

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

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

**Final 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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Final 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 inventories 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. 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. Currently, the intensity of use associated with activities such as hiking, horseback riding and hunting is significantly lower than climbing, if the Castle Rocks Interagency Climbing Plan had been adopted. Between 2006 and 2009, available information for the Castle Rocks State Park indicates there has been a 20% increase in visitation, from roughly 22,000 to 27,000 people during this three year period. This potential increase in climbing activity was the primary basis for the adverse effect determination, with concurrence from the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office. There is currently no evidence to suggest that hiking, horseback riding and hunting will increase significantly on BLM managed lands at Castle Rocks in the foreseeable future.

My decision to select the Proposed Action is needed now to protect historic properties. 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 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 multiple uses to include grazing, minerals, and recreation 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, one alternative was considered in detail. For a complete description of the Proposed Action and alternative 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 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. Under the selected alternative, no staging, sport, traditional or bouldering climbing or camping would be allowed and no new trails would be constructed on BLM. As a result of these restrictions, 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, historic properties were 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, sport, traditional or bouldering climbing or camping would be allowed and no new trails would be constructed on the BLM. As a result of climbing restrictions, recreational use in the Castle Rocks area would occur at significantly lower frequencies. As such, be nonexistent. In addition, the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes of Fort Hall and the Shoshone-Paiute Tribes of Duck Valley 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 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 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 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 will protect natural and cultural resources and avoid causing adverse effects to cultural resources. Since the most intense use in the area will

be limited, adverse effects to historic properties from climbing and the associated infrastructure will not occur.

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.

APPROVAL

The Cassia Resource Management Plan Amendment at Castle Rocks as described and analyzed in the April 2013 EA in the proposed action is approved. This decision is not subject to administrative appeal and in accordance with Resource Management Planning regulations at 43 CFR 1610.5-5, the amendment may be implemented 30 days after issuance of public notice of this decision.

/s/Timothy M. Murphy
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11/20/2013
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