

Split Rock Boat Ramp Improvements
Environmental Assessment OR134-EA-02-010
Wenatchee Resource Area, Spokane District

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), in cooperation with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), is proposing boat launch improvements at the Split Rock recreation site, located 19 miles west of Oroville, along the Oroville-Loomis highway (T39N, R26E, S18), in north-central Washington. Split Rock is adjacent to Palmer Lake in Okanogan County, within the Okanogan Management Area of the Wenatchee Resource Area, Spokane BLM District (see map).

Purpose and Need

The BLM's Split Rock recreation site was constructed in the late 1970s, after extensive local encouragement and support. The site is located on the only public sandy beach along Palmer Lake, and as a result, receives a great deal of recreational use. WDFW has received funding for warm water fisheries enhancement projects and would like to use it to improve fishing access to Palmer Lake at the Split Rock site. WADFW is cooperating with BLM to make this funding available, to improve the boat launch, access road and beach parking/turnaround, trail to beach, and to install a floating dock.

Although portions of the Split Rock recreation site have been upgraded in the 25 years since initial construction, the concrete plank boat launch, access road and trail to the boat launch have continued to degrade. The boat ramp planks are broken and partially buried in beach sand. The condition of the boat ramp creates a significant problem for boaters using the facility, as there is great potential for getting vehicles stuck and/or not being able to pull a boat trailer out of the water.

The access road, beach parking area, and turnaround have many potholes and ruts, with most of the aggregate surface material missing. In addition, the existing boat ramp access road is curved, limiting visibility for backing down the road to the ramp. It is also possible to exit the boat ramp access road and recreation site directly onto the Loomis-Oroville county road (east exit from the site), which is a safety hazard due to a blind corner.

The trail to the beach and boat ramp has been washed out by high lake water and recent floods, and is no longer useable.

Because of the various problems identified above, many attributable to use and weather over the years, the boat ramp area is the subject of proposed repair, replacement, or redesign to accommodate current and increasing recreational use of the 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 boat launch at the approximate area of the old boat launch, as well as reshaping, graveling, and grading the existing boat ramp access road and parking area/turnaround. In addition, the 200-foot trail to the beach and boat launch would be reshaped and regraveled to accessible standards, and an accessible floating dock would be installed on the west side of the boat launch.

The proposed action is to construct a new 140 x 25 feet concrete plank boat launch. This new launch would be located immediately adjacent to and east of the existing ramp. Slightly changing the location would take advantage of the deeper water and reduced sand deposits east of the existing ramp. The existing boat ramp planks would be broken up and used as fill for the new ramp. The boat ramp access road would be reshaped, graveled and widened to allow for a straight approach to the boat launch. Fill for the boat launch will come from private and BLM sources. Potential BLM sources include previously disturbed hillside talus material from sites adjacent to the road near Split Rock, and from an old gravel pit near the Chopaka grade road. Only previously disturbed material will be used to avoid cultural, botanical and wildlife conflicts.

The 200-foot trail to the beach and boat launch would be reshaped and resurfaced to Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards. A 40x20 feet portable floating plastic dock for fishing and boat tie-up would be installed at the west side of the boat launch. The dock is constructed of plastic components, has a non-slip surface and will be anchored onshore. The dock will be accessible and removable, as well as adjustable to changing lake water levels. A local bass fishing club has volunteered to move the dock on a voluntary basis, when needed to accommodate changing water levels.

The dock would be signed as a “No Swimming Zone” to alert visitors to safety hazards associated with the adjacent boat launch.

Project Design Features

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, consultation with Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (OAHP), consulting tribes and interested public will be conducted.

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. If any cultural or paleontological resources are encountered during project implementation, the disturbing activity will be halted and a BLM archaeologist will be notified for appropriate action.

The project area will be field inventoried for special status plants prior to ground-disturbing activities. If special status plants are found, effects will be assessed and the project may need to be modified to protect the population.

If any wildlife species that are sensitive to noise or disturbances are found, project activities would be modified to minimize or avoid disturbance.

To prevent disturbance of sediments underlying the fill, the two cottonwood trees should be cut near the ground surface rather than being pulled, and the stumps should be left in place and buried in the fill.

Alternative 2-No Action

Under this alternative, the Split Rock Recreation Site would remain in its current condition. No boat launch area improvements would be implemented.

Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

Vegetation /Plant Communities, Including Special Status Plant Species:

The project area is found within a black cottonwood-coyote willow riparian plant community on the shores of Palmer Lake. Project files identify several special status plant species that have potential to occur here. Because the proposed action involves a developed site, only a small amount of vegetation would be disturbed by the proposed alternative. The project area was inventoried for vegetation values and no special status plants or other unique vegetation values were found. The project will not imperil the continued existence of any native plant species or lead to the listing of any plant as threatened or endangered.

Riparian/Water Resources/Fisheries:

Palmer Lake is 3 miles long and the second largest lake in Okanogan County. The lake provides good habitat and sport fishing for small mouth bass, crappie, rainbow trout, and burbot. The lake also provides habitat for other native non-game species. The majority of the lakeshore is private land and the Split Rock boat launch is the only developed boat launch on public lands. Neither alternative will have any damaging affect on the species listed above. No known species of fish on the Endangered Species Act list inhabit Palmer Lake.

Terrestrial Wildlife Habitat:

Coyote willow and black cottonwood grow along the shore and are used by several species of resident and migratory birds, including Brewer's and red-winged blackbirds, song sparrows, black-capped chickadees, and other species common to riparian habitats. Bald eagles occur around Palmer Lake year round. An eagle nesting territory is located approximately 2.5 miles north of the recreation site. Little terrestrial habitat would be affected by either alternative.

Cultural Resources, Native American Values, and Paleontological Resources:

Palmer Lake is located in the territory traditionally used by the Okanogan people. It was a source of sucker fish, peamouth, squawfish, ling cod and trout and its banks were a well known deer hunting area and were also a source of roots and berries. Two panels of pictographs are located nearby. Palmer Lake was included in the Columbia Reservation, which was created in 1879 by executive order for the use of Chief Moses' people. In 1883, a 15-mile wide strip along the Canadian border, including Palmer Lake, was withdrawn from the reservation at the insistence of the area's few non-Indian residents whose ranches and mining claims were located there. The entire area was opened for non-Indian settlement the next year and became the scene of a mining boom lasting into the late 1890s when mining was gradually replaced by agriculture as the principal industry.

A BLM Archaeologist surveyed the Split Rock recreation site for cultural resources in 1995. This was a class III survey in which no cultural sites were found. The only cultural material found was an isolated stone tool, possibly brought in with fill for the parking lot. There are no known paleontological resources in this area.

Recreation

The Split Rock recreation site is among the more heavily used BLM sites in Washington State. Facilities at the site include two wooden vault outhouses, three picnic tables, a bulletin board, boat launch, trash Dumpster and gravel parking area. Visitor use occurs throughout the year and consists of boat launching for water skiing and fishing (ice fishing during winter), picnicking, water play, and beach activities. Although the site is managed as day use only, some overnight camping does occur. In addition, visitors frequently stop for wildlife viewing (mountain goats on the mountains across the lake) and to use the site as a rest area and restroom stop.

Approximately 15,000 people visited the Split Rock recreation site in 2001 (BLM RMIS figures). The majority of visitors are local residents, but the site also receives visitors from other parts of the northwestern U.S. and Canada. Because the Split Rock site is so popular and BLM's presence is low, there have been many incidents of vandalism and dumping of household garbage.

The Split Rock recreation site is the only public sandy beach on Palmer Lake. The Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) manages the only other public recreation site on the lake. The DNR site is located at the north end of the lake and consists of several small, developed campsites, outhouses, and a rocky beach.

Environmental Impacts

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action): Impacts from the proposed action are expected to be limited to the boat launch area and the beach and parking area immediately adjacent to the launch. Disturbance to the area would consist of localized lakebed sedimentation disturbance from constructing the new ramp. Widening the access road would eliminate the two cottonwood trees currently lining the existing road. Widening the road would also fill in a portion of the edge of the beach and could eliminate several parking places in the main parking area, but allow for limited parking near the boat ramp. From a safety standpoint, widening the road would be considered a positive effect, allowing visitors space to turn around at the top of the ramp without pulling out onto the county road.

Although parking is at a premium in the main parking lot on summer weekends, reshaping the access road and east exit to the site would increase overall safety at the site. A few additional parking spaces would be created along the edge of the access road. The access road would be filled and widened primarily to the west edge of the parking area, but no widening on the east side of the existing road would occur. Overall, constructing a new boat launch and improving the road and beach parking/turnaround would improve visitor utilization of the boat launch, provide for safe traffic flow and control, and reduce the amount of maintenance needed in this area.

The portable floating dock would improve access for anglers, allowing deeper lake fishing and concentrating fishing use along the dock. The dock would also provide a place for small boats to tie up, making it easier for people to leave and enter their boats. A dock of this type would allow lake and fishing access to disabled recreationists, adding to the recreation opportunities available to disabled visitors at this site. Portable docks similar to this dock have been installed at several other BLM recreation sites in Washington with much success. The fact that the dock is portable, and therefore would be adjusted to changing lake levels, would give it more utility.

The trail to the beach and launch site will be widened, so some displacement of soil and vegetation will occur. Improving and making this trail accessible, as well as adding an accessible floating dock, would increase access for all visitors to this beautiful site.

Implementing these improvements at the Split Rock recreation site would make the site even more attractive and popular. Additional visitors to the site are expected after improvements occur, which could result in additional crowding on busy weekends and potentially more vandalism. However, the improvements are also expected to make the existing site safer, better maintained, and allow visitors to better use the existing site. BLM will continue to improve this site, seeking funding to replace the two outhouses, pave the main parking lot, and make other needed repairs. BLM law enforcement, local law enforcement officers, and local citizens groups also watch over the site

Construction activities would remove 0.17 acre of riparian habitat including two, 30-inch diameter, 50-foot high cottonwood trees. The cottonwood trees are declining and beginning to lose large limbs. Affected habitat is a very small portion of the riparian habitat in the area and the project will not result in loss of unique and limited riparian habitat.

Construction activities would disturb and displace wildlife present at time of construction. Several nests could be lost if the cottonwoods are cut in spring or summer. These effects would be short-term and temporary since abundant riparian vegetation in the area would provide alternative habitats.

Increased levels of recreational use in the summer could also disturb and displace wildlife but this effect would be only slightly greater than existing conditions. The presence of the dock and increased amounts of refuse could attract opportunistic scavengers such as ring-billed gulls, magpies, and ravens. Bald eagles would not be affected by the action. Eagles currently avoid the area because of human activity and absence of good perch sites. This would not change under Alternative 1.

Cultural Resources, Native American Values, and Paleontological Resources

Because most of the area to be disturbed in this alternative is already covered by recent fill, implementation of this alternative would have no impact on cultural resources. The project area has been surveyed for cultural resources and no sites were found

Alternative 2 (No Action): Under Alternative 2, the Split Rock recreation site would remain in its current condition. Visitors would continue to recreate at this site, and the existing facilities would continue to degrade. Vehicles would continue to get stuck in the sand and water at the bottom of the boat ramp, locally affecting lake quality. Vehicles would also continue to enter and exit site at the blind corner, causing safety hazards. There would be no disabled access to the beach and boat launch area via the trail.

Other Resource Elements Considered in the Analysis:

Environmental Justice: There would be no disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority or low-income populations as a result of implementing the proposed alternative. Alternative 1 (Proposed Action) would benefit recreationists who have physical limitations by providing wheelchair access to the beach and boat launch area via the trail, as well as dock access for fishing or wildlife viewing. Alternative 2 (No Action) would not

provide disabled access at the Split Rock site.

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, special areas, wilderness, wastes (hazardous or solid), invasive non-native species, and wild and scenic rivers. The proposed action would not adversely impact energy and minerals resources or their development.

Coordination with Other Agencies, Groups and Individuals

The proposed boat dock improvements involved the coordination of various staff specialists, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and other individuals as identified below.

Wenatchee BLM Resource Area

Kevin Kane-Botanist
Madilane Perry- Archaeologist,
Diane Priebe-Recreation Planner
Neal Hedges-Wildlife Biologist
Gene Wehmeyer-Operations

Spokane BLM District

Richard Bailey-District Archaeologist
Kathy Helm-District Planning and Environmental Coordinator
Joe Kelly-District Fisheries Biologist

Washington Dept. of Fish and Wildlife

John Aukerman- Construction and Maintenance Superintendent
Jeff Skriletz- Warmwater Fish Program Coordinator
Glen Girth- Permit Administrator

Other Individuals:

Harold E. Flesland- President, AAC/EZ Dock
Claude Roberts- Member of local Bass Club
Bob Rothrock- Okanogan County Irrigation District

Consultation

Consultation was initiated with the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, the Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, and the Okanogan County Historical Society by letters dated August 3, 2001 and April 30, 2002.

Other Outreach

The EA will be placed on the Spokane District web page at www.or.blm.gov/spokane for public review.