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Environmental Assessment/Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration

Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area Visitor Center Trail

Mono Lake Ranger District, Inyo National Forest
Mono County, California
T4N, T5N, R13E, R14E sect. 4, 5, 8 & 9

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SUMMARY

The Inyo National Forest and California State Parks proposes to construct an interpretive trail from the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area Visitor Center to the “Old Marina” recreation site within the Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve. The project area is located within the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area and lays just northwest of the Scenic Area Visitor Center, ¼ mile north of Lee Vining, CA and is within the Mono Lake Ranger District, Inyo National Forest, California.

This action is needed for multiple reasons:

1. There has been an increasing demand for recreation opportunities in the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area and Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve,
2. There is demand for a safe and practical route from the Visitor Center to Mono Lake,
3. Unmanaged recreation within the project area is contributing to resource damage,
4. The existing visual quality of the project area does not comply with Forest Plan direction.
5. Cultural and historic resources in the area are being vandalized.
6. Lack of parking barriers in areas had led to expansion of parking areas and resource damage.
7. The restroom facility at Old Marina is in poor condition and no longer meets the needs of visitors.

The proposed action referenced in this document is a modified version of the proposed action that was introduced to the public during the scoping process in February and March, 2006. The modifications to the proposed action respond to issues that were identified with the original proposed action and comments that were received.

The Forest Service evaluated the following alternatives:

- *No Action – Continue to allow motor vehicle access along route Z51 and to the historic natural feature known as “Icebox Tufa.” No improvement in visual quality of area and no designation of a route from visitor center to Mono Lake.*
 - *Original Proposed Action – Harden entire length of proposed trail and design trail to create accessibility for hikers and bikers and construct a portion of trail to be compatible with wheelchair access. High level of development.*
 - *Modified Proposed Action – Construct an interpretive hiking trail that consists of native soils in the upper sections near the Scenic Area Visitor Center to Icebox Tufa, a sinuous trail design in the middle portion of the trail, and an ADA portion of trail from Icebox Tufa to Old Marina. Low level of development.*
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The original and modified proposed actions may increase visitation to the project area and change use patterns from motorized recreation to pedestrian oriented recreation. Increased pedestrian use of the project area could have minimal, but negligible, impacts to avian fauna and mule deer. Implementation of the original proposed action would likely result in greater impacts to shoreline birds than implementation of the modified proposed action. New trail construction and increased pedestrian traffic are potential vectors for noxious weeds. Elimination of vehicular access to cultural resources will reduce potential for vandalism. Road to trail conversion within the project area will reduce the amount of bare soil and thus reduce potential erosion impacts. Implementation of either the original or the modified proposed action would improve visual quality of the project area, however, the modified proposed action would improve visual quality more than the original proposed action.

Based upon the effects of the alternatives, the responsible officials will decide whether or not to approve the construction of an interpretive trail and which level of development, high or low, is appropriate if the trail is constructed.

Document Structure

This document is a joint Environmental Assessment, Initial Study, and Mitigated Negative Declaration (EA/IS/MND), intended to meet the requirements of both the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

The purpose of an environmental assessment is to:

1. Briefly provide sufficient evidence and analysis for determining whether to prepare an environmental impact statement or a finding of no significant impact.
2. Aid an agency's compliance with the Act when no environmental impact statement is necessary.
3. Facilitate preparation of a statement when one is necessary.

(40 CFR 1508.9(a))

The purposes of an initial study is to determine if a project may have a significant effect on the environment [CEQA Guidelines §15063(a)]. If there is substantial evidence that a project may have a significant effect on the environment, an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) must be prepared, in accordance with CEQA Guidelines §15064(a). However, if the lead agency determines that revisions in the project plans or proposals made by or agreed to by the applicant mitigate the potentially significant effects to a less-than-significant level, a Mitigated Negative Declaration may be prepared instead of an EIR [CEQA Guidelines §15070(b)]. The lead agency prepares a written statement describing the reasons a proposed project would not have a significant effect on the environment and, therefore, why an EIR need not be prepared. This IS/MND conforms to the content requirements under

CEQA Guidelines §15071. The decision to prepare a joint EA/IS/MND document, as opposed to several separate documents, was made in an effort to present to the public a cohesive project proposal and analysis, realize efficiencies and cost savings to the government agencies, and reduce confusion by asking the public to respond with comments to one agency, rather than several.

The document is organized into seven parts:

- *Purpose of and Need for Action:* The section includes information on the history of the project proposal, the purpose of and need for the project, and the agency's proposal for achieving that purpose and need. This section also details how the Forest Service informed the public of the proposal and how the public responded.
- *Comparison of Alternatives, including the Proposed Action:* This section provides a more detailed description of the agency's proposed action as well as alternative methods for achieving the stated purpose. These alternatives were developed based on significant issues raised by the public and other agencies. This discussion also includes possible mitigation measures. Finally, this section provides a summary table of the environmental consequences associated with each alternative.
- *Environmental Consequences:* This section describes the environmental effects of implementing the proposed action and other alternatives. This analysis is organized by [insert topic (i.e., resource area, significant issues, environmental component)]. Within each section, the affected environment is described first, followed by the effects of the No Action Alternative that provides a baseline for evaluation and comparison of the other alternatives that follow.
- *Agencies and Persons Consulted:* This section provides a list of preparers and agencies consulted during the development of the environmental assessment.
- *Initial Study*
- *Mitigated Negative Declaration*
- *Appendices:* The appendices provide more detailed information to support the analyses presented in the environmental assessment.

PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

Background

The Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area Visitor Center (SAVC) sits approximately 1.1 miles from the western shore of Mono Lake. An average of 118,000 people visit the SAVC annually. Visitors seek to learn about the unique volcanic Mono Basin and recreate in the surrounding Mono Lake area and the adjacent Sierra Nevada range.

The "Old Marina" site is managed by the California State Parks and is part of the Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve. Sitting adjacent to State Highway 395, the primary travel corridor of the Eastern Sierra, approximately 70,000 people visit Old Marina

each year. Visitors use the site as a rest stop, for picnicking, birding, hiking, and as a put-in for canoes and kayaks.

The project area has a diverse history of land uses that reflect the societal needs of the time, ranging from traditional gathering by the Native Kutzadika's, to dairy ranches in the late 19th century, to motor-cross and fireworks events in the 1970's and 80's. In 1982, the State established the Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve on recessional lands surrounding Mono Lake. Recessional lands are those lands adjacent to Mono Lake between elevation 6417 feet above sea level and the low water level of the Lake as it varies from day to day. In 1984, the area was designated by congress as a National Forest Scenic Area and the US Forest Service was directed to manage the land to preserve the scenic and natural characteristics of the landscape. With input from the public, the Forest Service developed a "Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area Comprehensive Management Plan" that provides specific management direction for National Forest Lands within the Mono Basin and guidelines for management of non-federal lands within the Basin.

In 2005, California State Parks signed a mitigated negative declaration approving redevelopment plans for the Old Marina recreation site.

The remnants of past land use are still visible within the project area. Several foundations from old ranches and an old dock are buried in the sagebrush within and outside of the project area. The foundation of the "Old Marina" and associated infrastructure are still present on the land managed by California State Parks. Routes established during the operation of the motor-cross track still exist on land managed by the City of Los Angeles.

Road Network

There are several un-improved roads within the project area. Routes Z50, Z51, and Z52, and Z53 exist within the project area.¹

Route Z50 is a four wheel drive, high clearance road that follows an existing utility corridor. It is very lightly used and does not receive any maintenance from the US Forest Service.

Route Z51 is an un-maintained four wheel drive road that splits off of Route Z52, crosses the main "Picnic Grounds Road" (also known as County Road), and provides access to the "Icebox/Cave Tufa." This road then continues down towards the shore of Mono Lake and eventually ends at "Old Marina." The most southern end of route Z51, approximately 400 feet, is on land owned by the City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. The southern half of the road is suitable only for four-wheel drive vehicles and has degraded in condition in recent years due to lack of maintenance. Two-wheel drive vehicles often get stuck in the soft pumice trying to climb up the road. The northern half of the road, north of the County Road,

¹ As designated in step one of the Inyo National Forest Route Designation Process, routes prefixed with a "Z" were inventoried in 1988. Routes prefixed with a "N" were inventoried in 2003.

has severe erosion problems and lack of maintenance has only increased the degrading condition of the road. High clearance is needed to traverse the uneven slope of the two-track.

Route Z52, commonly referred to as the “Avalanche Bypass Route,” is a partially paved and gravel road that receives moderate use. In the winter the route is plowed by Mono County and used by emergency vehicles when avalanches close sections of highway 395, although Z52 is not entirely out of the avalanche run-out zones. During avalanche control activities, Caltrans officially closes US 395. Caltrans does not provide a detour nor condones use of Z52 as an unofficial detour/bypass route.

Route Z53 is a gravel road within the Old Marina recreation site and lays inside the Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve. The road provides vehicular access to the David Gaines Memorial Boardwalk.

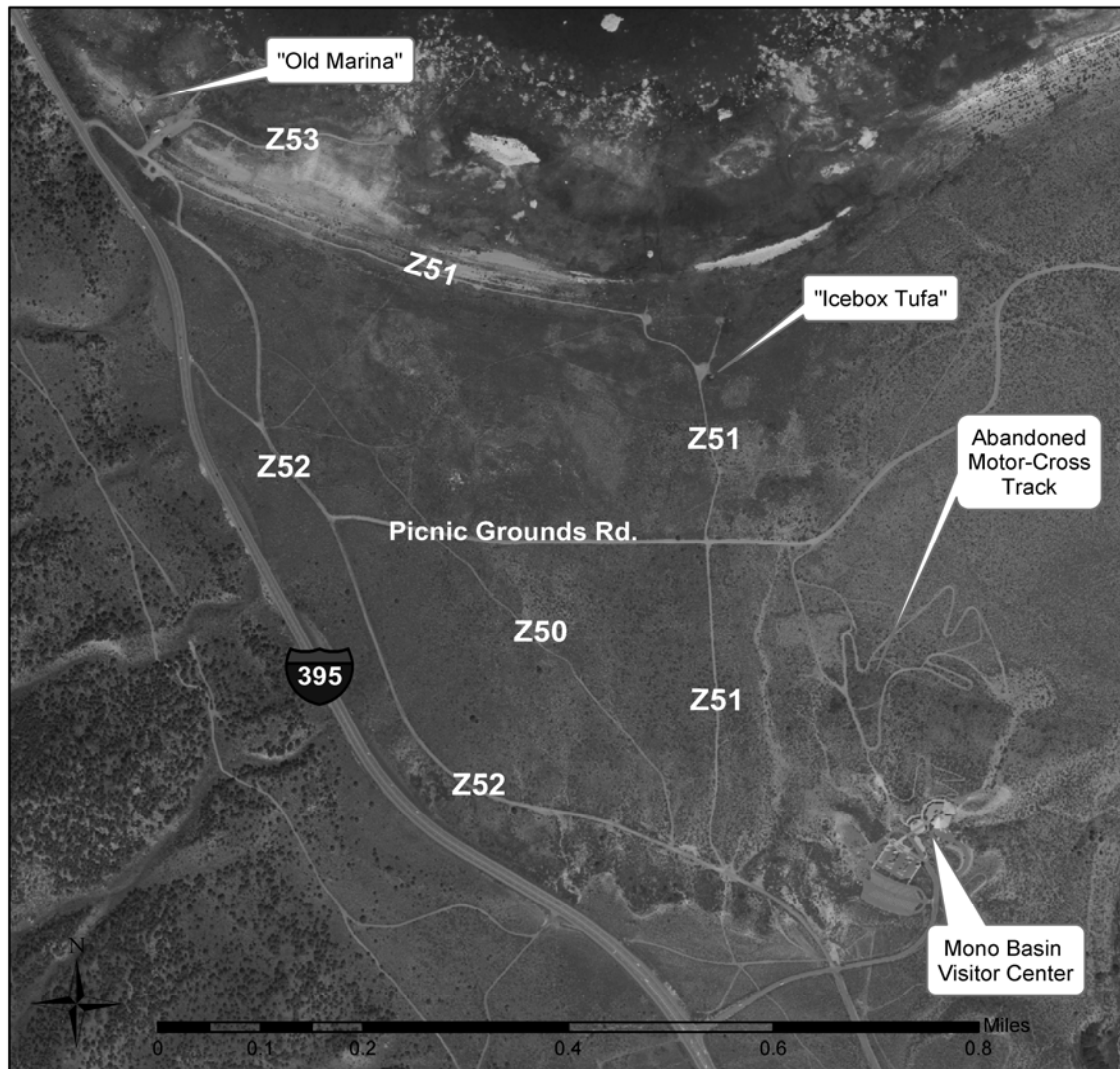


Figure 1. Project Area Roads

Purpose and Need

The purpose for this project is to:

1. Provide a safe and sustainable interpretive footpath from the Scenic Area Visitor Center to the Mono Lake shore. Currently there is no marked trail or road that will take visitors directly from the SAVC to Mono Lake. Visitors consistently inquire as to how they might walk down to Mono Lake and are disappointed to learn there is no practical way. This project would remedy this problem while enhancing the recreation opportunities within the Scenic Area.
 2. Provide additional ADA opportunities in the Mono Basin. Currently, there is only one trail in the Mono Basin Scenic Area that is ADA Accessible. Forest standards and guidelines put forth in the Mono Basin Scenic Area Management Plan call for 10% of new recreation sites with a capacity of 125 or people be designed to meet the needs of those with physical limitations.
 3. Comply with Forest Plan direction. Route Z51 is duplicate road in the project area and is contributing to resource damage in the forms of soil erosion and degradation of the visual quality of the Scenic Area. According to the management prescriptions of the “developed” and “general use” zones of the Scenic Area Management Plan, route Z51 should be closed and rehabilitated.
 4. Protect cultural resources. The northern half of route Z51 currently provides sole vehicular access to the unique geologic and cultural feature known as the “Icebox/Cave Tufa.” The easy vehicular access to this site has resulted in vandalism, vagrancy, and littering that is degrading the site. The Scenic Area Management Plan has specific direction to “protect significant geological features.”
 5. Improve visual quality and resource protection. At and near the intersection of Route Z50, “The Avalanche Bypass Road” and Visitor Center Drive, motorized users have created parking areas and short hill climbs to gain vistas of the Mono Basin. These areas are now denuded of vegetation, resulting in erosion and reductions in visual quality.
 6. Ensure public safety. The myriad of roads between the Scenic Area Visitor Center and Mono Lake Shore make pedestrian travel in the area confusing and difficult.
 7. Improve visitor services. Adjacent to the Old Marina recreation site, a portable toilet has been in place for many years and is in very poor condition. High visitation of this popular recreation area demands an alternative sanitation control that will promote visitor use.
-

Proposed Action

As released on February 1, 2006, the US Forest Service, in cooperation with California State Parks and the City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, proposes to construct a trail that would leave from the Mono Basin Scenic Area Visitor Center, at the north end of the existing interpretive nature trail, cross approximately 1000 feet of land owned by LADWP, and then contour down slope and connect with route Z51, which would be closed to motorized vehicles. The trail would follow route Z51 across the County Road, head towards the Ice Box Tufa, and then follow route Z51 to the parking area at Old Marina. It is proposed that approximately 3500 feet of trail, from the County Road to Old Marina, be constructed and maintained as an ADA Accessible Trail.

The proposed trail project would close road "Z51" and turn it into a hiking and biking trail.

The entire proposed trail surface would consist of a gravel road base material that would compliment the natural colors of the soil and rock in the Mono Basin.

Interpretive concepts that would be included in panels and information along the trail include: the ecology of Mono Lake, the volcanic and geologic natural history, Native American history in the Mono Basin, and the Anglo settlement of the Mono Basin. Benches and shade structures would be constructed at interpretive sites along the trail.

Decision Framework

This joint Environmental Assessment, Initial Study, and Mitigated Negative Declaration document serves as a planning document for decision makers.

Given the purpose and need, the deciding official for the Forest Service will review the proposed action and alternatives analyzed in this document and decide either to implement the proposed action, an alternative that moves the project area towards the desired condition, or not implement any project at this time.

California State Parks will review the proposed action, alternatives, and mitigation of issues put forth in this joint NEPA/CEQA document and decide if the proposed mitigations are effective in addressing the environmental issues created by this project proposal.

Additional Documentation

Additional documentation, including more detailed analyses of project-area resources, may be found in the project planning record located at the Mono Lake Ranger District Office in Lee Vining, CA. Please contact Deputy District Ranger, Mike Schlafmann, at (760)647-3033, for access.

The action is proposed by the United States Forest Service, California State Parks, and the City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. The USFS is the lead agency for the NEPA process and California State Parks is the lead agency for the CEQA process. The City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power is a responsible agency under CEQA and cooperating agency under NEPA. In accordance with both NEPA and CEQA, this draft EA/IS/MND is subject to a 30 day public review period.

Public Involvement

The proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions on February 1, 2006. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping, February 10, 2006 through March 10, 2006. In addition, as part of the public involvement process, the agency held a public scoping meeting on March 1, 2006 and a project field trip on May 10, 2006.

Using the comments from the public, other agencies, and area Tribes, the interdisciplinary team developed a list of issues to address. An issue is an effect (or a perceived effect) on physical, biological, social, or economic resources caused by the proposed action.

Issues

The Forest Service separated the issues into two groups: significant and non-significant issues. Significant issues were defined as those directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action. Non-significant issues were identified as those: 1) outside the scope of the proposed action; 2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; or 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) NEPA regulations require this delineation in Sec. 1501.7, "...identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not significant or which have been covered by prior environmental review (Sec. 1506.3)..." A list of non-significant issues and reasons regarding their categorization as non-significant may be found at the Mammoth Ranger Station in the project record.

The Forest Service identified five significant issues during scoping. These issues include:

1. Disturbance to wetland wildlife species along shoreline – In the current condition, route Z51 brings motor vehicles within close walking distance to the Mono Lake Shoreline and there currently exists several user created trails that leave route Z51 and head towards the shoreline. These routes are currently accessed primarily by birders who are sensitive to the needs of shoreline wildlife. Additional pedestrian traffic as a result of the proposed interpretive trail could result in increased disturbance to wetland wildlife species near and along the Mono Lake Shoreline.
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2. Trail surface material/level of development – The original proposed action proposed a hardened trail surface throughout the 1.27 mile trail route to improve access for bicycle users. Comments from the public expressed concern that a hardened trail surface for the entire length of the 1.27 mile trail route may not be consistent with the characteristics of the Scenic Area and may conflict with the management objectives put forth in the Mono Basin Scenic Area Management Plan. Trail Alignment/Route – The alignment and engineering of the proposed trail route in upper sections could result in a trail that is costly to maintain.
3. Development of User Created Trails – Trail alignment following existing route Z51 along the Lake shore without a connector trail to the David Gaines Memorial Boardwalk could result in the development of several user trails through the alkaline meadow from visitors wanting to access the Mono Lake shore as quickly as possible.
4. Visual Quality – The proposed trail design would result in visible bare soil, cuts in slope, and straight sections of trail following an existing roadbed that could reduce the visual quality of the area.

Laws, Regulations, and Other Direction that Influence the Scope of this Analysis

NEPA

The US Forest Service has prepared this Environmental Assessment in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations. This Environmental Assessment discloses the direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts that would result from the proposed action and alternatives.

CEQA

This Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration (IS/MND) has been prepared by the US Forest Service to evaluate the potential environmental effects of the proposed Lake Trail project and has been prepared in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), Public Resources Code §21000 *et seq.*, and the State CEQA Guidelines, California Code of Regulations (CCR) §15000 *et seq.*

Inyo National Forest Plan Direction – Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area Comprehensive Management Plan

This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area Comprehensive Management Plan, an amendment to the Inyo National Forest Plan, and helps move the project area towards desired conditions described in that plan. Specifically, the following objectives of the Scenic Area Management Plan are met through this proposed action:

III. B.2, Compliance with Management Prescriptions – The project area falls within two management prescriptions, the “Developed Recreation Zone” and the “General Use Zone.” The proposed action complies with these management prescriptions by providing increased visitor services and interpretive offerings, providing trail access, improving visual quality, and reducing the density of 4wd roads in the area.

III. C.2, Goal – “Identify, evaluate, protect, and interpret the cultural and historic resources of the Scenic Area.” In both the “developed” and “general use” zones, “interpret sites of public interest.”

III. C.10, Recreation and Interpretation, Goal - “Provide for a low level of overnight and day use facilities and provide interpretation to present a balanced program on the ecological, cultural, and geologic values of the Scenic Area. Use the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area Visitor Center as the focal point for interpretation and promote an atmosphere of discovery. Provide a full range of dispersed recreational opportunities in all ROS classes including motorized use on designated routes. Maintain an atmosphere of solitude over major portions of the Scenic Area.”

III. C.10, Recreation and Interpretation, Action Items – “Old Marina: in cooperation with the State of California and other interested parties, determine potential for historic interpretation and other facilities. Include redesign to limit impacts to sensitive areas. Implement when possible.”

III. C.12, Significant Geological Features, Goal – “Manage activities to protect and maintain the integrity of significant geological features. At the same time, provide opportunities for interpretation.”

III. C.14, Visual Resources, Goal – “Manage the Scenic Area to maintain and enhance the visual resource.”

III. C.16, Social/Economic, Goal – “Provide efficient Scenic Area management while responding to compatible economic and social needs of the public and local communities. Provide safe conditions for visitors to the Scenic Area.”

California State Parks – Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve Operations Plan

When the Tufa State Reserve was created in 1982, the enabling legislation specifically exempted the State from the requirement to write a General Management Plan. An “Operations Plan” was adopted in 2006 with the purpose of describing the current operations and planned activities of the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) in managing the lands and waters within the Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve. The plan provides the framework for management to be used as a tool by park staff to make both daily and long-term management decisions.

The Operations Plan for the Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve defers to the US Forest Service “Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area Comprehensive Plan” for management direction on planning efforts with the Scenic Area and Tufa State Reserve, “In evaluating an activity within the waters of Mono Lake and the State recessional lands, DPR uses the USFS (Zoning) Plan to determine if the activity is consistent with the Scenic Area Management Plan” (page 7).

Recreation Management in the Tufa State Reserve – The operations plan states that recreation within the Reserve is “confined to existing trails, boardwalks, roads, and parking areas” at Old Marina and the boardwalk below County Park (page 14).

Protection of Tufa Geologic Resources – The operations plan notes that “Boardwalks at the Old Marina and below the Mono Lake County Park help isolate tufa from visitors without impairing the visual experience” (page 16).

Visual Quality – The operations plan requires that “When possible, signs and interpretive panels will be clustered to prevent scattering signs around the reserve” and that the State shall “Avoid or minimize modifications to scenic resources” (page 21).

Applicable Regulatory Requirements, Required Coordination, Licenses, and Permits

The US Forest Service (USFS) is the lead agency and proponent of this action and alternatives. California State Parks (CSP), the City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP), and the California State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) are cooperating agencies. California State Parks is the lead agency under CEQA. A tri-party memorandum of understanding between the USFS, LADWP, and CSP was signed to delineate roles and responsibilities for conducting the environmental review of the proposed action and alternatives. If a decision is made to construct a trail as proposed in alternative 2 or 3, the three parties would enter into another memorandum of understanding to delineate roles and responsibilities for the construction and maintenance of the trail system and associated infrastructure.

A portion of the proposed trail is located on lands owned and managed by the City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP). To implement and construct trail and interpretive features on LADWP, the Forest Service must obtain a license from the City of Los Angeles. The process to obtain this license has been initiated by the US Forest Service.

Regulatory Framework The US Forest Service (Forest Service) proposes to identify, evaluate, treat, protect, manage, and consult about historic properties, as stated in the: Antiquities Act of 1906 (34 Stat. 225; 16 U.S.C. §§431 433), Historic Sites Act of 1935 (49 Stat. 666; 16 U.S.C. §§461 467), National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA), as amended (80 Stat. 915 et seq.; 16 U.S.C. §470 et seq.), National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), as amended (83 Stat. 852 et seq.; 42 U.S.C. §§4321 4347), Archaeological and Historical Data Preservation Act of 1974 (88 Stat. 174; 16 U.S.C. §469), American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 (92 Stat. 469; 42 U.S.C. §1996), the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, as amended (ARPA) (93 Stat. 721 et seq.; 16 U.S.C. §470 et seq.); and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA) (104 Stat. 3048 3058; 25 U.S.C. §§3001 3013); and as mandated under Executive Order 11593, entitled Protection and Enhancement of Cultural Environment, Executive Order 13007, entitled Indian Sacred Sites, Executive Order

13175, entitled Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments; and Executive Order 13287, entitled Preserve America.

Alternatives, Including the Proposed Action

This chapter describes and compares the alternatives considered for the Mono Lake Trail project. It includes a description and map of each alternative considered. This section also presents the alternatives in comparative form, sharply defining the differences between each alternative and providing a clear basis for choice among options by the decision maker and the public. Some of the information used to compare the alternatives is based upon the design of the alternative (i.e., helicopter logging versus the use of skid trails) and some of the information is based upon the environmental, social and economic effects of implementing each alternative (i.e., the amount of erosion or cost of helicopter logging versus skidding).

Alternative 2, the modified proposed action, was developed based on public input and comments received during initial scoping of alternative 3, the original proposed action. The interdisciplinary team considered all comments received from the public and discussed amendments to the proposed action with the cooperating agencies.

Alternatives

Alternative 1 - No Action

Under the No Action alternative, the project area would continue to be managed in its existing condition. No trail would be constructed, route Z51 would remain open to motor vehicles, and the project area would continue to be accessed by motorized users. Erosion problems would continue on route Z51 and adjacent areas where vegetation is denuded from motorized use and would continue to impede upon the visual quality of the Mono Basin Scenic Area. Forest Plan management direction as specified in the Mono Basin Scenic Area Management Plan would not be achieved.

The City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and California State Parks could alter the management of lands under their ownership and within the project area through decisions made outside of this document.

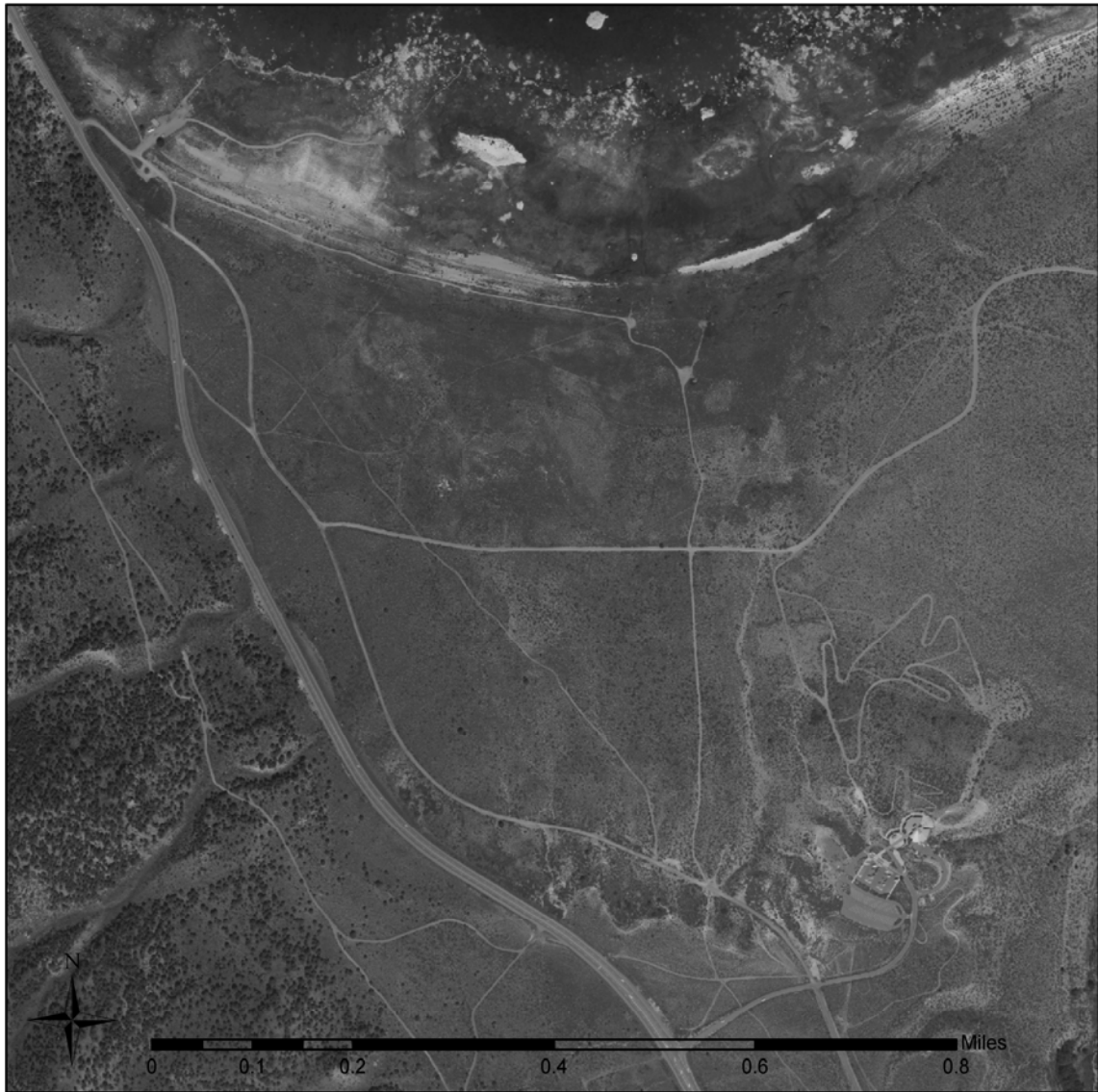


Figure 1. No Action Alternative

Alternative 2 – The Modified Proposed Action

The action proposed by the Forest Service to meet the purpose and need and to respond to issues and concerns raised by the public and cooperating agencies is to construct a 1.2 mile interpretive hiking trail, with a section of ADA Accessibility, from the SAVC to the “Old Marina” with design elements and mitigations absent in the original proposed action. The modified proposed action will contribute to:

1. Protecting the natural resources of the project area by managing recreation activities.
2. Creating a section of ADA trail, approximately 3500 ft in length.
3. Providing enhanced recreation opportunities in the Mono Basin.

-
4. Providing interpretive information to better inform the public of the history of the area, water conservation issues, and the ecology of the Mono Basin.
 5. Protecting significant cultural and geologic resources of the Scenic Area.
 6. Meeting the visual quality objectives set forth in the Forest Plan.

As proposed, the trail would leave the SAVC from the north end of the existing interpretive nature trail, traverse National Forest land on top of the moraine and contour northeast above the “high mark or ‘A’” of the old motor-cross track, and then switchback and cross approximately 1000 feet of land owned by LADWP. The trail would follow the natural contour down slope and connect with route Z51, which would be closed to motorized vehicles. The trail would follow route Z51 north in a sinuous pattern, winding slightly to west of the existing road alignment, to Picnic Grounds Road.

The trail would cross Picnic Grounds Road and continue towards the Icebox/Cave Tufa, and then follow route Z51 another 1/8 of a mile where the trail would turn north and head in a northwest direction along high ground above an alkali meadow to connect with the existing David Gaines Memorial Boardwalk. It is proposed that approximately 3500 ft of trail, from the Icebox/Cave Tufa to Old Marina, be constructed and maintained as an ADA Accessible Trail.

The proposed trail project would close road “Z51” to motorized vehicles and convert the road into a trail from the Avalanche Bypass junction to the point where the trail diverts towards the Mono Lake shoreline. Route Z51 between this point and Old Marina would be rehabilitated and restored to native vegetation. Sections of Z51 where the trail leaves the existing road alignment (to achieve sinuous trail alignment and sustainable trail development) will also be rehabilitated and restored.

At the route Z51 and County Road junction, it is proposed that two parking spots be constructed on the Z51 road segment south of County Road, using an area that is already denuded of vegetation. This parking area would allow visitors to park and hike a shorter distance to visit the Icebox Tufa.

The proposed trail surface of non-ADA portions of the trail would consist of native pumice soils.

The trail surface for ADA portions of the trail would consist of crushed class 1 and class 2 road base, with the possible addition of a polymer binding agent to provide increased trail durability. Per California State Parks redevelopment plan of the Old Marina recreation site, the road to the “David Gaines Boardwalk”, labeled as route Z53, would be closed, narrowed, and converted to ADA trail.

The existing ground-level boardwalk would be replaced with an elevated six foot wide boardwalk (similar to the boardwalk at “County Park” on the north side of Mono Lake) and boardwalk sections would be added and removed as needed based on rising/falling Lake levels and increased wetness in the adjacent meadow. Boardwalk

sections would not protrude into the Lake more than 50 feet and would stand at an elevation no more than 36 inches above the ground or water level. In sections of the trail that are in low lying areas but too short to use boardwalk, causeway sections may be constructed to elevate portions of the trail out of the wet meadow.

Interpretive Panels and Structures

It is proposed that interpretive panels be erected in small clusters and located strategically to keep the panels out of the viewshed as much as possible.

Interpretive concepts in the form of informational panels along the trail include: the ecology of Mono Lake, the natural volcanic and geologic history, Native American history in the Mono Basin, Anglo settlement of the Mono Basin, and water conservation messages. Benches would be constructed at some interpretive sites along the trail, taking advantage of the shade of the few mature pinyon pine trees along the trail route.

As part of the interpretive concept plan for this project, it is proposed that an interpretive “barrier” be constructed at the beginning of a user-created trail that leads down to the shoreline of the Lake, north of route Z51 and the Icebox Tufa. This barrier would obstruct the entrance of the user trail and have interpretive panels that are designed to deter visitors from walking towards the shore and disturbing shoreline bird habitat.

Vehicle Management Near Visitor Center Drive

It is proposed that the intersection of Avalanche Bypass Road with Visitor Center Drive be reconstructed to restrict vehicle access to designated roads and establish a delineated parking area for those parking and hiking in the area. Containment of the area would consist of erecting log and rock barriers and restoring vegetation to the hill and surrounding area where vehicles will no longer be able to travel.

Approximately 100 yards to the north of this intersection, similar conditions exist and it is proposed that this area be closed and restored using similar techniques.

Toilet Replacement at Old Marina

To compliment the redevelopment of Old Marina and proposed construction of the Lake Trail, it is proposed that portable toilet be replaced with a vault toilet, model commonly referred to as a “Sweet Smelling Toilet (SST).” The SST would be placed approximately 40 yards east of the existing toilet to improve accessibility from Old Marina.

List of proposed actions:

- 1) Designate a 1.5 mile interpretive trail from the Mono Basin Scenic Area Visitor Center to the “Old Marina” site on Mono Lake.
 - 2) Construct approximately 3000 feet of new trail between Visitor Center and route Z51 and along route Z51 south of Picnic Grounds Road.
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- 3) Close route Z51 to motorized vehicles. Narrow a large portion of the road to a five foot wide interpretive trail and close and rehabilitate some sections.
 - 4) Construct approximately 1500 feet of new “sinuous” trail adjacent to rehabilitated sections of route Z51 in segment of road between the Visitor Center and Picnic Grounds Road.
 - 5) Construct and maintain 3500 ft of ADA Accessible Trail that will include sections of elevated six foot wide boardwalk, causeway, and trail with a tread of crushed road base material.
 - 6) Rehabilitate and restore closed sections of road not converted to trail and areas of bare soil that result from trail construction efforts. Road rehabilitation will involve “ripping” and “grading” resulting in bare soil along existing road alignment and up to 20 feet from road edges in some areas.
 - 7) Construct interpretive panels and benches along the trail in locations that are minimally obtrusive to the viewshed and take advantage of shade provided by existing Pinyon Pine trees.
 - 8) Construct an “interpretive barrier” at the start of the shoreline user created trail, that is designed to provide information that will deter visitors from walking north towards the shore and disturbing shoreline bird habitat.
 - 9) Establish two unpaved parking spots, where the proposed trail intersects Picnic Grounds Road, to provide more accessible hiking to the Icebox Tufa geologic feature.
 - 10) Establish three unpaved parking spots near the intersection of Route Z50 and Visitor Center Drive.
 - 11) Rehabilitate vegetation on “hill climb” at intersection of Route Z50 and Visitor Center Drive, at vehicle turn-out and hill climb 100 yards north of the same intersection, and on “hill climb” on National Forest Land just below Visitor Center.
 - 12) Install a single ADA accessible “Sweet Smelling Toilet” (SST) restroom facility with vault on National Forest Lands adjacent to the Old Marina.
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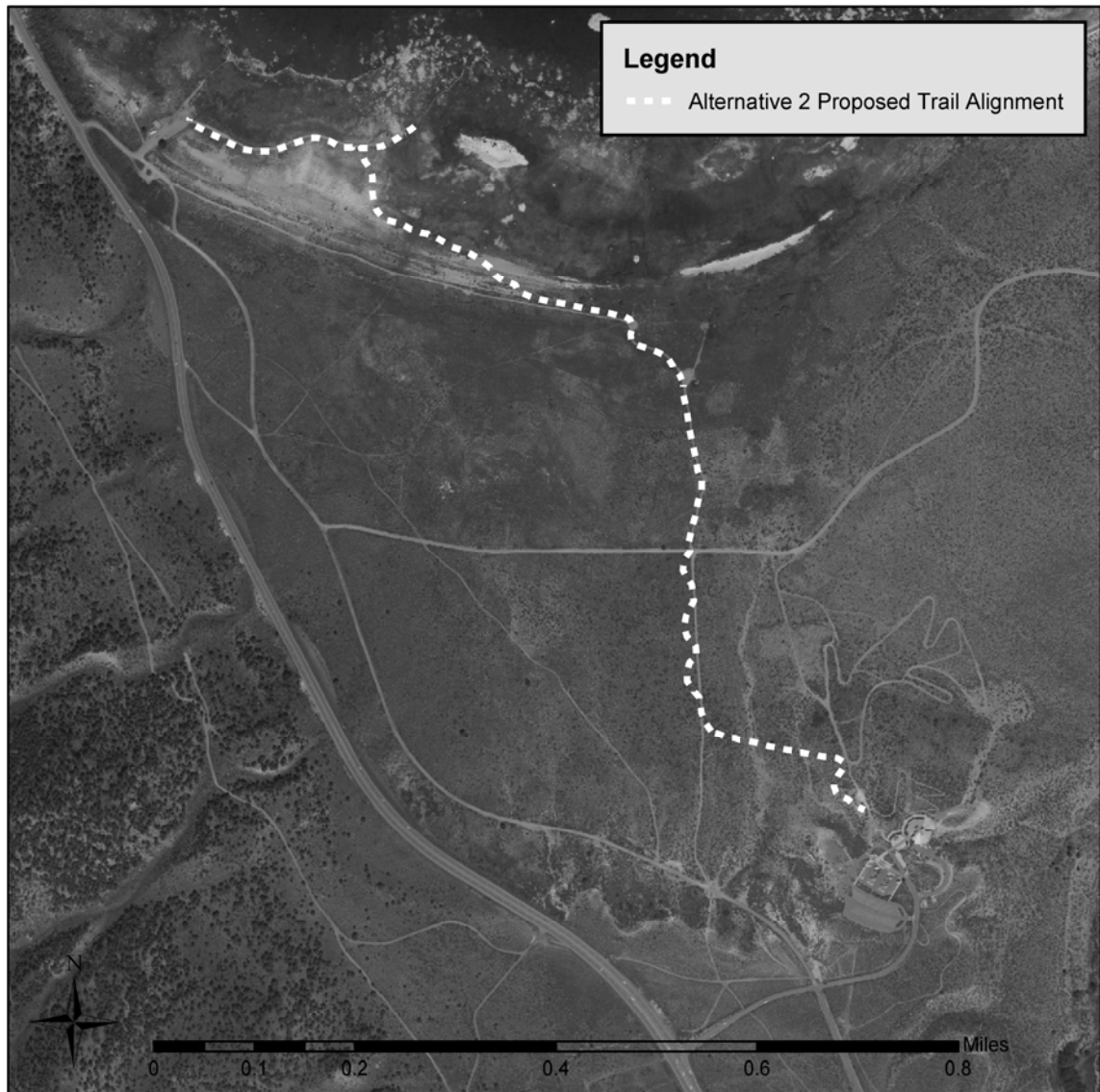


Figure 2. Alternative 2 – Proposed Action, Overview.

Alternative 3 – The Original Proposed Action

This alternative was initially proposed during the scoping process and commented on by the public and agencies. This alternative proposes the construction of a 1.27 mile hardened surface trail from the Visitor Center to the Old Marina. The entire length of the trail would be constructed with a hardened surface, using road base gravel material, hardening agents, and rollers to create a surface that is accessible to wheel chairs, hikers, and bikers. Portions of the trail would include boardwalk sections and elevated causeways. Approximately 3900 feet of the trail would be ADA accessible.

The alignment of the trail in this alternative differs from that of alternative 2. In alternative 3, the trail would leave the Scenic Area Visitor Center, drop northwest

into the first gully, cross the gully and traverse the moraine, drop and cross a second gully, and then traverse the moraine and head northwest to connect with route Z51. The trail would then continue north on route Z51, following the exact alignment of the road, cross Picnic Grounds Road and follow route Z51 past the Icebox Tufa, and then continue to follow the existing alignment of route Z51 all the way to Old Marina. The ADA portion of this trail alignment begins at Icebox Tufa and is proposed to be constructed to meet ADA standards all the way to Old Marina.

Alternative 3 is the same as alternative 2 except for:

1. Alternative 3 does not include parking spaces or a viewing platform as proposed in alternative 2.
2. Alternative 3 does not include actions to manage vehicle parking and turnoffs at and near Visitor Center Road.
3. Alternative 3 does not propose a sinuous trail alignment along the upper section of route Z51.
4. Alternative 3 trail alignment crosses drainages near the Visitor Center that would require the construction of bridges.
5. Alternative 3 trail alignment follows route Z51 between Ice Box Tufa and Old Marina and alternative 2 proposes to restore this section of road. Alternative 3 does not include a trail alignment that would connect directly to the David Gaines Memorial Boardwalk.
6. Alternative 3 does not propose to install a restroom near Old Marina.

The map below demonstrates the actions proposed in Alternative 3:

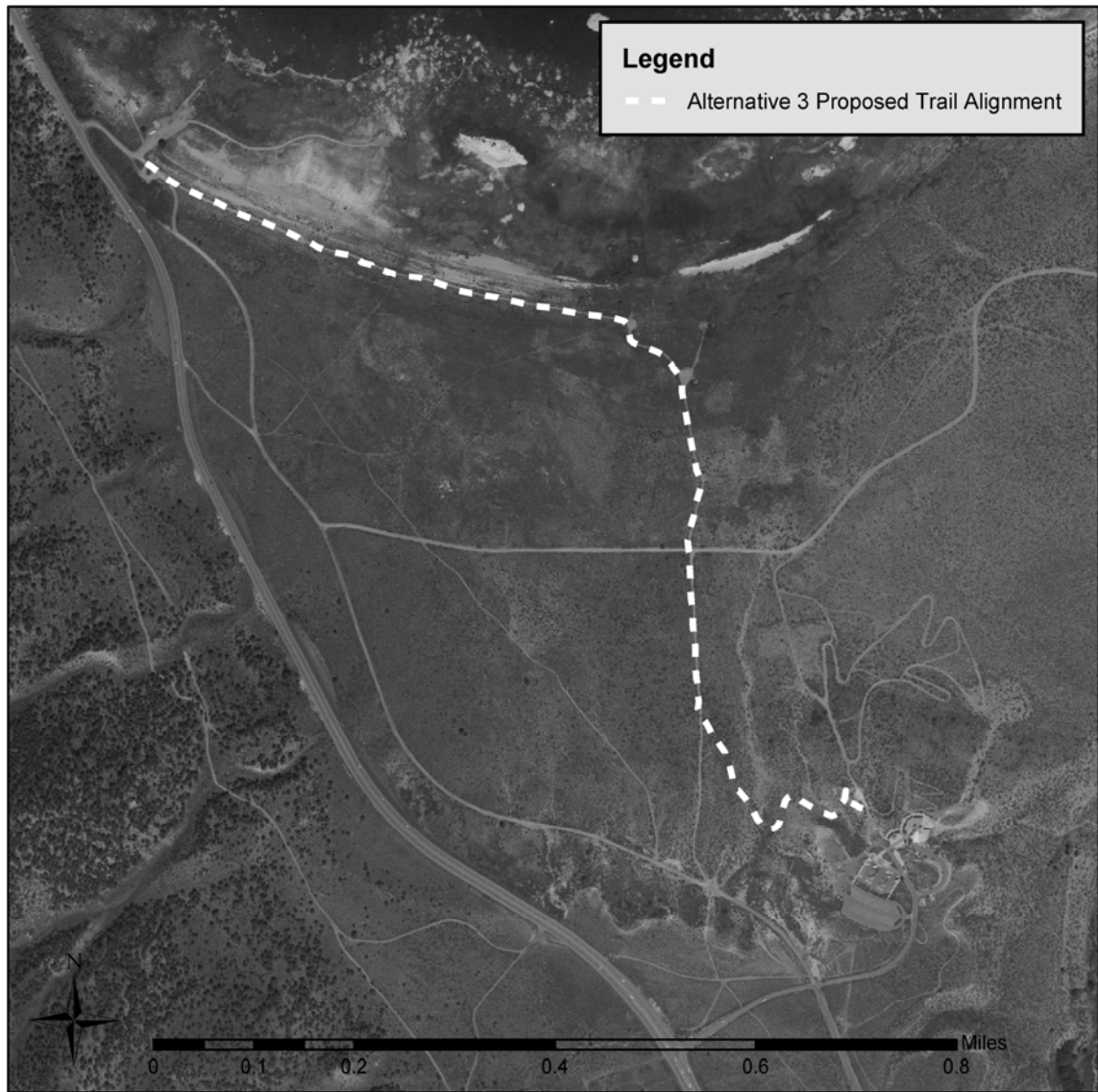


Figure 3. Alternative 3 – Hardened Surface, overview.

Mitigation Common to All Alternatives

Mitigation measures were developed to reduce the potential impacts of the action alternatives. These mitigations include standard management requirements such as best management practices. Mitigation measures referenced below are indexed to the CEQA environmental checklist.

Native Plants and Noxious Weeds - The following best management practices will be utilized:

- Monitor all construction areas and roadways within the project area annually for at least five growing seasons and treat any noxious weeds found.

-
- In all areas where grading or soil disturbance will occur, stockpile topsoil and re-spread topsoil following slope grading and prior to re-seeding. Stockpiled soil will be protected from wind and water erosion.
 - Local seeding guidelines will be used to determine detailed procedures and appropriate mixes. Preference is given to local seed sources, cultivars, and species available commercially. To avoid weed contamination, all seed purchases shall be certified weed-seed free.
 - Before ground disturbing activities begin, identify and locate all equipment staging areas. Treat existing noxious weeds in these areas prior to staging of any equipment.

Prior to construction the disturbance limits of the project will be flagged. Pop fencing, flagging or a staked rope line will be established to denote the limits of construction proximate to sensitive resource boundaries. (CEQA Checklist Section VI)

Erosion Control – The following best management practices will be utilized to minimize soil erosion and ensure the proper maintenance of hydrologic regimes:

- Soil disturbing activities will not be initiated during periods of heavy rain or excessively wet soils.
- Immediately following completion of approved ground disturbing activities and seeding, all areas of ground disturbance will be mulched with weed free straw, wood chips, bark, jute mat, etc.
- Check dams and sediment barriers (i.e., silt fence, weed-free hay bales, wattles, etc.) will be placed in all temporary erosion channels with minimum sufficient spacing to control runoff velocity and encourage sediment deposition.
- Water bars (12 to 18 inches deep) and cross drains will be constructed across all roads, trails, and other disturbed areas after seeding and fertilization at 50, 75, or 100 foot-intervals as a function of slope angle, or as necessary, to disperse surface runoff. The frequency will be sufficient to prevent rill erosion and sediment delivery channel formation. Alternatively “parabolic slope water bars” may be constructed at the gradient beginning at the center of the road or trail surface and traversing outward to spill into undisturbed vegetation on both sides of the road or trail prism. Waterbars and outlets will be inspected seasonally, maintained and cleared of sediments at regular intervals.
- Prior to construction, a construction access plan will be developed detailing access routes to pertinent project elements.

(CEQA Checklist Section VI and VII)

Disturbance to Wetland Wildlife Species Along Shoreline – In alternatives 2 and 3, there is a need to educate the public about the importance of maintaining undisturbed habitat for shoreline bird species at Mono Lake. The area to the northeast of the proposed trail is a highly productive wetland habitat, known to many birders as an excellent place to view shoreline birds, evidenced by several user-created trails that leave route Z51 towards the shoreline. An “interpretive barrier” will be constructed to act as a deterrent for those who consider access to the shoreline via the user-created trail network and as a venue for education and interpretation. Education materials will be in the form of interpretive panels designed to raise awareness about the needs of the area wildlife and deter visitors from leaving the established trail. Pictures of muddy shoes lost in the alkali muck and nesting shoreline birds will be used to illustrate the reasons why visitors should not travel away from the trail.

User trails in the sensitive wetland area will be monitored by annually photographing the condition and extent of user trails in the area. If it is determined that visitors are not respecting the voluntary “closure” of the wetland area, the Forest Service and California State Parks reserve the right to establish a seasonal closure of the area through appropriate legal mechanisms.

(CEQA Checklist Section IV)

Scenic Integrity – *The project without any mitigations will meet visual resource management objectives.* However, by following the attached mitigations, the potential effects to visual resources will be further reduced.

Interpretive panels should be designed to reduce glare and compliment the natural colors and textures of the project area.

The interpretive barrier and boardwalk should be constructed with materials that are context sensitive to the Scenic Area.

Cultural Resources – Evaluation of cultural sites identified within the project area will be completed prior to implementation of project. All recommended mitigation measures will be implemented at the Ice Box Tufa and other cultural sites will be avoided in implementation.

(CEQA Checklist Section V)

Restoration Techniques -

Restoration of rehabilitation areas will consist of the replanting and seeding of vegetation native to the project area, including grasses, herbaceous plants, and woody shrub species. “Vertical mulching,” a restoration technique that utilizes dead or dying vegetation to deter pedestrian and motorized traffic in restoration areas, will be used in many areas, particularly in areas where traffic control may be an issue.

Erosion control barriers, such as straw, will help keep seeds and soil in place. Restoration and rehabilitation will be facilitated using the above mentioned methods, however full restoration of areas denuded of vegetation will only be achieved over time as natural processes occur. Temporary signs designed to educate the public and assist in achieving restoration objectives will be used to direct pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

Mitigation Measures Specific to Alternative 2 _____

Noxious Weeds - Mitigation measures for alternatives 2 and 3: *Cardaria* should be removed using hand-pulling methods as soon as possible and monitored for reoccurrence annually. Equipment cleaning before and after working in the weedy areas is required and very important. How and when will weed locations be identified?

Wildlife – To ensure that nesting birds are not disturbed, an avian survey will be conducted prior to construction of the ADA trail that connects the portion of trail following route Z51 to the existing David Gaines Memorial Boardwalk. Nests will be flagged and avoided if found until young have fledged. (CEQA Checklist Section IV)

Comparison of Alternatives _____

This section provides a summary of the effects of implementing each alternative. Information in the table is focused on activities and effects where different levels of effects or outputs can be distinguished quantitatively or qualitatively among alternatives.

Table 1. Comparison of Alternatives.

	Alternative 1	Alternative 2	Alternative 3
Disturbance to wetland wildlife species along shoreline.	Minor and negligible disturbance levels would continue from access of existing user trail networks from road to shoreline.	Potential minor and negligible disturbance increase mitigated by viewing platform and educational signing.	Same as alternative 2.
Potential Human Disturbance to Wildlife along road and trail corridor	No change from existing condition.	Increased human disturbance potential. Overall potential increase is minor and negligible.	Same as alternative 2.

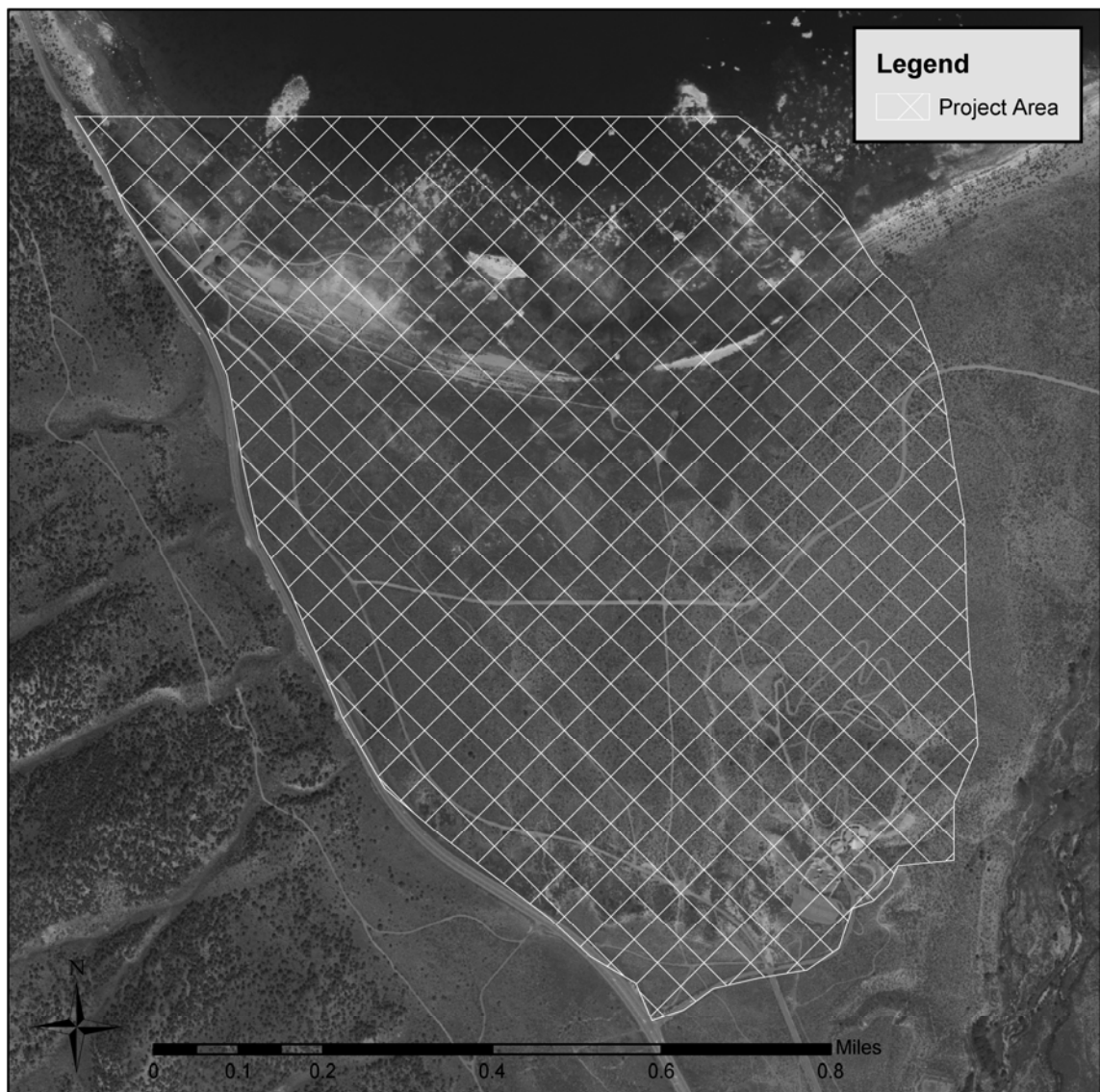
	Alternative 1	Alternative 2	Alternative 3
Habitat Affected	Sagebrush Habitat – 1.4 acres Alkaline Meadow Habitat – 0.4 acres Sagebrush/Dry Meadow Habitat – 0 Acres	Sagebrush Habitat – 0.9 acres Alkaline Meadow Habitat – 0.1 acres Sagebrush/Dry Meadow Habitat – 0.15 acres	Sagebrush Habitat – 0.79 acres Alkaline Meadow Habitat – 0.4 acres Sagebrush/Dry Meadow Habitat – 0 acres
Trail surface material/level of development	In the existing condition, there are no developed trails. Area roads consist of native pumice and alkalai soil with mixtures of gravel in some places that have been brought in over the years to harden soft spots.	All non-ADA trail segments would consist of native pumice and alkalai soils. ADA trail segments would consist of either elevated board walk, hardened causeway, or a hardened trail surface suitable for wheelchair access. Visual impacts from trail surfaces would be minimal on all non-ADA portions of the trail,	All trail segments would consist of some hardened surface material. The hardened materials would be either elevated board walk, hardened causeway, a hardened trail surface suitable for wheelchair access, or a hardened surface that is not designed for wheelchair access.
Trail Alignment	n/a	Trail alignment uses topography to minimize trail maintenance needs and reduce demand for costly infrastructure (bridges, retaining walls, etc). Alignment follows existing roads where possible. Alignment takes visitors to the Lake Shore as quickly as possible, thus reducing impacts associated with user created trails.	Trail alignment crosses drainages near visitor center, requiring construction of bridges. Increased construction and maintenance costs will result. Trail alignment follows existing roads as much as possible. Alignment does not take visitors directly to Mono Lake Shore, thus increasing the probability of visitors creating user trails to access Lake before reaching Old Marina.
Visual Quality And Visitor Experience	Existing condition does not meet management direction put forth in Forest Plan. Multiple roads in poor locations and unmanaged OHV use in the project area greatly reduces visual quality.	Visual quality would be greatly improved in areas where road is converted to non-ADA trail. Visuals would be somewhat improved in areas where road is converted to ADA trail. Elevated boardwalk would be visible from many vantage points. Trail alignment designed to minimize visibility of trail cut along slope. Sinuous trail alignment along southern portion of Z51 will greatly improve visual quality from vantage points along west and north shores of Mono Lake. Interpretive panels and benches clustered strategically to minimize obtrusiveness. Elevated boardwalk sections of trail would be visible from highway and surrounding landscape.	Visual impacts from non-ADA portions of trail would be greater than in alt 2 because of hardened surface. Visual quality of ADA portion of the trail and boardwalk would be the same as alternative 2. Visual quality would improve in areas where road is converted to trail. Trail alignment requires construction of bridges across drainages that would be visible from low and high elevation view points. Hardened trail surface throughout trail would be distinguishable from native soils and reduce visual quality. Highly probable creation of user trails near shoreline would have negative visual impacts.

Table 1 Continued – “Comparison of Alternatives

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT and ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

This section summarizes the physical, biological, social and economic environments of the affected project area and the potential changes to those environments due to implementation of the alternatives. It also presents the scientific and analytical basis for comparison of alternatives presented in the chart above.

As discussed in the sections below, the “project area” refers to the land that extends from the Visitors Center down to the lakeshore, and from the State Parking Area at the northeast shore known as “Old Marina,” easterly approximately 1.5 miles to the east perimeter of land owned the LADWP commonly referred to as the old “motor-cross track”. For relevant sections, such as wildlife, the project area extends out into the immediate open waters of the lake and 200 feet out into the water.



Sensitive, Threatened, and Endangered Wildlife Species

Affected Environment: No Federally listed Threatened, Endangered or Proposed wildlife species are known to inhabit the project area. The recently delisted bald eagle, may occasionally fly along the lakeshore to hunt in this area during migration. The species is not a resident at the Lake.

The project area also does not support resident populations of any Forest Service Region 5 sensitive species. The peregrine falcon may utilize the immediate lake environment to hunt for waterfowl and other birds along the lakeshore. There is suitable, although marginal habitat for the greater sage grouse. Potential sage grouse habitat is considered marginal due to a high road density resulting in fragmented habitat, a low productivity herbaceous under-story, and a lack of recent records of sage grouse using the area. No sage grouse sign was observed during field visits.

There are no State listed endangered wildlife species in the project area. The snowy plover does not nest within this section of the lake.

Environmental Consequences:

Alternative 1 - No Action: Under the No-Action Alternative, conditions within the project area would remain unchanged. There would be no effect on sensitive, threatened, endangered, or proposed plant or wildlife species.

Alternatives 2 and 3: Under the alternative 2 and alternative 3, route Z51 would be closed to motor vehicles and the project area would see an increase in pedestrian use. Because there are no threatened, endangered, or sensitive species nesting in the area, the increase in pedestrian activity would not have any adverse impacts for these species of concern. Because there are no threatened, endangered, or proposed plant species, or habitat for these species, there is no effect on these species.

Other Wildlife Species

Affected Environment: Forest Service management indicator species (MIS) identified in the 1988 LRMP that could be present in the project area are mule deer and yellow warbler. Very little sign of mule deer was evident during field assessments. Small willow clumps could be used by yellow warblers as stopover locations during spring and fall migration, or during post-breeding dispersal. The small scale willow habitats in the project area are not suitable habitat for nesting yellow warblers. No other MIS species occur in the project area.

Other species identified in the Mono Basin EIR (1993) and the Scenic Area Comprehensive Management Plan (USDA Forest Service 1989) that are likely to

use the lake and lakeshore habitats below the trail location are osprey, eared grebe, Wilson's phalarope, red-necked phalarope, California gull, Canada geese, and waterfowl species the most likely of which would be ruddy ducks, gadwall, and possibly northern shoveler. All of these species are found within immediate shoreline habitats and open waters adjacent to the proposed trail corridor.

These species are noted because of the potential for trail users to move off trail and enter into habitats used by these species. Information summarized below is taken from Mono Basin EIR (1993).

The lakeshore and lake environment is a highly important fall stopover for eared grebe. This species' numbers have been recorded between 600,000 and 900,000 during surveys in the 90's. The lake harbors the largest fall concentration of this species in all of North America. It also can be found on the lake from mid-June through the summer with counts approximately totaling 25,000 birds. The species' numbers build from June through early fall and peak in September and October. During early summer and fall they feed on the brine flies and tend to congregate at nearshore areas dominated by hard substrate such as shoaled pumice blocks and tufa towers where fly larvae and pupae are abundant. The species moves out to open water later in the summer and fall where it feeds on brine shrimp. The species does not nest at the lake.

The red-necked phalarope is another major bird species that uses the immediate lakeshore area adjacent to the proposed trail. It is a spring and fall migrant; small numbers in the spring, however tens of thousands of phalaropes (including Wilson's phalarope discussed below) have been counted during the summer period that begins in mid-July and continues into mid-September when numbers are at the highest. The lake is also the world's most important stop over for the Wilson's phalarope during migration. The National Academy of Sciences report (1987) noted a peak population of over 100,000 Wilson's phalaropes arrive at the Lake. The two phalarope species use shallow submerged tufa areas and pumice to find optimal fly foraging areas. Use appears to be concentrated near land along the lakeshore, although concentrated use areas appear to be variable depending on the year and lake water level. Areas such as the eastern shore, the western embayment, and the western shore areas have been noted in the EIR as high count areas with the western area apparently no longer used due to rising lake levels. The red-necked phalarope is not listed as nesting at Mono Lake, however the Wilson's phalarope has been identified as an uncommon breeder in Great Basin marshlands that include Mono Lake.

The EIR (1993) notes alkalai and dry meadow habitats harbor relatively few wildlife species because of the lack of vertical habitat structure, vegetative diversity, and lack of moisture. Species that have been identified as using this area include the horned lark, meadowlark, violet green swallow, savannah sparrow, Brewer's blackbird, black-tailed jackrabbit, Panamint kangaroo rat, deer mice and coyotes. There is a very limited margin of wet meadow adjacent to the project area. It

supports foraging habitat for migratory species such as killdeer, western sandpiper, American avocets, and Canada Geese as well as phalaropes already mentioned. The killdeer is likely the only species that might nest in this area. No nests of any wetland species were discovered during summer field surveys in 2006 and 2007. No substantive use by any waterfowl species has been described identified for this, however there is a possibility species such as gadwall and shoveler may forage along the shoreline and lake shallows.

The osprey is known to nest on a tufa out in the lake approximately 100 feet from the shoreline. Canada geese have also been observed to use the nest. The phalaropes, California gull, and eared-grebe utilize the shoreline and lake to feed on different life stages of the alkalai fly.

Species or species sign observed in the upland sagebrush habitats include the brewers sparrow, sage thrasher, mule deer, and black-tailed jackrabbit.

Environmental Consequences:

The mule deer is the only MIS that regularly uses the project area, and therefore it will be the only MIS discussed in the effects analysis. The yellow warbler will not be discussed further since it is unlikely to nest in the project area due to lack of suitable nesting habitat, and is not expected to be affected by the project. Potential impacts to shoreline wetland wildlife such as shorebirds and wading birds will be discussed since a public issue was identified. These species are not MIS, sensitive or federally listed, but are important species of management concern in the Scenic Area.

Alternative 1, No Action - Direct, Indirect and Cumulative Effects

The perpetuation of the existing Z51 and State Park road network would maintain the current minor and negligible level of human disturbance effects to wildlife species and their habitats within the project area. Wetland wildlife species along the shoreline such as avocets, shorebirds and gulls would continue to elicit variable levels of avoidance and displacement responses to human presence from hikers walking through the wetland to the shoreline from Road Z51 and the David Gaines boardwalk. The overall effect on these species would continue to be minor and negligible from continued low levels of human disturbance.

There would continue to be a direct effect of habitat loss on 1.4 acres of sagebrush habitat, and 0.4 acres of alkaline meadow habitat from road presence. The low level of motor vehicle use on the Z51 road network including OHV use, as well as other recreation uses such as hikers, mountain bikers, and birdwatchers would continue to have a minor and negligible effect to mule deer use of the sagebrush and dry alkaline meadow habitat within the project area. Deer would continue to experience a low level of avoidance and displacement responses that include disruption of deer activities such as feeding and resting. This type of impact would continue to have a

similar though highly variable effect on other non-MIS wildlife species such as resident songbirds, and mammals along the road corridor.

Recreation increased use of the Scenic Area is contributing some unknown level of human disturbance to wildlife species, but there is no evidence at this time to suggest this disturbance is adversely affecting any species population viability, or substantively affecting the species overall use of suitable habitats.

A reasonably foreseeable recreation project that could have positive cumulative effects on Scenic Area wildlife habitats is the restoration of the motor-cross track on land owned and managed by the City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. Closure of 6500 feet of road in the eastern half of the project area may somewhat decrease human disturbance effects to species such as resident songbirds and mule deer that have been observed to use the sagebrush habitat.

There are no reasonably foreseeable recreation projects that would contribute to adverse cumulative effects on Scenic Area wildlife habitats. The most recent project that has had a minor and negligible impact to habitat in the Mono Basin was the development of the Navy Beach/South Tufa trail and parking area expansion.

Action Alternative 2 - Direct, Indirect and Cumulative Effects

The conversion Z51 and the State Park road network to a trail may increase the potential for disturbance to shoreline wetland bird species since hikers may be more likely to hike to the shoreline from the trail than under current conditions. The level of effect would still be considered minor and negligible. The placement of a viewing platform and signs to educate hikers to avoid cross country travel to the shoreline to prevent adverse human disturbance effects to shoreline bird use may mitigate this issue.

Observations suggest the birds have become somewhat habituated to regular non-threatening human use of the project lakeshore/lake area, such that the birds may not move at all, or move a short distance away out in the lake, or flush to less disturbed near-areas of the Lake during the disturbance period. The Lake habitats to the east are considerably less disturbed and offer the birds a daily refuge as human use of the project area increases during periods of the day.

There would be a direct effect of habitat loss on approximately 0.9 acres of sagebrush habitat, and 0.1 acres of alkaline meadow habitat, and 0.15 acres of sagebrush/dry meadow habitat from the conversion of road Z51 to a 5 foot wide trail tread and the construction of new trail below the Visitors Center and from Z51 to the Davis Gaines boardwalk. The change in use from vehicles to hikers, mountain bikers, and birdwatchers would increase human disturbance potential to wildlife along the trail corridor and continue to have a minor and negligible effect to mule deer use of the sagebrush and dry alkaline meadow habitat within the project area.

Deer would continue to experience a low level of avoidance and displacement responses that include disruption of deer activities such as feeding and resting. This type of impact would continue to have a similar though highly variable effect on other non-MIS wildlife species such as resident songbirds, and mammals along the road corridor.

This action when combined with other past and future actions identified in the cumulative effects discussion in Alternative 1 would continue to have an overall minor and negligible effect on the wildlife use of Mono lake Scenic Area.

The most significant cumulative effect to wildlife habitat in the project area is the rising lake level toward the Court-ordered 6,392 foot elevation mark. The effect is a gradual inundation of portions of the wet meadow habitats that have developed since LADWP began the lake draw-down. The exact change and timing of the change is difficult to predict given the variability of annual lake level rise and fall. Gradual shifting of the lakeshore closer to the trail as the lake level rises may ultimately increase human disturbance from trail use to species such as shorebirds, marshbirds, grebes and phalaropes in the project area since the habitat used by the birds would move considerably closer to the trail. This may need to be mitigated over time with increased human education from interpretive displays, overlooks, and signs. The expansion of pinyon trees and invasive non-native plant species such as cheatgrass into the Scenic Area sagebrush habitats is having a slow but substantive adverse cumulative effect on the maintenance of sagebrush habitats for use by species such as sage grouse and sage brush dependent songbird species.

Action Alternative 3 - Direct, Indirect and Cumulative Effects

The effects to wetland wildlife species would be the same as Alternative 2.

There would be a direct effect of habitat loss on approximately 0.8 acres of sagebrush habitat, and 0.4 acres of alkaline meadow habitat from the conversion of road Z51 to a 5 foot wide trail tread and the construction of new trail below the Visitors Center. Otherwise other effects and cumulative effects would be the same as Alternative 2.

Heritage Resources

Area of Potential Effect

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act defines an area of potential effect (APE) as "...the geographic area or areas within which an undertaking may directly or indirectly cause alterations in the character or use of historic properties, if any such properties exist. The area of potential effects is influenced by the scale and nature of an undertaking and may be different for different kinds of effects caused by the undertaking" (36 CFR §800.16(d)). It does not limit consideration of potential

effects to resources within the project's defined limits nor does it limit analysis to lands under the agencies' jurisdiction.

The project area cultural resources assessed in this EA extend from the Visitors Center down to the lakeshore and from the State Parking Area at the northeast shore "Old Marina" easterly approximately 1.5 miles to the east perimeter of the LADWP roads proposed for rehabilitation. For the purposes of this discussion, the affected environment of the project area covers the existing roadways being considered for rehabilitation and pedestrian trail development.

A survey strategy using a 5-meter buffer on either side of the existing roadways was implemented, with the exception where the trail will have sinuosity, on the southern portion of Z-51, a survey strategy using 15-meter buffer was implemented. Known cultural resources include a circa 1930's to 1950's trash dump, the "Icebox Tufa," and remaining footings of the Old Marina boat dock. On state land, there are remnants of a rock retaining wall adjacent to route Z-51 for which there currently is not much information.

Affected Environment

Forest Service archaeologists conducted systematic survey of the Mono Lake Trail APE in May and August of 2006. The objective of both investigations was to identify archaeological and historical properties and to assess potential adverse effects to those resources based on parameters outlined in each of the three proposed alternatives. The data collected will also be used to evaluate each site's eligibility to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The archaeological investigations resulted in the identification of 5 sites, all of which are remnants of Anglo-American settlement in the Mono Basin.

Environmental Consequences of Alternatives 2 and 3

The proposed trail alignment (for alternative 2 and 3) would have no adverse effects to any of the five sites identified in the Area of Potential Effect. Beneficial effects are expected for one site because the alternatives would eliminate vehicle access to the site, thus reducing potential effects of vandalism.

In summary, the finding of NO EFFECT to cultural resources on this project is applicable as per Standard Protection Measures of the PROGRAMMATIC AGREEMENT AMONG THE U.S.D.A FOREST SERVICE, PACIFIC SOUTHWEST REGION, CALIFORNIA STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER, AND ADVISORY COUNCIL ON HISTORIC PRESERVATION REGARDING THE IDENTIFICATION, EVALUATION AND TREATMENT OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES MANAGED BY THE NATIONAL FORESTS OF THE SIERRA NEVADA, CALIFORNIA. With implementation of the standard protection measure and completion of this report, mandatory historic preservation requirements for this undertaking have been met.

Botany and Noxious Weeds

Sensitive and Special Status Plant Species

Affected Environment

There are no threatened, endangered, or proposed plant species within the project area, nor is there potential habitat for any threatened, endangered, or proposed plant species.

A preliminary search of the existing data for the project area revealed no known sensitive plant populations in the project area. However sensitive moonworts (*Botrychium* spp.) have been found along Lee Vining Creek (D. Taylor correspondence). Surveys were done on 4/21/06, 5/12/06, and 8/22/06, and no sensitive species were found in the trail corridors or the road rehabilitation sites. Potential habitat for moonworts exists in the wetter areas of the alkali meadow, particularly in spring areas near some of the tufa, away from the trail. Although the surveys did not locate any moonworts in the proposed trail corridor, a negative survey finding is not possible due to the difficulty of surveying for *Botrychium* and the fact that *Botrychium* spp. do not develop above-ground plants every year.

Environmental Consequences

Under Alternative 2, a new section of trail would be built in riparian habitat with several species of weeds (see below). This part of the trail would disturb 0.1 acres of riparian habitat and would place visitors closer to springs, which are the most likely potential habitat for moonworts. There would be no initial disturbance to the springs during construction, but there would be a higher risk of impacts from visitors leaving the trail, including trampling or spreading weeds, than in Alternative 3. Because moonworts are adapted to some disturbance, the low level of disturbance from visitor trampling would be a light intensity effect, but the duration of risk of repeated impacts would be long term, since the trail would be a permanent feature. Removing the weeds from the trail corridor will reduce risk of weed spread into moonwort habitat.

The spring system that provides potential habitat for the moonworts is affected by changes in lake level, so the habitat has been subjected to drying many times in the distant past and most recently from water diversions. The habitat may become more extensive as the lake level rises under the current management. The previous ranching and marina activities also could have disturbed the habitat and may have caused some soil compaction or water availability changes at the springs and probably introduced most of the weeds. Alternative 2 would add a small risk of soil disturbance in a recovering riparian habitat, but would not disturb more than 5% of the existing habitat.

Under Alternative 3, there would be no additional disturbance of riparian habitat, but there would be a similar increase in use in the area, including an increase in likelihood that visitors will leave the trail and go in to riparian habitat. The trail would be farther from the springs, so the risk of visitor trampling would be somewhat less than in Alternative 2. The cumulative effects would be similar to Alternative 2, but with the smaller risk of impacts.

Based on a review of the existing information in the files and the field surveys, it is determined that alternatives 2 and 3 MAY IMPACT INDIVIDUALS, BUT WILL NOT LEAD TO A TREND TOWARD FEDERAL LISTING for *Botrychium* spp.

Non-Native Invasive Species

Affected Environment

Several non-native species have been noted in the project area: Bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*), Russian thistle (*Salsola tragus*), Common sow thistle (*Sonchus cf. oleraceus*), Salsify (*Tragopogon cf. dubius*), White top (*Cardaria* sp.), White sweet clover (*Melilotus alba*), Curvseed butterwort (*Ranunculus testiculatus*), Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*), and Cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*).

Invasive non-native species are currently recognized as one of the most significant threats to wildlands in the West. Once established, weeds can spread quickly, displacing acres of productive native vegetation and wildlife habitat (USDA Forest Service, 1999). Estimates indicate invasive plants are spreading at about 4,600 acres per day on federal lands alone in the western United States (USDI BLM). Vehicles often serve as a dispersal mechanism for weed seeds, unwittingly transporting seeds from one area to another (University of California Berkeley, 2002). Other dispersal agents include hikers, livestock, wildlife, wind, and water.

Environmental Consequences

Alternative 1- No Action

Alternative 2 – Proposed Action

Trail would take visitors through a very weedy area in the alkalai meadow. Moderate to high risk from increased vectors.

Habitat alteration expected as a result of project: Under Alternative 2, ground will be disturbed in the construction of new trail, the narrowing of route Z51, construction of a viewing platform, and in the rehabilitation process. Habitat alteration expected from this action is moderate to high.

Project area will see an increase in visitor numbers and therefore an increase in vectors able to transport non-native species.

Alternative 3 – Hardened Surface

Moderate risk from increased vectors. Less ground disturbance results in a low to moderate risk of habitat alteration. Project area will see an increase in visitor numbers and therefore an increase in vectors able to transport non-native species.

Mitigation measures for alternatives 2 and 3: *Cardaria* should be removed as soon as possible and monitored for reoccurrence annually. More weed removal is recommended – see list above for priority of removal efforts. Equipment cleaning before and after working in the weedy areas is required and very important. If the connector trail is built, there should be weed removal from a buffer along the trail to prevent transport of weeds by visitors. The buffer should be wide enough that

weeds to not overlap the trail at all (approximately 2-3 feet) and will probably require annual maintenance.

Anticipated weed response to alternatives 2 and 3: The increase in visitor numbers will increase the likelihood of weeds spreading from the lower very weedy lakeshore into the sage above, and other areas of the forest they visit after hiking the trail.

Soil and Water Resources

Affected Environment

There are currently numerous roads within the project area, approximately 140 acres in total, all of which slightly modify surface water hydrology by concentrating flow. These roads are susceptible to erosion only when they have a relatively high gradient, because the decomposed granite/pumice soil is highly permeable. Almost all of the project area is in dry sagebrush-type area, except the area within about 500 feet of the current Mono Lake shoreline, which contains some riparian areas and wetlands. Soil in the area is generally loose, and therefore susceptible to wind erosion, and water erosion when on a relatively high gradient. Two soil types can be identified within the project area:

1. Soil 146 (Inyo Soil Survey, West Area) - part of the "Lakash-Brantel" family, a complex of "Lakash: Ashy-pumice, mesic Vitrandic Torriorthent" and "Brantel: Ashy, mesic Vitrandic Torripsamments." A highly permeable soil with low productivity and low erosion hazard. This is a pumice soil that makes up 90% of the project area.
2. Soil 380 (Inyo Soil Survey, West Area) – Vitrandic Torriorthents, ashy-Vitrandic Haplodurids complex (Old Lake Beaches). A soil that has moderate permeability and supports saltbrush and shadscale. It has low to moderate soil productivity and has a low erosion hazard with a pH of 8.0 to 8.5. This soil is found in the recessional lands near Mono Lake.

Currently, portions of the North-South trending section of road Z51 have minor to severe rill/gully erosion. This erosion occurs on the portions of the road that are steeper, particularly the southern half of the road. The road does not appear to have received recent maintenance, and gully erosion has been active within the past 3 years. The old motocross trails on land owned and managed by the City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power also have minor to severe rill/gully erosion due to water concentrating on the trail and causing high velocities that carry away soil. Some of the old motocross trails are very steep, and these areas are highly erosive, and will continue to erode without major maintenance or obliteration.

Environmental Consequences

Alternative 1 – No Action

Under the No Action alternative, there would be no new trail construction and no road rehabilitation. There would be no net change in disturbed soil area. Without closure and some reconfiguration of road Z51 to create a narrower trail, the road would continue to experience soil erosion, leading to soil loss and possibly mass wasting in the steepest sections of the road. This could occur if the gullies become so deep that their sidewalls collapse. The flat portions of Road Z51 would continue to be bare and compacted, but would not contribute to soil erosion.

The total bare, compacted road surface of Z51 would be about 1.5 acres (6,600 ft x 10 ft wide).

At the Old Marina, the existing boardwalk allows for unimpeded water movement in the wetlands bordering Mono Lake, and therefore hydrology is not affected in this area due to hiking activity. This condition would continue under Alternative 1.

Cumulative Effects

There would be no cumulative effects of the No Action Alternative on hydrology. The existing road Z51 does not affect hydrology because it is not within 100 feet of surface water.

The existing Road Z51 and the old motocross trails add a small area of bare, compacted, erodible soil to the Mono Lake Basin. A rough estimate of the dirt road area within the western Mono Lake basin (from about the middle of the lake west) is 140 acres. This assumes an average of 8 foot wide roads. The existing Z51 and old motocross trails cover a total of about 2 acres. While the roads do contribute some bare soil and soil loss to the western Mono Basin, it is a small contribution. Erosion on these roads is likely too small to be measured compared with the wind erosion around the edge of Mono Lake in the area that was exposed due to water diversions.

Alternative 2

Alternative 2 would decrease both the area of bare, compacted soil, and the rate of erosion in the overall project area. The decrease in both would be small.

The sections of new trail would add about 1.0 acres of bare, compacted soil. Approximately 0.45 acres of compacted bare soil would be added to a currently relatively undisturbed hillside. Approximately 0.2 acres of bare, compacted soil would be added to create sinuosity along the upper part of route Z51. Approximately 0.5 acres of bare, compacted alkali soil would be added by the section of new trail connecting road Z51 to the current David Gaines boardwalk. The new trail would be designed and built to engineering standards, with a low gradient and water control structures to prevent substantial erosion. The new trail construction could cause minor soil loss during construction and from normal use, but the soil loss should be minimal with the proposed trail design.

The sections of road Z51 that would be made into a trail and areas of road that would be restored would have about 2.5 acres of reduction in bare, compacted soil. Reductions in width of the existing road from 10 feet to 5 feet would occur in road to trail conversion sections and restoration of road widths from 10 feet to zero feet would take place.

Although there would be more trail area, there would likely be less erosion. The trail would be less steep and straight, and would therefore be less susceptible to erosion. Eroding segments of the road would be repaired, and the trail would be built with sufficient water bars and checks to prevent all but minor soil erosion. Proper maintenance would ensure that erosion from this sinuous portion of the trail would be very low. Erosion should be reduced relative to the No Action alternative.

The total bare, compacted soil remaining along the existing Road Z51 would be more than 1.5 acres, anywhere from 1.6 to 1.8 acres, depending on the trail sinuosity.

The segment of trail connecting route Z51 to the David Gaines Boardwalk would result in around 0.05 acres more bare, compacted soil on the dry portion of the trail. The boardwalk segment of the connector trail, while very slightly reducing the extent of lakeside riparian vegetation, would not affect hydrology. The boardwalk would be raised and therefore would allow unimpeded movement of groundwater and surface water.

The proposed project would not affect water quality post-construction. The only water in the project area is Mono Lake, and under Alternative 2 new trail construction remains about 500 feet from the current lake shore. New trail construction would skirt the higher elevation sections of an alkali meadow and will use elevated boardwalk where necessary to maintain riparian or wetland function. Reconstruction of boardwalk on the existing David Gaines ground-level boardwalk will result in short-term impacts to water quality during construction, but will improve water quality and wetland function over time, as the new elevated boardwalk will prevent visitors from straying off the boardwalk into the sensitive wetland and allow surface and subsurface water to flow more freely in the wetland and between the rising/falling Lake and adjacent wetland area.

The designation of two parking spaces should not affect bare soil area or erosion, because the parking spaces will be in a currently disturbed area.

The construction of a new Sweet Smelling Toilet should not affect water quality, soil quality, or erosion. The toilet will be placed in a previously disturbed area, and because it is a vault toilet that will be pumped, will not allow waste to enter soil, surface water or groundwater.

Alternative 3

Throughout most of the project area, the hydrologic and soil effects of Alternative 3 would be the same as Alternative 2.

The largest differences would occur along the section of road Z51 that would remain open and be constructed to be ADA accessible (3,700 ft). This section of trail would have a reduction in bare soil area from 0.8 to 0.4 acres. It would be reduced from about 10 feet to an average of 5 feet wide (4 foot wide trail with regular pullouts). As under Alternative 1, there would continue to be very little soil erosion from this segment of the road because it is flat and not easily erodible. The total bare, compacted road surface of Z51 would be about 0.7 acres (6,600 ft x 4.5 ft wide). Further, because the trail would be constructed along the existing road, it would be less sinuous than under Alternative 2. Therefore, there might be more potential for erosion than under Alternative 2, but less than Alternative 1, when the full width of the existing road would remain on the current relatively steep grade.

The other difference would be that the connector trail would not be constructed adjacent to the alkali meadow and the David Gaines Boardwalk would not be replaced with an elevated boardwalk. By not constructing the connector trail, there would be no new bare alkali soil impacts. By not replacing the David Gaines Boardwalk, there would be no short-term water quality issues, but the ground-level boardwalk would remain and the hydrology of the lake-side meadow would continue to be impacted by human disturbance and the impedance on surface and subsurface water flow.

Cumulative Effects – Alternatives 2-3

Alternatives 2 and 3 are similar in terms of their direct and indirect effects to hydrology and soils. Therefore, the cumulative effects of these two alternatives are expected to be the same.

There would be no cumulative effects of Alternatives 2 and 3 on hydrology. The project does not affect hydrology, because the only trail within 500 feet of surface water, or in or near a wetland, would be a boardwalk. Because boardwalks are elevated, they do not affect surface or subsurface flow.

The project would reduce the area of bare, compacted soil in the project area by about 2.5 acres. Total area of dirt roads within the project area is 140 acres. This assumes an average of 10 foot wide roads. Closure, rehabilitation, and alteration of roads into trails would have a small beneficial effect by reducing bare soil and soil loss to the western Mono Basin. Reduction of erosion on these roads is likely too small to be measured. Wind erosion around the edge of Mono Lake in the area that was exposed due to water diversions should continue to be the largest source of soil loss in the area.

Visual Resources

Affected Environment

The Mono Basin is the Nation's first congressionally designated "Scenic Area." The natural beauty of the Mono Basin is unrivaled, but impacts from human activity in the last fifty years are still visible and perhaps most noticeable in the Lake Trail project area.

There are numerous roads, turnouts, and parking areas within the project area that are denuded of vegetation and detract from the visual quality of the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area. Route Z51 and the old "motorcross track" are situated on 20 to 30 degree north facing slopes and the bare soil is highly visible from multiple vantage points along the Highway 395 Scenic Corridor, the Historic Mono Inn, the County Park, and other areas along the north shore and waters of Mono Lake. Unmanaged motorized recreation has resulted in widening of roads, pullouts, and parking areas, thus further decreasing the visual quality of the area.

Environmental Consequences

Alternative 1 – No Action

Under the no action alternative, the project area would continue to see the use patterns visible today that contribute to moderate scenic integrity. Continued motorized vehicle use in the project area would prevent the natural restoration of routes, so these routes would continue to degrade the scenic quality of the viewshed. Motorists traveling along the Hwy-395 scenic corridor would continue to travel through a viewshed that does not meet the standards and guidelines of the Inyo National Forest Plan or the management prescriptions of the Scenic Area Management Plan due to the high density and poor alignment of roads within the project area.

Alternative 2 – The Modified Proposed Action

Scenic integrity of the project area would improve greatly under the proposed actions of alternative 2. New trail construction along the moraine near the Visitor Center would be visible only from elevated vantage points, motorists traveling along the highway will see partial views, limited in duration, of the new trail cut. Native soils as trail surface materials in the upper portions of the trail along the north-facing moraine and down route Z51 would help the trail blend in to the surrounding landscape. Sinuous trail alignment along the southern half of route Z51 would help mask the existing road cut that is currently visible from most of the western and northern shores. Rehabilitation of route 51 between Old Marina and the point where the Lake Trail diverts toward the David Gaines Memorial Boardwalk would greatly improve visuals from highway turnouts north of Old Marina.

Elevated boardwalk would be visible from vantage points throughout the western third of the Mono Basin, including the Scenic Highway 395 corridor. New trail construction from Z51 to the existing David Gaines Memorial Boardwalk would be visible from the elevated Highway 395 and vistas near the Visitor Center. Hardened

trail surfaces along the ADA portion of the trail would be more visible than native soils and reduce visual quality in the project area. The restroom facility near Old Marina would be visible only from the Old Marina and non-highway routes that approach the recreation site.

Clustering of interpretive signs in strategic locations and placing of benches under mature pinyon pines will help hide these structures. Restoration of hill climbs and confinement of parking areas near Visitor Center Drive will improve visuals as visitors approach the Scenic Area Visitor Center.

Alternative 2 will meet the requirements of Retention for the project area and viewshed.

Alternative 3 – The Original Proposed Action

Scenic integrity of the project area would somewhat improve under the proposed actions of alternative 3. Trail alignment along the moraine near the visitor center occurs on multiple northerly aspects and may be visible from vantage points outside of the Visitor Center and by motorists traveling along the highway who will see partial views, limited in duration, of the new trail cut. Bridges across drainages would be somewhat visible from vantage points within the project area. The narrowing of route Z51 from a road to a trail would improve visual quality of the road cut, but maintaining straight alignment would allow the trail to be highly visible from vantage points towards Old Marina, along the Highway 395 corridor, from the Mono Inn, County Park, and multiple points along the northern shoreline and from the waters of Mono Lake. Hardened trail surface along the entire trail alignment would be more noticeable than native soils. The proposed action will meet the requirements of Retention for the project area and viewshed.

CUMULATIVE EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVES

The Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area is preserved in perpetuity as a “Scenic Area” and is administered by the Inyo National Forest. Past activities in the project area have contributed to the poor visual quality of the area. Construction of the Scenic Area Visitor Center improved visual quality, as the Center was constructed atop an old dump site and soils were placed to cover portions of the dump that did not need to be removed. Vegetation growth in former parking areas and roads that were closed upon implementation of the Scenic Area Comprehensive Management Plan has greatly improved visual quality.

Reasonably foreseeable actions that could greatly improve visual quality of the area include the rehabilitation and restoration of the motorcross track on LADWP lands and the California State Parks’ redevelopment plans for the Old Marina recreation site.

The cumulative effects of this alternative will continue the existing recreation activities in the area and the visual quality of the site will continue to improve as vegetation grows and degraded areas become more thoroughly rehabilitated.

Unavoidable Adverse Effects

This section describes unavoidable adverse impacts that would occur under the proposed action and alternatives. Unavoidable adverse impacts may include temporary impacts, mitigated impacts, and impacts that remain after mitigation. It is the unavoidable adverse impacts that remain after mitigation which determine whether these impacts are acceptable and if a FONSI is appropriate.

Botany and Noxious Weeds

Alternative 1, the no action alternative, would support the continuing spread of noxious weeds along roads and user created trails within the project area. Implementation of alternatives 2 and 3 would require noxious weed mitigation measures to be implemented along the proposed trail alignment and within the project area, thus reducing the number of non-native plants and promoting the growth of native vegetation. Potential spread of noxious weeds during trail construction will be mitigated by best management practices described earlier in the “Mitigation Common to All Alternatives” section.

Visual Resources

Alternative 1, the no action alternative, would allow the existing road and trail network to continue to negatively impact the scenic integrity of the project area. Implementation of alternative 2 or 3 would temporarily result in areas of bare soil while restoration efforts are underway. Based on the natural recovery rate of bare soil areas from past activities within the project area, it can be expected that bare soil areas would recover and blend with surrounding vegetation within five to ten years.

Implementation of alternative 2 would improve the visual resources from the existing condition of the project area. Removal of duplicate routes, restoration of road areas, and development of the sinuous trail along the upper section of route Z51 would greatly improve the scenic integrity of the project area and make the trail less visible from key viewpoints within the Scenic Area.

Implementation of Alternative 3 would also improve the visual resources from the existing condition of the project area, but less so than alternative 2. Trail construction along the entire length of the existing route Z51 would make the trail more visible from key viewpoints within the Scenic Area.

Visitor Experience

Implementation of alternative 1, the no action alternative, would maintain the existing visitor experience. Visitors would not have a clearly designated hiking route from the Scenic Area Visitor Center to Mono Lake, the project area would continue to have a confusing myriad of roads that are difficult to navigate, and cultural resources in the

project area would continue to be unprotected and lack interpretive information. Primary access to the area would be by motorized vehicles and visitation would continue to be low. At the height of the season, visitors could expect to encounter 3 - 5 other parties within an hour.

Implementation of alternatives 2 or 3 would promote a more structured visitor experience, directing visitors to use the established trail system, learn from interpretive panels along the hiking trail, and respect the delicate resources within the project area. Primary access to the area would be pedestrian oriented and visitation would increase. At the height of the busy season, visitors may expect to encounter 10 – 15 other parties within an hour.

Wildlife

Implementation of alternative 1, the no action alternative, would allow continued occasional disturbance to wildlife species along the shoreline that is considered minor and negligible. Human disturbance along the road and trail corridors would continue, but also is considered to be minor and negligible.

Implementation of alternatives 2 or 3 would change the pattern of use in the area and result in a slight increase in human disturbance to wetland wildlife species along the shoreline and along the trail corridor. This increase in disturbance is considered to be minor and negligible.

Trail construction and restoration efforts will result in increased traffic and human disturbance to the project area for a total of approximately two to four months. To mitigate potential disturbance to wildlife, construction will be scheduled to avoid nesting periods. Wildlife surveys adjacent to the construction areas will be completed prior to construction work taking place.

Soil and Water

Implementation of alternative one, the no action alternative, will result in continued erosion problems along the route Z51 road corridor.

Implementation of alternatives 2 or 3 will require the removal of the existing David Gaines Boardwalk and construction of a new elevated boardwalk. This construction activity will result in some disturbance to alkaline meadow areas adjacent to Mono Lake and some minor sedimentation in or near wet areas of the Lake. Construction during fall months will promote a drier working environment and reduce the potential for sediment entering adjacent water.

CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

The Forest Service consulted the following individuals, Federal, State, and local agencies, and non-Forest Service persons during the development of this environmental assessment:

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