

WILLAMETTE VALLEY SOARING CLUB
SPECIAL RECREATION PERMIT
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
EA OR-026-01-30

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

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

A. Introduction

The Willamette Valley Soaring Club has applied for a Special Recreation Permit (SRP) to hold their annual gathering on the Alvord Playa. This event has occurred in the past without a permit. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) policy allows for SRPs to be issued for organized group activities in areas where permits are needed for management or resource concerns. There is little data on the amount of use the Alvord Playa receives from both individuals and organized groups. SRPs are one way to gather this information for the current Andrews Resource Area/Steens Mountain planning effort.

The Alvord Playa is located in the Alvord Desert Wilderness Study Area (WSA). The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976 mandated the BLM to manage its land under wilderness review "so as not to impair their suitability for preservation as wilderness." The BLM Manual Handbook H-8550-1 - Interim Management Policy (IMP) for Lands Under Wilderness Review (Release 8-67, 7/5/95) provides specific guidance on the management of resources and the evaluation of actions within WSAs.

The IMP details BLM's general policy for WSAs and provides "specific policy guidance" for 19 subject areas (pp. 7-18). The IMP also contains "policies for specific activities" which may take place or be proposed in WSAs (pp. 29-49). If the "policies for specific activities" do not address the proposal to be evaluated, then the "nonimpairment criteria" and other "specific policy guidance" may apply. The "policies for specific activities" and applicable "specific policy guidance" are the basis for the IMP screening discussion below.

B. Purpose of and Need for Action

The proposed action would allow for a specialized recreation activity to occur under permit. Issuance of a permit would allow the BLM to better manage this type of activity through permit stipulations and monitoring. Permits also allow the BLM to collect data on types of recreation activities and numbers of participants in those activities. Opportunities for this type of event are limited because of the availability of public land areas suitable for launching and landing gliders.

C. Land Use Plan Conformance Statement

The proposed action and alternative described below are in conformance with the Andrews Management Framework Plan (MFP) and are consistent with Federal, State, and local laws, regulations, and plans to the maximum extent possible. The Andrews MFP specifically states:

The Alvord Playa would be managed for all legitimate public land uses as well as ORV (sic) use. Recreation vehicles and commercial uses which do not impair the wilderness values of the Alvord (sic) WSA would be allowed until Congress makes its final determination on wilderness.

CHAPTER II. PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVE

A. Proposed Action

Willamette Valley Soaring Club has applied for an organized group (noncompetitive, noncommercial) SRP for camping and flying gliders on the Alvord Playa (Map 1). The permit would be for July 7 through July 15, 2001. There would be approximately 20 club members camping for an average of 6 days per person. Six to eight gliders would be on-site at any one time. The club proposes to launch one and two seat gliders by auto-tow from, and land the gliders, on the Alvord Playa.

The club also proposes to camp at one of two locations (Map 2). Site 1 would be the primary location for glider launching and camping. Site 2 would be used if wind or weather conditions make Site 1 unusable. Participants would camp in motor homes and tents on the desert. Participants would use the motor home sanitation facilities and pit toilets.

B. No Action Alternative

The Willamette Valley Soaring Club permit application would be denied. The proposed club activities would not be permitted and would not be allowed on the Alvord Playa.

C. IMP Compliance Analysis

Definitions of the IMP-related words and phrases can be found in Appendix 1. The no action alternative is not analyzed in this section because it would not affect the wilderness values of the Alvord Desert WSA. However, this EA does analyze the effects of the no action alternative on other resources.

1. Policies for Specific Activities

a. Aerial Activities

Key concept - aerial activities may be allowed under certain conditions.

The proposed action would be an exception to the restrictions on this activity. A variety of documents, including the Andrews MFP and the Draft Southeast Oregon Resource Management Plan, recognize that motorized recreation use of the Alvord Playa occurred prior to the passage of FLPMA and support its continuation. The Andrews MFP allows motorized vehicle use on the Alvord Playa if wilderness values are not impaired.

2. Specific Policy Guidance

a. Overriding Consideration

Key concept - preservation of wilderness values.

Implementation of the proposed action would not affect wilderness values over the long term. Issuing permits for activities on the Alvord Playa would reduce temporary, short-term impacts through the use of stipulations and monitoring. Therefore, the proposed action would preserve wilderness values and would meet the "overriding consideration."

b. Nonimpairment Criteria

Key concepts - temporary, no surface disturbance, must not degrade wilderness values (five exceptions (see Appendix 1)).

The proposed action would not cause surface disturbance. Although digging pit toilets would disturb the soil, pit toilets are commonly used for human waste disposal in WSAs and wilderness. Wilderness values would not be degraded. None of the five exceptions apply to the proposed action. The proposed action would meet the nonimpairment criteria.

c. Surface Disturbance

Key concept - new disruption of soil or vegetation requiring reclamation.

The proposed action would not cause surface disturbance. Reclamation would not be required because no ruts would be created, soil would not be compacted, and vegetation would not be trampled or

compressed. Any vehicle tracks on the Alvord Playa are erased during the winter and spring months when water covers the playa.

d. Impair Suitability for Preservation as Wilderness

Key concept - nonimpairment of wilderness values.

The proposed action would cause short-term effects to the wilderness values of solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. Overall, wilderness values would not be impaired.

e. Motor Vehicles

Key concepts - allowed only off boundary roads and ways under three conditions (two exceptions (see Appendix 1)).

See discussion for Aerial Activities above.

f. Substantially Unnoticeable

Key concepts - action insignificant, a minor feature of area or not distinctly recognizable as being humanmade or human-caused.

The proposed action would not be noticeable to the average visitor to the Alvord Playa. The Soaring Club would only be camped on and using the Alvord Playa for a short time. There would be no long-term or permanent modification of the landscape.

3. Analysis Summary

Based on the above analysis, the proposed action, would be in compliance with the IMP. The Andrews MFP allows the use of “recreational vehicles” on the Alvord Playa if wilderness values are not impaired. The analysis above details that wilderness values would not be impaired.

CHAPTER III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

A. Proposed Action

The following critical elements of the human environment are not present or are not affected by the proposed action or alternatives in this EA:

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

Environmental Justice

Farm Lands (prime or unique)

Floodplains

American Indian Religious Concerns

Paleontology

Wastes (hazardous or solid)

Water Quality (drinking/ground)

Wetlands/Riparian Zones

Wild and Scenic Rivers

1. Critical Elements

a. Air Quality

Air quality in the Alvord Basin is generally good. During high wind events, large amounts of dust may be carried into the air from the Alvord Playa and other dry lakes in the area.

b. Cultural Resources

Cultural resources are commonly found near water sources and around and on old lake shore terraces. The sand dunes on the east side of the Alvord Playa are considered a high potential location for cultural resources.

c. Noxious Weeds

Noxious weeds are not found on the Alvord Playa. Small populations of three thistle species were documented in 1994 at Frog Spring and Scotch thistle was found along the Fields-Folly Farm Road west of the Alvord Playa.

d. Threatened, Endangered, and Special Status Species/Migratory Birds

The inland snowy plover, a migratory bird, is listed as Threatened by the State of Oregon and is a BLM Sensitive Species. A major breeding area for the snowy plover is located near Alvord Hot Springs (Map 2). The breeding period starts as early as March and may extend into July, the majority of nesting occurring during May through late June. In the nearby Harney Basin, nests with eggs have been found as late as July 24. One of the main causes for snowy plover nest failure is disturbance during incubation.

e. Wilderness

The proposed action location is within the Alvord Desert WSA. The wilderness values for the WSA are summarized from the Oregon Wilderness Study Report, Volume 1 (1991).

Naturalness - The Alvord Desert WSA appears to be in a natural condition. The playa is occasionally flooded and receives light use by migrating waterfowl and shorebirds. The dunes on the east side of the Alvord Playa provide habitat for rodents and songbirds. There are few unnatural features, which are relatively unnoticeable.

Solitude - The Alvord Desert WSA has outstanding opportunities for solitude. The ridgeline and cliffs provide some topographic screening. Military aircraft use the area for low altitude training flights, but their influence is short and temporary.

Primitive and Unconfined Recreation - There are outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation including hiking, backpacking, camping, horseback riding, and sightseeing.

Special Features - Geology, wildlife, wild horses, cultural resources, and scenic quality are the identified special features of this WSA.

2. Resources

Bureau specialists have determined that the following resources, although present in the project area, are not affected by the proposed action: soils, geologic resources, vegetation, livestock grazing/range, wild horses, wildlife, and visual resources.

a. Recreation

The Alvord Playa is used throughout the year for casual recreation. People are attracted to the area because of the expansive views across the playa and the views of the Steens Mountain west of the playa. The Alvord Hot Springs, located on private land, attracts others to the area. Frog Springs, also on the west side of the Alvord Playa, is a popular location.

CHAPTER IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Proposed Action

1. Critical Elements

a. Air Quality

Increased dust would occur during the towing activities of the Soaring Club. Only one glider is launched at a time, with a maximum of eight gliders on site at any one time. The dust caused by glider launching would not be greater than the wind-caused dust storms and other vehicle use of the playa, but could cause small, short-term increases in dust.

b. Cultural Resources

Cultural resources could be affected if the camp sites are located on or near cultural sites. Disturbances could include digging of fire pits or toilet pits and/or collection of artifacts by club members.

c. Noxious Weeds

The potential for spread of noxious weeds is always present, but vegetation does not grow on the Alvord Playa because of the soil and water conditions.

d. Threatened, Endangered, and Special Status Species/Migratory Birds

The snowy plover does not nest at or near Camp Site 1. Any Soaring Club activities at Camp Site 2 could disrupt snowy plover nesting sites.

e. Wilderness

Naturalness - The surface disturbance caused by digging pit toilets could cause some short-term impacts to naturalness. The decomposition of solid human waste and toilet paper would not occur rapidly in the microflora-depauperate environment of the playa.

Solitude - Solitude on the parts of the Alvord Playa would be temporarily affected, but the size of the playa and WSA and its ridgelines and cliffs would allow for solitude in other parts of the playa and WSA. Glider activities may attract the attention of other visitors, further affecting solitude on the Alvord Playa.

Primitive and Unconfined Recreation - Those visitors seeking a primitive recreation experience may be temporarily displaced from the camp area(s) and glider takeoff/landing location(s), but other areas of the playa and the WSA would still be available for primitive and unconfined recreation.

Special Features - Other than cultural resources, as discussed above, special features of the WSA would not be affected.

2. Resources

a. Recreation

Primitive and unconfined recreation associated with the WSA could be temporarily affected, as described above. Dispersed recreation users would generally not be affected by the Soaring Club activities. The presence of the gliders may attract additional sightseers and campers to the Alvord Playa.

B. No Action Alternative

1. Critical Elements

a. Air Quality

Air quality would not be affected by the no action alternative.

b. Cultural Resources

Cultural resources would not be affected by the no action alternative.

c. Noxious Weeds

Noxious weeds would not be affected by the no action alternative.

d. Threatened, Endangered, and Special Status Species/Migratory Birds

The snowy plover would not be affected by the no action alternative.

e. Wilderness

Naturalness - Naturalness would not be affected by the no action alternative.

Solitude - Solitude would not be affected by the no action alternative.

Primitive and Unconfined Recreation - Primitive and unconfined recreation would not be affected by the no action alternative.

Special Features - Special features would not be affected by the no action alternative.

2. Resources

a. Recreation

The opportunity for the Soaring Club to meet and fly their sailplanes at this location would be foregone. The number of dry lakebeds is limited, so it may not be possible for the club to find another location. Also, the proposed event may occur even if it is not permitted. If this were to occur there could be unmitigated impacts to cultural resources, Special Status species, and wilderness values.

C. Mitigating Measures

1. Critical Elements

a. Cultural Resources

A cultural resources inventory would be conducted at the proposed campsites. Should cultural resources be located, the area around them would be flagged and use would be prohibited. Collection of cultural resources, including points, flakes, and ground stone, would also be prohibited.

b. Threatened, Endangered, and Special Status Species/Migratory Birds

Camping and glider activities would not be allowed in the area east of Alvord Hot Springs. Specifically, Sections 33 and 34, T.34 S., R. 4 E., and Sections 3 and 4, T. 36 S., R. 34 E., would be closed to all activities. A recommended camping area would be northeast of Frog Springs in Section 9, T. 35 S., R. 34 E. along the playa edge south of Frog Springs.

c. Wilderness

The digging of pit toilets would not be allowed. The Willamette Valley Soaring Club would be required to carry and use portable toilets. All human wastes would be disposed of in an approved sanitary waste disposal facility.

D. Cumulative Impact Analysis

There would be no cumulative impacts as a result of the proposed action or no action alternative. The proposed mitigation would reduce or eliminate those impacts identified. Issuing permits for organized group use of the Alvord Playa in the future would reduce or eliminate any potential impacts for both the short and long terms. The present situation is unregulated, with a number of groups using the Alvord Playa on a regular basis.

E. Monitoring

Standard BLM monitoring of the SRP during the event would be sufficient.

CHAPTER V. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

A. List of Preparers

Dean Bolstad, Wild Horse Management Specialist
Mary Emerick, Wilderness Specialist
Richard Finerty, BLM Ranger
Gary Foulkes, Planning and Environmental Coordinator
Terri Geisler, Geologist (HazMat)
Rick Hall, Natural Resource Specialist (Botanist)
Matt Obradovich, Wildlife Biologist
Mark Sherbourne, Natural Resource Specialist
Scott Thomas, Archaeologist
Evelyn Treiman, Outdoor Recreation Planner/Lead Preparer

B. Persons, Groups, and Agencies Consulted

Dave Kuchenbecker, Willamette Valley Soaring Club

C. Public Notice and Availability

A notice would be placed in the Burns Times-Herald announcing the document's availability and a 30-day comment period. The document would also be available on the Burns District environmental documents web page.

Appendix 1 - Definitions for IMP Compliance Analysis

All citations are to the BLM Manual Handbook H-8550-1 - Interim Management Policy for Lands Under Wilderness Review (Release 8-67, 7/5/95).

aerial activities: aerial activities such as ballooning, sailplaning, hang gliding, and parachuting (sky diving), may be authorized as long as they do not require cross-country use of motorized vehicles or mechanical devices to retrieve equipment, except in areas designated as "open" before October 21, 1976. (p. 47, H. 7.)

impair suitability for preservation as wilderness: refers to activities that are considered to impair an area's suitability for preservation as wilderness -- i.e., that do not satisfy the "nonimpairment criteria" . . . (p. 2, ¶4; p. 3, ¶3 & ¶4; p. 4, all; p. 9, #2b; Glossary, p. 2, "impair wilderness suitability")

motor vehicles: motor vehicles or mechanical transport may be allowed off boundary roads and existing ways for these purposes only:

- a. in emergencies and search and rescue operations . . . ;
- b. for official purposes by the BLM and other Federal State, and local agencies and their agents when necessary and specifically authorized by the BLM for protection of human life, safety, and property; for protection of the lands and their resources; and,
- c. to build or maintain structure and installations authorized in this document, as long as such use of vehicles is determined to satisfy the nonimpairment criteria and is only along routes authorized and specified by the BLM. No grading, blading, or vegetative disturbance will be permitted as this would constitute surface disturbance and thus not meet the nonimpairment criteria.

In emergencies, cross-country travel will not be held to the nonimpairment standard; but in all other cases, cross-country travel is allowed only where it is specifically authorized by the BLM and it satisfies the nonimpairment criteria. If impacts threaten to impair the area's wilderness suitability, the BLM may limit or close the affected lands to the uses causing the problem.

. . . Fixed wing aircraft may land only on existing airstrips or established vehicle ways as long as the nonimpairment criteria is met. . . . (p. 15, #11)

nonimpairment criteria: BLM will review all proposals for uses and/or facilities within WSA to determine whether the proposal meets the criteria below. Uses and/or facilities found to be nonimpairing may be permitted on land under wilderness review. Uses and/or facilities found to be impairing will be denied.

The following criteria are referred to hereafter as the "nonimpairment criteria".

- a. The use, facility, or activity must be temporary. This means a temporary use that does not create surface disturbance or involve permanent placement of facilities may be allowed if such use can easily and immediately be terminated upon wilderness designation.** "Temporary" means the use or facility may continue until the date of wilderness designation, at which time the use must cease and/or the facility must be removed. "Surface disturbance" is any new disruption of the soil or vegetation, including vegetation trampling, which would necessitate reclamation. "Reclamation" (p. 9, #3) is the recontouring of the topography, replacement of topsoil, and/or restoration of native plant cover.
- b. When the use, activity, or facility is terminated, the wilderness values must not have been degraded so far as to significantly constrain the Congress's prerogative regarding the area's suitability for preservation as wilderness.** The wilderness values to be considered are those mentioned in Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

The only permitted exceptions to the above rules are:

- (1) Emergencies such as suppression activities associated with wildfire or search and rescue operations;
- (2) Reclamation activities designed to minimize impacts to wilderness values created by IMP violations and emergencies;
- (3) Uses and facilities which are considered grandfathered or valid existing rights under the IMP;
- (4) Uses and facilities that clearly protect or enhance the land's wilderness values or that are the minimum necessary for public health and safety in the use and enjoyment of wilderness values; and
- (5) Reclamation of pre-FLPMA impacts. (p. 9, #2; pp. 2-5)

overriding consideration: the preservation of wilderness values within a WSA is paramount and should be the primary consideration when evaluating any proposed action or use that may conflict with or be adverse to those wilderness values. (p. 8, B).

surface disturbance: any new disruption of the soil or vegetation. Uses and facilities in a WSA necessitating reclamation (i.e., recontouring of the topography, replacement of topsoil, and/or restoration of native plant cover are surface disturbing. Cross-country vehicle use off existing ways or boundary road is surface disturbing because the tracks created by the vehicle leave depressions or ruts, compact the soils, and trample or compress vegetation. (p. 9, #3; Glossary, p. 4, “surface disturbance”)

substantially unnoticeable: refers to an action that either is so insignificant as to be only a very minor feature of the overall area or is not distinctly recognizable by the average visitor as being manmade or man-caused because of age, weathering, or biological change. An example of the first would be a few minor dams or abandoned mine buildings that are widely scattered over a large area, so that they are an inconspicuous part of the scene. . . . An example of the second would be an old juniper control project that has grown up to a natural appearance, the fallen trees largely decomposed. (p. 17, #17; Glossary, p. 4)

temporary use: a use or activity that does not create any new surface disturbance (including no vegetative trampling), involve permanent placement of structures, and may not continue after the date of wilderness designation. (p. 9, #2a; p. 9, #3; Glossary, p. 4)

Appendix 2 - Comment Letters and Responses