

USDI, Bureau of Land Management  
Burns District  
HC 74-12533 Hwy 20 West  
Hines, Oregon 97738

DECISION RECORD  
and  
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT  
for  
STEENS MOUNTAIN TRAIL MAINTENANCE

EA OR-27-01-15

INTRODUCTION:

The Steens Mountain Wilderness was designated on October 30, 2000, through passage of the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act (Act) of 2000. Prior to the passage of the Act, much of the land affected by wilderness designation was included within the High Steens Wilderness Study Area (WSA) and the Little Blitzen Gorge WSA.

Recreation use, consisting mainly of horseback riding, day hiking, fishing, and backpacking, has occurred in these areas for many years. A 4-wheel drive road through Big Indian Gorge, originally constructed with a bulldozer to make a jeep trail to homesteaded portions of that canyon, was closed to motor vehicle traffic in the 1980's, and has mostly revegetated and now has the appearance of a trail. Other trails in the area have been created by users seeking the easiest way to their destinations, livestock trailing, and actual construction, including some dynamite work at the mouth of Little Blitzen Gorge.

Some of the user-created paths were improperly placed, and over time portions have eroded; other sections lead through boggy areas; and fast-growing vegetation obscures the trail in places. To circumvent this, some users have attempted to clear paths with chain saws and axes. In some cases, this has resulted in limbs being cut improperly, allowing insect passage and resulting in an unattractive visual appearance. In other places, users seeking to avoid wet areas have expanded trail width and packstock have created boggy holes. Also, users have created multiple paths to avoid fallen trees, brushy vegetation, and wet areas.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSED ACTION:

The proposed action requests minimal trail maintenance on Little Blitzen, Big Indian, and Wildhorse Lake trails to correct resource damage and to provide for public safety. Maintenance would only occur on portions of these trails, leaving existing trailless areas in their current condition. The decision to be made is whether or not to permit the proposed action, thereby allowing for limited trail

maintenance. The no action alternative is to leave the trails in an unmaintained condition, with no trail maintenance authorized.

#### DECISION:

As a result of the environmental analysis presented in the Environmental Assessment (EA), it is my decision to approve the Proposed Action. The rationale for the FONSI support this decision. The Proposed Action, coupled with the mitigation measures detailed in the EA and FONSI, has led to my decision that all practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm and to protect wilderness values have been adopted. Selection of the No-Action Alternative would not provide for resource protection. This decision is consistent with the Andrews MFP (1982).

All resources have been evaluated for cumulative impacts. It has been determined that cumulative impacts would be negligible for all resources.

#### FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT:

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts detailed in the attached EA, I have determined that the impacts of the trail maintenance described in the proposed action, when coupled with the mitigation measures presented and detailed in the EA, are not significant. Therefore an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

#### Rationale:

The activities described in the proposed action, incorporated with the management constraints as described in the Wilderness Act and subsequent laws, will, as best can be determined, prevent unnecessary and undue degradation of public land. Resources determined to be potentially impacted were analyzed in the EA specific to the proposed action. Among the latter resources are water quality, wetlands and riparian zones, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs), Wild and Scenic Rivers, cultural heritage, wilderness, noxious weeds, migratory birds, recreation, vegetation, visual resources, and soils. Impacts to these resources are considered nonsignificant (based on the definition in 40 CFR 1508.27) for the following reasons:

**Water Quality:** While some short-term soil displacement into water sources could occur through the trail rehabilitation process, rerouting of trail sections would curtail existing erosion.

**Wetlands and Riparian Zones:** Rerouting of trails around wetlands where foot and stock passage are causing trail expansion and changes to water flow would restore these areas. Placement of stepping stones across unavoidable bogs would lessen the impact of user traffic in these areas. Cleaning of and installation of water drains would facilitate dispersal of water off trail areas.

**ACECs:** Since most of the proposed action takes place on existing trails, there would be no significant impact to the relevant and important values for which the three ACECs within the project area were established. As described in the attached EA, trail reroutes would be performed so as to avoid any rare or sensitive plant communities.

**Wild and Scenic Rivers:** The Outstanding Remarkable Values and features found to contribute substantially to the river system or ecosystem for which each section was designated would not be affected through the proposed action.

**Cultural Resources:** Since the extent of cultural sites located within the project area is not known, impacts to cultural resources could occur through displacement and disturbance. As described in the attached EA, archaeological surveys will be performed on sections where trail reroutes are proposed in order to avoid these impacts.

**Wilderness Values:** No new unnatural features would be added through the proposed action. The appearance of maintenance could contribute to the loss of naturalness, but camouflaging of limbs and scattering of cut brush would mitigate these impacts. Consolidation of multiple paths and correction of resource damage including trail expansion and disturbance to boggy areas would enhance naturalness. Short-term impacts to solitude could be experienced through presence of a work crew. Opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation would continue.

**Noxious Weeds:** An overall increase in weed colonization could occur from soil disturbance from these projects. Adherence to the Burns District Weed Plan would prevent the introduction and spread of undesirable species.

**Migratory Birds:** Impacts to migratory birds could consist of temporary abandonment of nests and possible permanent abandonment of nests in some camping areas if visitation use increases due to improved access. Potentially impacted habitat is less than 1-percent of all migratory bird habitat available. As described in the attached EA, trail work will not commence prior to July 15, the end of nesting season.

**Recreation:** Since trails would only be maintained in a primitive condition, it is not anticipated that a large increase in visitor use would occur due to the proposed action. Visitor safety would be enhanced by erosion control measures. Opportunities for recreation use including horseback riding, backpacking, and fishing would continue.

**Vegetation:** Impacts to vegetation would be restricted to cutting of low overhead branches or trimming of brushy shrubs and tree limbs. Local breakage or cutting of some plants could occur as deadfall or other debris on trails are cast aside. Botanical clearances would be performed in areas scheduled for reroutes.

**Visual Resources:** The proposed project area lies within a BLM Visual Resource Management Class I area, wherein changes to the landscape must be very low and the existing character of the landscape must be preserved. Actions proposed would render the trails more visible in certain locations and could create a local appearance of maintenance. As described in the attached EA, scattering of cut limbs out of trail view and camouflaging of cut limbs would minimize long-term impacts.

Mitigation Measures/Monitoring: Approval of this proposal is subject to adherence to constraints of the Wilderness Act and subsequent laws. In addition, the following project-specific measures would be implemented by the work crew:

Migratory Birds: To avoid impacting nesting, trail work would not begin before July 15.

Leave No Trace: Any overnight use, if required to complete work, would be in compliance with Leave No Trace guidelines, including proper disposal of human waste in individual cat holes 200 feet from water sources, trails, or campsites; washing of dishes or persons at least 200 feet from water sources; selection of an existing, recognizable campsite; minimizing campfire use unless severe weather dictates this use; and avoiding of wildlife during sensitive times as nesting and raising of young. The work crew would be considerate of other visitors by avoiding loud voices and noises wherever possible and yielding to other users on the trail.

Hand Tools: Only nonmechanized and nonmotorized equipment would be used. Cut material would be scattered out of view of trails. No bridges or other developments would be constructed.

Monitoring: Trail work would be supervised and monitored by wilderness personnel. Trail conditions would be observed over time to determine the effectiveness of the proposed action.

These decisions may be appealed to the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of the Secretary, in accordance with the regulations contained in 43 CFR, Part 4 and the enclosed form 1842-1. If an appeal is taken, your notice of appeal must be filed in this office (at the above address) within 30 days from receipt of this decision. The appellant has the burden of showing that the decision appealed from is in error.

If you wish to file a petition pursuant to regulation 43 CFR 4.21 (58 FR 4939, January 19, 1993) or 43 CFR 2804.1 for a stay of the effectiveness of this decision during the time that your appeal is being reviewed by the Board, the petition for a stay must accompany your notice of appeal. A petition for a stay is required to show sufficient justification based on the standards listed below. Copies of the note of appeal and petition for a stay must also be submitted to each party named in this decision and to the Interior Board of Land Appeals and to the appropriate office of the Solicitor (see 43 CFR 4.413) at the same time the original documents are filed with this office. If you request a stay, you have the burden of proof to demonstrate a stay should be granted.

#### Standards for Obtaining a Stay

Except as otherwise provided by law or other pertinent regulation, a petition for a stay of a decision pending appeal shall show sufficient justification based on the following standards:

- (1) The relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied;
- (2) The likelihood of the appellant's success of the merits;
- (3) The likelihood of immediate and irreparable harm if the stay is not granted:

(4) Whether or not the public interest favors granting the stay.

Signature on file

July 29, 2001

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Miles R. Brown  
Andrews Resource Area Field Manager

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Date