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Avalanche Campground Healthy Forest Campsite Relocation Environmental Assessment

**White River National Forest, Aspen-Sopris Ranger District
Pitkin County, Colorado**

Township 9S Range 88 W section 34
39 14' 07 N
107 12 ' 09" W
UTM NAD83 309759E 4346558N



**For Information Contact:
Karen Schroyer
Aspen and Sopris Ranger Districts
White River National Forest
(970) 962-2266**

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Introduction

We are proposing to permanently relocate the campground loop immediately adjacent to the current site boundaries of Avalanche Campground, north of, and across the road, from sites 11-13 (Figure 1 conceptual design plan). The proposed site location will extend up to 100 feet outside of the current site boundaries for the campground. The proposed campground relocation area is located within an open meadow with oak brush cover at an elevation of 7,350. (See proposed campground and road design).

This proposal includes construction of ten new campsites to replace the existing sites proposed for formal decommission. The proposed access location for this campground site plan is approximately 50 feet north of the Horse Trailer Trailhead Parking loop and will extend northwest approximately 1,000 feet. Ten campsites will be constructed. The new developed sites will be constructed as a level 3 development scale, to stay consistent with its current level of development and retain scenic integrity.

Presently this is an open meadow habitat area with oak brush cover sitting at approximately a 4% grade. Existing open spaces within the oak brush will be utilized to the extent practical to reduce the amount of vegetation lost and to provide a natural barrier between sites. The physical recreation opportunity spectrum (ROS) for this management area will remain roaded natural (May- November) and semi-primitive non-motorized (November- April) during the seasonal road closure time. Construction of a new one lane road loop will be necessary to access to the sites and would connect to the current road (FDR 310), reducing the amount of new road construction. The entirety of the loop would be located east of the Horse Trailer Parking loop, separating uses.

Construction of a new campground loop and rehabilitation of the existing loop would serve the purpose and need of ensuring visitor safety while managing for riparian health. In addition, a highly valued campground with contemporary/rustic design of improvements will retain its character, ensuring a positive recreation experience on the White River National Forest. Avalanche Campground is a development scale 3 campground with site modification moderate and facilities about equal for protection of natural site and comfort of users. In contrast to this lower development level, Redstone Campground the nearest campground from Avalanche CG is at the development scale 5 with high facilities mostly designed strictly for comfort and conveniences and includes amenities such as electricity and showers. Redstone Campground sites are considered expensive for many campers who prefer a less-developed camping experience.

This decision notice authorizes formal decommissioning of sites 1-10 and replacement. Restoration and rehabilitation to the riparian zone will also occur with this project. Campground amenities such as picnic tables and fire rings will need to be removed and site spurs closed off for motorized access. Rehabilitation will be focused on return of the original landscape condition including road obliteration, grading, and re-vegetation. The district suggests creating this for day use only to facilitate river access, nature watching, and angling. Rehabilitation work will include; planting native seeds and trees, woody

debris placed in the creek, and monitoring to ensure sustainability. This work may be completed with assistance from partner organizations and volunteers.

Additional campground improvements will be provided as funding and staffing allow. Construction of two horse camp sites with corrals are proposed along with sufficient parking for horse trailers for day use as a phased-in project. This will allow for sustained multi-use recreation while maintaining adequate space for day use and equestrian users. This includes, construction of two new day use parking lots, relocating a CXT vault toilet, and rerouting a section of trail to connect with a new trailhead location. These tasks will be secondary to the main purpose and need and will be phased in as the District can accommodate.

Access for the trailhead NFST #1969 will be moved to the northwest with two parking areas and will continue to be accessed from FDR 310. Construction of a new day use parking area for six vehicles at the west end of the proposed campground will assist in separating uses, providing overflow and further our objective of rehabilitating the existing campground loop. This will allow for a closure of motorized vehicles beyond the existing western CXT toilet located adjacent to the present horse trailer parking area. The Avalanche Creek Trailhead will then be relocated to the new proposed day use parking lot with approximately .25 mile of trail being constructed to connect to the trail. The day use parking lot will serve approximately 16 cars. The double vault toilet located at the present trailhead parking lot will be moved to the new parking lot to serve campers, day use and trail use visitors. The existing well and hand pump will be tested and monitored for water quality the summer of 2014 for future operations.

The formal closure process to close and decommission sites 1-10 along the loop in Avalanche Campground has been initiated, to ensure visitor safety. This proposal will implement a permanent solution to replace the camping opportunities Avalanche Campground has historically provided. Funding and weather dependent, the new designated sites can begin construction as early as Fall 2014. In summary, the following items are the proposed actions for relocating the Avalanche Campground. These items will be prioritized and implemented as funding becomes available. The project could take several years to complete:

We prepared this environmental assessment (EA) to determine whether to relocate existing campground opposite of the 3 existing overflow sites, construct a new loop road for ten new campsites to replace the ones closed, and harden sites for sustainability

- Decommission the old trailhead parking lot, campsites, and convert the old campground road into a trail to across the trailhead into the Maroon Bells Wilderness Area.
- Cross rip the road and campsites to remove compaction, amending soil, and re-vegetate the area.
- Relocate a CXT toilet to near the campsites and new trailhead.
- Improve in stream habitat using large unanchored wood. Dead trees may be hauled in from off site and/or if live trees are used they will come from outside

- the Watershed Influence Area (WIZ) and will be surveyed for wildlife habitat prior to removal.
- Reconfigure the existing horse trailer parking area into a circular area with 2 or 3 horse camping sites, hitching post, and trailer parking to accommodate this use and for overnight parking for horse trailers traveling into the wilderness.
 - Maintain the current well and hand pump for water (fire and/or potable) if this water system passes CO State Standards.

Need for the Proposal

The purpose and need for action at Avalanche Campground is to ensure visitor safety, maintain forest health within this developed site, continuing to offer a developed camping experience for the public and maintaining a high level of scenic integrity in this area. Presently all camping within the Crystal River valley is restricted only to developed campgrounds in the Crystal River Valley. The Aspen-Sopris Ranger District is recommending a new course of action to permanently relocate the ten designated sites in the Avalanche Campground road loop.

Decision

Based on my review of the alternatives, I have decided to select Alternative 2 – Proposed Action. The action proposed by the Forest Service, is to permanently relocate the campground loop immediately adjacent to the current site boundaries of Avalanche Campground, north of, and across the road, from sites 11-13 (Figure 1 conceptual design plan). The proposed site location will extend up to 100 feet outside of the current site boundaries for the campground. The proposed campground relocation area is located within an open meadow with oak brush cover at an elevation of 7,350. (See Avalanche Campground Healthy Forest EA June 2014 for design).

This proposal includes construction of ten new campsites to replace the existing sites proposed for formal decommission. The proposed access location for this campground site plan is approximately 50 feet north of the Horse Trailer Trailhead Parking loop and will extend northwest approximately 1,000 feet. Ten campsites will be constructed. The new developed sites will be constructed as a level 3 development scale, to stay consistent with its current level of development and retain scenic integrity.

Public Involvement

The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping July 2011-December 2011. In addition, as part of the public involvement process, the agency collaborated with the Aspen Times to submit articles on; the tree that fell on a tent over Memorial Day weekend 2011, the closure of eight out of the ten sites, and the proposal for rebuilding campsites. A legal ad in the Aspen Times was published on 11/24/2011 stating this project proposal.

A scoping letter and conceptual design plan was sent to interested parties including the USFS White River west zone mailing list, homeowners, outfitter guides, community members, and partner organizations. A public open house was held at the Sopris Ranger Station on November 30th, 2011 to receive community input and answer questions. Quarterly updates of the project were provided in the Schedule of Proposed Actions beginning July 2011. Articles were published in the *Aspen Times* on July 8 and November 22, 2011.

Response to the scoping revealed a general tone that Avalanche Campground is highly valued campground and the public would like to retain this opportunity for camping. In the design and operations, many would like to see the campground retain its low level of development and rustic qualities, continuing to operate as a non-reservation campground.

Based on these comments and analysis, the Forest Service intends to maintain the current development level and recognize the priority to operate Avalanche Campground at full capacity. The interdisciplinary team also developed a list of issues to address, as discussed in the next section.

In the process of analyzing this project, the regulations for this project at Avalanche Campground EA changed with the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012. It includes a provision (Section 428) directing the Secretary to establish a pre-decisional objection process for projects and activities implementing land management plans in lieu of the post-decisional appeal process used by the agency since 1993. More specifically, Section 428 directs that the pre-decisional objection process provided by the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) be applied in lieu of the Appeal Reform Act (ARA) requirements covering Right to Appeal, Disposition of an Appeal, and Stay. It is now subject to the objection process pursuant to 36 CFR 218, subparts A and B. Objections will only be accepted from those who have previously submitted specific written comments regarding the proposed project during scoping or other designated opportunity for public comment in accordance with §218.5(a). Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted, timely and specific written comments regarding the proposed project unless based on new information arising after the designated comment opportunities.

On March 27, 2013, new regulations defining the public objection process were released by the U.S. Forest Service. The Pre-decisional Objection Process (36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B) replaces the previous Administrative Appeal Process (36 CFR 215). The White River National Forest will utilize the new objection process in this project as the collaborative nature of the objection process is more consistent with the goals and values of the overall Avalanche Campground EA process.

The Forest Service consulted the following individuals, Federal, State, tribal, and local agencies during the development of this EA:

Consultation Needed With Other Agencies

Consultation	Agency/Company
SHPO Clearance on Heritage Resources	Colorado State Historical Preservation Office
Consultation on Threatened and Endangered Species with USFWS	US Fish and Wildlife Service
Past and Future management of Avalanche CG	California Land Management dba White River Recreation Company

Comment Summary

Nine letters and emails were received during initial scoping. Open House participation at Sopris Ranger Station on November 30 2011 included 2 public and 4 Forest Service staff. Comments were reviewed and categorized into three areas: 1) issues to be addressed in the EA analysis, 2) comments beyond the scope of the project and 3) issues eliminated from detailed study because of known minimal or no effects, or effective mitigation. The Forest Service also consulted with other agencies and companies.

No objections were received after Draft EA was posted and the EA draft was sent to all the commenters.

Finding of No Significant Impact

As the responsible official, I am responsible for evaluating the effects of the project relative to the definition of significance established by the CEQ Regulations (40 CFR 1508.13). I have reviewed and considered the EA and documentation included in the project record, and I have determined that the Avalanche Campground Healthy Forest Relocation project will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Thus, an environmental impact statement was not prepared. My rationale for this finding is as follows, organized by sub-section of the CEQ definition of significance cited above.

1. Context and Intensity

This project is located at a popular and scenic developed recreation area with use within the land and resource capabilities. Visitors, largely, are from the local and regional area. This project is designed to improve visitors’ recreation experience, provide quality in a lower level recreation development opportunity and minimize any impacts to the dramatic scenery of the area. No significant effects on local regional or national resources were identified in the EA.

Project design and mitigation measures will keep project impacts below the level of significance. Forest Service representatives will regularly inspect project operations to assure conformance with the terms of the EA, the Forest Plan and appropriate State and Federal laws. Specialists who participated in analysis of this proposal will be involved

with design and on-site layout in the campgrounds, picnic areas, trails, and other facilities to assure that design criteria/mitigation requirements described in the EA and included in my decision are met. In addition, the projects are within the scale and with the context of current development and recreation management activities within the Avalanche Campground.

Impacts associated with the project are discussed in the EA and the project record. The impacts are within the range of those identified in the *2002 White River Revised Forest Plan*. Alternative 2 will not have significant impacts on resources identified in the EA. After careful consideration of the EA, the project record, and in documented consultation with resource specialists, it is my finding that the effects of these projects are not significant. My finding that the impacts are not significant is not biased by the beneficial impacts described in the analysis.

2. Public Health and Safety

Proposed activities will not significantly affect public health and safety due to the mitigations/project design included with this decision. One goal of the project is to provide a quality and safe recreation experience for visitors.

3. Unique Characteristics of the Area

The projects for the selected alternative are located within Avalanche Corridor which is adjacent to the Maroon Bells Snowmass Wilderness Area. NRHP eligible cultural resources were identified in the project area. The project will not adversely affect these unique characteristics of this area or ecologically critical areas (wetlands, wildlife habitat, domestic water reservoirs). My determination is based on the discussion of effects found in the EA, and Issues Dismissed from Detailed Analysis (EA pg. 2-16). There are no parklands, prime lands (forest, farm or range), or wild and scenic rivers associated with the project area. By adhering to the project's construction standards and design criteria/mitigations, impacts to watersheds, wetlands, environmentally sensitive or critical areas, cultural resources, and wilderness and roadless areas will not be significant.

4. Controversy

The activities described in my decision do not involve effects on the human environment that are likely to be highly controversial (40 CFR 1508.27). Public comment during scoping and the comment period regarding this project focused primarily on the recreation experience, improving visitor safety, protecting the visual quality, and protecting wildlife and other natural resources. These concerns were addressed in alternative development and through project design criteria/mitigation. I find the effects on the human environment are not highly uncertain, are unlikely to involve unique or unknown risks and are not likely to be highly controversial and are, therefore, not significant.

5. Uncertainty

The activities described in my decision will not involve effects that are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks (40 CFR 1580.27). Pertinent scientific literature has been reviewed and incorporated into the analysis process and the technical analyses

conducted for determinations on the impacts to the resources are supportable with use of accepted techniques, reliable data and professional judgment. Impacts are within limits that are considered thresholds of concern. Issues of public concern and possible environmental effects of the selected alternative have been adequately addressed in the analysis of this decision. Therefore, I conclude that there are no highly uncertain, unique or unknown risks.

6. Precedent

My decision to implement the activities included in Alternative 2 does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. I have made this decision based on the overall consistency of the proposed activities with Forest Plan standards, guidelines and management practices, and the capabilities of the land.

7. Cumulative Impacts

The EA includes all connected, cumulative and similar actions in the scope of the analysis. The cumulative effects of past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions are considered and disclosed in the EA, and there are no significant cumulative effects.

8. Properties On or Eligible for the National Register of Historic Places

There are no archaeological sites, which have been determined to be eligible for the national Register of Historic Places (e.g., historic irrigation ditch and incinerator). Heritage resource specialists based this determination on a literature review of the proposed project and a Class III cultural resources inventory in the project area. Forest Service archaeologists documented a determination of *no historic properties affected* for this project. The State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) has concurred on this finding. The clearance letter from SHPO and the cultural resource specialist report are included in the project file. Should an unknown cultural resource site be discovered during project implementation, it will be protected under the requirements of Federal law.

9. Endangered or Threatened Species or Their Critical Habitat

The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or their critical habitat (Endangered Species Act of 1973). The project area was field checked by the Forest Botanist, Fish Biologist and District Wildlife Biologist. Biological Evaluations for threatened and endangered plants, wildlife, and fish were conducted. Habitat occurs in the area for one threatened wildlife species, Canada lynx, and it was concluded that implementation of Alternative 2 “may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect” the Canada Lynx (EA, pg. 5). There are no endangered or threatened plant species. The Biological Evaluations have been summarized in the EA and the full reports are located in the project file.

10. Legal Requirements for Environmental Protection

The action will not violate Federal, or applicable State and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA, the Issues Dismissed from Detailed Analysis section and Specifically Required

Disclosures section of the EA . The action is consistent with the 1997 Revised Forest Plan as required by the National Forest Management Act.

Implementation Date

This project was subject to the objection process pursuant to 36 CFR 218. No Objections were received. The Forest Service plans to embark this project planning in the fall of 2014 and continue re-construction in the summer of 2015 and beyond. This decision may be implemented immediately upon signing of the Decision Notice.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service objection process, contact
Martha Moran Recreation Staff, Aspen and Sopris Ranger District, White River National Forest, mmoran@fs.fed.us, (970) 963-2266


KAREN SCHROYER
District Ranger

9/16/14
Date