

CYCLE OREGON STEENS TOUR
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

EA OR-027-01-035

Bureau of Land Management
Burns District Office
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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

A. Location of Project

The proposed action would take place on the Steens Mountain Back Country Byway; at Kiger Gorge, East Rim, and Wildhorse Lake Overlooks; and Steens Summit. The Steens Mountain Back Country Byway is located within the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Area (CMPA), 60 miles south of Burns, Oregon.

B. Purpose of and Need for Action

The proposed action would allow Cycle Oregon to provide their participants with an interpretive tour of Steens Mountain. The need is to continue to meet Bureau of Land Management's (BLM's) responsibility to serve the recreational interests of the public.

C. Conformance with Land Use Plans

The proposed action and alternative described below are in conformance with the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act of 2000 (Act), the Andrews Management Framework Plan (MFP), and the Andrews Plan Amendment for Recreation Access Surrounding the Steens Mountain Loop Road, and are consistent with Federal, State, and local laws, regulations, and plans to the maximum extent possible. One of the objectives of the Act is to "promote grazing, recreation, historic and other uses that are sustainable" (Sec 102 (b) (1)). One of the purposes of the Act is to "maintain the cultural, economic, and social health of the Steens Mountain area in Harney County, Oregon" (Sec 1 (1)). The MFP specifically states:

The objective of the recreation management and development program in the Andrews Resource Area should be to provide quality recreational opportunities for the various publics who wish to use the Federal lands for recreational purposes. (Recreation Step I)

D. Major Issues

Sightseeing activities on the proposed tour occur in close proximity to the Steens Mountain Wilderness. Wilderness areas are subject to stringent management constraints as described in the Wilderness Act and subsequent laws. All projects occurring in wilderness areas must be carried out in accordance with these constraints to preserve wilderness values.

CHAPTER II. ALTERNATIVES INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

A. Proposed Action

Cycle Oregon's literature identifies the organization as a not-for-profit corporation with the specific objective of creating economic and other benefits in rural Oregon communities. The organization proposes to present their participants an interpretive tour and self-guided hike on Steens Mountain. Tours would be conducted via 45 passenger buses, which would bring groups to the Kiger and East Rim Overlooks at scheduled times throughout September 11 and 12, 2001. Those participants wishing to hike would follow the existing road from the East Rim Overlook to the Steens Summit and back.

Buses would run from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. on September 11, with a total of nine buses and approximately 405 people; and from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. on September 12, with 21 buses and a total of approximately 1,350 participants. Each bus would spend 20 minutes at each overlook. Buses would travel in groups of three, and the maximum number of participants at any area would not exceed 135, except for the groups hiking to the Steens Summit Area from the East Rim Overlook. The total number of participants could exceed 135 at one time, depending on how many people chose to hike. The proposed schedule has each group completing the tour in 3 hours. Four portable toilets would be placed at the Kiger Gorge Overlook and would be removed after the tours are completed.

Participants would board buses at the community corrals in Frenchglen, and would receive pamphlets detailing interpretive information, descriptions of the stops, hikes, and safety information. Cycle Oregon would restrict participants to hiking on only the established trails at each viewpoint and on the Loop Road. Their proposal states that the established trails would be marked to keep people on them. Four rescue personnel would be stationed along the Loop Road in order to provide assistance in case of emergencies. An ambulance would also be staged at the Wildhorse Overlook. Participants would be briefed on the need to stay on approved trails and the necessity of not approaching wildlife during the tour.

No Action Alternative

Under this alternative, no interpretive tour would be conducted. Cycle Oregon would have to find an alternate activity for its participants.

CHAPTER III. DESCRIPTION OF THE AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

A. Critical Elements

The following critical elements of the human environment either are not present or would not be affected by the proposed action or the no action alternatives: prime or unique farmlands, floodplains, environmental justice, hazardous materials, water quality, wetlands and riparian zones, Wild and Scenic Rivers, cultural heritage, American Indian religious concerns, Special Status species–fauna, paleontology, and noxious weeds.

The following critical elements are present and may be affected by either alternative: air quality, wilderness, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs), and Special Status species–flora.

1. Air Quality

Air quality on the Steens Mountain Back Country Byway is generally good. Seasonal sources of air pollution are caused by dust from passenger vehicles and from windstorms. Drift smoke from wildfires can cause temporary impacts to air quality.

2. Wilderness

The Steens Mountain Wilderness is 174,753 acres in size and is composed of diverse topographical and geological features, including glacier-carved canyons, sagebrush flats, and rocky benches. Vegetation ranges from low sagebrush to high alpine species. Stands of aspen, cottonwood, and juniper are found throughout most portions of the wilderness.

a. Naturalness

The portions of the Steens Mountain Wilderness that would be affected by the proposed action are mostly in outstanding natural condition. A few social trails used by visitors hiking along the rims, are apparent in some areas. The majority of the main viewing areas are not within wilderness.

b. Solitude

Opportunities for solitude are sometimes present in the portions of the wilderness affected by the proposed action. While the overlook areas, including the parking lots and the main viewing spots, are not within the wilderness, the Kiger and East Rim Overlooks are surrounded by wilderness on four sides. The overlooks are attractions for most visitors during daylight hours, and solitude in the immediate vicinity is often difficult to find.

c. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation are outstanding and include day hiking, photography, and nature study.

d. Supplemental Wilderness Values

Special features enhancing the area's wilderness values include geology, vegetation, wildlife, and scenic qualities.

3. Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

Two ACECs exist in the proposed tour area: Steens Mountain ACEC (56,187 acres) and Little Blitzen ACEC/Research Natural Area (RNA) (2,530 acres). The Steens Mountain ACEC was designated for scenic qualities including subalpine ecosystems and pristine, high gradient streams. Relevant and important values for Little Blitzen ACEC/RNA, which is located within the Steens Mountain ACEC, include plant community types and unique assemblages of rare plants as well as several Special Status plant species. This area was designated to protect several terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems including alpine communities, a mid-to-high elevation vernal pond, and a stream system originating in the subalpine zone.

4. Special Status Species—Flora

While there are no known threatened or endangered plant species known in the project area, several species of sensitive plants are known to occur in the tour route area. These include Steens Mountain paintbrush, Cusick's hyssop, Hayden's cymopterus, Cusick's draba, and Davidson's penstemon. Steens Mountain thistle is found in abundance along the Byway.

Noncritical Elements

The following noncritical elements are present and would be affected by one or both of alternatives: recreation, vegetation, visual resources, wildlife, and soils.

1. Recreation

Recreation activities along the Steens Mountain Back Country Byway include driving for pleasure, mountain biking, horseback riding, and sightseeing. The majority of visitors stop at Kiger Gorge, East Rim, and Wildhorse Lake Overlooks. Heavy visitor traffic has allowed for development of distinct trails leading to overlooks, particularly in the Kiger area. From these areas, other faint trails emerge over each season. Some naturally revegetate while others become well-traveled paths. There are some barren areas at each overlook from sightseeing activities. Wildhorse Lake is a popular destination for fishermen, day hikers, and backpackers. Hunting activities occur in most areas during designated seasons.

2. Vegetation

The tour route is characterized by a wide diversity in vegetation. Sagebrush, native bunchgrass, juniper and aspen communities, and subalpine grassland and meadow communities all occur within the area.

3. Visual Resources

All wilderness areas are classified as Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class I. In these areas, management objectives are to preserve the existing character of the landscape. This VRM class provides for natural ecological change and limited management activity is allowed. The level of landscape change should be very low and must not attract attention. The Steens Mountain Back Country Byway and the parking and main viewing areas at the overlooks are classified as VRM Class II. The objective of this classification is to retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to landscape characteristics should be low. Management activities may be seen but should not attract the attention of a casual observer. Any changes must conform to the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant natural features of the landscape.

4. Wildlife

Steens Mountain supports a diversity of wildlife. Mule deer, pronghorn antelope, Rocky Mountain elk, cougar, and California bighorn sheep are found at varying elevations depending on season. Upland bird species, raptors, and small mammals are present.

5. Soils

Soil texture and depth vary along the proposed tour route. Soils at the overlook areas are typically shallow to moderately deep over bedrock, and well drained.

Additional information on the affected environment can be found in the Wilderness Study Report (BLM-OR-EA-91-43-8561.6, 1991) and in the Draft Southeast Oregon Resource Management Plan (1998).

CHAPTER IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Proposed Action

1. Critical Elements

a. Air Quality

Additional dust and diesel fumes would be generated by the tour buses as they transport passengers along the Back Country Byway and as they arrive at the overlooks. On a calm day without good wind dispersal, clouds of dust could hang in the air for long periods. Cycle Oregon proposes that buses would be shut down at the overlooks to minimize fumes. There could be a temporary impact to air quality during the event.

b. Wilderness Values

The majority of the wilderness area would be viewed from the transportation route, but visitors would travel on foot immediately adjacent to portions of the wilderness as they hike to the Kiger Rim, the East Rim, and the Steens Summit area. As visitors disperse along the rims for sightseeing, some could walk into the wilderness area.

(1) Naturalness

Facilities such as toilets are temporary in nature and would be placed outside of the wilderness. New social trails could develop from people walking along the rims.

(2) Solitude

The proposed action would be limited to 2 days. Opportunities for solitude in the portions of the wilderness surrounding the overlooks would be temporarily disrupted by the presence of large groups of people. However, these are areas where the majority of Steens Mountain visitors also stop to view the scenery, and are adjacent to parking lots. Visitors below the rims in other areas of the wilderness could observe the large group along the skyline. Topographic and vegetative screening would not be affected.

(3) Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Primitive and unconfined recreation activities would not be affected in the wilderness as a whole.

(4) Supplemental Values

The supplemental values of scenic, geologic, wildlife, and vegetative qualities would not be affected by the proposed action, except in small areas near the overlooks, where new trails or trampling of vegetation could occur.

c. Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

Since most of the proposed action takes place on existing roads and trails, the relevant and important values for which the ACECs were established would not be affected, except in some areas along the rim where trampling of vegetation and user-created paths could occur. These activities would impact the scenic quality of the ACEC and its special plant communities. Other ACECs would be viewed from a distance by the tour participants, but would not be visited on foot or by vehicle.

d. Special Status Species–Flora

Cycle Oregon would restrict visitors from areas known to have sensitive species, which would lessen impacts. With 135 participants at each overlook at one time, however, some trampling of sensitive plants could occur.

2. Noncritical Elements

a. Recreation

Recreation patterns on the mountain would be temporarily disrupted by the Cycle Oregon tour. The large traffic volume could discourage other visitors from traveling on the Back Country Byway. Visitors wishing to sightsee from the overlooks would be displaced or avoid these areas due to the large groups. Traffic would be temporarily congested along the Byway and from private vehicles encountering groups of hikers along the summit road. Hunting activities would be taking place during the tour period. The bighorn sheep hunt runs from September 4 to September 17 and deer and elk archery hunting from August 25 to September 23. The two permitted bighorn sheep hunters could be indirectly affected as visitor movement on the rim could cause bighorns to abandon the ledges below. Archery hunting activities occur near the proposed tour area, and it is possible that deer and elk could change their normal patterns to avoid areas near the Kiger Gorge Overlook. However, these developed overlooks are normally places where large numbers of visitors congregate, and displacement of animals is expected to be minimal. The proposed tour would take place during the week, when there is usually less visitation than on weekends.

b. Vegetation

During the time period of the proposed tour, most plants would be in the dormant stage. The vegetation around both Kiger and East Rim Overlook is normally heavily impacted as a result of seasonal visitor use. Additional impacts could occur as a result of a large group of sightseers. Cycle Oregon's proposed mitigation emphasizes restricting participants to two existing trails at Kiger Gorge and one at East Rim. However, most visitors tend to spread out along each rim and this would be nearly impossible to control.

A possibility exists for the loss of vegetative cover and the creation of new trails in these areas. The trail to Wildhorse Lake Overlook and to the Steens summit are former roads, one of which (Steens Summit) is still used occasionally by authorized motor vehicles. Vegetation here is sparse, but could still be affected by the large number of people. Once at these two locations, people naturally walk along the rims to look and take photographs. The possibility of vegetation loss is likely. Cycle Oregon's proposal states that they would restrict access to areas containing sensitive areas of vegetation.

As Cycle Oregon participants hike along the existing roadway to reach the Steens Summit, normal visitor vehicle traffic trying to reach the same area would move the hikers off the road. Vegetation in the immediate vicinity of the road could be trampled.

c. Visual Resources

The four portable toilets placed at the Kiger Gorge viewpoint would be placed in a VRM Class II area. There would be a temporary impact to the landscape because of the form and color of the toilets. Buses parked at the viewpoints would be easily seen against the skyline and would appear unnatural from a great distance. These would be temporary in nature and would not permanently affect the visual resources.

d. Wildlife

Bighorn sheep, deer, and elk patterns could be affected by the presence of a large tour group. Sheep are occasionally seen below the East Rim, and may feel threatened enough to disperse to other areas. However, this overlook is commonly visited by unrelated groups of people during the summer months. In addition, by the time of the tour, sheep, elk, and deer may already be dispersed from hunting activities.

e. Soils

Large numbers of people visiting overlooks would impact soils by trampling protective vegetation and exposing the soil to wind and water erosion. Concentrated activity by a large group of people could increase soil compaction in certain areas. Cycle Oregon plans to require participants to remain on existing sightseeing trails. However, large groups tend to spread out over the landscape once a viewpoint is reached. Though soils at the overlooks are rocky and thin, some disturbance could occur.

3. Cumulative Impacts

There would be no known cumulative impacts to air quality, wilderness values, ACECs, Special Status species–flora, wildlife, recreation or visual resources.

a. Vegetation

Vegetation loss could become unnaturally accelerated in those areas near overlooks where tour participants are expected to disperse. In combination with the high visitor use already occurring, vegetation loss and subsequent soil exposure in these areas could increase at a faster rate. Over time, the barren core areas around these sites are anticipated to widen as people gravitate to the popular viewing spots.

b. Soils

Soil disturbance from a large tour would be readily apparent and future users could be drawn to those new areas of mineral soil exposure, including any new trail development. Participants could easily wander onto existing faint social trails and make them more apparent. Over time, the multiple paths that now exist at the overlooks could increase as new visitors are attracted to them. Once trails develop in these high elevation areas, they become established and are difficult to rehabilitate. Compaction and displacement of soils from this event, in combination with historic and future foot travel, could affect the ability of water to infiltrate soils. Over time, less water would be available for plants in this area and plant root penetration would lessen. Because of the semiaridity of the area, soil productivity may never recover.

B. Mitigating Measures

1. Resources

a. Air Quality

Cycle Oregon would be required to water down the North Steens Mountain Back Country Byway to the road junction below the Kiger Overlook during the tour as necessary to prevent dust. Areas of particular concern that would be watered more frequently would be sections of road that pass near campgrounds. As proposed by Cycle Oregon, buses would not idle in parking lots. Buses would be required to not exceed a speed limit of 35 miles per hour below the Kiger Gorge turnoff and 25 miles per hour above that point.

b. Vegetation/Areas of Critical Environmental Concern/Special Status Species Flora/Soils

Cycle Oregon participants would be monitored during the event by tour coordinators and the BLM to prevent, as much as possible, creation of new trails at the overlooks. As per Cycle Oregon's proposal, participants would be briefed on the necessity of remaining on existing trails and avoiding sensitive areas. In addition to the toilets at Kiger Gorge, Cycle Oregon would be required to place two toilets at the road junction below the East Rim and two toilets at the Wildhorse Lake Overlook parking area.

c. Recreation

Participants undertaking the hike to the Steens Summit/Wildhorse Lake Overlook area would be strongly encouraged to break into smaller walking groups to facilitate traffic flow and to prevent unnecessary off-road hiking. Buses would be required to park below the East Rim at the road junction and in the road right of way before the Kiger turnoff, not at the actual parking lots. BLM may adjust the bus schedule so that three buses are not parked at one overlook area at the same time. Participants would not be allowed to hike to Wildhorse Lake due to resource concerns from such a large group.

C. No Action Alternative

1. Critical Elements

a. Air Quality

This resource would not be affected.

b. Wilderness Values

This resource would not be affected.

c. Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

This resource would not be affected.

d. Special Status Species–Flora

This resource would not be affected.

2. Noncritical Elements

a. Recreation

The opportunity for the Cycle Oregon participants to experience an interpretive tour would be foregone. Steens Mountain is a major attraction to these cyclists. Other visitors on the mountain would continue to recreate without the presence of a large tour.

b. Vegetation

This resource would not be affected.

c. Visual Resources

This resource would not be affected.

d. Wildlife

This resource would not be affected.

Soils

This resource would not be affected.

3. Cumulative Impacts

There would be no cumulative impacts to the resources discussed above from the no action alternative.

CHAPTER V. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

A. Preparers and Reviewers

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