

Decision Notice  
Finding of No Significant Impact

**Grand Mesa Winter Recreation Improvements  
Environmental Assessment**

Grand Valley Ranger District  
Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison  
National Forests  
Delta County, Colorado

December 27, 2011

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## **Introduction**

The USDA Forest Service, Grand Valley Ranger District, is responsible for providing recreation opportunities on the Grand Mesa National Forest in accordance with the Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) for the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison (GMUG) National Forests. This includes identifying projects necessary to meet public needs, health and safety requirements and/or to reduce long term annual and deferred maintenance costs. The GMUG identifies, designs and evaluates such projects to determine Forest Plan consistency, and environmental, social and economic analysis and evaluation.

The Environmental Assessment (EA) on the Grand Mesa Winter Recreation Improvements describes the potential environmental effects of implementing the proposed reconstruction of parking areas and the construction of additional cross country ski trails and associated facilities.

The EA analyzed alternatives to the proposed action and the potential effects they could have on the environment. The alternatives were designed to address issues and to help achieve the goals and objectives of the Forest Plan. Mitigation measures are prescribed under all alternatives to protect other resource uses and values.

## **Background**

The proposed project identifies winter recreation improvements associated with cross country ski trails and trailheads on the Grand Mesa National Forest along the Highway 65 corridor. State Highway 65 is the only road across the Grand Mesa that is maintained throughout the winter. The project is located on the Grand Valley Ranger District of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forest.

The Grand Mesa is renowned for providing a full range of premier winter recreation opportunities in the Nation.

- Over 156 miles of marked snowmobile trails with approximately 75% of which is routinely groomed. This system includes the state designated SP (Sunlight to Powderhorn) trail. The trail system can be accessed from any one of the eight trailheads designated for snowmobile parking.
- There are currently five different Nordic areas providing access to over 46 miles of system cross-country ski and snowshoe trails offering a range of experiences from backcountry to extensively groomed networks.
- The Grand Mesa hosts 10 to 14 winter recreation events each year including ski and dog sled races, snowmobile, ski and/or snowshoe demos, poker runs, training sessions (avalanche, survival) and a Klondike Derby. In addition, Artic Cat

Manufacturing, under special use permit, has historically used the Grand Mesa for equipment research and testing. Almost all of the above events originate off of the Highway 65 corridor.

- Powderhorn Ski area is located on the North side of the Grand Mesa providing downhill ski and snowboarding activities.
- There are two areas used extensively by the public for general “snow play” such as tubing and undeveloped snowboarding. These areas are located on each the North and South slopes of the Grand Mesa just above the forest boundary and adjacent to Highway 65.

The Grand Valley Ranger District has agreements and/or special use permits in place to with The Grand Mesa Nordic Council and with three different Snowmobile Organizations to authorize the maintenance and grooming of trails associated with many of the above many of the above routes.

The following is a list of all facilities located on the Grand Mesa National Forest along the Highway 65 corridor that are maintained throughout the winter to provide public amenities (Listed in order from North to South):

- Powderhorn Ski Area: Access road, parking area, lodge/restaurant and condos are all located on private land. The majority of ski runs, lifts and patrol shacks are on the National Forest.
- Old Mesa Ski Hill (snowplay area): Includes paved parking area for approximately 30 vehicles and a double toilet building.
- Jumbo: Paved parking area immediately adjacent to the Highway can accommodate approximately 22 vehicles and include one double toilet building. Provides primary access to Mesa Lakes Backcountry Nordic area including the West Bench Ski Trail and the lower Griffith Ski loop, aka “Waterdog”.
- Mesa Lakes Lodge: Authorized under special use permit to provide lodging and restaurant services. Parking area for lodge patrons.
- Upper Griffith: Paved pullout providing parking for approximately 6 vehicles and access to the Upper Griffith Ski Loop, aka “Lake of the Woods”.
- Skyway Ski: A pull in graveled parking area for approximately 40 vehicles with double toilet building. Accesses the highly groomed and maintained Skyway Ski System used extensively by general public and used to host the majority of the Grand Mesa Nordic Council events.
- Mesa Top: Newly developed and paved pull in parking area to accommodate up to 80 vehicles and trailers provides direct access to the Western part of the S-P Snowmobile Trail System. Parking area includes two double toilet buildings and two double unit change rooms.
- County Line: Paved pullout located immediately adjacent to Highway 65 designed to accommodate approximately 21 vehicles

and includes a double toilet building. Additional plowing sometimes occurs further along the sides of Highway 65 to provide increase parking. Parking area provides access the groomed Crag Crest Ski System, more commonly known as “County Line Ski System”.

- Grand Mesa Lodge: Authorized under special use permit to provide lodging and small store. Also authorized to conduct winter Outfitter and Guide services (snowmobile tours). Parking area for lodge patrons and clients.
- Grand Mesa Visitor Center: Provides heated restroom and visitor information. Recent services have also included a fishing store and guide services (snowmobile and fishing), authorized under special use permit, throughout the 2010/2011 winter. Paved parking is plowed to accommodate approximately 10 vehicles. Parking area also used by Colorado Dept of Transportation for equipment storage.
- Cobbett: Paved parking area near intersection of Hwy 65 and FDR 121 primarily used by snowmobilers to access the S-P snowmobile trails. Parking lot is located along FDR 121 directly across from the Grand Mesa Visitor Center.
- Thunder Mountain Lodge: Located approximately ½ mile from Highway 65 off of FDR 121. Authorized under special use permit to provide lodging and restaurant. Also authorized to conduct winter services (snowmobile tours and rentals). Parking area for lodge patrons and clients.
- Ward Creek: Southern most paved parking area along Highway 65 plowed to allow parking of approximately 40 vehicles. Parking area and double toilet building used by recreationists accessing the lower Ward Ski System and the Ward Creek Snowplay Area.

With the exception of the Powderhorn Ski area and the three lodges, plowing of the above parking areas are conducted by the Colorado Department of Transportation. The parking capacities listed above are “approximates” and can vary greatly dependent upon snow conditions and available equipment and personnel. All restrooms associated with public parking areas along Highway 65 are maintained (shoveled, cleaned and stocked) by the Forest Service.

In addition to the above parking areas, there exists 5 five trailheads, not located directly off of Highway 65, that provide parking and access to the Grand Mesa National Forest during the winter. These trailheads; Bonham, Vega, Hightower, Surface Creek and Leroux Creek, are all located at or below the Forest Boundary and are accessed by County maintained (gravel) roads. Each of these areas are used to access one of the lateral trails connecting to the main S-P Snowmobile corridor. There

are currently no restroom facilities provided in conjunction with any of these outlying trailheads.

**Purpose of and Need for the Project**

The primary purpose of this project is to address existing safety concerns associated with the parking, loading and unloading of recreationists immediately adjacent to Highway 65. In addition, the project will reduce deferred maintenance costs, improve the overall recreation experience and to provide additional services to better meet the public's need.

Since 1988, the Grand Valley Ranger District has conducted three different recreation visitor surveys specifically regarding winter use on the Grand Mesa National Forest. In addition, in 1996 the district completed a winter recreation capacity analysis on existing trailheads and trail systems. Survey results demonstrate that recreation use along the highway 65 corridor has grown more than 230% during the past 20 years. While the 1996 capacity analysis identified some overcrowding within the Skyway and County Line Ski systems, the primary concern and limitation was related to the parking lot capacities at many of the trailheads.

Since that time the district has been actively working to address capacity issues as identified in the analysis with priorities given to those areas that involve public health and safety concerns. An additional objective is to relocate trailheads that are immediately adjacent to Highway 65 to a location that is less impacted by highway traffic. In addition to addressing safety concerns with parking, loading and unloading of vehicles adjacent to the highway, relocating trailheads out of the highway corridor better correlates to visual quality objectives along the Scenic Byway. To decrease deferred maintenance costs and improve visitor experience, the district has also placed a high emphasis on replacing the older dilapidated toilet buildings along the highway corridor.

Recent accomplishments have included the relocation of the Lands End Snowmobile Trailhead to a new location off of Highway 65. This project was a high priority due to the unsafe parking conditions, poor condition of facilities and large need to improve visitor experience.

For reasons similar to the above, the County Line Trailhead has been identified as the next highest priority needing improvement. Due to a large growth in visitors to this trail system during recent years, the need to address these health and safety issues has increased substantially. The district has been working with Forest engineers to design (see attachment 1) a new parking lot that would be located off the highway corridor and would provide for current and future public needs.

Other improvements needed include a minor realignment of the Skyway Parking Area and the relocation or replacement of the existing toilet building out of the middle of the parking area to improve traffic flow, parking and snow removal operations. Additional parking needs to be created near the upper part of the Ward Lake Ski System off of FDR 121 and the replacement of the toilet facility at the lower trailhead located at Ward Creek Reservoir.

In addition to winter trailhead and facility improvements, the Grand Mesa Winter Recreation Improvement proposal also includes the construction and reconstruction of winter trails. This work is necessary to improve grooming operations, increase trail capacity and improve the trail experience.

The Grand Mesa Nordic Council, Colorado Department of Transportation and both Delta and Mesa Counties have been involved throughout the planning process and are willing partners to help implement winter recreation improvements on the Grand Mesa.

## **Decision**

I have reviewed the environmental analysis and project record, including Response to Comments, the Biological Evaluation and Assessment as well as the Fish and Wildlife response to the proposed activities and it is my decision to implement Alternative 2 (Proposed Action) with additional design/construction features as described below:

### 1) Relocation and construction of the County Line Parking Area/Trailhead as follows:

- Relocate the existing parking area to an area further from the Highway 65 corridor to reduce potential vehicle/pedestrian encounters.
- The new parking area will be larger and constructed in a manner to increase parking capacity to a maximum of 80 vehicles and designed to improve traffic flow and to allow the efficient removal and storage of snow.
- This project will include the replacement of the toilet building and may include the addition of change rooms.

### 2) Improvement of the Skyway Trailhead:

- Minor realignment and reconstruction of the Skyway Parking Area/Trailhead to improve traffic flow, increase capacity and allow for effective snow removal and storage.

- Relocation or replacement of toilet facility to a location out of the immediate parking lot. The toilet facility will be set in a manner to allow effective snow removal from doorways and vents and drainage away from the facility.
- Installation of new facility to serve as “change rooms” and/or the addition of a temporary equipment building/warming hut adjacent to the parking area.

3) Widening and expansion of the Skyway and County Line Nordic trail system:

- Removal of trees within the Skyway and County Line Ski Systems to increase the existing trail width to accommodate a 16 ft wide groomer.
- The construction of approximately 1.3 miles of new trail located on the Northeast side of the Skyway Ski system to provide a connector loop between the Sunset and Vista Trails.  
The removal of trees associated with the above new trail will be accomplished through a timber sale and will involve the construction of approximately 2.3 miles of temporary road.
- In addition, due to the high number of hazard trees along these trail systems, trees adjacent to and within 200 ft of the existing trail corridor may be removed.

4) Additional improvements associated with Nordic use on the Grand Mesa National Forest include:

- Creating additional parking capacity associated with the upper Ward Lake Ski System along FDR 121. This work may include the widening of an existing parking area near the Ward Lake Campground entrance and/or the construction and/or plowing of additional area between the Grand Mesa Visitor Center and the Campground entrance.
- The replacement of the toilet facility at the lower Ward Ski System within the Ward Creek Reservoir Parking area.
- The installation of additional signs and trail indicators to better mark ski trails within the Mesa Lakes Backcountry Nordic area.

Implementation of this Decision will occur in phases dependent upon the receipt of funds and identified priorities associated with the project. Currently, the GMUG has received confirmation that Scenic Byway funds are available for the relocation of the County Line Trailhead. It is the GMUG’s intent to pursue a variety of grants, partnerships and additional resources to acquire the additional funds necessary to complete the project.

### Project Design Standards

In addition to the standard direction in the Watershed Conservation Handbook for Best Management Practices (FSH 2509.25, Chapter 2) and standards and guidelines in the Forest Plan, I have decided to implement the following project design standards that are specific to the Grand Mesa Winter Recreation Improvements.

#### Air Quality

Any pile burning of remaining slash associated with the removal of timber will be conducted in a manner that complies with State of Colorado air quality guidelines.

#### Cultural Resources

- Locations of known cultural resource sites needing protection will be shown on internal working maps not subject to disclosure and/or identified on the ground so that these areas are avoided and protected during all phases of project implementation.
- If any new cultural resource sites are discovered during implementation, project activities will stop and the archeologist will be contacted immediately. The archeologist will evaluate the site and determine how the site will be protected.

#### Noxious Weeds

- All treatments of noxious weeds will follow the 2005 Grand Valley Ranger District Noxious Weed Treatment Decision Notice.
- Contractors will not move any “off-road equipment”, which last operated in an area that is infested with one or more invasive species of concern onto timber sale areas without having first taken reasonable measures to make each such piece of equipment free of soil, seeds, vegetative matter, or other debris that could contain or hold seeds.
- Disturbed areas will be re-vegetated with approved certified weed-free seed mixes to prevent soil erosion and/or establishment of noxious weeds. Certification tags that are removed from the seed mixture will be provided to the contract administrator or engineering representative.
- The Forest Service will designate the seed mixture to be used. The following list displays the recommended seed mixture. Appropriate substitutions can be made and are at the discretion of the rangeland management specialist based on availability at the time the seed is to be purchased. The anticipated mixture of seed is currently:

Slender wheatgrass	3 lbs./acre
Mountain brome	5 lbs./acre
Thickspike wheatgrass	3 lbs./acre
Canby bluegrass	3 lbs./acre
Blue wildrye	5 lbs./acre

### Soil, Water and Wetlands

- Operation of heavy equipment associated with timber harvest activities and mechanical fuels treatments will avoid soil type 127 and wetlands.
- All perennial and intermittent streams, lakes, reservoirs, designated wetlands, and soil type 127 will be shown on project area maps.
- Soil disturbing actions will be avoided during long periods of heavy rain or wet soils to prevent excessive rutting and mobilization of sediment during runoff events. Operation of heavy equipment within harvest units will occur when the soil moisture is below the plastic limit or protected by at least one foot of packed snow or two inches of frozen soil to prevent excessive compaction.
- During road and parking lot construction, initial clearing operations will fully contain material on-site and not allow material to move into the Water Influence Zone (WIZ).
- Ground disturbance will be minimized to the extent possible within the WIZ of lakes, reservoirs, and perennial and intermittent streams.
- Heavy equipment will not be operated within 100 feet of the channel of perennial and intermittent streams.
- Mechanical ground disturbance in or immediately adjacent to ephemeral drainages will be avoided.

**Comment [LKB1]:** What happens if you can't avoid the wetlands? Have they all been mapped, especially for the Ward Creek Reservoir tie-in?

### Wildlife / Fisheries

No activities shall be allowed within ¼ mile of an active northern goshawk nest from March 1 to July 31 if they will cause nesting failure or abandonment (Forest Plan standard and guideline). For the purposes of this project, the boreal owl shall also have a ¼-mile buffer placed around all active nests until the young have fledged or until the wildlife biologist determines that the activities will not disturb the nest and nesting pair.

### **Mitigation Measures**

No mitigation measures will be required as a result of implementing this decision.

### **Monitoring**

All timber removal operations, trail and parking lot construction will be monitored to ensure that work meets identified design specifications and standards.

**Reasons for the Decision**

I selected Alternative 2 for the Grand Mesa Winter Recreation Improvement Project because it meets forest-wide general direction from the Forest Plan direction is consistent with guidelines provided in the GMUG Recreation Facility Analysis Decision, addresses issues and concerns as identified during winter recreation use surveys and analyses and best meets the needs of the recreation public, as well as Forest Service partners in the area.

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**Public Involvement**

The proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions in March of 2009. The Grand Mesa Winter Recreation Improvements Scoping and Public Comment Period was initially in April 2006 and again in June of 2010. This scoping was sent to the Daily Sentinel, Delta County Independent and Mountain Valley News. As a result of this scoping, the Forest received 5 written comments regarding the proposed alternatives.

The comments regarding the proposed alternatives considered under this Decision Notice are further described in Attachment A.

## **Alternatives Considered**

### **Alternative 1**

Under the No Action alternative, current plans would continue to guide management of the project area. No construction work would occur and existing parking areas would not be altered and furnishings would not be replaced. This alternative would also result in no additional trail miles. This alternative does not improve the existing capacity issues and the Forest would continue to conduct basic maintenance on the existing sites to meet health and safety standards and the sites operated and managed for the public as in the past.

### **Alternative 2**

For the most part, the proposed action was previously identified in the "Decision" portion of this document. This alternative placed an emphasis on the construction and reconstruction of winter parking areas and associated facilities as well as the widening and construction of new trails. A more complete discussion may be found starting on page 2.

## **Findings Required by Other Laws, Regulations and Policies**

### **Forest Plan Direction**

Management of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forest is carried out under the guidance of the *Amended Land and Resource Management Plan, 1991* (Forest Plan). The Forest Plan establishes goals, objectives, and standards and guidelines for management of National Forest System lands. The EA on the Grand Mesa Winter Recreation Improvements is tiered to the Forest Plan. Forest-wide direction, Management Prescription 1A for developed recreation sites and Management Prescription 2B for scenic byways provide direction applicable to this proposal as follows:

1. Provide appropriate developed facilities where the private sector is not meeting the demand (page III-16).
2. Maintain cost-effective developed recreation facilities which complement non-Forest Service developments (page III-16).
3. Provide facilities that are accessible to handicapped persons (page III-16).
4. Management emphasis under Prescription 1A is for developed recreation in existing and proposed trailheads. Facilities such as roads, trails, toilets, signs may be dominant but harmonize and blend with the natural setting (page III-88).
5. Design facilities and access to provide site protection, efficient maintenance, and user convenience (page III-89).

6. Scenic byways will be a special emphasis. They provide passenger car activities along scenic, cultural, and historic routes. The primary objective will be to showcase outstanding national forest scenery and increase public awareness and understanding of national forest activities (pageIII-105).

This decision is consistent with the overall management direction set forth in the Forest Plan. The Forest Plan is being implemented as directed by the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (RPA, P.L. 93-378) and the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA, P.L. 94-588).

### **Finding of No Significant Impact**

I have reviewed the EA to determine whether this action would have significant effects on the quality of the human environment. Section 1508.27 of 40 CFR defines significance and it is on this basis that the determination whether to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement is made. The context and intensity of this federal action must be considered when determining significance.

The context of this action is within the Island Lake Recreation Area on the Grand Valley Ranger District of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests. There will be very little change in the use of the roads, trails and recreation facilities by the public as a result of this action.

The proposed action will have a positive effect on public health and safety by relocating trailheads off of the highway shoulder and by replacing substandard toilet facilities. The effects of the proposed action on the human environment are not highly controversial nor do they involve unique or unknown risks. There are no significant cumulative effects on the environment, whether combined with the effects created by past or concurrent projects or with the effects from natural changes in the foreseeable future.

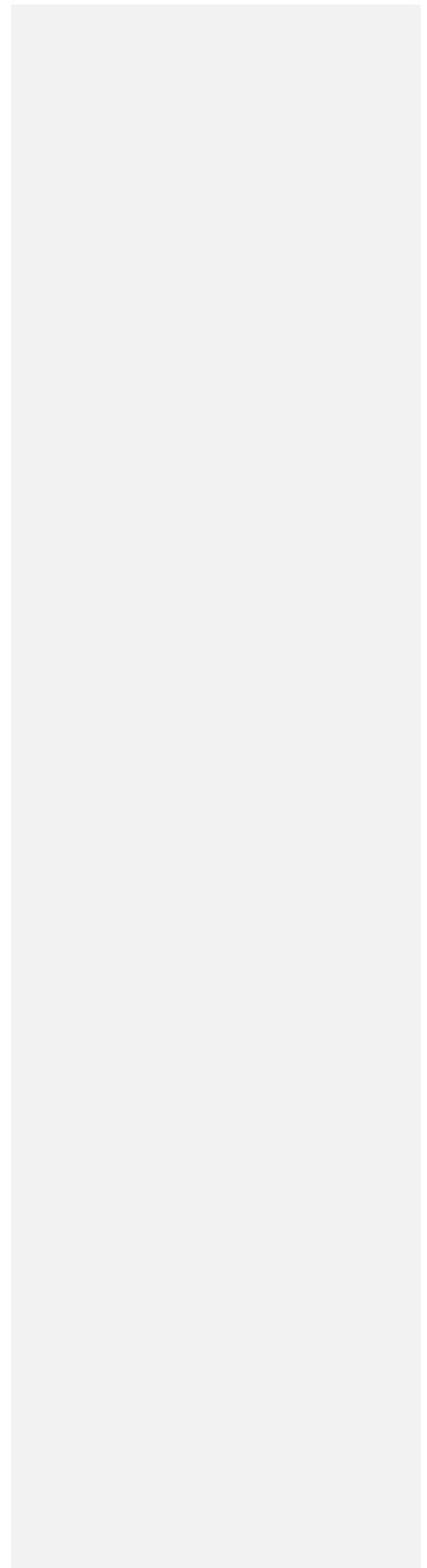
This action would not adversely affect endangered or threatened species or their habitats. All projects are proposed within existing developed recreation sites. This Decision is consistent with all applicable Federal, State and local laws. The purpose and need met by this Decision clearly advances the goals set out by laws and requirements established for the protection of the environment.

Based on these findings, it is my determination that there will be no significant effect on the quality of the human environment from

implementing this Decision, and that an Environmental Impact Statement need not be prepared.

**Implementation Date**

If no appeal is received, the implementation of this Decision may take place five (5) days after the close of the appeal filing period. The appeal filing period extends 45 days after the publication of the Notice of Decision.



**Appeal Opportunities**

This Decision is subject to administrative review pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215.7(a). In accordance with 36 CFR Part 215.7(a), a written Notice of Appeal must be submitted to:

USDA Forest Service  
Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre & Gunnison National Forest  
Attn: Appeal Officer  
2250 Highway 50  
Delta, Colorado 81416-2485

The document must be submitted within 45 days after the Notice of Decision is published in the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel. Appeals must meet the content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14(b), which are listed below:

1. State that the document is an appeal filed pursuant to 36 CFR part 215;
2. List the name and address of the appellant and a telephone number;
3. Identify the Decision document by title, subject, date of decision, and name and title of the Responsible Official;
4. Identify the specific change(s) in the decision that the appellant seeks or portion of the decision to which the appellant objects;
5. State how the Responsible Official's Decision fails to consider comments previously provided, either before or during the comment period specified in 36 CFR 215.6 and, if applicable, how the appellant believes the decision violates law, regulation, or policy.

**Contact Person**

For further information concerning this Decision contact Loren Paulson, District Recreation Manager at 2777 Crossroads Blvd, Unit 1, Grand Junction, CO 81506.

**Responsible Official**

/s/Connie Clementson  
CONNIE CLEMENTSON  
District Ranger

12-28-2011  
Date

## **Appendix A – Response to Comments**

1. The following comments were received through correspondence such as e-mail, letter and/or through phone conversations:

**Comment #1: To address Lynx concerns and to ensure there is not “net gain” in compacted trail miles, the Nordic Council identified routes that could be eliminated to ensure the new trail can be added.**

*Response: As identified in the Biological Assessment, the removal of a previously existing winter trail from the Griffith area allowed for the addition of the proposed new trail without an overall increase to the previous total miles of compacted trails.*

**Comment #2: Support for the widening of trails and the addition of new trails as long as they do not conflict with existing snowmobile trails.**

*Response: The new trail will be located on the North East side of the Skyway Ski system and will not impact or result in a conflict with existing snowmobile trails.*

**Comment #3: Concerned with the widening of trails and feel that the widening will “defeat the beauty and natural woodland feel of the trails”.**

*Response: The Forest Service recognizes that the widening will result in additional impact and will, to some degree, further impact the natural feel of the area. The trails are currently managed for a 12 to 14’ width and this proposal is to allow widening to 16 feet. The Forest Service feels that the widening will improve grooming operations and the increase of skier/snowshoeing lanes will result in decreased congestion and should improve the overall recreation experience for the majority of users.*

**Comment #4: A 25 member senior group commented that they were all in favor of increased parking and new toilets.**

*Response: The comment supports the proposal and subsequent decision.*

**Comment #5: A municipal agency provided support for the project and volunteered to assist if possible.**

*Response: As mentioned in the decision, the district plans to use a wide variety of means, including partners, to accomplish this project and appreciates the support.*

## **Appendix B – Environmental Assessment Errata Section**

The scoping and public comment period for the reconstruction of the Island Lake Recreation area was completed and sent to interested parties in May, 2009. The EA was also sent to personnel within the Forest Service, including the Interdisciplinary Team for final review at the same time. As a result of this review, errors and changes to that October 13 version of the document have been identified. There will be no attempt to correct spelling, punctuation, or formatting errors.