

Yellowstone Reevaluates Environmental Issues for Third Phase of Reconstruction of East Entrance Road

Yellowstone National Park (YNP) is reevaluating the environmental issues for the third phase of the proposed improvement of East Entrance Road. Since the Environmental Assessment (EA) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) were completed in 1993, some changes have occurred to the affected environment and the proposed project. The reconstruction of East Entrance Road is part of the park-wide road improvement plan to reconstruct principal YNP roads to a 30 feet top width. The third phase of East Entrance Road is a seven-mile segment that begins at the East Entrance gate and ends at Sylvan Pass. YNP began its efforts to reconstruct its principal park roads in 1992 as described in the 1992 environmental assessment (EA), *Parkwide Improvement Plan, Environmental Assessment*. Since 1992, nearly half of YNP's principal park roads have been reconstructed to the 30-foot width standard, including two segments of East Entrance Road.

East Entrance Road is an integral line in the transportation system within YNP. It connects the gateway community of Cody, WY to the spectacular resources along East Entrance Road and within YNP. The proposed improvements to East Entrance Road, from the East Entrance gate to Fishing Bridge junction are described as the preferred alternative in the 1992 EA, *Environmental Assessment: Reconstruct East Entrance Road* and the 1993 FONSI, *Finding of No Significant Impact, Reconstruct East Entrance Road, Yellowstone National Park*. Because the road has historic significance, the features along the third phase would be designed to maintain the original character of the segment. In order to preserve the integrity of the historic alignment, the upper (westernmost) 4 miles of the segment would be constructed at a 25-mph design speed, with the remaining 3 miles constructed at a 40-mph design speed. Rock cuts and soil slopes would be excavated to provide a final appearance similar to the existing slopes. Where possible, unique and interesting roadside formations would be preserved. Ditches would be constructed or widened as needed to convey water or to catch falling rock. Existing masonry guard-walls would be repaired and reconstructed, and in some locations these walls would be extended. The existing deteriorated and sub-standard cable rail would be replaced with weathering steel w-beam guardrail similar to that installed on the prior two segments. To address safety concerns, particularly along the upper 4 miles of this segment, approximately 2100 feet of additional guardrail would be installed, totaling 6,700 feet. Alternative post and cable guardrail could be tested on a portion of this road for future applications within the park.

Existing culvert headwalls, previously documented as contributing to the historic character of the road, would be removed and reconstructed as pipe culverts area extended or replaced. The stone masonry headwalls will be reconstructed using the same material and in the same manner, to retain their historic appearance. Some large deeply buried culverts would be repaired and extended to accommodate the wider reconstructed road. Several large parking areas near streams may be redesigned to provide landscaped areas for visitors to stop and view scenery. Other large, under-used, paved parking areas close to the East Entrance gate may be reconfigured and downsized to reduce the feel of human intrusion. Masonry guardwall would be added to the roadside near several of these parking areas. The design at the East Entrance station area would remain within the footprint of the existing road.

Pending the results of the re-evaluation, construction activities for the third phase are expected to begin in the spring of 2004. If required funding levels are not met in 2004, a portion of this road segment will have to be constructed under a future contract.

PROJECT CHANGES

Since the East Entrance road EA and FONSI were issued, some changes to the affected environment and the proposed project have developed. YNP is evaluating these changes as they are described below.

Project Start and End Dates

The 1992 EA envisioned that the project would take five to eight years to complete. This would be the fourth phase of the project and would occur in late spring of 2004, 13 years after the completion of the EA. This portion of the East Entrance Road reconstruction is estimated to take two years to complete.

Threatened and Endangered (T&E) Species and Consultation with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS)

Some changes have occurred on T&E species in the project area either due to a change of conditions or a change in federally listed T&E species in the project area. When the East Entrance Road was first evaluated in 1992, Grizzly Bear was acknowledged as a T&E species in the project area and still is today. Primarily due to increased Grizzly Bear activity within this segment, YNP has reclassified the impacts to Grizzly Bear from a *may affect, not likely to adversely affect* to a *may affect, likely to adversely affect*. YNP has initiated formal consultation with the FWS for this revised determination of effect. Possible mitigation measures include bear access ramps along proposed wall locations, restricted work areas and periods, obliteration of some turnouts to reduce potential human/bear conflicts, and efforts to accelerate revegetation of areas that would be disturbed by construction.

Gray Wolf was re-introduced into YNP since the East Entrance Road EA and FONSI were issued and are now a T&E species. In the past couple of years, Canada Lynx was also added as a T&E species in the project area. These species have been addressed in YNP's formal consultation with FWS. Impacts of this project *may affect, likely to adversely affect*, Gray Wolf and *may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect* Canada Lynx

While some species have been added to the T&E species list, some have been de-listed since the 1992 East Entrance Road EA and FONSI were issued. Peregrine Falcon is no longer a federally listed T&E species in the project area. Whooping Crane is no longer considered to be present in the project area.

Wetlands

The proposed improvements along the third phase of East Entrance Road would result in approximately 1.8 acres of permanent wetland impacts. Refinements to the design and layout of the road have reduced the permanent wetland impact from the 3.1 acres described in the 1992 EA. To compensate for these impacts, YNP has developed a wetland mitigation plan that will replace these wetlands at a ratio at or greater than 1:1. While some of the mitigation would occur adjacent to the third phase of East Entrance Road, a significant portion will occur along the Turbid Lake Road corridor. Portions of Turbid Lake Road have been obliterated and restored to the conditions of the surrounding wetlands in which they were built. YNP is coordinating with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to address the proposed project effects to wetlands and compensatory mitigation.

Maximum Fill and Cut Height

The proposed reconstruction along the third phase of East Entrance Road would result in cut and fill limits slightly different than described in the EA. Along the third phase, the maximum fill would be 100 feet and the maximum cut would be 100 feet as opposed to the 80 foot maximum and 120 foot maximum, respectively, described in the EA. These changes are generally due to refinements in the design, and to additional design data obtained since 1992.

Sylvan Pass Material Source

The large talus deposits at Sylvan Pass would continue to be used for producing roadway materials for the remainder of the East Entrance projects. Partial reclamation of this site would occur under the 2004 project, as well as with future phases of East Entrance Road, with the completed reclamation tentatively scheduled for 2011, depending on funding. The amount of material extracted from the source to date is well within the estimated quantity of 1.5 million cubic yards stated in the 1992 EA. It is currently anticipated that a grand total of approximately 1.2 million cubic yards of material will be excavated from this site prior to final reclamation.

If you have any questions or comments on Yellowstone National Park's reevaluation of the East Entrance Road project, please send comments to:

Superintendent
attn: East Entrance Road Project
P.O. Box 168
Yellowstone National Park, WY 82190