

**U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management**

**Environmental Assessment MT- DOI-BLM-MT-B050-2016-0010-EA
June 3, 2016**

East Fork Blacktail Deer Creek Footbridge

Location: East Fork Blacktail Deer Creek WSA, within Township 11 South, Range 5 West, Section 35.



East Fork Blacktail Deer Creek

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Dillon Field Office
1005 Selway Drive
Dillon, MT 59725
Phone: 406-683-8000
Fax: 406-683-8066

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

INTRODUCTION

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Dillon Field Office (DFO), proposes to construct a footbridge across the East Fork Blacktail Deer Creek to facilitate hiker access to trails on BLM and USFS lands within the Snowcrest Range. The bridge location would connect existing trails within Township 11 South, Range 5 West, Section 35. The trail originates on BLM lands within the East Fork Blacktail campground, and provides access upstream for about ½ mile before it crosses the creek, then divides and provides access both upstream and downstream on the east side of the creek. The trails ultimately traverse many miles across USFS lands within the Snowcrest Range above. See attached location map (Figure I). The proposed bridge would be constructed using nearly all native materials gathered on-site, including a single cut tree to be split for a walking surface, and a variety of rocks gathered from nearby to form the bridge abutments. All work would be performed by a volunteer hand crew provided by the National Smokejumpers Association. If approved the proposed bridge would be constructed in the summer of 2016.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

This purpose of the project is to improve hiker access to an extensive network of backcountry trails on BLM and USFS lands within the Snowcrest Range. It would allow hikers to safely cross the creek in the late spring or early summer when runoff swells the creek to dangerous levels, and would allow hikers to cross the creek with dry feet throughout the remainder of the use season, including the high use that occurs during big game hunting season. Currently, hikers leaving the campground area for a hike must get their feet wet within the first ½ mile of their hike unless they can find a downed tree across the creek. Though these trails systems have existed for many years, a bridge similar to the one currently proposed was washed out by high flows approximately twenty years ago and never replaced along the trail. Although an engineered bridge was constructed downstream as a remedy, it was located very poorly and did not provide access to the existing trail system, and it would be nearly impossible to restore access to those trails using the existing bridge.

The currently proposed bridge would be located within approximately 50 yards of the location where the existing trail crosses the creek and where the stream banks are high enough to protect the bridge through most high water events.

CONFORMANCE WITH BLM LAND USE PLAN(S)

The proposed bridge conforms to the BLM Dillon Resource Management Plan (RMP), approved February 2006. The Dillon RMP describes the Dillon Field Office's Recreation Goal 1 as, "Provide a diverse array of quality, resource based recreation opportunities while protecting and interpreting the resource values, providing educational opportunities, minimizing user conflicts and promoting public safety." The proposed

project is consistent with that goal, and especially that portion that emphasizes the promotion of public safety. The proposed project is also consistent with Goal 2 which is described as “Develop and maintain appropriate recreation facilities, balancing public demand, protection of Public Land resources, and fiscal responsibility.” The East Fork Blacktail Deer Creek area is also both a Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) and a Wilderness Study Area (WSA). The defined recreational emphasis for the SRMA is “Primitive and semi-primitive, non-motorized recreation, with limited camping.” The proposed bridge design would allow for foot traffic only, and would facilitate the use of the lands beyond for the defined purposes of the SRMA.

RELATIONSHIPS TO STATUTES, REGULATIONS AND OTHER PLANS

Since the project proposed is within the WSA, it must be consistent with BLM Manual 6330, “*Management of BLM Wilderness Study Areas.*” A more thorough analysis of this is provided within the following analysis; however this project is considered the minimum necessary to provide for reasonable access to the hiking trails beyond, facilitating this type of wilderness-dependent recreation experience.

SHPO -- As required by Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, a Class III cultural resource inventory is required prior to the implementation of any proposed recreation improvement projects. Should significant cultural resources be identified, adverse impacts would be mitigated through project abandonment or redesign.

CHAPTER 2 DESCRIPTION OF ALTERNATIVES

INTRODUCTION

This EA focuses on only two alternatives: no action and the proposed action. The no action alternative is to take no action and allow continued use of this area as it has been used since the original bridge washed out some 20 years ago. The proposed action is the construction of the bridge as described in detail below. The No Action alternative is considered and analyzed to provide a baseline for comparison of the impacts of the proposed action.

NO ACTION

The No Action Alternative would be to leave the crossing as it currently exists, allowing the public recreational user to fend for himself to either find a way to safely cross the creek or limit their hike to the short distance above the campground before the creek crossing. This alternative would have no impacts on the environment. BLM would continue to manage the site in the same way as it has been.

PROPOSED ACTION

The BLM’s Proposed Action is to construct a footbridge across the East Fork of Blacktail Deer Creek to facilitate public hiking access to the trails beyond on both USFS and BLM lands in the Snowcrest Range. The bridge would be constructed of nearly all local native

materials, including; one to two trees to provide the walking surface and the material for bridge abutments, and rocks to be gathered from nearby to provide some weight and substance to the bridge abutment structure to ensure its stability. All work would be performed by hand labor, using a volunteer crew from the National Smokejumpers Association, which offers expertise in the construction of these types of projects. The tools would all be non-motorized hand tools with the exception of a chainsaw for falling and modifying the trees to create the bridge design, and possibly a battery operated drill to drill holes to install rebar to strengthen the bridge abutments and stabilize the walking surface. The rebar would be the only non-native material used in the bridge and would be driven into the native logs sufficiently to reduce any visual impacts and eliminate any safety hazards that would result from them sticking out from the logs.

The construction would take place in the summer of 2016. The construction will take an estimated 3 - 5 days. The trail and campground would remain open to public recreational use throughout the construction period.

CHAPTER 3

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT/ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL SETTING

The project location is in southwestern Montana within the Snowcrest Range along the East Fork of Blacktail Deer Creek, approximately ½ mile above the BLM campground. The surrounding vegetation is mixed conifer, including douglas fir, spruce and limber pine as well as willows, aspen, and cottonwood in the creek bottom.

The project is located within the East Fork Blacktail Deer Creek WSA, where the dominant historical use of the area has been for fishing, hunting, camping, backpacking, and horseback riding. The creek has good fishing for in this reach for hybrid cutthroat and brook trout. Hunting activity is dominated by elk hunting, but the area also has a reputation for good mule deer hunting. Mule deer hunting has been limited in recent history to successful applicants for special tags for that hunting district.

The entire area is essentially closed to all human entry every year from the end of big game hunting season at the beginning of December until May 1st of the following year. Although the BLM lands are not officially closed for that time, the only reasonable access to BLM lands is through the Robb-Ledford Game Range, which is closed during that time to accommodate the substantial elk wintering and calving that occurs in this area each year.

The enclosed map shows the location of the project area.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS		
Determination*	Resource	Rationale for Determination
NI	Air Quality	Not impacted
NP	Areas of Critical Environmental Concern	ACEC not present at this location
NP	Cultural Resources	A Class III cultural resource inventory was conducted and did not identify any cultural resources.
NI	Environmental Justice	Not impacted.
NP	Farmlands (Prime or Unique)	No Farmlands present at this location
NP	Floodplains	The bridge location would be outside of the floodplain.
NI	Invasive, Non-native Species	See description below
NP	Native American Religious Concerns	No known Native American Religious Concerns are present at this location.
NP	Threatened, Endangered or Candidate Plant or Animal Species	Bald Eagles and grizzly bears may be present in the area from time to time but will not be significantly impacted by the proposed action.
NP	Wastes (hazardous or solid)	None present, any waste from the construction will be removed from site.
NP	Water Quality (drinking/ground)	There will be little, if any work within the creek and there is no drinking water or groundwater affected.
NI	Wetlands/Riparian Zones	The creek is within a riparian zone, but will not be impacted because the project will be constructed well above the normal high water mark.
NP	Wild and Scenic Rivers	No Wild and Scenic River sections present at this location, nor are there any recommendations for future consideration at this location
NI	Wilderness	This location is not located in the Wilderness, but is within the East Fork Blacktail Deer Creek WSA.

*Possible determinations:

NP = not present in the area impacted by the proposed or alternative actions

NI = present, but not affected to a degree that detailed analysis is required

PI = present and may be impacted to some degree. Will be analyzed in affected environment and environmental impacts. (NOTE: PI does not mean impacts are likely to be significant in any way).

Impacts to Resources not analyzed in detail

In addition to the Critical Elements identified above, the following resources will not be analyzed in detail because there are no, or negligible impacts anticipated to them as a result of the proposed action; Forestry, Range Wildlife, Fisheries, Geology, and Hydrology. Those resources with potential impacts are discussed further below.

Cultural Resources

A Class III cultural resource inventory was conducted for the proposed East Fork Blacktail Deer Creek footbridge. During the course of the inventory no cultural resources were identified within or around the proposed location for the footbridge, therefore the project will not affect any known historic properties.

Invasive, Non-native Species

Spotted knapweed (*Centaurea maculosa*), one of the more aggressive noxious weeds in the area administered by the Dillon Field Office, is found scattered in small infestations along the road and in the campground.

Houndstongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*), a noxious weed that is toxic to animals due to high levels of alkaloids contained in the plant, is found scattered in moderate sized infestations along roads, trails, and streams. Because of its seeds ability to cling to hair and clothing, the potential is high for it to be spread rapidly within the watershed.

The trail leading out of the East Fork Campground to the bridge site is free of noxious weeds but the possibility for it to be invaded is high because of the location of nearby infestations. Any new surface disturbance creates opportunities for new infestations of noxious weeds. There will be very little surface disturbance associated with the proposed project. Willows will need to be cleared from the stream bank to allow placement of the bridge abutments, and to allow hikers access to the bridge. A short length of trail will be needed on each side of the creek to connect the existing trail to the new bridge location. Additional treatment may be necessary to manage infestations resulting from proposed construction activities. Any new infestation would be mapped and treated as part of existing weed management of the area.

Wilderness

There is no designated wilderness in the project area. However, the project is located within the East Fork Blacktail Deer Creek WSA. Therefore, the proposal must be consistent with BLM Manual 6330, "*Management of BLM Wilderness Study Areas.*" Generally, proposed projects within WSAs must meet the nonimpairment standard or one of the exceptions in order to be considered consistent with the policy. The nonimpairment standard requires; that the use or facility is temporary OR that it will not create new surface disturbance.

The facility is not intended to be temporary. The facility will also create some new surface disturbance, including the falling of one to two trees and the movement of some rock, as well as the installation of a man-made structure, which is typically discouraged within wilderness. However, there are several exceptions to the non-impairment standard that should be considered. "When a use and/or facility that does not meet the non-impairment standard meets one of these exceptions, the BLM will endeavor to allow only the least impairing activities that facilitate the use and/or facility in order to avoid unnecessary impacts to wilderness characteristics." (BLM Manual 6330, p. 1-11)

One of those exceptions is when the use or facility protects or enhances wilderness values. Consideration of this exception involves essentially a cost-benefit analysis of the impacts of the project on the wilderness values. Essential components of wilderness defined by the Wilderness Act include; size, naturalness, and opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation. This project will not affect the size of the area, but would affect the naturalness and the opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation.

There would be a minor adverse impact on the naturalness of the area because a man-made structure would be introduced where none currently exists. However, this structure would replace a structure that existed at the time of the initial inventory. Therefore, the naturalness would not be degraded from the condition that existed when it was initially determined to possess the wilderness characteristic of naturalness. The structure itself would be composed of virtually all native materials and would blend in well with the surrounding environment. In the final analysis, there would be a minor adverse impact to the naturalness when compared with the existing condition, but no reduction from the condition that existed at the time of the original wilderness inventory.

There are sure to be differences of opinion among wilderness users as to whether this project would enhance or degrade the opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. Some would argue that the bridge would eliminate an element of challenge that should be a component of a wilderness recreation opportunity. Others would argue that opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation would be enhanced by enabling hikers to extend the usable season of use by being able to safely cross the creek to access many miles of trail beyond the creek. Both of these are true. Ultimately, in the cost-benefit analysis, it seems that the minimal impacts to naturalness and loss of the element of “challenge” to the primitive and unconfined recreation opportunity is outweighed by the benefit of providing visitor safety and expanding the availability of the primitive and unconfined recreation opportunities.

BLM Manual 6330 also provides direction specific to management of the recreation program, and more specifically to management of trail (p. 1-29). It says, in pertinent part to this project;

“If found to meet the non-impairment standard or one of the exceptions, new trail section, trail structures, or installations may be provided under the following conditions:

- ii. Hiking or horseback riding use levels have increased so that a defined route is present, and the route leads visitors to a hazard...

Although increasing use levels have not been a major issue in this location, this trail has been present in this location since well before the wilderness inventory in 1979, and a bridge in a nearby location once provided access for hikers to cross the creek. Restoring that opportunity will return the area essentially to the condition that existed at the time of the inventory, and will reduce off-trail use by hikers seeking a safer, or drier, opportunity to make the creek crossing. This will reduce damage to streamside vegetation and damage to the stream banks and will discourage the public from falling trees near the creek to walk across.

CHAPTER 4 PERSONS, GROUPS, AND AGENCIES CONSULTED

Table 4.1. List of Persons, Agencies and Organizations Consulted

Name/Agency	Purpose & Authorities for Consultation or Coordination	Findings & Conclusions
Gordon Ash, USFS Madison Ranger District	Adjacent Land Managing Agency	Supportive of bridge project to provide improved access to USFS trails.
Tim Egan, DNRC	Consultation	Supportive
Dave Green, MT FWP	Consultation	Supportive

List of Preparers

Table 4.2. List of Preparers

Name (and agency if other than BLM)	Title	Responsible for the Following Section(s) of this Document
Rick Waldrup	Outdoor Recreation Planner	Recreation/Wilderness
Jason Strahl	Archaeologist	Cultural Resource
Mike Mooney	Weed Specialist	Invasive, Non-native Species
Sean Claffey	Hydrologist	Hydrology

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