

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
USDA Forest Service
Whitney Portal Walk-In Campground Expansion Project
Mounty Whitney Ranger District; Inyo National Forest
Inyo County, California

PROPOSED ACTION

The Inyo National Forest proposes to expand the existing walk-in campground at Whitney Portal. The project involves construction of up to 13 tent pads in the Whitney Portal area east (downhill) of the overflow parking lot. These tent pads will be an addition to the existing walk-in campsites located west (uphill) of the overflow parking lot. The tent pads measure 10' by 12' and will consist of a leveled native surface, surrounded by wood beams. Communal picnic tables and bear boxes will also be installed. Approximately 100 feet of an access trail linking the new tent pads to the overflow parking lot will be re-established to provide walk-in access. The access trail will be constructed using native materials and follow the path of the old trail as closely as possible to minimize further ground disturbance. All construction activity will be accomplished with hand tools, and the project will likely be completed by October 2012. See Alternative section of this assessment for a map of the project area and example tent pad.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The current walk-in campground, the lower family campground and group camping sites at Whitney Portal are often overbooked during the high-use summer months and hikers often camp in undesignated areas along Lone Pine Creek and elsewhere. Expanding the existing walk-in campground would provide additional camping opportunities, particularly for permitted hikers who need short-term (overnight), basic accommodations. The expansion of the walk-in campground could potentially alleviate camping pressure in undesignated areas and make campsites in the other campgrounds available for families or groups who are mainly there to enjoy the Whitney Portal recreational area.

DECISION TO BE MADE

The decision to be made is whether or not to expand the existing walk-in campground at Whitney Portal.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public scoping was initiated on January 30, 2012 and ran concurrently with the legal notice of proposed action and public comment period which published in the Inyo Register on February 2, 2012. Scoping letters and maps of the project area were sent to the Whitney Portal Cabin Owners, Whitney Portal Store, local Native American tribes, and other organizations. The proposed action was published in the Inyo National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions on April 1, 2012. A project description and scoping documents were also made available at the project website (<http://www.fs.fed.us/nepa/fs-usda-pop.php/?project=38111>) during the comment period.

The legal notice of proposed action, scoping letters with mailing list, and a list of comments received are included in the project file. Six comments were received in regards to this project. Two comments expressed support for this project. Issues identified from the comments received are described below.

Issues

An issue, as it relates to the NEPA process, is a point of disagreement, debate, or dispute with the proposed action based on some anticipated effect. The Forest Service separated the issues into two groups:

Significant Issues: Unresolved conflicts or undesired effects directly or indirectly caused by the proposed action. Issues would be categorized as significant if the impact has the potential to be severe and highly noticeable.

Minor or Non-Significant Issues: Issues that are: 1) outside the scope of the proposed action; 2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; or 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence.

There was no significant issues identified from the comments received; however, one minor issue was identified:

The Whitney Portal area is already over-developed; further campground additions will remove more natural landscape.

This issue was categorized as minor because it is a statement of opinion that is not supported by factual evidence. A list of comments received, reasoning for categorization, and responses to the comments can be found in Appendix A of this document.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1 – No Action

No action would be taken. No expansion or improvements to the walk-in campground would occur.

Alternative 2 – Proposed Action

The proposed action would allow for the construction of up to 13 tent pads, placement of associated picnic tables and bear boxes, and reestablishment of an access trail. The access trail and tent pads would be constructed east of the overflow parking lot and south of the Whitney Portal Road in Township 15 South, Range 34 East, Sections 35 and 36.

Alternatives Considered But Eliminated From Detailed Study

Eliminated Alternative – Smaller Scale Expansion

Under this alternative, an expansion of approximately half the size of the proposed action (7 tent pads) would be constructed. Bear boxes and picnic tables would be reduced proportionately and the trail would still be reestablished.

After consultation with Inyo National Forest recreation staff, this alternative was eliminated from detailed consideration because it does not substantially accomplish the purpose and need which is to provide additional camping opportunities and alleviate camping pressure in other campgrounds/undesignated areas. Campground use at Whitney Portal was high (~70% capacity on average) during the last three years with greater use occurring on weekends. Construction of 7 tent pads may not be enough to meet the need for additional camping opportunities during high use periods. Furthermore, fewer tent pads would decrease cost effectiveness from a campground management standpoint.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Effects related to significant issues

No significant issues were identified during the public scoping and comment period.

Effects related to significant factors

The following discussion addresses the ten factors to be considered in determining the significance of a federal action as defined by the implementing regulations for the National Environmental Policy Act [40 CFR 1508.27(b)].

1. Beneficial and adverse effects

Hydrology and Soils: A Hydrology and Soils effects analysis (Lutrick 2012) is summarized here and included in the project file. The Whitney Portal Walk-in Campground Expansion Project should have no effects to water quality and very local effects to soil quality. Implementation of Best Management Practices and project specific design criteria will ensure little to no effect on water/soil quality. Although the entire project area is within a Riparian Conservation Area (RCA), the activities will cause ground disturbance over a very small area, with a total footprint of less than ¼ acre. This amount of ground disturbance should not affect conditions enough to change any runoff or sedimentation processes, and therefore should not affect water quality. It will alter soil productivity over the tent pad footprint and around picnic tables, which would be up to 3,000 square feet (0.06 acres). On a watershed scale, there will be no measurable effects to soil or water quality.

Under the no action alternative, there would be no direct, indirect or cumulative effects on water quality, hydrology, stream condition or soil quality. Current watershed conditions at Whitney Portal would likely remain the same and overflow camping along Lone Pine Creek would continue.

Wildlife: A Biological Evaluation/Assessment (Murphy and Sims 2012a) and a Management Indicator Species analysis (Murphy and Sims 2012b) are summarized here and included in the project file.

The BE/A identified one candidate species and three Forest Service sensitive species that have potential to occur and/or be affected by the proposed action. Potential effects to these species (wolverine, northern goshawk, Sierra Nevada red fox and American marten) were analyzed in detail in the BE/A. It was determined that the proposed action would have no impact on any of the four special status species that potentially occur within the project area.

The MIS analysis identified no potential effects on any of the indicator species. Yellow warbler, mountain quail, Sooty grouse, California spotted owl, American marten, northern flying squirrel, and hairy woodpecker have habitat within or adjacent to the project area but no habitat modification will be done which would affect these species' habitats.

Under the no action alternative, there would be no direct, indirect or cumulative effects on sensitive species or their habitat. Species habitat and distribution would likely be maintained at the current level.

Sensitive Plants and Noxious Weeds: A Biological Evaluation (Weis 2012a) for sensitive plants and a Noxious Weed Risk Assessment (Weis 2012b) are summarized here and included in the project file. The BE identified no special status plants in the general area and none are expected to occur in the project area. The proposed action will have no impact on any special status plant species. The weed assessment identified three species known to occur at Whitney Portal including cheatgrass, dandelion and knotweed. Equipment and clothing cleaning was prescribed to reduce the potential spread of weeds. No new weeds are expected in the project area as a result of construction activities if equipment cleaning is done. Some weeds may be introduced to the campsites once they are in use, but weed information will be posted in the area to reduce the risk of weeds spreading into proposed campground.

Under the no action alternative, there would be no direct, indirect or cumulative effects on sensitive plants or noxious weeds. The current distribution and rate of spread for existing noxious weeds would likely continue at current levels.

Cultural Resources: A Heritage Resource Report #R2011-05-04-01684 (Nicholas 2012) is summarized here and included in the project file. No cultural resources were observed or known to exist in the project area. If cultural resources are discovered during construction, all activities will halt until the site can be evaluated by a Heritage Resource Specialist.

Under the no action alternative, there would be no direct, indirect or cumulative effects on cultural resources.

Recreation: The expansion of the walk-in campground will have the benefit of providing more camping opportunities to the public, especially to permitted Mt. Whitney hikers who need simple, short term accommodations before beginning their trip on the Whitney Trail. This project should also alleviate crowding pressure in other campgrounds where families and large groups tend to camp while visiting the Whitney Portal recreational area. Overall, the expansion will help the Inyo National Forest accommodate and effectively manage recreational use at Whitney Portal.

Under the no action alternative there would be no direct, indirect or cumulative effects on the current recreation experience. Camping outside of designated areas (e.g. along Lone Pine Creek) and crowding in the campgrounds would likely continue to occur at existing levels.

2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety

Concerns regarding campground construction/use and water quality are addressed in the Hydrology and Soil Report (Lutrick 2012). There is potential for users to deposit human waste in the proposed campground, but educational signs placed at the trailhead or in the campground would direct users to the nearest restroom to prevent this from occurring. Based

on the current analysis and other existing campground facilities on the Inyo National Forest, the proposed action is not likely to affect public health or safety.

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, parklands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas

The project area is not in the proximity of any parklands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild or scenic rivers, and historic or cultural resources. The project area is entirely within the Lone Pine Creek Riparian Conservation Area, but the small scale of the project and prescribed best management practices will likely prevent any negative effect to soil or water quality.

Under the no action alternative, no campground would be established within the Lone pine Creek Riparian Conservation Area. Current conditions along Lone Pine Creek would likely remain the same.

4. The degree to which the effects on the human environment are likely to be highly controversial

The nature of potential effects on the human environment from the proposed action is well established and not likely to be highly controversial. There is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the decision.

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risk

The proposed action is similar in type and scope to many projects completed on the Inyo National Forest. The Mount Whitney Ranger District has developed and maintained several campground facilities in the Eastern Sierras, including the existing walk-in campground which is adjacent to the proposed expansion. Proposed construction and use activities are routine in nature and their effects are generally well known.

6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration

The proposed action is a site-specific project that does not set precedence for future actions with significant effects, and it does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. Any other proposals in the project area or at Whitney Portal would require a separate analysis.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts

The proposed action is limited in scope and will not contribute to cumulatively significant adverse impacts when considered in combination with past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future activities.

The wildlife BE/A (Murphy and Sims 2012a) and Management Indicator Species Report (Murphy and Sims 2012b) identified no impacts to sensitive species or habitat under the proposed action. High visitor use at Whitney Portal may cause some sensitive wildlife species (northern goshawk, wolverine, American marten and Sierra Nevada red fox) to avoid the area. Since the Whitney Portal area is relatively small and a large amount of suitable habitat for these species exists adjacent to the project area and across the Forest, visitor use at Whitney Portal does not have a significant effect on these species. The proposed action is not expected to have any additional impact on sensitive wildlife or habitat; therefore, the cumulative impact is not significant.

The no action alternative would have no effect on any sensitive species or habitat, and therefore would not contribute towards any significant cumulative effects.

No sensitive or special status plants occur in the area; thus no cumulative effects are expected (Weis 2012a). Some weeds have been introduced to the Whitney Portal area, but no new weeds are expected to be introduced as a result of this project. Some weeds may spread to the new campground area when it is in use (Weis 2012b). Although weeds may spread to the new campground it is unlikely the proposed action in combination with other past, present and reasonably foreseeable future activities will have a significant impact on the distribution of weedy species.

The no action alternative would have no effect on sensitive plants or weeds, and therefore would not contribute towards any significant cumulative effects.

Cumulative watershed effects were analyzed for the Lone Pine Creek Watershed (see Lutrick 2012). The Ecological Risk Assessment (ERA) method was used, which considered the disturbance due to roads, past timber sales, fires, and recreational development such as parking lots, trails and campgrounds. The ERA in the Lone Pine Creek Watershed was calculated to be less than 2%, far below the 14% threshold of concern. The addition of this project, with less than 0.6 acres of new disturbance, is not large enough to alter the current 2% threshold of concern, and therefore will not contribute to any significant cumulative watershed effects.

The no action alternative would have no effect on the watershed, and therefore would not contribute towards any significant cumulative effects.

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources

A cultural resources review was conducted for this project and there are no scientific, cultural or historical resources within the project area (Nicholas 2012).

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973

Biological Evaluations/Assessments were prepared for plants and wildlife. No threatened or endangered plant or wildlife species are known to occur within the project area. Several sensitive and one candidate wildlife species have potential habitat within the project area, but it was determined that this project would have no effect on these species or their habitats (Murphy 2012a).

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law, or other requirements imposed for the protection of the environment

The proposed action was developed in accordance with and, therefore, does not threaten to violate any Federal, State or local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment (i.e.: Endangered Species Act, National Historic Preservation Act, Clean Water Act, and the Natural Forest Management Act). The above discussion of effects and the related references in the project file document that this project will not adversely affect soils, water quality, special status species, or cultural resources. The proposed action is also consistent with the Inyo National Forest Land and Resources Management Plan (1988) as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (2004).

Agencies and Persons Consulted

Whitney Portal Cabin Owners
Whitney Portal Store
Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone Reservation
Fort Independence Community of Paiute Indians
Big Pine Paiute Tribe of the Owens Valley
Bishop Paiute Indian Tribal Council
Recreation Resource Management
Lone Pine Chamber of Commerce
Audubon Society
Lahontan RWQCB
Inyo County Board of Supervisors
Sierra Club
Sierra Forest Legacy
LADWP
Friends of the Inyo
CDFG
Various Interested Individuals

Documents Incorporated by Reference and Available upon Request

- Crane, Hern. 2012. Recreation Report for the Whitney Portal Walk-in Campground Expansion Project. Bishop, CA: Inyo National Forest, U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- Lutrick, Erin. 2012. Hydrology and Soil Report for the Whitney Portal Walk-in Campground Expansion Project. Bishop, CA: Inyo National Forest, U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- Murphy, Leeann and Lisa Sims. 2012a. Biological Evaluation and Assessment for the Whitney Portal Walk-in Campground Expansion Project. Bishop, CA: Inyo National Forest, U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- Murphy, Leeann and Lisa Sims. 2012b. Management Indicator Species Report for the Whitney Portal Walk-in Campground Expansion Project. Bishop, CA: Inyo National Forest, U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- Nicholas, Colleen. 2012. Heritage Resources Report for the Whitney Portal Walk-in Campground Expansion Project. Bishop, CA: Inyo National Forest, U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- USDA Forest Service, Inyo National Forest. 1988. Inyo National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan.
- USDA Forest Service. 2004. Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment, Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision. Pacific Southwest Region, Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- Weis, Sue. 2012a. Biological Evaluation for Plants for the Whitney Portal Walk-in Campground Expansion Project. Bishop, CA: Inyo National Forest, U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- Weis, Sue. 2012b. Noxious Weed Risk Assessment for the Whitney Portal Walk-in Campground Expansion Project. Bishop, CA: Inyo National Forest, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

APPENDIX A

Response to Comments

Comment 1: Will there be an additional campground host added to support the additional campgrounds?

This comment was classified as a non-issue because it does not involve a point of disagreement or debate regarding the effects of the project. No additional campground host was proposed as part of this project and no additional campground host is being proposed as part of any other project at this time.

Comment 2: Please consider an expansion of only half this size. The Whitney Portal area is already over-developed, and further campground additions will remove more natural landscape. Besides, more campsites have been available in the drive-in campground.

This comment was classified as a minor or non-significant issue because it is a statement of opinion and not supported by factual evidence. An alternative was developed, but eliminated from further consideration in response to this comment (See analysis on p. 3).

Comment 3: Why is the Inyo National Forest preparing an EA vs. a CE for the project?

This comment was classified as a non-issue because it does not involve a point of disagreement or debate regarding the effects of the project. There is no categorical exclusion applicable to this project; therefore, an environmental assessment was prepared.

Comment 4: Is there water nearby?

This comment was classified as a non-issue because it does not involve a point of disagreement or debate regarding the effects of the project. There is no standing or flowing waters within the project area. The project area is in the vicinity of an old road bed. Project activities are located within the Lone Pine Creek Riparian Conservation Area, but no effects on water quality or the creek are expected (See hydrology analysis under significance factors 1 and 7 on p. 4, 7)