is the authorized agency to administer the Clean Air Act. WDEQ monitoring data identifies that there are no Air Quality concerns within the project area.
PI	Areas of Critical Environmental Concern	See Sections 3.2.1, 4.1.1.1, and 4.1.2.1
PI	Cultural Resources	See Sections 3.2.2, 4.1.1.2, and 4.1.2.2
NI	Environmental Justice	The action alternatives were reviewed in accordance with Executive Order 12898 and no impacts to minority and low-income populations are expected.
NP	Farmlands: Prime or Unique	No Prime or Unique Farmlands (as defined by 7 CFR 657.5) are present in the project area.

<b>Determination<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Resource</b>	<b>Rationale for Determination</b>
NP	Floodplains	No floodplains were identified in the project area.
NP	Fuels/Fire Management	No fuels projects are planned or proposed within the project area. All wild land fires and fire management will be managed according to BLM protocol.
PI	Invasive Species/ Noxious Weeds	Covered under Vegetation and Soils.
NI	Lands/Access	No rights-of-way or other land use authorizations are required to implement the proposed action or alternatives.
NI	Livestock Grazing	The proposed action would not affect livestock grazing.
NP	Native American Religious Concerns	None present.
NP	Paleontology	An inventory of the proposed location did not indicate the presence of paleontological sites. If an undocumented site is discovered during construction, the BLM would be notified, and construction would be halted until the site could be assessed.
PI	Public Health & Safety	See Sections 3.2.8, 4.1.1.8, and 4.1.2.7
NI	Rangeland Health Standards	The proposed action would not affect Standards for Healthy Rangeland.
PI	Recreation	See Sections 3.2.4, 4.1.1.4, and 4.1.2.3
PI	Socioeconomics	See Sections 3.2.7, 4.1.1.7, and 4.1.2.6
NI	Soils	The proposed action would not affect soils.
PI	Special Status Species	See Sections 3.2.3 and 4.1.1.3
NP	Threatened, Endangered or Candidate Plant Species	No Special Status Plants occur in the project area.
PI	Threatened, Endangered or Candidate Animal Species	See Sections 3.2.3 and 4.1.1.3
NP	Wastes (hazardous or solid)	There are no known hazardous or solid wastes present in the project area.
NI	Water Resources/Quality (drinking/surface/ground)	Currently, the WDEQ administers water quality and water quality programs. Furthermore, guidance from BLM IM No. WY-98-061 identifies that the WDEQ is the responsible agency for the administration of the Clean Water Act. The WDEQ has not

<b>Determination<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Resource</b>	<b>Rationale for Determination</b>
		provided any information in regards to water quality issues or implementing a water monitoring program within the area, this will not be discussed in detailed analysis.
NP	Wetlands/Riparian Zones	There are no Wetlands or Riparian Zones in the project area but nearby riparian areas could benefit.
NP	Wild and Scenic Rivers	There are no WSR or lands with wilderness characteristics (LWC) within the project area.
NP	Wilderness	No wilderness or WSAs are present within the project area.
NP	Woodland/Forestry	There are no areas that meet the definition of woodlands/forestry within the project area.
PI	Vegetation	See Sections 3.2.6, 4.1.1.6, and 4.1.2.5
NI	Visual Resources	The project is determined not to affect the Class 2 visual management of the area. See Sections 3.2.5, 4.1.1.5, and 4.1.2.4.
NI	Wild Horses and Burros	The project will not affect wild horse herd area management.
NI	Wildlife/Fisheries	There is the potential for both negative and positive impacts to wildlife from this project depending on the human response to the project.

<sup>1</sup>Determination:

PI: Potential Impact due to one or more action alternatives; therefore, analyzed in the NEPA document.

NP: Not Present in the area impacted by the action alternatives.

NI: No Impact expected from action alternatives.

### **3.2 Affected Resources**

#### **3.2.1 Area of Critical Environmental Concern**

The site covered in the project plan lies within the Greater Sand Dunes ACEC. This ACEC has three relevant resources that require special management attention. These resources are cultural, wildlife, and scenic values.

#### **3.2.2 Cultural\Historic Resources**

The unstable nature of the sand dune surface in the area tends to obscure archaeological resources and surface inventory is often unreliable. It is likely that other archaeological sites will be discovered in the dune field as dormant dunes are reactivated. Numerous lithic scatters of artifacts have been found at various locations directly adjacent to the site. A number of historic sites including a historic ranch are found adjacent to the area. Records indicate that these

abandoned structures and ruins generally date to 1900-1915 and were associated with ranching activity.

Late arrival visitors tend to use the ranch to camp and base their activities out of this site, which has an impact on the historic resource and the riparian zone.

### 3.2.3 Wildlife

The Crookston Ranch and its associated riparian area provide a much needed source of water and vegetation for greater sage-grouse, elk, mule deer and pronghorn antelope, as well as many species of migratory birds and small mammals.

There is potential for mountain plover to attempt to utilize the parking area during the nesting season. However, this is an artificially created bare area due to motorized traffic. This motorized traffic is also highly likely to prevent any nesting attempts in the parking and road areas at the site. Since it is highly unlikely this species would be impacted by this action, it will not be discussed further.

### 3.2.4 Recreation

The Sand Dunes area has long been a popular place for recreational users. Off Highway Vehicle enthusiasts are one of the primary users of the area along with hunters and photographers. Other recreation activities which take place in the Sand Dunes include horseback riding, hiking, bird watching and sightseeing.

### 3.2.5 Visual Resources

The Sand Dunes Special Resource Management Area (SRMA) is a visual resource Management class II area. This was a reflection of the uniqueness and scenic beauty of the area. The endless combinations of shapes, patterns and forms created by windblown sand add value to the scenic value of the area. Add this to the heights of some of the dunes, the diversified textures playing up the slopes, the clear ponds surrounded by deep green grasses all combine to paint a truly beautiful landscape. Some of the dunes are stabilized by vegetation. The active sand dunes are barren of vegetation but have superb draws and valleys. The area contains greasewood (*Sarcobatus vermiculatus*), big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) and rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus spp.*) communities.

### 3.2.6 Vegetation/Soils

Sand dune areas that have not been stabilized are essentially devoid of vegetation. In a few areas, some pioneer type plants are beginning to stabilize the active dunes. Lemon scurfpea (*Psoraleidium lanceolatum*) is one of the first plants to begin invading the active dunes. Between the dunes are small wet and dry meadows called flocks. Grass species are common on these sites. Depending on the meadow, common species include sedges, inland salt grass and wheat grasses. Depending on the stage of succession or the amount of time the dunes have been stabilized, vegetation varies considerably. The succession of plant communities indicates relative ages of dormant dunes. The pioneer stabilizing community in the Killpecker Dunes usually consists of veiny dock (*Rumex venosus*), Lemon scurfpea and various grasses. The pioneer community typically appears on parabolic dunes on the lower parts of the windward slopes of the dome, transverse and barchans dunes which are inactive for a long period of time.

The pioneer stabilizing community is replaced by rabbit brush and the oldest dormant dunes are stabilized primarily by big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), with lichen and moss developing near the base of the sage. Common grasses are Indian ricegrass (*Achnatherum hymenoides*), various wheatgrasses and Great Basin wildrye (*Leymus cinereus*). Minor areas of cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*) occur in the area on disturbed sites.

### 3.2.7 Socioeconomic

Visitors include local residents from southwest Wyoming and other locations in Wyoming as well as out of state users from Colorado, Idaho, and Utah. The Sand Dunes area is a destination site for most of these users. Some of the users make a circuit loop of the specialized sport sites in Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, and Colorado.

A demographic survey has never been compiled. The impression is that not many “low income” visitors come to the Sand Dunes because of the expense of the equipment and incidental costs associated with this sport. It is also thought that most users come from urban areas such as the Colorado Front Range, the Rock Springs-Green River Wyoming area and the Wasatch Front area of Utah.

### 3.2.8 Public Health and Safety

The Sand Dunes Open Play area currently has two dilapidated fire rings and numerous user-constructed fire rings stone fire rings. The existing parking area is 80' x 200' and is outlined by timber posts. The site also includes an interpretative sign and a separate sign that lists rules for use at the site. The entrance sign was damaged and has been removed. On normal use weekends, the parking area frequently fills up with a combination of day-use trailers and overnight camping vehicles. The increase in user numbers in combination with the increase in motor vehicles, recreation vehicles and trailers occupying the small parking area leave late arrivals with no room to park. This has dramatically elevated the level of concern for public safety and health at the site. The late arrivals park outside of the designated parking area sometimes getting stuck in the sand.

## **4.0 ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS**

### **4.1.1 The Proposed Action**

The proposed action is designed to provide improved public health and safety, reduce natural resource degradation, manage visitor use and reduce congestion, reduce resource conflicts, meet Bureau accessibility standards and provide long-term protection of the adjacent resources. These actions would have a beneficial or insignificant impact on all natural resources when compared to the No Action Alternative.

#### 4.1.1.1 Area of Critical Environmental Concern

The Greater Sand Dunes ACEC has three relevant resources that require special management attention. These values are cultural, wildlife and recreation. Providing user friendly facilities that direct the visitor use away from the riparian zone and the historic ranch would alleviate impacts to these resources. These actions would be compatible with management objectives of the ACEC.

#### 4.1.1.2 Cultural\Historic Resources

No known cultural sites would be affected by the proposed action. A cultural clearance survey was conducted in 2004 and no concerns were noted. Appropriate avoidance or mitigation measures would be taken if cultural sites are encountered.

#### 4.1.1.3 Wildlife

If this project is successful in reducing trespass motor vehicle use in the Crookston Ranch and associated riparian area, then the project affects will be very beneficial for wildlife in the area.

However, if this project increases visitor use of the Sand Dunes play area, then there will be negative impacts to the elk calving and security cover at the base of Steamboat Mountain. This area is already being negatively impacted by OHV users destroying the vegetated dunes at the base of the mountain and an increase in use will foreseeably increase the destructions of the tall sage used by the elk.

#### 4.1.1.4 Recreation

The proposed action would positively benefit the user by providing improved public health and safety, managing visitor use and reducing congestion in the parking area, provide for improved access and separating different uses which would reduce conflicts. The supplemental rules would improve visitor satisfaction and provide for a safer visitor experience.

#### 4.1.1.5 Visual Resources

There would be no significant impacts to the VRM Class II area as a result of the proposed action.

#### 4.1.1.6 Vegetation\Soils

There would be insignificant impacts to some of the vegetation during construction of the camping areas. Less than one half acre of sagebrush would be lost due to the development of this site. Cheatgrass may spread but it will be controlled with Integrated Pest Management Techniques and cooperation with the Sweetwater Weed and Pest District. Improved signage may reduce inadvertent travel in sensitive riparian areas.

#### 4.1.1.7 Socioeconomic

There would be no significant impacts to socioeconomic resources as a result of the proposed action

#### 4.1.1.8 Public Health and Safety

Impacts to public health and safety as a result of the proposed action would be beneficial and would include improved safe use of the site by directing visitor use and reducing congestion in the parking area.

### **4.1.2 The No Action Alternative**

This alternative would be a continuation of existing management practices. These management practices have not been adequate to provide for public health and safety, reduce natural resource degradation, direct visitor use and reduce congestion in the parking area, reduce resource

conflicts, meet Bureau accessibility standards and provide long-term protection of the adjacent riparian zone and historic ranch.

#### 4.1.2.1 Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

The relevant resources identified with this ACEC would be negatively affected and positive benefits would not be realized.

#### 4.1.2.2 Cultural\Historic Resources

Adverse impacts to the historic ranch would continue to occur and could increase if the project plan is not implemented.

#### 4.1.2.3 Wildlife

Adverse impacts to the historic ranch and associated riparian area and spring would continue to occur and could increase if the project plan is not implemented.

There may not be an increase in visitation to the area and subsequently, there would not be an increase to the tall sagebrush partition and security cover at the base of Steamboat Mountain.

#### 4.1.2.4 Recreation

The users experience would continue to be adversely impacted by not expanding the existing parking area and creating a family and group camping area. The congestion at the existing parking area would continue to cause conflicts between users. Families and group uses would not be addressed. Without separating uses, conflicts can occur and the quality of the experience would be negative. Access to the site would continue to deteriorate which can cause harm to humans and the vehicles they drive. Failure to implement the Supplementary Rules would result in an increasingly hazardous situation.

#### 4.1.2.5 Visual

Continued uncontrolled expansion would result in additional and new impacts to landform and texture of the existing landscape. Loss of vegetation would reduce the visual variety and have a negative impact on the color and texture of the visual landscape.

#### 4.1.2.6 Vegetation\Soils

Continued uncontrolled expansion would result in additional vegetation loss on stabilized dunes. Cheatgrass would also continue to exist in the area and its spread would not be controlled as easily.

#### 4.1.2.7 Socioeconomic

Visitors who view the existing condition as congested and unsafe would not visit the site. This translates to a loss of tourism revenue to the nearby communities.

#### 4.1.2.8 Public Health and Safety

Continued uncontrolled expansion increases the potential for safety concerns at this site. Below standard campground roads and uncontrolled vehicle travel, in conjunction with increased user demand would continue to encourage motorists to access areas not design for vehicle use. This

use is causing damage to vehicles and is unsafe for the drivers causing unsafe issues with public users.

## **4.2 Cumulative Effects**

### **4.2.1 Proposed Action**

By providing user friendly facilities and ample room for parking away from the adjacent riparian area and historic ranch, impacts to these resources would be reduced significantly over time.

Health and safety issues would be improved significantly by directing visitor use and reducing congestion in the parking area. User conflicts would be reduced by providing for improved access and separating different uses. Implementing the Supplemental Rules would further improve the visitor experience for all users.

The new facility would serve as a focal point for the Bureau to educate and inform the public about the unique and diverse resources found in the area. Information and education brochures and interpretive displays could help get voluntary compliance for adjoining area's OHV designations, the seasonal OHV closure on Steamboat Mountain and land use ethics such as Leave NO Trace and Tread Lightly! which would benefit numerous resource programs.

### **4.2.2 No Action Alternative**

By not addressing the congested parking issue and not installing controls at the existing site, degradation of the adjacent riparian area and cultural site would continue.

Health and safety problems would be expected to continue as uncontrolled visitor use continues. The visitor experience would continue to degrade and visitor satisfaction would continue to decline. Supplemental Rules would not be implemented and dangerous conditions would not be addressed. Positive benefits would not be realized.

## **4.3 Mitigation Measures**

If the enlargement of the facilities and additional educational information is insufficient to stop the associated OHV traffic around the historical ranch and the tall sagebrush at the base of Steamboat Mountain, then the BLM could propose fencing these areas in addition to the educational efforts.

## **4.4 Residual Effects**

Residual effects as a result of implementing the proposed action are considered to be positive and beneficial.

Residual effects of the No Action Alternative would include continued degradation of the physical resources present at the site.

## **5.0 TRIBES, INDIVIDUALS, ORGANIZATIONS, or AGENCIES CONSULTED**

Several briefings, public meetings and visitor use discussions were conducted with the public, Congressional Representative and County Commissioners when the Rock Springs Field Office

was considering adding the Sand Dunes Off-Road Vehicle area to the Bureau's Pilot Fee Demonstration.

The University of Idaho Park Studies Unit conducted a Visitor Survey to comply with the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) during the fiscal year 2008.

The Green River Chamber of Commerce, the Rock Springs Chamber of Commerce, and the Sweetwater County Joint Travel and Tourism were consulted under the existing Memorandum of Understanding concerning collaboration of outdoor recreation, tourism and economic development dated January 2012.

## **6.0 LIST OF PREPARERS**

Jo (Georgia L.) Foster – Outdoor Recreation Planner  
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### **6.1 List of Reviewers**

Darren Cook – P&EA SCEP  
Jim Speck – P&EC

## **7.0 Literature Cited**

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