



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Inyo National Forest

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File Code: 1900

Date: February 17, 2006

Dear Friends:

This letter is to inform you that personnel on the Lee Vining Ranger District of the Inyo National Forest are beginning scoping for a trail construction and landscape restoration project within the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area. The planning area lays to the north-northwest of the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area Visitor Center, extending north to the shore of Mono Lake and west to the "Old Marina" site managed by California State Parks (Sections 4, 5, &9, T1N, R26E). The majority of the project area is on National Forest lands, but a portion of the project area is owned and managed by the City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

The Lee Vining Ranger District invites interested and affected parties to review this proposal and submit comments pertaining to the project. A public meeting will be held to introduce the project in more detail on March 1, 2006 at 6:00 pm at the Lee Vining Community Center on Hess Drive in Lee Vining, CA.

Purpose and Need for Action

The Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area Visitor Center (SAVC) sits approximately 1.1 miles from the western shore of Mono Lake. An average of 118,000 people visit the SAVC annually seeking to learn about the unique volcanic Mono Basin and recreate in the beauty of the Mono Lake and the Sierra Nevada range.

The need for this project is to provide access from the Scenic Area Visitor Center to the Mono Lake shore. Currently there is no marked trail or road that will take visitors directly from the SAVC to Mono Lake and *vice versa*. Visitors consistently inquire as to how they might walk down to Mono Lake and are disappointed to learn there is no practical way. This project would remedy this problem and enhance the recreation opportunities within the Scenic Area.

In meeting the need for this project, the following purposes must be met:

1. Enhancement of the visual quality objectives established in the Mono Basin Scenic Area Plan - The Management Plan zones the Scenic Area using four management scenarios. The proposed trail project falls within two of the four management zones, a "Developed Recreation Zone" and a "General Use Zone." Management direction for both zones prescribes "land uses that do not significantly detract from the natural/visual integrity of the Scenic Area". For the Developed Recreation Zone, direction prescribes that the Forest Service "close roads or restrict use on all but main travel routes." For General Use Zones, direction prescribes that the Forest Service "close roads having significant damage to natural resources or which are not needed to further appropriate public use."



2. Meet the Mono Basin Scenic Area Plan objective of reducing duplicate roads - (explanation below, combined with purpose number 3)

3. Reduce or eliminate resource damage (erosion) caused by the current road alignment and condition -Traveling in the project area can be very confusing and disorienting, as a myriad of roads and trails cross one another in various directions. Combined with loose soil, vehicles are prone to getting stuck, thus causing resource damage as they attempt to turn around and dig to get out. Travelers on foot have a difficult time navigating to their destination, as routes are difficult to see over the high shrubbery and loose soil makes hiking very difficult.

The majority of the confusing roads lay on land owned by the City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) and are part of an old motor cross track. Un-maintained roads and trails on steeper terrain are resulting in erosion problems, thus impeding the growth and regeneration of native vegetation. The eroded slopes can be seen from multiple vantage points on the north and west shores of Mono Lake and degrade the scenic qualities of the Mono Basin. LADWP has expressed concern about recent motorized use on the roads and is interested in closing the trails and restoring the vegetation with the help of the Forest Service and volunteer groups. As directed by the Scenic Area Management Plan, these problem areas need to be restored.

4. Provide access compatible with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) – Currently, there is only one trail in the Mono Basin Scenic Area that is ADA Accessible. The proposed project would create 3500 feet of new ADA Accessible trail, thus enhancing the recreation opportunities in the Mono Basin for a large number of people.

A unique geologic and culture landmark known as the “Icebox Tufa” is being vandalized and abused. Members of the public are requesting that this site be petitioned to be included on the National Register of Historic Places. The Forest Service has a responsibility, as directed by the State Historic Preservation Act and the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area Management Plan, to protect such valuable resources.

Existing Condition

The project area has a diverse history of land uses that reflect the societal needs of the time, ranging from traditional gathering by the Native Kutzadika’s, to dairy ranches in the late 19th century, to motor-cross and fireworks events in the 1970’s and 80’s. In 1991, the area was designated by Congress as a National Forest Scenic Area and the Forest Service was directed to manage the land to preserve the scenic and natural characteristics of the landscape. With input from the public, the Forest Service developed a “Scenic Area Management Plan” to provide specific management direction for the Mono Basin.

There are still many signs of past land uses that are visible within the project area. Bare soil, road cuts, and un-maintained trails are leading to resource damage on land managed by both the Forest Service and LADWP. Several foundations from old ranches and an old dock are buried in the sagebrush within and outside of the project area.

The Icebox Tufa has been vandalized to some degree and is a location where illegal camping and partying frequently occurs. Evidence of abuse can be seen at the Tufa and in the surrounding area.

The Old Marina site is managed by the California State Parks and is part of the California Tufa State Reserve. A site redevelopment plan was finalized in 2005 and the project will be implemented when funding becomes available.

Proposed Action/Desired Condition:

As proposed, the trail would leave the SAVC from the north end of the existing interpretive nature trail, cross approximately 1000 feet of land owned by LADWP, and then contour down slope and connect with route Z51, which would be closed to motorized vehicles. The trail would follow route Z51 across the County Road, head towards the Ice Box Tufa, and then follow route Z51 to the parking area at Old Marina. It is proposed that approximately 3500 feet of trail, from the County Road to Old Marina, be constructed and maintained as an ADA Accessible Trail. Please see the attached map to gain a better idea of the location of the proposed trail.

The proposed trail project would close road “Z51” and turn it into a hiking and biking trail. Route Z51 is a lightly used, duplicate road that is on land managed by the Inyo National Forest. The southern half of the road is suitable only for four-wheel drive vehicles and has degraded in condition in recent years due to lack of maintenance. The northern half of route Z51 does provide sole vehicular access to a unique geologic and cultural feature known as the “Icebox Tufa,” but the easy vehicular access to this site has resulted in vandalism, vagrancy, and partying that is slowly destroying the site. The Forest Service seeks to protect the icebox tufa by limiting access to only foot and bicycle traffic.

The proposed trail surface would consist of a gravel road base material that would compliment the natural colors of the soil and rock in the Mono Basin.

Interpretive concepts that would be included in panels and information along the trail include: the ecology of Mono Lake, the volcanic and geologic natural history, Native American history in the Mono Basin, and the Anglo settlement of the Mono Basin. Benches and shade structures would be constructed at interpretive sites along the trail.

Decisions to Be Made

The decision to be made is whether to implement the Proposed Action as described above, or to meet the purpose and need for action through some other combination of management actions, or to defer any action at this time.

Coordination with Other Agencies

In preparation of the EA, the Forest Service will consult with the State Historic Preservation Office, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, California State Parks, the Mono Lake Committee, the Native American Community, Friends of the Inyo, and other federal and state agencies as appropriate.

Comments

To assist the Forest Service in identifying and considering issues and concerns on the proposed action, comments should be as specific as possible. Comments received in response to this invitation to participate in public scoping will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered. **If you have comments, please submit them in writing by March 10, 2006 to:**

**Jon Kazmierski, Project Coordinator
Inyo National Forest
PO Box 429
Lee Vining, CA 93541**

If you want to remain on the mailing list for future contact regarding this project, you must either submit comments or send a request in writing by March 10, 2006 to the address above.

I appreciate your interest and involvement in this project. If you have questions or need more specific information about this project proposal, please contact Jon Kazmierski by calling (760) 647-3010 or by sending an e-mail to jkazmierski@fs.fed.us.

Sincerely,

/s/ Molly M. Brown

MOLLY M. BROWN
Acting District Ranger, Mammoth/Mono Ranger Districts
Inyo National Forest