

SCOPING/INFORMATION PACKAGE
Blacks Creek Reservoir Management Plan
Four Rivers Field Office

This information package summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposal to address off-highway vehicle (OHV) and recreation activities at Blacks Creek Reservoir (BCR) in accordance with the Kuna Management Framework Plan. Federal actions must be analyzed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations to determine potential environmental consequences.

The purpose of this report is to inform interested and affected parties of the proposal and to solicit comments to assist with the NEPA review of the proposal. Analysis of the proposal is ongoing, and will be documented in an Environmental Assessment (EA) with an estimated completion date of July 1, 2012. Comments received in response to this solicitation will be used to identify potential environmental issues related to the proposed action and to identify alternatives to the proposed action that meet the need for and purpose of the project.

Need for and Purpose of Action

Blacks Creek Reservoir was identified as a potential ‘Jewel in the Desert’ by the Ada County Open Space Task Force. The task force recommended the area be considered for development of an open space park/preserve (page E4) connected to similar sites by waterways, habitat corridors, and walking trails and managed as an outdoor oasis, providing wildlife habitat and recreation in a growing part of the county. National, state, and local entities share the vision that the BCR area can provide high-quality wildlife habitat and an aesthetically pleasing recreation site. A water feature in a sagebrush steppe environment is unique and an attraction for a variety of wildlife, especially birds.

Because of its proximity to a metropolitan area (approximately 12 miles from downtown Boise), BCR receives a wide variety of recreational uses, some of which adversely affect wildlife habitat conditions. The area is currently designated as open to OHV use. Cross-country OHV use has resulted in damage or loss of vegetation in extensive areas. Target shooting has resulted in substantial litter (e.g., 30 yards of waste, mostly associated with shooting, was removed during a recent cleanup) and disturbance to wildlife and other recreational users.

The objectives of this project are to:

- Improve wildlife habitat in the Blacks Creek Reservoir area.
- Provide diverse recreational and interpretive activities that are compatible with wildlife using the area.

Existing Condition

Vegetation - The area contains a variety of cover types, including open water, mud flats, riparian, uplands, cliffs, rock outcrops, and disturbed areas. The surface area of the reservoir fluctuates between approximately 52 acres and 200 acres in a given water-year. Typically, the reservoir fills to its annual maximum by late May and recedes to its annual minimum by early spring. During high water, much of the grass/forb/mudflat and disturbance cover types are inundated.

The water slowly recedes from this area over the course of the summer, fall, and winter as water is released from the dam and evaporation occurs.

Because of its location, the area has been spared the effects of common broad-scale disturbances such as recent wildfire (Kuna Mora Road and the railroad right-of-way act as firebreaks). Instead, localized and site-specific disturbances are the primary factors affecting vegetation. Upland vegetation is dominated Wyoming big sagebrush with a perennial and exotic annual grass understory or disturbed areas dominated by exotic annual grasses, primarily cheatgrass and medusahead, or bare ground. Native and exotic species occur in seasonally flooded areas as the water level recedes. Small amounts of whitetop, a noxious weed, are present.

Special Status Plant Species – The area contains slickspot peppergrass habitat (e.g., slickspots are present, but it is not known if slickspot peppergrass is present) and potential habitat. Slickspot peppergrass is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. No other special status species are known to occur in the area.

Wildlife – Bird abundance and diversity are the primary conservation values at BCR. Due to the diversity of habitat and availability of water in and around the reservoir, bird diversity is high relative to the surrounding landscape. More than 150 bird species have been recorded during standard surveys and recreational observations at BCR. Fourteen special status species use the area in at least one season. Breeding Bird Survey data indicated 14 water-associated bird species that use BCR are declining in western North America.

Reservoir Management - Blacks Creek Reservoir was constructed to deliver irrigation water to farmers along Kuna Mora Road. The Pleasant Valley Irrigation District is responsible for managing reservoir operations. There are currently fewer than 15 shareholders. Water delivery is sporadic, and downstream land uses have changed in such a way that effective delivery has become challenging. Water use takes place during the spring, but water generally remains in the reservoir throughout the year. In 2011, the dam outlet valve was damaged beyond repair allowing the reservoir to drain completely.

Recreational Uses – Off-highway vehicle use has created a spider web of tracks and trails on both public and private lands. This impacts vegetation, disturbs wildlife, and affects water quality. The use of mud flats for mud bogging is most frequent in the areas most attractive to shorebirds resulting in chronic disturbance. Much of the mud bogging activity is seasonally concentrated at the time of spring migration. Shorebirds are highly sensitive to vehicle disturbance.

While a public shooting range exists only one mile away, the area attracts those who prefer a less structured shooting experience. Target shooting results in trash being shot up and left behind, disturbs wildlife during critical periods (e.g., nesting, brood rearing, winter), and affects non-shooter recreational experiences.

Private Property – Despite the posting of ‘No Trespassing’ signs, daily target shooting has continued to take place on private land just east of the reservoir. Used targets, such as pallets, television sets, and furniture are often left behind as trash.

Livestock Management – The project area is in the Sunnyside Spring/Fall Common Pasture of the 270,000 acre Sunnyside Spring/Fall Allotment (#00825).

Preliminary Alternative Development

The following alternatives have been developed for management of BLM-administered lands adjacent to Blacks Creek Reservoir.

Alternative A - Continue Current Use

The area would remain open to OHV use. Shooting activities would not be limited.

Alternative B – Proposed Action

The BLM proposes to work cooperatively with non-governmental organizations (e.g., Golden Eagle Audubon Society, Land Trust of the Treasure Valley), adjacent private landowners, and other stakeholders to manage the Blacks Creek Reservoir area to provide wildlife habitat and educational and passive recreational opportunities. Activities would include (Map 1):

- Designate 255 acres north of the Kuna-Mora Road and adjacent to Blacks Creek Reservoir as closed to OHV use. Motorized access would be allowed with written permission from the BLM-authorized officer.
- Construct 0.7 miles of fencing along the Kuna-Mora Road to delineate the area. Access points would be provided for livestock.
- Provide two parking areas (approximately one acre) with interpretive signs and access points to trails.
- Create a non-motorized trail system that provides access to the area while minimizing impacts to wildlife and their habitat.
- Restore upland (e.g., outside the high water mark) vegetation with the use of herbicides and seeding native species of grasses, forbs, and shrubs on up to 200 acres.
- Limit firearm use to shotguns during the waterfowl and big game hunting seasons.

Alternative C – Moderate Access

Actions related to livestock access, parking areas, interpretive facilities, a non-motorized trail system, habitat restoration, and firearm use would be as described in Alternative B. The following activities would be modified (Map 1):

- Designate 217 acres north of the Kuna-Mora Road and adjacent to Blacks Creek Reservoir as closed to OHV use.
- Designate OHV use on 38 acres north of the Kuna-Mora Road and adjacent to Blacks Creek Reservoir as limited to designated routes.
- Construct 1.0 miles of fencing along the Kuna-Mora Road to delineate the area.

Preliminary Issues

Vegetation – Vegetation treatments and changes in recreational uses could affect native species.

Special Status Plant Species – Current uses and proposed activities could affect special status plant species and their habitat.

Wildlife – Fencing, vegetation treatments, and changes in recreational uses could affect wildlife use of the area.

Reservoir Management – Use of herbicides could affect water quality. Modifications in recreational use and access could affect reservoir management.

Recreational Uses – Changes in recreational designations could affect public access to and use of 255 acres.

Private Property – Management actions on public lands could affect access to or use of adjacent private lands.

Livestock Management – Proposed management actions could affect access to water source or use of up to 255 acres.

Decision to be Made

The Four Rivers Field Manager is the authorized officer responsible for management decisions. Based on the NEPA analysis, the Field Manager will issue a decision document that includes a determination of the environmental effects' significance and whether an environmental impact statement (EIS) would be required. If he determines it is unnecessary to prepare an EIS, the Manager will decide which management actions, mitigation measures, and monitoring requirements will be prescribed for the area.

Public Input Needed

Comments are specifically requested on the proposed action, preliminary issues, and alternatives. Comments made on this proposal would be most helpful if they are received by June 15, 2012 and are directly relevant to the proposal and project area. The BLM will not reject public feedback outside established public involvement timeframes; however, these comments may be considered secondary to comments received in a timely manner and may only be assessed to determine if they identify concerns that would substantially alter the assumptions, proposal, design, or analysis presented in the EA.

Comments sent electronically should be sent to BLM_ID_FRFO_OHV@blm.gov with the title of this project in the subject line. Please identify whether you are submitting comments as an individual or as the designated spokesperson on behalf of an organization. Issues that are outside the scope of the proposal will not be addressed at this planning level.

A public meeting will be held from 5-7:30 PM, June 5, 2012 at the Boise District BLM office (3948 Development Avenue, Boise) to solicit additional input. The primary contact for questions and comments for this analysis is Larry Ridenhour, Outdoor Recreation Planner, 3948 Development Avenue, Boise, Idaho 83705, (208) 384-3334.

MAPS

Map 1. Proposed Area Designations and Fencing, Blacks Creek Reservoir