

Decision Memo

Falls Creek Horse Camp

Rehabilitation and Maintenance Project

**USDA Forest Service
Mount Adams Ranger District, Gifford Pinchot National Forest
Skamania County, Washington
Sec. 31, T. 6N, R.8E., WMU**

It is my decision to implement the Falls Creek Horse Camp Rehabilitation and Maintenance Project to 1) address unwanted campsite expansion--both total numbers of sites and site size--through log and boulder barrier placement; 2) address road drainage problems by installing a coarse aggregate low water ford, a culvert; and placing crushed rock on designated sections of the camp loop road; 3) harden two crossings of the intermittent stream channel with Trail 152, below the proposed ford; 4) replace picnic tables and fire rings at each site; and 5) install high lines at each campsite and one manure bin for the campground.

This action falls within a category of actions that may be categorically excluded from formal NEPA documentation, including a Decision Memo (DM). However, because of the presence of specific issues and required mitigation, it is within my discretion to document this decision with a DM. The decision includes mitigation measures for one sensitive plant species, noxious weeds, and water quality. The project will be implemented in 2005 through a contract. Site-specific plans for each campsite and related road sections are attached. This memo documents the NEPA analysis conducted for this project.

BACKGROUND and NEED FOR ACTION

The Falls Creek Horse Camp lies within the upper reaches of the Wind River Watershed within Skamania County, Washington. It is situated on a loop road off of Forest Road 6500 in T. 6 N., R 8 E., Section 31, WMU. It lies just west of Indian Heaven Wilderness; a trailhead for Trail 152 (Falls Creek), 157 (McClellan Meadows), and 171 (Indian Race Track) is nearby. Trail 152 runs through the Falls Creek Campground.

Falls Creek Horse Camp has six “established” campsites and that receive a low-to-moderate amount of use by horse riders for overnight use in the peak summer months; most use is on weekends. A few non-horse users stop there to picnic. Three additional “sites” are user-created openings. Rarely are all of the sites occupied at one time. A vault toilet, installed in 2002, serves the campsite users, trail users, and drive-by recreations.

From 2001-2003, users were required to have a Northwest Forest Pass for overnight camping or to day-use park in a site or along the major access road. In 2004, the campground became a Region 6 Rustic Camp, and a \$5/night/site fee was implemented.

PROPOSED ACTION

This project proposes to block off three user-created sites with strategic boulder placement and reestablish campsite “boundaries” of designated sites by placing boulder and log barriers to contain camping within these sites. Worn or missing picnic tables and fire rings would be replaced in each of the six designated campsites. New highlines would be installed in each site; a manure bin would be installed for the campground.

The proposal includes road drainage improvements by reconfining an intermittent stream that runs through the campground into the original channel, and adding a culvert under the road; this would involve excavating a ditch, approximately three feet wide, three feet deep, and 150 feet long. A splash apron (energy dissipater) would be installed at outlet of the new pipe.

A coarse-aggregate low water ford, approximately 100 feet in length, would be installed where the intermittent stream crosses and dissipates spring runoff across the campground loop road, damaging the road; the road damage is aggravated by traffic on the wet native road surface during the early summer months.

Sections of the loop road would be resurfaced with crushed rock aggregate. The road would be graded prior to re-surfacing.

Two crossings of the intermittent stream channel with the developed trail, below the proposed ford, would be hardened: large-sized gravel would be placed at both crossings; an existing rotting log, used by recreationists to cross the intermittent stream, would be replaced with a sound log.

Information signs would be provided at the fee tube station highlighting the restoration efforts and the need for campers to contain their camping activities within the confines of the “barriers.” Parking would be limited to two vehicles per site to prevent further expansion of disturbed sites. No camping would be permitted outside of designated sites.

FOREST PLAN DIRECTION

The Falls Creek Horse Camp is allocated as “General Forest ” by the *Gifford Pinchot National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan* (1990) as amended by the *Record of Decision for Amendments to Forest Plans Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl* (1994, amended 2004). The Visual Quality Objectives is “Modification”; the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum is “Roaded Modified.” The Recreation Standards and Guidelines state, “Where appropriate, recreational activities, compatible with commodity management may be encouraged. Driving for pleasure, hunting, dispersed camping, wildlife viewing, berrypicking, cross-country skiing, the use of off-road vehicles, and interpretation of cultural or other features of interest are examples of possible activities.”

ISSUES

Botany

Pale blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium sarmentosum*) occurs in Falls Creek Horse Camp. This is a Regional Sensitive species, also rated as Threatened by the State of Washington, and listed as a Species of Concern by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This occurrence was found in the small meadow and on the shoulders of the access road in the campground. Surveys conducted in 2004 uncovered additional occurrences for this species in areas nearby but outside the campground. Together, these occurrences appear to constitute a single contiguous population.

Noxious Weed And Invasive Non-Native Species

Forest Service Manual direction requires that Noxious Weed Risk Assessments be prepared for all projects involving ground-disturbing activities. For projects that have a moderate to high risk of introducing or spreading noxious weeds, recent Forest Service policy requires that decision documents must identify noxious weed control measures that will be undertaken during project implementation (FSM 2081.03, 11/29/95). To be in compliance with the EIS for Managing Competing and Unwanted Vegetation, it is also recommended the applicable *Standard Procedures to Reduce the Risk of Spreading Weeds* be implemented in all projects, regardless of weed risk ranking.

Risk Ranking

For this project, the Weed Risk Ranking is “Moderate” for the introduction or spread of noxious weeds, based on the applicable Factor and Vectors, shown below:

Factor

Known noxious weeds in close proximity to project area that could invade project.

Vectors

Importing soil/cinders/gravel/straw or hay mulch
Recreationists (hikers, horses, mountain bikers, etc)

FINDINGS

Botany

No Federally listed Threatened, Endangered or Proposed species or their habitats are known to occur in the area.

Pale blue-eyed grass (SISA), occurs within the campground area, with small populations immediately adjacent to the loop road. The mitigation measures assure a fairly high level of protection for the occurrence of SISA within the campground. Hence, there will be no impact to this species in association with this project.

Aside from this project, the presence of this small and seemingly vulnerable occurrence of SISA in such close proximity to the human and livestock impacts would appear so tenuous as to be eventually fatal, if not for the context of the larger population that surrounds this occurrence. The presence of the larger population provides a greater assurance that SISA will persist in the local area, and also provides sources of propagation and re-colonization that buffer (to some degree) detrimental impacts associated with the campground. At the population scale of assessment the most pressing threat to SISA in the area is not the campground, but the unrelenting encroachment of conifers and invasion of weeds into occupied habitats.

Wildlife

This project would have no effect on Threatened or Endangered species, and would not impact Forest Service Sensitive species. There would be no cumulative effects. The project would likely benefit wildlife habitat, as it would minimize new threats to adjacent undisturbed habitat by confining camping activities to the existing sites.

Hydrology

There are no data to characterize the volume, rate, and character of sediment input in the site's natural state. The gentle topography in the vicinity suggests water moved in a channel through the horse camp. The fish-bearing stream Falls Creek flows approximately 500 feet south of the camp.

Upslope of the camp, the channel passes through an existing culvert on the 65 Road. The loop road of the horse camp is intercepting flow and dissipating in a wet area in the center of the camp (Figure 1). Flow entering into the loop road is damaging the road, aggravated by traffic when the native surfacing is wet, and has cut a 5-inch deep rut (2 to 3 inches wide) for about 70 feet of the road. The water crosses the wet area in the center of the camp toward the south.

The flow passes across the loop road on the southwest side of the camp in a 12 inch wide rut (2 to 3 inches deep) seen for 50 feet above (upstream) the road. The rut continues for 50 feet below (downstream) the road along a user created trail, which is east of the historic channel. The road surface and the soils adjacent to the road are potential sources of sediment, which could reach the flood plain of Falls Creek, given it's proximity to the creek.

A significant amount of sediment would not likely reach the creek, judging from the amount of erodable surface, the gently sloping bench between the camp and stream, and the mitigation measures listed below.

The proposed activities would limit erosion and protect the road from further deterioration. The new ford and culvert would allow water to cross the road with little or no erosion of the road material. It would also promote the development of a channel similar to what apparently existed before the horse camp was established. Road surface repair would reduce the chance of water flowing out of the channel and reduce erosion and resource damage. The proposed activities would lead to improved conditions in the long term and meet the intent of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy.

Heritage

There would be “No Effect” on heritage resources.

Fisheries

This project would have no effect on Threatened or Endangered species: The Falls Creek Horse Camp is approximately six miles upstream of a steelhead barrier falls; stream shade or woody debris would not be reduced, and sediment would not be increased from stream banks, roads or slope stability.

MITIGATION

Pale blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium sarmentosum*)

To minimize or avoid impacts to SISA in the campground the following mitigation measures apply:

- Gravel will not be applied to the section of the access road where SISA occurs to avoid damage or loss of existing plants and habitat. This section of road is in fairly good condition as it is.
- Wooden posts will be placed along the access road and edge of the small meadow to prohibit vehicle access and avoid damage or loss of plants and habitat. Because some plants grow along the edge of the road and could be damaged by digging and placing the posts, the Botanist shall mark the locations for placement of the posts. Additional care shall be taken to minimize disturbance to the meadow and herbaceous road shoulders during excavation and placement. Excavated dirt shall be piled off the meadow and road shoulders, and excess dirt shall be disposed of off-site.
- Efforts will be taken to minimize the area of disturbance associated with placement and construction of the culvert near the small meadow to minimize impacts to existing plants and habitat. Excavated dirt shall be piled off the meadow and road shoulders, and excess dirt shall be disposed of off-site.
- Efforts shall be taken to reduce the risk of introducing and spreading weeds into the area. Mitigation for weeds is outlined below.

Standard Procedures to Reduce the Risk of Spreading Noxious Weeds

Most of the project work will be done in existing disturbed campsites or roads and will not create additional areas of disturbance as weed habitat. Much of the project area occurs in fairly shady forest understory environments that are relatively unfavorable habitats for weeds. Still, several weedy species were noted in open areas adjacent to the project, and as such actions shall be taken to minimize the risk their introduction to the area as a result of the project. To reduce the risk of introducing and spreading weeds into the area the following mitigations are prescribed.

- To prevent the introduction of noxious weeds into the project area, all heavy equipment, or other off-road equipment used in the project is to be cleaned to remove soil, seeds, vegetative matter or other debris that could contain seeds. Cleaning should be done before entering National Forest Lands, and when

equipment moves from or between project sites or areas known to be infested into other areas, infested or otherwise. Cleaning of the equipment may include pressure washing. An inspection will be required to ensure that equipment is clean before work can begin. (Equipment cleaning clause Wo-C6.35).

- Sources for gravel and boulders imported from outside of the project area should be inspected for weed contamination to ensure that weeds are not introduced into the project area. If sources are contaminated with weeds, then the gravel or boulder materials need to be either cleaned of weeds and seeds, or other weed-free sources for these materials need to be utilized. Consult with the District Botanist for assistance if needed.
- A mixture of native grass seeds shall be sown over areas of ground disturbance to inhibit the establishment of weeds. Consult with the District Botanist for seed mixture prescriptions, and fertilizing and seeding application rates.

Water Quality

In the cooperative spirit of the Memorandum of Understanding with WDFW, the following provisions apply. Measures prescribed specifically for this project are listed below each provision.

- Alteration or disturbance of the bed, banks, and bank vegetation of water bodies shall be minimized and limited to that necessary to construct the project.
 - Disturbances to stream channels are designed only to improve those crossings. No other work is proposed near water bodies.
- To prevent contamination, equipment used around streams or other water bodies shall be free of external petroleum-based products. Equipment shall be checked daily for leaks and any necessary repairs shall be completed prior to commencing work activities. All machinery fueling and maintenance involving petroleum products shall occur at a sufficient distance from stream channels, water bodies, or wetlands to prevent delivery of potential contaminants.
 - Fueling and maintenance involving petroleum products shall occur at a designated campsite or outside the horse camp, away from sites where water will be flowing. Equipment that could leak contaminants into water or soil shall be inspected daily and repaired prior to commencing work activities.

- Erosion prevention and control methods shall be used as necessary during and immediately after project implementation to minimize loss or displacement of soils and to prevent delivery of sediment into streams or other water bodies. These may include, but are not limited to, operational techniques, straw bales, silt fencing, erosion control blankets, temporary sediment ponds, and/or immediate mulching of exposed areas. Disturbed ground with the potential to deliver sediment into stream channels or other water bodies shall be revegetated or protected from surface erosion by seeding, mulching, other methods prior to the fall rainy season.
 - In the event water should begin flowing in the channels before or during work on the ford, straw bales shall be installed downstream of the worksite.
- Fords shall be designed to avoid negative channel changes such as channel widening or erosion of the streambed or streambanks.
 - The ford is designed to pass water across the road with little or no erosion of the road surface and direct flow into the original channel.

DECISION

I have decided to implement this project as described on page 2 of this document. This decision includes the required mitigation detailed above.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment. The action is covered by the following categories from FSH 1919.15, 31.12: (3) Repair and maintenance of administrative sites, (4) Repair and maintenance of roads, trails, and landline boundaries, and (5) Repair and maintenance of recreation sites and facilities.

A categorical exclusion is appropriate since there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects that may significantly affect the environment. These categories do not require the maintenance of a project file or documentation of the decision in a Decision Memo; however, at my discretion, I have decided to document the decision and required mitigation. I find that there is no potential for significant impact from implementation of this action. In this decision, I considered the potential to affect critical habitat for federally listed species; and the potential for disturbance to culturally significant sites. I find that the effect of this action will not result in individually or cumulatively significant impacts.

Scoping

The project was listed in the quarterly schedule of proposed actions for the Gifford Pinchot National Forest (*Pinchot Projects*); the decision will be published in the upcoming quarterly schedule.

Findings Required by National Forest Management Act and Other Laws

As required by the National Forest Management Act, this decision is consistent with the *Gifford Pinchot National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan* (1990, amended 2004) as amended by the *Record of Decision for Amendments to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl*. This project is located within a developed recreation site within the Wind River Tier 1 Key Watershed. I find that implementation of this project is consistent with standards and guidelines for this allocation and will result in conditions that are closer to the desired future condition.

I find that this action is consistent with the Forest Service policy concerning Sensitive species. As mitigated, this action will have no effect to plant species currently listed on the Regional Forester's Sensitive species list.

I find that this decision is consistent with the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and the Clean Water Act. There are no timing restrictions for this action.

Implementation Date

This project will be implemented in the summer of 2005.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is not subject to administrative appeal.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision, contact Julie Knutson, Public Service Assistant, (509) 395 3410 or email: jcknutson@fs.fed.us.

/s/ *Nancy Ryke*

12/16/2004

DISTRICT RANGER

Date

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