

DECISION MEMO

Left Hand Fork of Blacksmiths Fork Riparian Improvement Project

Cache County
Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest
Logan Ranger District

Background

The Blacksmith Fork River is an important fishery in northern Utah and is currently considered a Utah Blue Ribbon Fishery. Left Hand Fork of the Blacksmith Fork supports the largest remaining population of Bonneville cutthroat trout in the Blacksmith Fork drainage. It also provides habitat for popular game fish such as brown trout and brook trout.

The Left Hand Fork is paralleled the majority of its length by Forest Service Road 245. This is a popular area for a variety of recreation activities, including fishing, camping, and ATV-riding. Many forest visitors enjoy camping along the stream. These campsites offer a minimal level of development; there are no surfaced camping areas, tables, permanent fire rings, nor other developments. Most of the campsites along the Left Hand Fork are in favorable locations, far enough away from the water to avoid impacts to the stream. However, some of the camping spots are directly within the “riparian” area (identified as land directly adjacent to and influenced by water such as lakes and streams). These riparian ecosystems support unique vegetation and animal communities associated with wet areas. Riparian vegetation helps to stabilize stream-banks, filters sediment from entering streams, and provides streamside shade to keep water temperatures cool for quality fish habitat.

In some of the more popular areas close to the stream, multiple campsites and ATV-riding between campsites has caused large areas of compacted soil and extensive loss of riparian vegetation. As soil is compacted from extensive camping and motor vehicle use, grasses, plants and shrubs die off and bare soil is exposed. Some of this bare soil, in turn, erodes downward, adding sediment to the stream and impacting fish habitat. Also, in some of these spots, streamside vegetation (including willow and dogwood, which provide shade to keep the water cooler for quality fish habitat) has died back, due to trampling and/or cutting.

Although ATV use is not allowed in camping areas, (they are only allowed on designated roads and trails, as shown on the Logan District Travel Map) ATV use between campsites is becoming increasingly apparent by the number of new, unauthorized routes that appear each year. These routes add to the amount of exposed bare ground and are additional sources of sediment to the stream.

Decision to be Implemented

Some of the benefits derived from encouraging camping outside the riparian areas will include increased stream-bank stability, improvement of water quality, enhancement of wildlife and fish habitat, and improvement of the fishing and camping experience. I feel we can still provide the same amount of camping with low level of development, while protecting fish and wildlife.

I have reviewed the proposed project and the analysis and have decided to approve the Left Hand Fork of Blacksmiths Fork Riparian Improvement Project. I have analyzed the environmental impacts associated with the proposal to place barrier rock and buck and pole fencing at specific sites to keep motorized vehicles away from Left Hand Fork. While no dispersed camping sites will be closed (one small parking area near a climbing wall would be closed), a number of sites will be reduced in size including two of the larger areas. All campsites included in this project are within the riparian area. Under this project, barrier rock or buck and pole fencing will be placed approximately 25-200 feet from the stream (depending on the lay of the land), allowing motorized camping only outside the riparian area. Foot traffic and tent camping (after revegetation efforts are complete) will continue to be allowed in these areas.

MITIGATION MEASURES

Mitigation measures, which are part of the decision, include the following:

1. Stream-bank and riparian habitat areas would be restored through seeding, mulching, and the planting of native seedlings/cuttings.
2. Silt Fencing, straw wattles, or other erosion control will be set in place in steep areas to help protect rehabilitation efforts (seeding, revegetation).
3. Buck and pole fencing would be replaced in areas where it is currently damaged.

SCOPING AND PUBLIC COMMENT

A scoping document was mailed to 182 individuals, groups, and agencies on June 4, 2008. Responses were due by July 7, 2008. In addition, questionnaires were given to dispersed campers in Left Hand Fork of Blacksmiths Fork throughout the summer of 2008. The project was also presented to nine Forest resource specialists. While most responses supported the proposed project, a number of people were concerned that dispersed sites would be closed without additional sites (in appropriate locations) being identified.

REASON FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

As described in the mitigation section above, all practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental impacts have been incorporated into this decision. The proposed action falls under Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 - Environmental Policy and Procedures Handbook, Chapter 30, Section 31.2, Category 7 – Modification or maintenance of stream or lake habitat improvement structures using native materials or normal practices and Section 31.12, Category 5 – Repair and maintenance of recreational sites and facilities.

Based on scoping, interdisciplinary team review, consideration of threatened, endangered, and sensitive species, cultural resources, and past experience, I have determined the effects of implementing this action will be of limited context and intensity and will result in little or no environmental effect to either the physical or biological components of the environment.

The categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action. There were no significant effects identified for the resource conditions listed below:

a. Federally listed threatened and endangered species or designated critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species. The wildlife biologist, fisheries biologist, and botanist have determined there will be “no effect” to any threatened and endangered species or designated critical habitat and “no impact” to any Forest Service sensitive species because there is no suitable habitat present, the species are not found here, and/or the scope of the project is limited and within a previously disturbed environment and therefore will have no measurable effect on any T,E,S species or critical habitat.

b. Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds. While the project is located within flood plains, wetlands, and municipal watersheds, Forest Service Specialists have determined this project would have a beneficial effect on these features.

c. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas. The riparian improvement project is not in a congressionally designated area.

d. Inventoried roadless areas. The riparian improvement project is not within a roadless area. Therefore, this project will not have any effect on roadless values or the roadless character of the area.

e. Research Natural Areas. The project is not in a Research Natural Area.

f. American Indian and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites. The Forest archaeologist has determined that no such religious or cultural sites will be significantly affected by this project.

g. Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas. The Forest archaeologist has determined that no archaeological sites or historic properties or areas will be significantly affected by this project.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

The Forest Plan has been reviewed and a determination made that this decision is consistent with its direction. The action in this project complies with Forestwide Goals 2 and 3 of the Forest Plan, the Forest Wide Riparian Management standards and guidelines, in addition to Management Prescriptions.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision may be implemented immediately. Most of the work for this project should be completed by July 1, 2009.

This decision pursuant to 36 CFR 215.8(a)(3) is not subject to appeal.

For further information contact the Logan District Office, 1500 East Highway 89 Logan, UT 84321 or telephone (435) 755-3620.

/s/Jennefer Parker

September 8, 2008

Jennefer Parker
District Ranger

Date