

**Chopaka Lake Campground Improvements
Environmental Assessment #OR-134-04-EA-001
Wenatchee Resource Area, Spokane District**

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposes campground improvements at its Chopaka Lake recreation site, situated about 25 miles west of the community of Oroville (Township 40 North, Range 25 East, S33), in Okanogan County of north-central Washington (see map). This area is in the Okanogan Management Area of the Spokane BLM District's Wenatchee Resource Area. The camping area is immediately south of and adjacent to the Chopaka Mountain Wilderness Study Area (WSA).

The Chopaka Lake recreation site is north of, and adjacent to, a developed Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) campground along the shores of Chopaka Lake.

Background Information

The Chopaka Lake recreation site was established after many years of casual recreational use by the public. When the 5,518-acre parcel to the north of the camping area was designated as a Wilderness Study Area in 1986, improvements were made to the original primitive camp area. The improvements were minimal and included construction of two wooden outhouses and fencing of the camping area. The two wooden outhouses were replaced in 1995 with one new accessible vault outhouse. No additional improvements have been made at the campground location, and recreation visitors have had uncontrolled access over the campground.

Chopaka Lake is widely known as a destination, high quality flyfishing lake, and visitor use at the lake has been increasing. The Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) maintains a designated, developed campground near the south end of the lake, but there are no such designations on BLM-administered land to the north. As a result, recreationists have been able to drive anywhere in the meadow areas of BLM's Chopaka Lake campground, resulting in numerous roads throughout the site and along the lakeshore.

All roads through the camp area are bumpy and rutted, and the existing non-motorized boat ramp at the north end of the site is shallow and muddy. Over time, a large number of primitive campsites have become established along the lake's shore, as evidenced by the number of rock fire rings throughout the area. Many of these campsites are very close together, and as close to the lake as possible, impacting riparian vegetation in this area.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the campground improvements is two-fold: (1) to support increasing recreational visitor use of the area; and (2) to protect the area's natural resources, including riparian vegetation and the adjacent Wilderness Study Area. These improvements are needed to define specific parking and camping areas, meet the needs associated with increasing recreational use, provide onsite interpretive information, and protect sensitive resource values of the riparian area and the Wilderness Study Area.

Description of Alternatives

Two alternatives were considered; Alternative 1 (Proposed Action) and Alternative 2 (No Action). A description of each alternative is provided below.

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action)

Proposed improvements include constructing a new loop road and establishing designated campsites and parking spaces along this loop road. In addition, the existing boat ramp and entrance road would be improved; extra parking spaces would be created; the western perimeter of the camp area would be fenced; the area behind the outhouse would be modified to improve drainage; interpretive and entrance signs would be constructed and installed; a trail would be designated leading from the camping area to the Wilderness Study Area; and native plants would be established for screening purposes. All new improvements and construction would take place outside the boundary to the Wilderness Study Area.

Specifics about the proposed projects with Alternative 1 are explained below:

- Designate approximately eight areas as campsites. Campsites would contain minimal development: gravel parking pad for vehicles and a metal fire ring. All campsites would be set back a minimum of 50 feet from the ordinary high watermark to protect riparian resources. Campsites would be designed along the sloping hillside to conform to the existing topography in a manner that minimizes grading of the terrain.
- Construct a new, one-lane, graveled loop road to access the developed campsites. The loop road would be constructed parallel to the lake shore. Reshape, grade, and gravel the existing entrance road to provide a single lane of travel, with periodic turnouts to accommodate two-way vehicle traffic.
- Construct five parking spaces to allow for additional parking at the north end of the site, near the outhouse. There would also be enough parking space for one or two horse or boat trailers along the road at this end of the recreation site.
- Relocate the existing non-motorized boat launch approximately 80 feet south, to access deeper water at a less muddy section of the shoreline. The launch would be approximately 20 feet long and narrow (less than 15 feet wide). The launch would be hardened by using a plastic geo-web material filled with gravel to provide a firmer surface for boat launching.
- Replace the barbed wire boundary fence at the site entrance with a post and rail fence, similar in design to the post and rail fence at the WSA boundary. Install a pass gate to allow passage for horses and other non-motorized uses.
- Build a second similar post and rail fence along the western boundary of the camping area. This fence would tie in with the entrance and WSA fences, and act as a barrier to discourage off-highway vehicle (OHV) use on the hillsides above the camping area. A gate would be installed in the pole fence to prevent vehicle access along the road to the west of the entrance road. This road would be signed as a non-motorized trail. The vehicle gate along this road would have a pass gate to allow passage for horses and other non-motorized uses.
- Install interpretive signs and entrance signing where appropriate.
- Designate a trail, leading from the north end of the parking area (in the camping loop) to the WSA boundary, where it would tie in with existing trails.
- Grade and modify the hillside behind the outhouse to reduce impacts from upslope drainage.
- Seed disturbed areas with native grasses.
- Add plantings of native species throughout the camping and outhouse area to provide screening and improve aesthetics at the site.

- Relocate the existing kiosk to a location closer to the camping loop, and install a second kiosk along the trail to the WSA near the parking area. This kiosk would inform visitors about the wilderness study area.

Management Actions/Project Design Features for Alternative 1

- An intensive BLM class III cultural resources inventory will be conducted in the area of potential effect prior to project implementation. If historically significant resources, traditional cultural properties or sacred areas are identified, the project will be redesigned to avoid them. If the sites cannot be avoided, mitigation to impacts will be implemented in consultation with the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (OAHP), consulting tribes, and interested public.
- If significant paleontological resources are located prior to or during project implementation, the project will be redesigned to avoid the resource. If the resource cannot be avoided, the locality will be evaluated and mitigation will be conducted.
- The project area will be field inventoried for special status plants prior to ground-disturbing activities. If special status plants are found, effects would be assessed and the need for project modification addressed.
- If any wildlife species that are sensitive to noise or disturbances are found, project activities would be modified to minimize or avoid disturbance.
- Projects at the campground will be constructed towards the end of the season, when visitor use has decreased.
- A silt boom will be placed around the boat ramp during construction to reduce sediment disturbance in the water.
- Straw wattles or straw fencing will be placed throughout the campground during construction for erosion. All disturbed locations will be seeded after construction with an approved mixture of native grasses.
- Interpretive signs will be posted to educate visitors about management of the adjacent Wilderness Study Area and resources.
- The adjacent Wilderness Study Area will continue to be monitored monthly.

Alternative 2 (No Action)

Under this alternative, the Chopaka Lake Recreation Area would remain in its current condition. No camp area improvements would be implemented.

Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

Vegetation/Plant Communities, Including Special Status Plant Species: Plant communities within the project area consist of big sagebrush with mixed grasses and forbs. Adjacent forested areas are either Douglas-fir/pinegrass or Douglas-fir/pinegrass-bluebunch wheatgrass plant

associations. The project area has been extensively inventoried and no special status plants were found. Diffuse knapweed and Canada thistle are found within the project area.

Riparian/Water Resources/Fisheries: Chopaka Lake is a quality fly fishing only lake. The daily limit is one fish, and the majority of the fisherman practice catch and release fishing. It draws large crowds of fishermen from all over the state. The rainbow trout population in the lake appears stable. There is some shallow lake side spawning on the north east side of the lake. The lake is intermittently planted with hatchery rainbows. There is reported to be a small population of small mouth bass which have probably been released into the lake.

Terrestrial Wildlife Habitat: The Chopaka Lake area contains a mixture of grassland, shrub-steppe, and forest habitats, including bluebunch wheatgrass-Idaho fescue, big sagebrush-bluebunch wheatgrass, and Douglas-fir-pinegrass. Mountain shrubs such as serviceberry, mock-orange, and Rocky Mountain maple are scattered throughout, and Chopaka Lake provides aquatic, riparian, and wetland habitats. Special habitats include cliff and talus, late-successional ponderosa pine, aspen, seeps and springs, and snags.

Four Federally Threatened species, one State Endangered, eight State Candidate, one State Sensitive Species are known to use the general project area for part of their life cycle (see table below). In addition, some bats (State Candidate and State Monitor status) use the project area. The area is outside the range of sage-grouse, but it could have historically been used by sharp-tailed grouse, a State Threatened species.

Special Status Wildlife Species Known or Suspected to Occur in Chopaka Lake Area		
Species	Known Occurrence	Remarks
<i>Federally Threatened Species</i>		
Lynx	Occurrence farther west.	Individuals could occasionally wander through project area, but habitats within project area unsuitable for habitat.
Bald Eagles	Nest near Palmer Lake & Winter along Similkameen River	
Grizzly Bear	Transitory. Historical records within 10 miles.	
Gray Wolf	Transitory. Historical records within 10 miles.	
<i>State Endangered</i>		
Peregrine Falcon	Historical records.	Suitable habitat on Mt. Chopaka.
<i>State Candidate</i>		
Golden Eagles	Nest to north along Chopaka Lake	
Vaux's Swifts	Occurs in area.	
Pileated Woodpeckers	Occurs in area.	
Columbia Spotted Frog	Probable. Known from area.	Suitable habitat.
Western Toad	Probable. Known from area.	
Northern Goshawk	Probable. Known from area.	
Flammulated Owl	Possible.	Suitable habitat.
Black-backed Woodpecker	Probable. Known from area.	
<i>State Sensitive</i>		
Common loons	Chopaka Lake	No records of nesting in project area.

Moose are observed occasionally in the general area. Mountain goats are seen in the Chopaka and Grandview Mountains, to the north and east of Chopaka Lake. The area is considered to be important habitat for mule deer and white-tailed deer. Columbia ground squirrels occur in the project area.

Cultural Resources: A Class II cultural resources inventory performed in 1978 identified three sites within Section 33. These archaeological sites indicate Native American and Euro-American activities within the vicinity of Chopaka Lake. Cultural resource sites within the Similkameen area have included possible house pit depressions, talus pits, pictographs, and lithic scatters as well as historic cabins and evidence of late nineteenth and early twentieth century settlement activity.

Native American Values: The project area lies within the former Columbia Reservation and the traditional territory of the Salish speaking Southern Okanogan or “Sinkaietk” peoples, and the Northern Okanogan. Ethnographies note the groups shared a similar seasonal subsistence pattern characterized by temporary villages and reliance on fish, game, and edible plants and roots. While primarily within the traditional territory of the Okanogan, certain resource gathering areas were thought to have been shared with other Salish speaking groups such as the Colville, Nespelem and Sanpoil.

A number of plants and roots of cultural importance to the Native American community are found in the Similkameen area. These have included, but are not limited to Saskatoon berries, bitterroot, huckleberries, chokecherry and lilies. This area remains an important traditional resource gathering area.

Ethnographic studies identify place names for Chopaka Lake and Chopaka Mountain. The locations may be associated with traditional cultural properties.

Paleontological Resources: Review of archival records and geological maps indicate paleontological resources are unlikely in the project area. However, ground-disturbing activity could reveal certain exposures of fossil-bearing material.

Recreation: Facilities at the Chopaka BLM recreation site are limited, consisting of one vault outhouse, an information board, and an undeveloped non-motorized boat launch. The entire campground area is enclosed by barbed wire fence, to exclude it from cattle grazing lease. Visitors to the recreation site camp in dispersed campsites along the lakeshore. Visitor use occurs primarily from April through October, and consists of fishing, camping, hunting and hiking. Chopaka Lake is internationally known as a quality flyfishing lake, and use at the site peaks when the lake opens for fishing at the end of April. Some snowmobile use around the campground during winter months has been observed, although most of the BLM-managed area surrounding Chopaka Lake is too steep to be negotiated by snowmobiles.

Approximately 7,000 people visited BLM’s Chopaka Recreation site in 2003 (BLM RMIS figures). Visitors consist of local residents, and visitors from other parts of the U.S. and Canada. Many of the visitors have a long history of camping at the lake. Others have heard about it more recently, through newspaper and magazine articles, or from members of fishing clubs. With its additional facilities, the state campground to the south of BLM is often full at the start of fishing season and on weekends. The BLM camp area often functions as an “overflow” area for the

state campground, or attracts self-contained vehicles and/or those who prefer a more primitive camping experience.

The Chopaka Lake campground is adjacent to the 5,518-acre Chopaka Mountain Wilderness Study Area (WSA), which was established in 1986. The WSA is popular for hiking, primitive camping, hunting and nature study.

Other Resource Elements Considered in the Analysis

Environmental Justice: No disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority or low-income populations are expected to result from implementation of any of the alternatives addressed in this environmental assessment.

Other Values: The following resources were considered in this analysis, but determined to be either not present or not expected to be impacted: air quality, prime or unique farmlands, wastes (hazardous or solid), floodplain, invasive non-native species, special area designations (including Areas of Critical Environmental Concern), wilderness and wild and scenic rivers. The proposed action would not adversely impact energy and minerals resources or their development.

Alternative-Specific Impacts

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action): Building the new boat ramp would disturb the lakebed, causing some sediment movement. The use of the silt boom during construction will reduce sediment movement. Planting native plants and seeding native grasses on disturbed areas throughout the site would improve forage habitat for wildlife, riparian condition, and scenery and also add screening between campsites and around the outhouse. Some soil displacement and vegetative disturbance would occur, but these impacts are not expected to degrade sensitive resources in the area.

Improving the entrance road and camping loop, and rehabilitating and closing other unwanted roads, would encourage visitors to stay on existing roads and use designated campsites. Fewer roads and campsites would reduce impacts in other areas of the campground and in the riparian area along the lake. Campground improvements are expected to decrease the spread of weeds and to reduce fire hazards by discouraging visitors from driving on dry grass. Replacing existing camper-constructed rock rings (which were often placed directly over dry grass) with metal fire rings on gravel pads would reduce the area's fire hazard. Installing wooden fences along the south and west boundaries of the campground would reduce off-highway vehicle (OHV) cross-country traffic around the perimeter of the recreation site.

Improving the roads and the campground, and providing additional directional and interpretive signing, is likely to attract additional visitors to this area. This could increase disturbance to wildlife and vegetation resources. Visits to the Wilderness Study Area are also expected to increase. Increased visitor use would result in additional campground crowding on busy weekends. However, the improvements are also designed to limit visitor impacts to specific areas, rather than spreading them across the entire campground, as is currently the situation.

The three-week closure of the campground during construction would displace campers from the BLM location during the main use season of this area. Although access to the WSA would still be possible by water or by skirting the campground to the west, people would not be able to use the rest of the recreation site. Camping facilities would still be available at the DNR campsite to

the south, but this campground would likely be crowded on busy weekends and at the start of the fishing season. By closing the site for construction at the end of the peak season, fewer visitors would be inconvenienced.

Campground and boat launch construction would disturb and displace resident wildlife. Activities during spring and early summer could displace or harm nesting songbirds and small mammals such as Columbian ground squirrels. Activities conducted in other seasons would have less effect, but would displace some wildlife during construction activities. New roads and campsites would affect approximately 3 acres of grassland and shrub-steppe. The developed camp area and boat launch would attract more visitors who would increase disturbance associated with human presence but it could reduce disturbance associated with OHV travel and unrestricted dispersed camping. Pulling campsites away from the lake should reduce impacts to riparian habitat. No special status species would be affected by the project. The project is not expected to damage or destroy special status plants, ethnobotanical plants, or any high quality plant communities.

Proposed construction activities could potentially impact unidentified cultural resources, as well as paleontological resources within the project area. Construction of a new road parallel to the lake shore and new boat ramp, may impact sites specifically along the shore. New parking areas and campground improvements would include ground disturbing activities and possible impacts to cultural and paleontological sites. Traditional Cultural Properties and /or sacred sites, if located within the project area, may be adversely impacted by proposed construction activities. If such sites are identified they will be avoided, and further actions mitigated. If the sites can not be avoided, the State Historic Preservation Office and consulting Tribes would be consulted.

The proposed improvements could help eliminate negative impacts to certain areas. By establishing specific vehicle routes and improving campground facilities, the general public would have a well defined recreation area and be less likely to expand their activities into other areas affecting valuable cultural resources.

Alternative 2 (No Action): Under this alternative, the Chopaka Lake campground would remain in its current condition. No road or recreation improvements would be implemented. Due to poor road conditions, additional unauthorized vehicle routes would establish over time, complicating BLM management of the site and damaging plant, wildlife and visual resources of the area. The potential for erosion, weed infestations, and fire hazards would increase.

The riparian area would continue to be degraded by numerous campsites and increased trailing along the shore, gradually reducing plant cover in the area. Campsites, roads, and trails would likely spread throughout the campground. The non-motorized boat ramp would continue to be used, but its shallow and muddy location would result in most visitors accessing the lake in other locations along the shoreline.

Unidentified cultural and paleontological resources may be impacted as the public expands their use into undesignated recreation areas. Unauthorized vehicle routes, campsites and trails may expose undocumented cultural and/or paleontological, resulting in damage, destruction or vandalism of such sites.

Coordination with Other Agencies, Groups and Individuals

The proposed project was coordinated with the following BLM specialists:

Richard Bailey- Archaeologist, Spokane District
Carolyn McAleer- Archaeologist
Kevin Kane- Botanist, Wenatchee Field Office
Joe Kelly- Fisheries Biologist, Spokane District-Wenatchee Field Office
Neal Hedges- Wildlife Biologist, Wenatchee Field Office
Kathy Helm- Planning and Environmental Coordinator, Spokane District
Diane Priebe- Outdoor Recreation Planner, Wenatchee Field Office

Consultation

This environmental assessment will be made available for public review and comment by posting of the document on the Spokane website: www.or.blm.gov/spokane. Copies of the environmental assessment will also be mailed by request.

Consultation has been initiated with the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation to determine if traditional cultural properties, sacred sites or other tribal interests would be affected by the proposed undertaking. Consultation has also been initiated with the Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, and the Okanogan County Historical Society.