

**United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management**

Environmental Assessment: DOI-BLM-ID-DOI-BLM-ID-T020-2013-0010-EA

**Proposed Decision Record
and
Finding of No Significant Impact
*(FONSI)***

**Cassia Resource Management Plan Amendment at Castle
Rocks**

Location: Cassia County, Idaho

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Proposed Decision Record / FONSI Burley Field Office

INTRODUCTION

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has conducted an environmental assessment (DOI-BLM-ID-T020-2013-0010-EA) on a proposal to amend the Cassia Resource Management Plan to protect and preserve cultural and geologic resources in the 400 acres of BLM lands described in the background section. Rock climbing, camping, staging and trail building would not be allowed in order to protect fragile and irreplaceable resources eligible as historic properties (36 CFR CFR 800.16). A public education effort, including signage, would be installed at the access points to public lands.

History of Events

Until 2003, access to Castle Rocks public lands was limited to a difficult and lengthy hike from Steins Pass. The Castle Rock Ranch Acquisition Act of 2000 authorized the National Park Service (NPS) to purchase a private ranch that provided convenient public access on the east side of the geologic area. The NPS was not authorized to manage the property for recreation, but instead to exchange it with the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation (IDPR) for property within Hagerman Fossil Beds National Monument. Since May 25, 2003, IDPR has provided park facilities and managed recreation at Castle Rocks. Climbers are the largest user group, and many pass through the state park to climb the higher granite towers on lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Forest Service.

Jurisdiction of the geologic area, known administratively as Castle Rocks Interagency Recreation Area (Castle Rocks), includes 480 acres of the Sawtooth National Forest (Minidoka Ranger District), 400 acres of the BLM's Burley Field Office (Twin Falls District), and 1,420 acres of IDPR's (Castle Rocks State Park). Representatives from these agencies, in cooperation with rock climbing enthusiasts, developed a draft Climbing Management Plan for the Castle Rocks area. This draft interagency Climbing Management Plan was developed to (1) manage recreation uses, (2) establish pre-approved routes and trails, (4) protect natural and cultural resources, and (5) reduce confusion related to separate management policies and jurisdictional boundaries. Resource conflicts and predicted impacts have prevented the Burley Field Office from implementing the draft Climbing Management Plan.

City of Rocks National Reserve (City of the Rocks), located a few miles south of Castle Rocks, is internationally recognized as a climbing area and offers exceptional rock climbing. However, at City of Rocks National Reserve the majority of climbing occurs near roads. At Castle Rocks most of the climbing requires a longer hike and visitors are more likely to achieve a backcountry experience than they would at the City of the Rocks.

There are three types of climbing uses that occur at both City of Rocks and in the Castle Rocks area.

Traditional: A style of climbing where protection is placed by the ascending climber and removed by the seconding partner. Traditional climbs are protected by climbing equipment that is removable and does not impact the rock surface.

Sport: Climbs that are protected exclusively with fixed protection, usually bolts. These climbs are usually short (typically one rope length, 50 - 60 meters). Sport climbs are generally more popular and provide a safer climbing environment.

Bouldering: Ropeless climbing that concentrates on short, sequential moves on rock usually no more than 15 feet off the ground. Falls are short and typically inconsequential. Use of a bouldering crash pad is common.

Since 2003, the 400-acre parcel managed by the BLM has been closed to rock climbing, camping, staging, and trail building through a series of temporary closure orders. The unique ownership pattern and geography of the lands surrounding the BLM have preserved resources on the BLM lands that are rare and of great importance to the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes of Fort Hall and the Shoshone-Paiute Tribes of Duck Valley. Both Tribes consider the area a sacred site and have requested the Burley Field Office to help them nominate the area to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) as a Traditional Cultural Property (TCP).

The latest Notice of Temporary Closure was published in the Federal Register on November 16, 2010 and expired on November 16, 2012. The associated EA ID-220-2009-EA-3768 analyzed four alternatives; 1) Implementation of the draft Castle Rocks Interagency Recreation Area Climbing Management Plan, 2) Traditional Climbing, 3) No Climbing or Trail Construction, and 4) No Action or Unmanaged Climbing. Significant resources discovered by BLM staff performing botanical, wildlife, and cultural clearance work throughout the 400 acres of BLM lands limited the Burley Field Manager's ability to select alternatives 1, 2 and 4.

On March 26, 2010, the Burley Field Manager issued a Decision Record and FONSI selecting Alternative 3, No Climbing or Trail Construction. Paragraph 1 of the Decision Record notes,

"I have decided to select Alternative 3 because the other alternatives have the potential to cause adverse cumulative effects to historic properties (defined under 36 CFR 800.16); a FONSI cannot be reached for the Proposed Action, Alternative 2, or the No Action Alternative."

The Access Fund appealed the decision and on September 27, 2010, the Office of Hearings and Appeals, Interior Board of Land Appeals affirmed the Field Manager's Decision. However, to implement the management decision, the Cassia Resource

Management Plan must be amended to allow for the closure of the area to climbing and climbing-related recreational activities.

Public involvement

On August 23, 2011, the Burley Field Office published a Notice of Intent in the Federal Register announcing the intent to,

“.....prepare a Resource Management Plan (RMP) amendment with an associated Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Cassia and Monument RMPs to consider closing BLM –managed lands to certain activities to protect cultural and historic properties.....”

The scoping process lasted until December 16, 2011.

DECISION

I have decided to select the Proposed Action Alternative. My decision will amend the Cassia Resource Management Plan to clarify the management of the Castle Rocks public lands. As a result of the plan amendment, the BLM will have the authority to implement its March 26, 2010 decision to: (1) close the BLM managed lands in the Castle Rocks area to staging, traditional climbing, sport climbing, and bouldering; (2) prohibit overnight camping and the construction of new trails; and (3) remove bolts from existing bolted climbing routes from BLM-managed lands. I have decided to select the Proposed Action Alternative because the other alternative does not address the purpose and need for action and has the potential to result in irrevocable and irretrievable damage to cultural and natural resources.

The Burley Field Office is in the early stages of preparing to revise the current land use plan. During the upcoming Cassia Resource Management Plan revision process the BLM will consider broad-scale decisions that guide future land management actions and subsequent site-specific implementation decisions. The plan revision process will result in decisions related to allowable uses of resources, and may result in decisions regarding intensity and limits of recreational uses within the planning area. The upcoming Burley Field Office land use plan revision process will evaluate recreational uses including climbing in the planning area which includes Castle Rocks.

I recognize that my decision will displace climbers in the BLM-managed portion of Castle Rocks. However, climbers will continue to have climbing opportunities at the nearby City of the Rocks and in the IDPR portions of Castle Rocks. These areas contain over 900 documented sport climbing routes and provide a similar experience for climbers. My decision will protect natural and cultural resources.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the Proposed Action Alternative, one other alternative was considered in detail. For a complete description of all the alternatives considered, refer to Chapter 2 of the EA.

The No Action alternative would retain existing provisions in the Cassia Resource Management Plan and would leave the area open to all types of climbing with minimal regulations and restrictions. No new trails would be authorized; however, controls would not be in place to restrict users from creating new social trails.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based upon a review of the EA and the supporting documents, I have determined that choosing the Proposed Action Alternative would not be a major federal action and would not significantly affect the quality of the human environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the general area.

In making this determination, I considered the following factors:

- 1. Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse.** The EA includes a description of the expected environmental consequences of the proposed Action Alternative. Under the selected alternative, no staging, climbing or camping would be allowed and no new trails would be constructed on BLM. As a result of climbing restrictions and no new trails being built, recreational climbing opportunities in the BLM portion in the Castle Rocks area would decrease and so would the associated impacts to natural and cultural resources. The loss of climbing opportunity may over time place additional pressure on existing climbing areas at Castle Rocks and City of the Rocks, thus exacerbating effects to resources in those areas.
- 2. The degree to which the selected alternative will affect public health or safety.** This alternative will not significantly affect public health or safety. No climbing would be allowed and as a result of no climbing public health and safety risks associated with climbing activities would be reduced.
- 3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.** There are no park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas present within Castle Rocks. However, there were archaeological resources identified in 2009 through an intensive survey conducted by archaeologists from the BLM, Burley Field Office throughout the entire 400 acres managed by the BLM. With the Proposed Action Alternative no staging, climbing or camping would be allowed and no new trails would be constructed on the BLM. As a result of climbing restrictions, recreation use in the Castle Rocks area would decrease and so would impacts to cultural resources associated with climbing, staging and trails. The Shoshone-Bannock Tribes of Fort Hall and the

Shoshone-Paiute Tribes of Duck Valley Tribes consider the area a sacred site and have requested the Burley Field Office's help in nominating the area to the NRHP as a Traditional Cultural Property (TCP).

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial. The Proposed Action Alternative will close all rock climbing on BLM managed lands at Castle Rocks. The Environmental Assessment disclosed the expected environmental effects on the quality of the human environment. The effects of a proposal are highly controversial when there is a substantial dispute about the size, nature, or effect of the major Federal action rather than the existence of opposition to a use. Opposition to a project does not render it controversial. Closing this area to climbing will likely result in some opposition from the climbing community. However, the nearby City of Rocks National Reserve and Castle Rocks State Park provides opportunities for a similar experience for climbers.

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks. The Proposed Action Alternative will allow the BLM to implement a closure to traditional climbing, sport climbing and bouldering on BLM managed lands at Castle Rocks. The possible effects on the human environment are not highly uncertain nor do they involve unique or uncertain risks. BLM analyzed the possible effects on the human environment and the possible effects are well understood.

6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration. Neither the Proposed Action, nor the No Action Alternative sets precedent or represents a decision in principle about a future management consideration.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts – which include connected actions regardless of land ownership. Significant cumulative effects are not predicted. A complete disclosure of the effects is contained in the EA.

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or other objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. The Proposed Action Alternative will amend the Cassia Resource Management Plan to allow closure of staging areas and to prohibit traditional climbing, sport climbing, bouldering, camping and new trails on BLM managed lands in the Castle Rocks area. The Proposed Action Alternative will protect natural and cultural resources and avoid causing adverse effects to cultural resources.

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, or the degree to which the action may adversely affect: 1) a proposed to be listed endangered or threatened species or its habitat, or 2) a species

on BLM's sensitive species list. There are no endangered or threatened species present on the BLM managed lands at Castle Rocks.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of a federal, state, local, or tribal law, regulation or policy imposed for the protection of the environment, where non-federal requirements are consistent with federal requirements. Choosing the Proposed Action Alternative will not violate any known federal, state, local or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment. State, local, and tribal interests were given the opportunity to participate in the environmental analysis process.

PROTESTS

This Proposed EA Decision is open for a 30-day protest period beginning with public notification of the proposed decision. Public notification of this proposed decision will be considered to have occurred on April 17, 2013. During this period, the BLM will take no action to implement the proposed decision. However, the proposed decision may be protested by any person who participated in the planning process and who has an interest that may be adversely affected by its approval. A protest may raise only those issues that were submitted for the record during the planning process (see Code of Federal Regulations 1610.5-2). Protests must be filed with the Director, Bureau of Land Management. Regular mail protests should be sent to: Director, Bureau of Land Management (210) Attention – Brenda Hudgens-Williams, P.O. Box 71383, Washington, DC 20024-1383. Overnight mail protests should be mailed to Director, Bureau of Land Management (210) Attention – Brenda Hudgens-Williams, 20 M Street SE, Room 2134LM, Washington, DC 20003. Emailed and fax protests will not be accepted as valid protests unless the protesting party also provides the original letter by either regular or overnight mail postmarked by the close of the protest period. Under these conditions, BLM will consider the emailed or faxed protest as an advance copy and it will receive full consideration. If you wish to provide BLM with such advance notification, please direct faxed protests to the attention of the BLM protest coordinator at (202) 452-5112, and emails to Brenda.HudgensWilliams@blm.gov.

All protests must be written and must be postmarked on or before the 30th day following public notification of the proposed decision. Protests must contain the following information:

- The name, mailing address, telephone number, and interest of the person filing the protest;
- A statement of the issue or issues being protested;
- A statement of the part or parts of the document being protested;
- A copy of all documents addressing the issue or issues previously submitted during the planning process by the protesting party, or an indication of the date the issue or issues were discussed for the record; and
- A concise statement explaining precisely why the decision presented in the Proposed EA Decision is believed to be wrong. The Director, Bureau of Land Management, will promptly render a decision on the protest. The decision will be in writing and will be sent

to the protesting party by certified mail, return receipt requested. The decision of the Director shall be final.

APPROVED

/s/Steven A. Ellis
Steven A. Ellis
State Director

4/12/2013
Date

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