



Gandy Creek Dispersed Group Site

Cheat-Potomac Ranger District, Monongahela National Forest
Randolph County, West Virginia



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Monongahela National Forest proposes to construct a dispersed group site in the Gandy Creek dispersed camping area intended for and accommodating group, recreational vehicle, and horse campers. The project area is located on the Cheat-Potomac Ranger District of the Monongahela National Forest, West Virginia along State Road 29 northwest of Spruce Knob Lake campground. This action is needed to meet the growing demand for group, recreational vehicle, and horse campers in the Gandy Creek dispersed camping area.

An interdisciplinary team of Monongahela National Forest resource specialists and managers analyzed suitable sites that could provide the desired recreation opportunities. In addition to the participation of Forest Service specialists, consideration of public input was a vital component of the analysis and decision making process.

Three alternatives are fully analyzed in this assessment. Under Alternative A—the No Action Alternative—current plans and policies would guide management of the project area and no construction would occur. This alternative is analyzed and disclosed in order to serve as a baseline comparison for any action alternative. The two action alternatives—Alternative B, Lufe Hedrick Hollow site and Alternative C, Leading Ridge Trailhead site—both propose to construct dispersed group sites that would accommodate recreational vehicles, group campers, and horse trailers. With the new horse camping opportunities designed for both action alternatives, horse camping would be prohibited in the Johnny Meadows area allowing more group camping opportunities there with less user conflict. The two action alternatives are differentiated by their location, site design, cost of implementation, and associated environmental impacts.

Environmental analysis shows no expected significant impact on the project area. Specifically, the proposed project is not expected to negatively impact threatened, endangered, or sensitive or other plant and animal species. Neither would there be a significant adverse effect on water quality, riparian resources, or cultural resources. Full analysis of potential direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of each alternative on the project area will follow in an environmental analysis.

The responsible official will decide between the analyzed alternatives including any policy or management changes in the project area.

INTRODUCTION

The Gandy Creek dispersed camping area is used extensively by fishers, hunters, hikers, and other outdoor enthusiasts. This area—specifically along State Road 29—experiences particularly heavy use because of its proximity to Gandy Creek, the large number of dispersed campsites available, the extensive local trail system, and the scenic qualities of the area. The area is especially popular with visitors who like to ride and camp with horses on the Forest. Until recently, none of the dispersed campsites have been significantly improved to withstand such heavy use. In the summer of 2003, a project was undertaken to improve camping conditions in the area while providing increased protection of the aquatic and riparian resources along Gandy Creek. Some of the area's campsites were moderately to severely eroded, difficult to access, and often wet and muddy. Several campsites were hardened with gravel while less suitable sites were closed to camping and vehicle traffic which, if user demand increases, can be reopened once the sites stabilize. The intent was to reduce erosion of Gandy Creek's riparian area and shoreline, decrease sediment entering the creek, protect riparian vegetation, and improve water quality while maintaining recreational uses in the area.

Since the initial proposed action was developed and shared with the community (see the *Public Involvement* section on p. 5), the Forest Service expanded the scope of this project to incorporate additional user needs that could meet and complement growing recreational demands in the Gandy Creek dispersed camping area. This endeavor to maximize site design resulted in the incorporation of recreational vehicle and group camping considerations in the *need for and purpose of action* statements.

Need for and Purpose of Action

The *need for and purpose of action* is intended to lay out for the public and decision maker why the Forest Service desires to undertake a proposed action. More specifically, the *needs* statement(s) outline underlying problems that should be addressed while the *purpose* statement(s) specify objectives aimed at fulfilling those needs. Both help shape the means to bridging the gap between existing and desired conditions within the project area.

Existing conditions in the Gandy Creek dispersed camping area include user-made campsites at Johnny Meadows that lack adequate and organized camping services. As a result, the safety of campers and horses are of concern as is the potential for future environmental impacts from increased use.

This document's proposed action and alternatives are intended to meet desired conditions of the project area by fulfilling its recreational goals outlined in the Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) of the Monongahela National Forest. The action alternatives' management objectives are described under the LRMP's 3.0 and 6.2 management prescriptions (pp. 127-140, 183-190). Specifically, for Alternative B which is located within the 3.0 management prescription, desired conditions can include recreational development activities that are compatible with environmental considerations (LRMP, p. 128). Such recreational development activities include "correcting health and safety problems, protecting the environment, complementing prescribed recreation opportunities, and meeting public demand" (LRMP,

p.130). For Alternative C, located in the 6.2 management prescription, desired conditions include facilities which “include, but are not limited to: trails, Adirondack shelters, trail bridges, interpretive and directional signing, trailhead parking lots, designated campsites, and primitive toilets” (LRMP, p.185). To support these management goals within the project area, the following need for and purpose of action was identified:

With the aforementioned existing and desired conditions in mind, these project area needs exist:

- Camping sites in the Gandy Creek dispersed camping area accommodating the growing demand of forest visitors wishing to camp in groups, with large recreational vehicles, or with horses and horse trailers.
- Sanitation facilities in the Gandy Creek dispersed camping area to meet the health and safety needs of visitors.

To fulfill these underlying needs, the *purpose of* this initiative is to:

- Construct an appropriately designed camping area within the Gandy Creek dispersed camping area which permits and better accommodates group, recreational vehicle, and horse camping while allowing for better separation of these uses. Specifically, the proposed site will provide for:
 - Designated roads and camping sites
 - Adequate maneuvering space for large recreational vehicles and horse trailers.
 - Vault toilet facilities

Designating what types of trail use are permitted within the project area does not fall under the purview of this project.

Proposed Action

To meet the *need for and purpose of action*, the Forest Service originally proposed to construct a campsite primarily designed and intended for horse campers. The following was distributed for public comment in March, 2004.

The Forest Service is now planning to construct a horse camping area that would be located away from the Gandy Creek side of the road to protect riparian resources and still provide horse camping in the Gandy Creek vicinity. The horse camp would consist of two spur campsites and 3 pull through campsites on the western side of State Road 29 between Lafe Hedrick Hollow and Big Run. The road, spurs, and pull-throughs would be leveled and hardened with rock and gravel. Some small tree removal may occur.

This project would also move the horse camping from the Johnny Meadows group campsite to the one being developed so that more group camping is available for campers at Johnny Meadows who do not wish to camp near horses.

Decision Framework

Given the *need for and purpose of action* delineated above, the deciding official reviews the *proposed action and alternatives* in order to construct a final decision from the following framework:

- Select one of the following or a modified version for implementation:
 - Alternative A: No Action
 - Alternative B: Proposed Action at Lafe Hedrick Hollow Site
 - Alternative C: Leading Ridge Trailhead Site
- Permit and/or restrict any combination of group, recreational vehicle, and/or horse camping within the project area.
- Select mitigation measures as outlined in the project's environmental analysis.
- If appropriate, select monitoring opportunities.

Public Involvement

The Forest Service uses the public involvement process in assisting its interdisciplinary team in developing a list of issues regarding the proposed action. The proposal was listed in the Monongahela National Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions in January, April, August, and December of 2004. The proposal was provided to 21 individuals or groups for comment on March 1, 2004 and was posted in the Grant County Press on March 9, 2004, the Pendleton Times on March 11, 2004, and the Elkins Inter-Mountain on March 5, 2004. The Forest Service received nine public comments resulting from this initial public involvement process.

The Forest Service's proposed action focused solely on the development of a horse camp without the inclusion of group or recreational vehicle camping opportunities. Consequently, public involvement concentrated on the effects and needs of horse camping. The public's primary concerns were the adequacy of a five-site horse camp and the environmental impact of horses specifically on riparian resources and adjacent trail systems.

Issues

Issue identification helps to modify and hone a proposed action and its alternatives by anticipating potential impacts and brainstorming possible mitigation steps for those impacts. The Forest Service separated issues into two groups: significant and non-significant. Significant issues were defined as potential impacts directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action. Non-significant issues were identified as those which: 1) are outside the scope of the proposed action; 2) are already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) are irrelevant to the decision to be made; or 4) are conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence. The Council on Environmental Quality 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 in the project record.

The Forest Service identified the following significant issues:

Sedimentation of Gandy Creek: The construction and use of a dispersed group site has the potential of delivering and increasing stream sediment to Gandy Creek. The evaluation of alternatives will consider the amount of ground disturbance, the presence and possible disturbance to functioning stream channels, the stability of the soil and presence of wet soil conditions, and stream filterstrip effectiveness. Increased sediment production to streams typically contributes to degraded aquatic habitat conditions for fish species designated as a Management Indicator Species or Sensitive species.

Horse Waste Contamination: Horse waste has the potential to reduce water quality in Gandy Creek through nutrient (nitrogen) enrichment and introduction of fecal contaminants. The evaluation of alternatives will consider the size of the camp and expected numbers of horses, and the presence of functioning channels that could carry surface runoff to Gandy Creek.

Safety: Location of a dispersed group site will largely influence where and how hikers, horse riders, etc. utilize roads and access trail systems. Therefore, the evaluation of alternatives will consider the safety of recreationists with regard to site location.

PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

Using the issues described above, site visits, and public involvement, project alternatives were identified and developed. The alternatives are presented in comparative form to sharply define their differences thus providing a clear basis for selection by the decision maker. Criteria for decision making will include consideration of the alternatives’ implementation (for example, the costs involved in designing and constructing a project) and the alternatives’ environmental effects during and after implementation (for example, the predicted sedimentation into the local watershed from construction and increased visitation).

Alternative Descriptions

Three alternatives—a *no action* and two *action* alternatives—were considered in detail and carried forward for further analysis. Mitigation measures common to the action alternatives follow these alternative descriptions.

Alternative A: No Action

Under the No Action alternative, current plans and policy would continue to guide management of the project area. There would be no construction of roads, campsites, vehicle pullouts, or installation of vault toilets. Group and horse camping could continue at Johnny Meadows and associated site impacts would likely persist at that location. Road and site maintenance of the Johnny Meadows group site would also continue.

Alternative B: Proposed Action – Lafe Hedrick Hollow Site

This alternative proposes the construction of a dispersed group site on the west side of State Road 29 opposite Gandy Creek. The camp would consist of two spur and three pull-through campsites between Lafe Hedrick Hollow and Big Run. A vault toilet would be installed. Some small tree removal may occur. With the new horse camping opportunities designed for this site, horse camping would be prohibited in the Johnny Meadows area allowing more group camping opportunities there with less user conflict.

Alternative C: Leading Ridge Trailhead Site

This alternative proposes the construction of a dispersed group site between State Road 29 and Gandy Creek near the Leading Ridge Trail trailhead. The site would consist of an entrance road, five parking spots, five pull-through campsites accommodating recreational vehicle and horse camper traffic, and a circular turnaround for such vehicles. A vault toilet would also be constructed. Some small tree removal may occur. With the new horse camping opportunities designed for this site, horse camping would be prohibited in the Johnny Meadows area allowing more group camping opportunities there with less user conflict. A mitigation measure specific to this alternative would be the construction of a fence 100 feet from Gandy Creek in those areas requiring riparian protection.

Common Mitigation Measures

The following mitigation measures were identified to ease some of the potential environmental impacts that the *action* alternatives may cause.

Site Design and Construction

- Road, spurs, and campsites will be hardened with a suitable aggregate to maintain soil stability.
- Any vault toilet will be installed above the 100-year flood elevation.
- Watering troughs are preferred to using Gandy Creek as a water source for horses.
- If stream access is provided for horse watering, the best available access site will be designated and its approach hardened.
- All designs of roadbed and placement will account for high water tables.
- Silt fence will be used around areas of disturbed soil during and after construction to trap soil and reduce sediment movement off-site. Silt fences will be cleaned periodically and the material will be deposited away from channels out of any flood plain. Silt fence will be removed after site revegetation becomes effective.

- Revegetation of disturbed soil will be accomplished immediately after construction using weed-free seed and mulch. Kentucky 31 Fescue will not be used due to its toxicity to horses. Temporary mulch should be used to protect disturbed soils when a break in construction activities occurs of more than one week duration.
- All disturbed soils will be mulched during construction when activities are not ongoing for more than one week at a time. All disturbed soils will be mulched and seeded upon completion of the project.

Policies and Enforcement

- Horse owners will be required to stay with their horses while watering them in Gandy Creek; horses will not be allowed to be tied up at the stream or to riparian trees.
- Hauling horse waste out of the site will be encouraged to reduce potential environmental impacts. If hauling from the area is not required, then scattering manure on the floodplain away from the stream and in the drier areas nearby will be required.

Alternatives Eliminated from Detailed Study _____

Consideration was given to the proposal of constructing a dispersed group site in the field across State Road 29 from the *proposed action* site. This was eliminated from further study after a site visit showed that it lacked sufficient space for the creation of adequate spurs and campsites. Consideration was also given to the proposal of constructing a dispersed group site at the nearby Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) site located on the west side of the State Road 29. The CCC site was eliminated from further study due to a variety of resource, heritage, and enforcement considerations.