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Bear Gulch Road Closure (Forest Road 159) Environmental Assessment



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SUMMARY

The Bear Gulch Road is located in the bottom of a steep narrow canyon that connects the Mesa Falls Scenic By Way to the Henrys Fork of the Snake River. This road provided access to the Bear Gulch Ski Resort lift which has not been in operation since 1985. The road is 0.72 miles long of which the last .25 miles is essentially a hiking or ATV trail (Photo 1). During the 1997 Forest Plan Revision the segment of the Henrys Fork including where this road or trail meets the river was designated as an Eligible Wild River. Roaded access closer than ¼ mile to an Eligible Wild River does not protect its eligibility. The existing road is also heavily rutted; with eroded sediment being transported to live water and then to the Henrys Fork (Photo 2). Deposition of fine sediments in river systems degrades spawning habitat for fish, water quality and aquatic habitat in general.

Options to fix the road in place and effectively mitigate erosion would be difficult requiring the road to be moved out of the bottom and reconstructed. The present road and trail provides access to the Henrys Fork. The action being proposed would close the present road and provide non-motorized access only to the river. Walk in only access is compatible with current management direction regarding Eligible Wild Rivers.

This project was scoped and a 30 day comment period began on February 25, 2011. A total of ten official comments were received. Most were supportive or neutral four requested access be left open. Contact was also made with the Fremont County Sheriff in regards to search and rescue needs at this location. The Sheriff stated that the needs could be met with the proposed changes.



Photo 1. Near confluence with the Henrys Fork, trail to left of stream capturing stream at high flows



Photo 2. Road in narrow valley bottom capturing overland run-off and actively eroding.

CHAPTER 1 – PURPOSE AND NEED

DOCUMENT STRUCTURE

The Forest Service has prepared this Environmental Assessment in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations. This Environmental Assessment discloses the direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts that would result from the proposed action and no action alternatives. The document is organized into four Chapters:

- *One - Purpose and Need:* This chapter includes information on the history of the project proposal, the purpose of and need for the project, and the agency's proposal for achieving that purpose and need. This chapter also details how the Forest Service informed the public of the proposal and how the public responded.
- *Two- Alternatives:* This chapter provides a more detailed description of the agency's proposed action and no action alternatives. This discussion also includes possible design features to avoid impacts. Finally, this chapter provides a summary table of the environmental consequences associated with each alternative.
- *Three - Environmental Consequences:* This chapter describes the environmental effects of implementing the proposed action and no action alternatives. This analysis is organized by resource area. Within each section, the existing conditions are described first, followed by the effects of each alternative.
- *Four - Consultation and Coordination:* This section provides a list of preparers and agencies consulted during the development of the environmental assessment.

Additional documentation, including more detailed analyses of project-area resources, may be found in the project planning record located at the Ashton/Island Park Ranger District Office in Ashton, Idaho.

BACKGROUND

The Bear Gulch Road has likely been in place since the late 1930's and was used to access the Bear Gulch Ski Resort and lift. This road has historically been an unimproved, native surface road constructed in the very bottom of a steep narrow canyon. Occasional maintenance over the years has provided access for high clearance vehicles but has never effectively addressed erosion issues. In 1997 when the Forest conducted planning for the current road system, the road was not as eroded and was left in place so the old ski lift could be removed.

FOREST PLAN DIRECTION

The project has been designed to meet Forest-wide standards and guidelines, and the following Management Prescription direction:

2.3 Eligible Wild River (1997 RFP pp. III 85-89).

Wild rivers are intended to remain as a “vestige of primitive America” with the river corridor, within at least ¼-mile of the ordinary high water mark on each side of the river, essentially natural and unmodified.

- Watershed restoration will be done primarily where deteriorated soil or hydrologic conditions are caused by humans or their influence creates a serious threat of loss of outstanding remarkable river resource values. (G)
- Dispersed recreation facilities will be of a very primitive nature, using a pack-it-in, pack-it-out philosophy. (G)
- No new roads may be constructed that would change or modify the classification for which the river was designated. (S)

2.8.3 Aquatic Influence Zone (1997 RFP pp. III 106-107)

Management emphasis is directed ... to restore and maintain the health of these areas in ways that also produce desired resource values, products, protection, restoration, enhancement, ... and appreciation of these areas.

- Minimize adverse effects to aquatic and riparian dependent species from past, existing and proposed management activities. (G)

4.1 Developed Recreation Sites (1997 RFP p. III 125).

Overall you find many signs of people. You will see little evidence of development except for recreation. (G)

- Protect and enhance a natural appearing environment within and adjacent to the existing sites to the extent possible while maintaining the existing array of developed recreation sites.

5.2.1 Visual Quality Improvement (1997 RFP p. III 142)

The direction under this prescription emphasizes improving or maintaining visual opportunities for visitors along major travel corridors...while allowing.....other compatible commodity outputs.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The purpose of this project is to comply with direction in the 1997 Revised Forest Plan (RFP) to decrease erosion into the Henrys Fork and protect an Eligible Wild River. It is proposed that the ski lift base be left onsite.

The Bear Gulch Road is associated with an old ski resort. The short 0.72 mile road was used to access the ski lift. It was built in the very bottom of a steep canyon, is prone to erosion and is severely rutted. Most sediment generated from the road is being transported down the road to the Henrys Fork River. During a restoration project on the Grandview Boatslide it was noted that anglers are using the Grandview site to access the river for floating and that the Bear Gulch site was not as desirable as Grandview (See Map 2.). The Grandview access point is about 2.5 river miles upstream from Bear Gulch. Bear Gulch is not an important boat access site, though 1 comment received noted they used this site to launch canoes yearly.

The 1999 Motorized Road and Trail Travel Plan shows the Bear Gulch Road FS 159 going to the river and as being 0.72 miles long. However the actual road extends about 0.5 miles to just below the old ski base lift. The last 0.25 miles of road is more a hiking trail and ATV trail than a road.

PROPOSED ACTION

The project area is located in Fremont County, Idaho northeast of Ashton, Idaho within the Island Park Subsection, Forest Management Prescription 2.3 (Eligible Wild River), 2.8.3 (Aquatic Influence Zone), 4.1 (Developed Recreation Sites), and 5.2.1 (Visual Quality Improvement). The action being proposed is to close the existing Bear Gulch Road corridor and construct a new foot trail in a better location, to protect Wild and Scenic River Eligibility and provide access to the Henrys Fork River. Rehabilitation of the existing corridor would eliminate soil erosion along the road prism of Forest System Road 159 (also known as Bear Gulch Road). Closure would be completed using heavy equipment to make the route impassable, and encourage growth of native vegetation. The segment being proposed for closure is .72 miles long. The 1999 Final Open Road and Open Motorized Trail Analysis for the Targhee National Forest would be amended through this decision to incorporate this change. The Road is currently identified as a maintenance level 2 high clearance road with deep rutting. This proposed closure will include actions such as deep scarification, recontouring, water barring, placement of barrier rock, felling of trees, and protection to allow native vegetation to return to the site. The trailhead would be the existing Bear Gulch parking area. The road and trail are located in T. 10N., R. 44E. Sections 31 and 32. (See Map 1)

A new non-motorized trail would be built to provide access to the Henrys Fork from the Bear Gulch parking area (See Map 3). This trail would be located in a way to protect the wild river characteristics of this eligible section.

Three user-created ATV trails in the area would also be closed using heavy equipment to scarify the soil, plant trees, place barrier rocks or other trail closure methods. Two ATV trails are

depicted on Map 1. just west of the Bear Gulch parking lot and there is one going up an old ski run that is not visible on the map.

The following actions are anticipated:

- Construct a new foot trail from the parking area to river as shown on Map 3. The trail would be built within or near the existing travel corridor of the existing road. It would be constructed on a grade that can be maintained over time with drainage structures to prevent future erosion
- New trail would ford the stream at a narrow section of stream and be armored with rock taking care not to alter channel capacity and ensuring there is trail drainage prior to the ford, this stream only flows in the spring and is fishless.
- Obliterate existing road and trail through deep scarification and recontouring.
- Woody debris may be placed on scarified roadbed to discourage use and facilitate natural recovery.
- Reclaim and re-seed disturbed sites using seed mix similar to the surrounding vegetation.
- Place barrier rock to prevent use of closed roads.
- Close unauthorized ATV trails using similar methods as proposed for road.
- The ski lift infrastructure would not be removed.
- Remove and dispose of two existing culverts at the stream crossing and rehabilitate the stream to match existing channel dimensions in undisturbed reaches.

DECISION FRAMEWORK

The Ashton/Island Park District Ranger will decide:

1. Whether the proposed action will proceed as proposed, as modified by design features, by an alternative, or not at all?
2. What design features and monitoring requirements will be required?

This proposal will require an amendment to the 1999 Final Open Road and Open Motorized Trail Analysis for the Targhee National Forest requiring an environmental assessment (EA) to be completed. The environmental assessment will be completed according to 2008 regulations (36 CFR 220).

The District Ranger will consider the environmental effects described in the EA and make a determination as to whether a finding of no significant impact (FONSI) can be made and the proposed action implemented or whether an EIS is needed. According to the 2008 NEPA regulations (36 CFR 220.7(b)(2)(ii)), the EA may document consideration of a no-action alternative through the effects analysis by contrasting the impacts of the proposed action and any alternative(s) with the current conditions and expected future condition if the proposed action were not implemented. Full development of the no action alternative is not required.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions beginning January of 2010. Then cancelled in July and put back on the Schedule of Proposed Actions in October. The proposal was provided to the public, other agencies and the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes for comment during beginning February 25, 2011. In addition, this project was presented to the outfitters and guides in the spring of 2010 at the annual guide barbeque sponsored by the Henry's Fork Foundation. Articles about this project were also printed in the Island Park News and Post Register.

A total of eight written comments were received. Of the eight, six were supportive or neutral. Two were in favor of keeping access open and correcting road issues cited as reasons for the proposed closure. Two oral comments were received one expressed that they like to be able to drive to the river. The other inquired about ATV access for handicapped individuals.

Using the comments from the public and the interdisciplinary team a list of issues was developed.

ISSUES

Issues serve to highlight effects or unintended consequences that may occur from the proposed and modified action, giving opportunities during the analysis to reduce adverse effects and compare trade-offs for the decision maker and public to understand. The responsible official approved the four following issues to be analyzed in depth in this environmental analysis by the Interdisciplinary Team.

Issue 1: Providing visitor access to the Henrys Fork River suitable under current Forest Plan designations such as Wild River Eligibility.

Measurement Criteria: Change in visitor access

Issue 2: Compliance with the Forest Plan direction for Eligible Wild Rivers.

Measurement Criteria: Motorized use within ¼ mile is generally not compatible

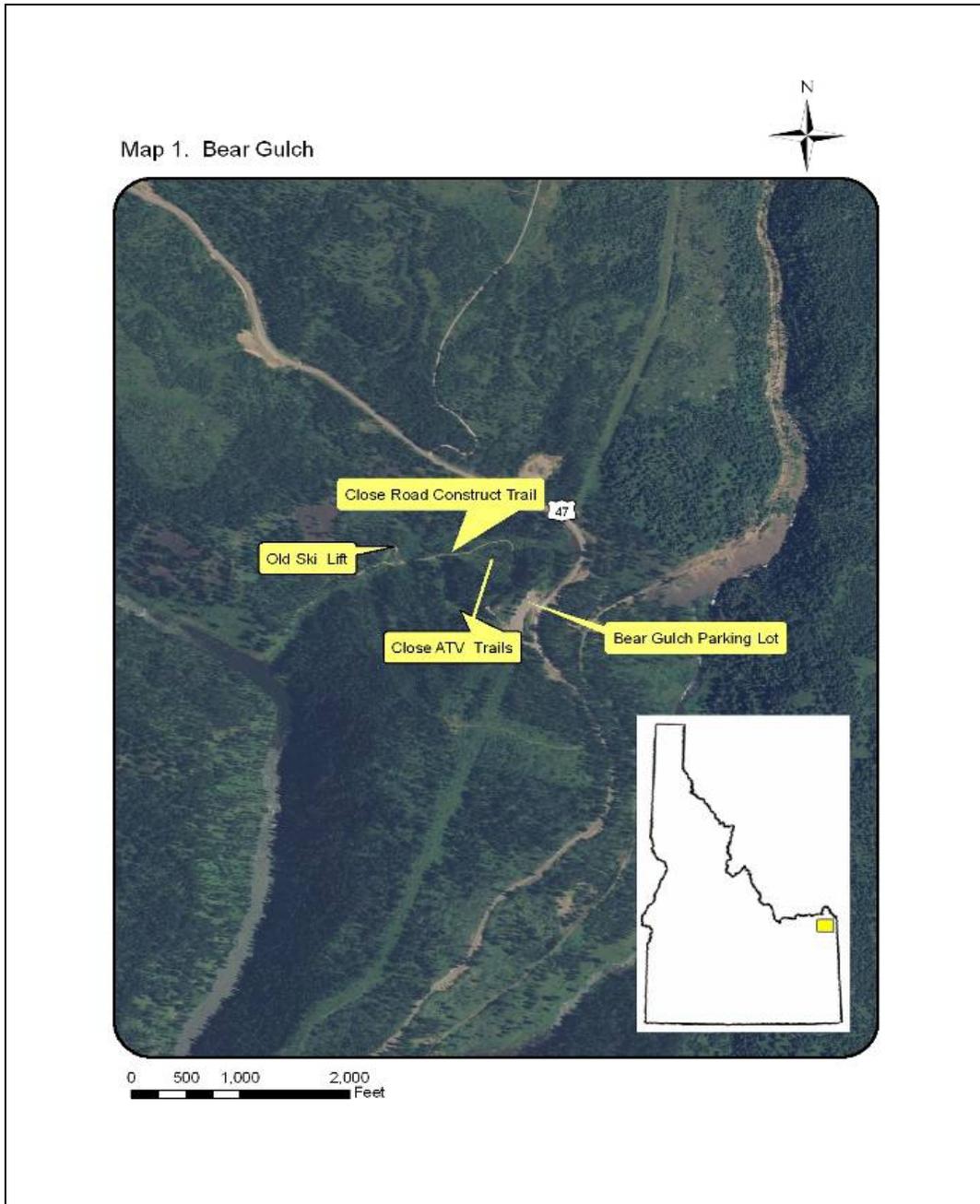
Issue 3: Protecting water quality in the Henrys Fork from roads and trails by minimizing associated erosion.

Measurement Criteria: Compliance with best management practices and direction in Forest Plan.

Issue 4: Protecting Cultural resources found within the project area from further disturbance.

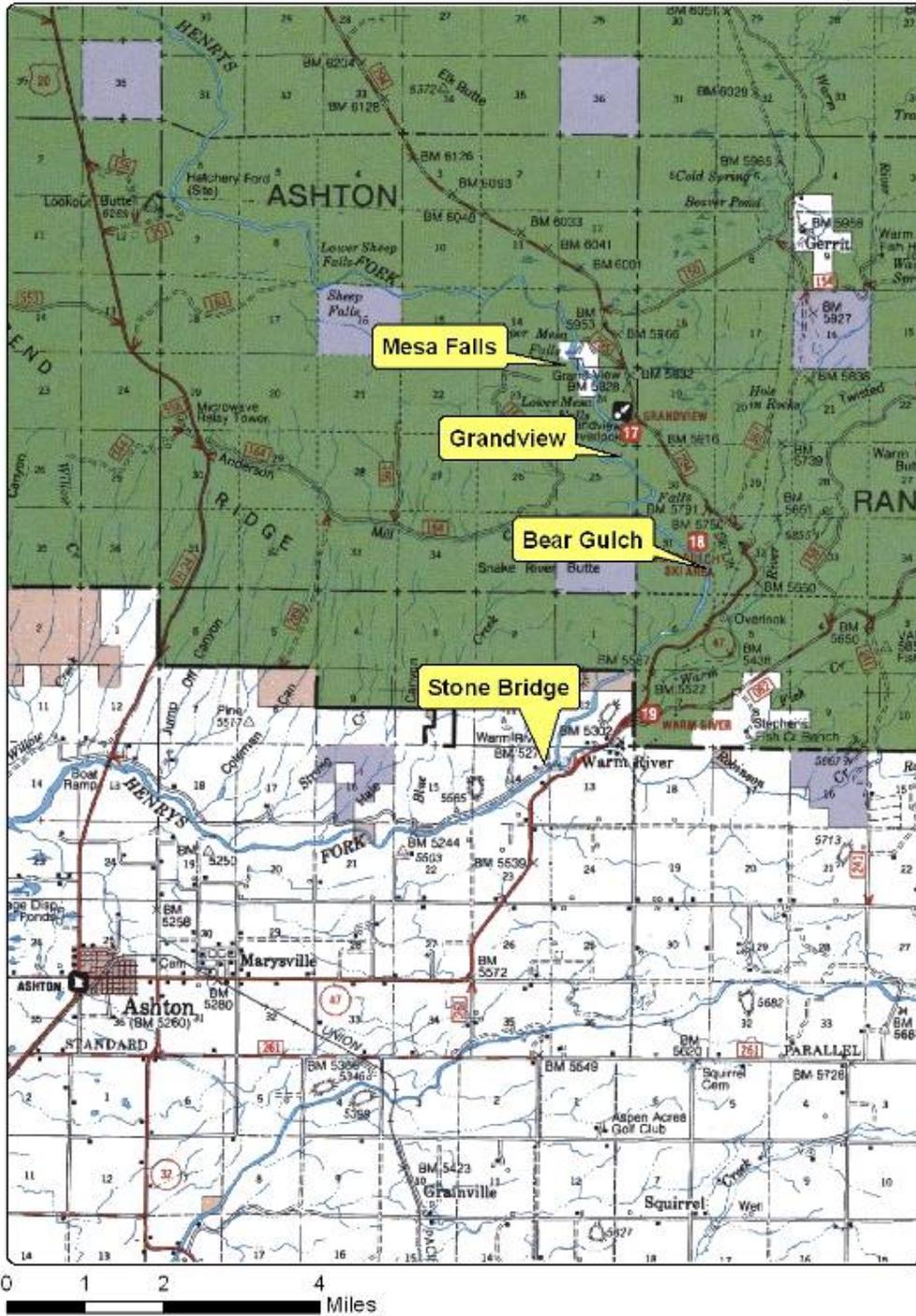
Measurement Criteria: Cultural resources are protected from further disturbance.

One potential issue that was considered and dismissed after consultation with the Fremont County Sheriff was the need for the existing road for Search and Rescue. It was determined that access at Stone Bridge and Grandview plus walk in access at Bear Gulch would meet the needs of Search and Rescue (See Map

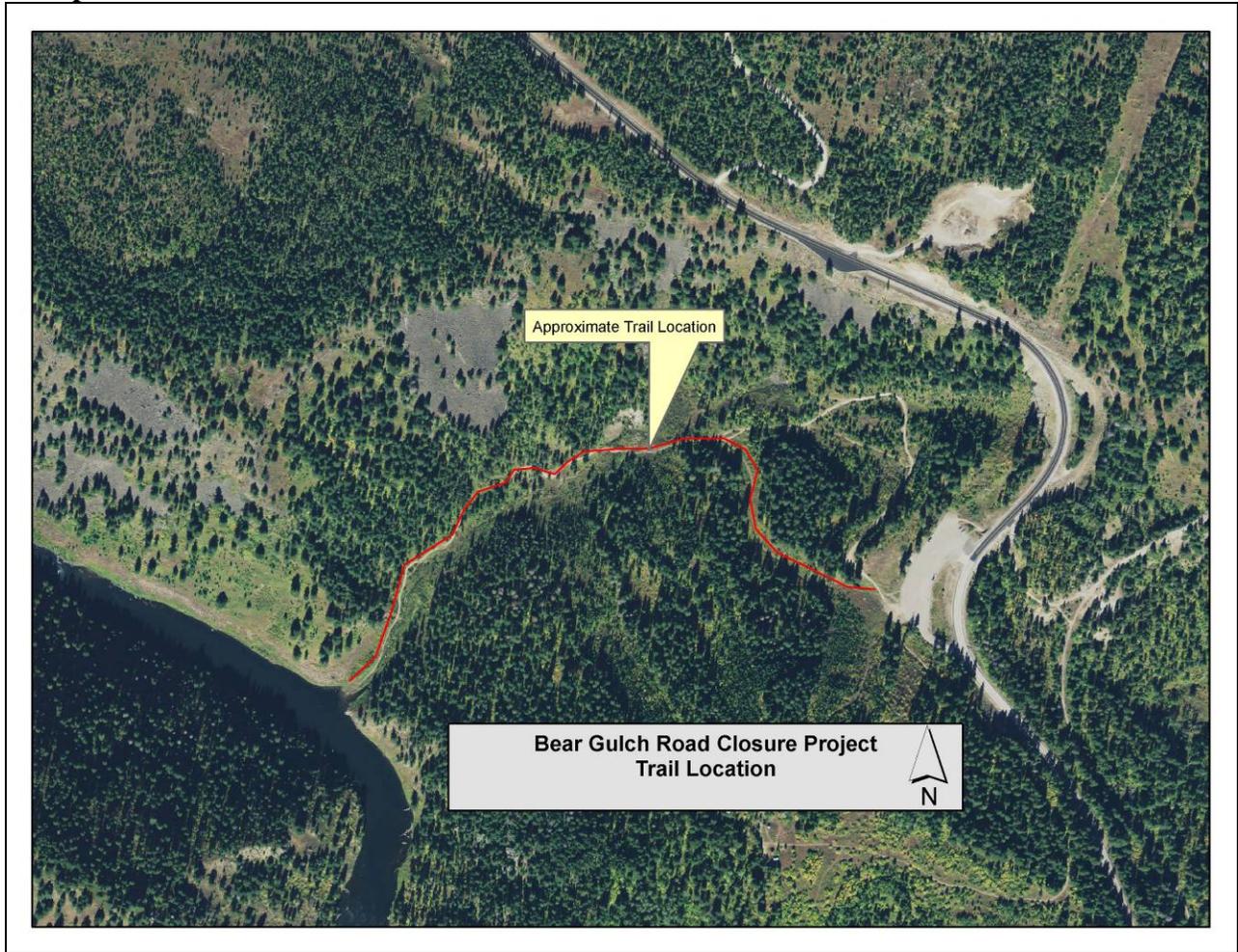


2.)

Map 2. General Locations



Map 3. General Trail Location



CHAPTER 2 – ALTERNATIVES

This chapter describes and compares the alternatives considered for the Bear Gulch Road Closure project. It includes a description of each alternative considered. This section also presents the alternatives in comparative form, sharply defining the differences between each alternative and providing a clear basis for choice among options by the decision maker and the public.

The no action alternative is not fully developed in Chapter 3 except where needed for a comparison to the proposed action.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1 – No Action

Under the no action alternative use of the area would continue as is. Due to declining road budgets and lack of maintenance dollars for low use roads further deterioration of the road and increasing sedimentation into the Henrys Fork would continue. The riparian zone within the roadway would continue to be degraded. Motorized access to the river within ¼ mile of an Eligible Wild River would remain and would not be in compliance with the 1997 RFP direction. Disturbance of cultural resources would continue.

Alternative 2 – Proposed Action

The action being proposed is the closure of Forest Road # 159 also known as Bear Gulch Road. The proposal includes several treatments as described in the bulleted statements under the proposed action in chapter one and as illustrated on Maps 1 and 3 and described in more detail below.

Forest Road 159 is .72 miles long single lane and considered a maintenance level 2 road with a service level of D, suitable for high clearance vehicles on a native surface. It is proposed that this road be closed and obliterated through deep scarification and recontouring. A track-hoe will be used to obliterate the road and place woody debris on the road surface to facilitate natural recovery and prevent further use. No motorized use will remain within ¼ mile of the Eligible Wild River.

- A new trail will be constructed as depicted in general on Map 3. following an old ski run for the first half and then adjacent to or within the closed road. Following the methods in FSH 2309.18 (Chap. 3) for trail preconstruction and construction. Proper design measures for the location, alignment, grade, switchback & climbing turns, stream crossings, and drainage features are extremely important for minimizing erosion.

- The “*frequency of cross drains*” exhibit from FSH 2309.18 (chap. 3) is made site-specific based on silt loam soil type in the area. The maximum spacing of drainage structures (e.g. waterbars, grade sags/reversals,) are shown below. Grades should not exceed 10%:

| Trail Grade (%) | 2 | 4 | 6 | 8 | 10 |
|-------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|----|----|
| Maximum Drainage spacing (ft) | 350 | 150 | 100 | 75 | 50 |

- Avoid placing trail drainage structures where they may discharge onto erodible slopes or directly into streams.

Unauthorized ATV trails will be closed in similar manner as to the roads. Barrier rock and woody debris will be used to close ATV trails to prevent further use. The stream which is dry or just a trickle except in early season will be forded. The trail is to be well drained prior to the ford to avoid sediment entering the stream. Ford is to be hardened using available rock. Ford will maintain existing channel flood capacity. The existing culverts will be removed during a period of no or low flow and the channel reconstructed to match similar characteristics as the existing channel. Willows will be transplanted as part of channel reconstruction. The ski lift infrastructure is to be left in its existing state. Disturbed sites will be reclaimed and re-seeded using a seed mix similar to the existing vegetation. The existing Bear Gulch parking area will serve as the trailhead.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

One alternative mentioned during public comment was to perform the needed maintenance on the road to minimize resource damage and keep the road open. This alternative was not considered in detail as it does not meet the intent of the 1997 Revised Forest Plan pertaining to Eligible Wild Rivers as motorized access within ¼ mile is discouraged.

Another option considered was to improve the road to approximately the old ski lift and then create a hiking trail for the last .25 miles. This alternative was considered but upon review of the location of the current road located in a steep narrow bottom that cannot be properly drained it was decided that the road could not be fixed in place long-term and would need to be partially reconstructed in a different location. Adverse effects to cultural resources were also a concern. Reconstruction of a lightly used road was not deemed justifiable given use levels, budget and resource impacts.

Design Features for Alternative 2

- Disturbed and re-seeded areas will be monitored for noxious weeds. Noxious weeds will be controlled using chemicals or biological controls depending on weed species.
- Follow all appropriate best management practices to prevent impacts to water quality.

1. Instream work (e.g. culvert removal) will be conducted during low flow periods and in accordance with the necessary permits (stream channel alteration and §404 permits).
 2. Instream work will be conducted in accordance with the MOU with the Idaho Department of Water Resources (USDA FS 2008).
 3. Schedule operations during periods when the probabilities for rain and runoff are low.
 4. Place woodstraw or other organic debris on disturbed areas during rehabilitation efforts in order to provide immediate ground cover and accelerate recovery.
 5. Obliterate, re-contour, and/or seed the FSR 159.
- Place large barrier rock to prohibit future motorized use.
 - Construction will post July 15th to minimize impacts to breeding migratory birds.
 - This project is in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966. NHPA Section 106 consultation with the Idaho State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) has been completed. If any cultural resources are found during project activities, work will be stopped and the Forest Archaeologist will be contacted.
 - Appropriate permits for instream work have been acquired.
 - All personnel involved with on the ground implementation of the project must comply with the food storage order, Order Number 04-15-0063, to protect grizzly bears.

COMPARISON OF ALTERNATIVES

This section provides a summary of the effects of implementing each alternative. Information in Table 1 is focused on activities and effects where different levels of effects or outputs can be distinguished quantitatively or qualitatively among alternatives.

The no action alternative would leave things as they currently exist. There would be no improvements made, roads would remain in their present state and location. Motorized access would remain unchanged. Areas with existing resource damage would continue and areas contributing sediment to the Henrys Fork would remain unchanged.

The proposed action would decrease erosion and sedimentation. It would close and rehabilitate unauthorized ATV trails causing resource damage. No motorized access within ¼ mile of the Henrys Fork would remain. Cultural resources would be protected (See Table 1.).

Table 1. Comparison of Effects between Alternatives

| Indicator | Alternative 1 No Action | Alternative 2 Proposed Action |
|---|------------------------------------|--|
| Change in visitor access | No | Yes Walk in only |
| Motorized use within ¼ mile | Yes | No |
| Compliance with BMP's and direction in Forest Plan | No | Yes |
| Reduces sedimentation to the Henry's Fork | No | Yes |
| Cultural resources are protected from further disturbance | No | Yes |
| Complies with Forest Plan including WSR Eligibility | No | Yes |

CHAPTER 3 – ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

This section summarizes the physical, biological, social and economic environments of the affected project area and the potential changes to those environments due to implementation of the alternatives. It also presents the scientific and analytical basis for comparison of alternatives presented in the chart above.

The no action alternative will not be fully developed except as needed as a comparative basis.

Effects considered:

- Water quality and watershed conditions.
- Effects on sensitive, threatened, and endangered plant and animal species.
- Cultural resources.
- Effects on Scenic and Recreational River eligibility status.

SOILS *(Excerpted from Soils Report)*

Existing Conditions

There are two dominant soil types within the project area. Both are characterized as silty and more skeletal due to colluvial basalt and rhyolite in the incised river canyon. Erosion hazards are of particular concern due to the silty nature of the soils and the steep canyon slopes.

Water erosion is an issue on the Bear Gulch Road. It was built in the very bottom of a steep canyon, is prone to erosion and is severely rutted. Most sediment generated from the road is being transported to the Henrys Fork River.

Direct and Indirect Effects

Established roads and trails are assumed to be temporarily removed from the productive soil base. Obliteration and closure of the road and trails will remove this area (about 0.72 mile) from the dedicated use of the designated travel system. The road prism has several segments that would likely return to productivity after closure methods (ripping, water barring, placement of barrier rock, and protection to allow native vegetation to return to the site). Some sections, where more severe erosion has resulted in more of a loss of productive potential, may have reduced potential for many years.

Constructing a foot trail to standard would result in very little erosion. The steep slope of the canyon can be addressed through trail design. Soil compaction and erosion are generally less on trails designed for non-motorized uses compared with motorized trails use (Weaver and Dale, 1978).

Clean Air Act

Projected activities under the proposed action are expected to meet air quality standards. The decision will result in no adverse long-term effects.

Cumulative Effects

Past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions in the activity area include the recreational use that has contributed to the existing condition. No reasonably foreseeable future actions within the activity area have been identified. These closures, including erosion control and road prism obliteration will be beneficial to the soil resources and result in less erosion and sediment delivery to the Henrys Fork in the long-term (>2 years).

HYDROLOGY *(Excerpted from Hydrology Report)*

Existing Conditions

State Water Quality Standards and Best Management Practices (BMPs): The Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (IDEQ) identifies surface water use designations (beneficial uses) and the water quality standards (IDEQ 2012). The beneficial uses of the Henrys Fork River include: coldwater aquatic life, salmonid spawning, primary contact recreation, domestic, agricultural and industrial water supply, wildlife habitats, aesthetics, and the protection and propagation of fish, shellfish, and wildlife, wherever attainable.

Through a MOU with the State of Idaho, the Forest is responsible for implementing nonpoint source pollution control measures during all management activities (USDA FS 2008). The Idaho antidisturbance policy states that the designated uses and the level of water quality necessary to protect those uses, shall be maintained and protected. It is also Forest Service Policy to maintain or improve water quality (Targhee RFP and FSM 2500 (2520.3)). Idaho recognizes BMPs as an effective process for protecting beneficial uses and ambient water quality. Project BMPs designed to protect water quality are identified below.

Water Quality Assessments, Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs), and BMPs: There are no impaired waters (i.e. 303(d) listed) or TMDLs within the project area (IDEQ 2011, 2010a, & 2010b). Table 2 summarizes Idaho's 2010 Integrated Report for the Bear Gulch area and the Henry's Fork River immediately downstream. BMPs designed to protect water quality are included in the recommendations below.

Table 2: Summary of Idaho's 2010 Integrated Report (IDEQ 2011).

| Assessment Unit | Relevant Waterbodies | Use Assessment |
|--|----------------------|---|
| ID17040202SK014_02: Henry's Fork Tributaries-Thurman Creek to Warm River | Bear Gulch | Not Assessed |
| ID17040202SK014_05: Henrys Fork-Thurman Creek to Warm River | Henry's Fork River | Supporting cold water aquatic life and primary contact recreation |

Road Conditions: The Bear Gulch Road is located in the valley bottom of a steep canyon. Because of its location, the road lacks adequate drainage as there is very little opportunity to drain water off of the road prism. Therefore the road is prone to erosion and is severely rutted. Runoff and sediment generated from the roads surface is delivered to tributary streams of the Henrys Fork River.

Recommended BMPs for the Proposed Action

Compliance with the Clean Water Act is achieved through the proper site-specific design, implementation, and monitoring of BMPs¹. The Forest's BMPs for this project include:

- Targhee RFP direction (USDA FS 1997)
- National Best Management Practices for Water Quality Management on National Forest System Lands (USDA FS 2012)
- Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 2509.22-Soil & Water Conservation Practices (USFS, 1988)

The BMPs listed below emphasize the applicable direction and also provide project-specific information that expands on the RFP and FSH direction. The proposed action is basically implementation of these BMPs to improve long term watershed conditions; the project is itself a BMP.

BMP#1 – Protection of Soil and Water Resources

- Instream work (e.g. culvert removal) will be conducted during low flow periods and in accordance with the necessary permits (stream channel alteration and §404 permits).
- Instream work will be conducted in accordance with the MOU with the Idaho Department of Water Resources (USDA FS 2008).
- Schedule operations during periods when the probabilities for rain and runoff are low.
- Place woodstraw or other organic debris on disturbed areas during rehabilitation efforts in order to provide immediate ground cover and accelerate recovery.
- Obliterate, re-contour, and/or seed the FSR 159.
- Place large barrier rock to prohibit future motorized use.

BMP#2 – Trail Construction Measures

- Follow the methods in FSH 2309.18 (Chap. 3) for trail preconstruction and construction. Proper design measures for the location, alignment, grade, switchback & climbing turns, stream crossings, and drainage features are extremely important for minimizing erosion.
- The “*frequency of cross drains*” exhibit from FSH 2309.18 (chap. 3) is made site-specific based on silt loam soil type in the area. The maximum spacing of drainage structures (e.g. waterbars, grade sags/reversals,) are shown below. Grades should not exceed 10%:

| Trail Grade (%) | 2 | 4 | 6 | 8 | 10 |
|-------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|----|----|
| Maximum Drainage spacing (ft) | 350 | 150 | 100 | 75 | 50 |

- Avoid placing trail drainage structures where they may discharge onto erodible slopes or directly into streams.

Supporting AIZ Guidelines for trails:

- *No new trails will be constructed within these lands until appropriate standards for construction, maintenance, and operations are in place (see above BMP's 1 and 2).*
- *Stream crossings will accommodate at least a 50-year flood, including associated bedload and debris (crossing will not alter channel capacity).*

¹ 40CFR130.2(m): Methods, measures, or practices selected by an agency to meet its nonpoint source control needs. BMPs include, but are not limited to, structural & nonstructural controls & operation & maintenance procedures. BMPs can be applied before, during, & after activities to reduce or eliminate the introduction of pollutants into receiving waters

- *New stream crossings will be constructed and maintained to prevent diversion of streamflow out of the channel and down the trail in case of failure.*
- *Construct and maintain all trail crossings of streams which currently or historically bear fish to provide for fish passage.*

Environmental Effects Analysis

Direct and Indirect Effects

Alternative 1 (No Action) – This alternative would result in little direct and indirect changes to the existing conditions. The Bear Gulch Road would continue to be in poor condition because of inadequate drainage. Runoff and sediment generated from the roads surface would continue to be delivered to tributary streams of the Henrys Fork River.

Motorized use of unauthorized trails would likely continue to degrade watershed conditions. Vegetative cover would not be restored in these locations.

Water Quality: Minor but chronic water quality impacts would continue as the road and trails continue to deliver fine sediment to the stream systems during rainfall and runoff events.

Alternative 2 (Proposed Action) – The direct and indirect effects of this alternative would result in short term disturbances that provide for long term watershed improvement. The direct effects would involve minor and temporary fine sediment inputs during the road and trail obliteration work. The proposed action would provide for increased protection of watershed resources over the long-term however because all disturbed areas would be returned to a natural vegetative cover. Returning these areas that have been disturbed by poor road alignment and unmanaged recreation to resource production (i.e. vegetation) would decrease the amount of disturbed soil available for erosion. This would subsequently minimize sediment delivery downslope to the stream channel and riparian areas.

Water Quality: Minor short term sediment delivery to the stream channel is expected as the project is implemented. However, the proposed action provides for greater long-term protection as disturbed areas recover.

Cumulative Effects

Alternative 1 (No Action) – Minor but chronic sediment delivery would continue. Fine sediment delivery to riparian areas and stream channels may increase if disturbed areas grow as unmanaged recreation is ignored.

Alternative 2 (Proposed Action) – Water Quality in the area would slightly improve as runoff and sediment delivery from areas disturbed by unmanaged recreation recover.

FISH *(Excerpted from Fisheries BE)*

Existing Conditions

This project is located on an intermittent tributary to the Henrys Fork and is within the historical distribution range of Yellowstone cutthroat. However the river has been chemically treated twice and has an abundant population of non-native rainbow and brown trout with no remaining Yellowstone cutthroat. The Henrys Fork including this section of the river is managed as a highly productive sport

fishery for primarily rainbow trout. Fisheries habitat is near its potential and corresponds with its eligibility as a Wild River.

Environmental Effects

Project will decrease sediment inputs to the Henrys Fork by closing the Bear Gulch Road a chronic sediment source. The health and resiliency of the AIZ within the intermittent stream corridor will be improved by removing the road culverts. There may be a slight increase in sediment post project due to scarification and disturbance but long-term there will be an overall decrease in sediment.

Cumulative Effects

Ongoing use by recreationists is expected to continue along the new trail but expected impacts will decrease due the elimination of vehicle and ATV use. No other projects are anticipated or foreseen in this area.

Determination of Effects

Yellowstone cutthroat have essentially been extirpated from the Henrys Fork near the project area. The Henrys Fork is managed as a wild rainbow and brown trout fishery and there are no plans to eradicate non-native trout and re-establish Yellowstone cutthroat. Therefore it is my determination that this project will have “No Impact” on Yellowstone cutthroat as they no longer occur within the project area or adjacent waters. However, the project as outlined will decrease sediment inputs to the Henrys Fork, and improve riparian conditions within the AIZ providing aquatic benefits.

BOTANY (Excerpted from *Botany BE*)

Analysis Methods

The following steps were taken to complete the analysis for TES plants:

1. Forest records and the Idaho Conservation Database Center (CDC) element occurrence records were reviewed to determine species already known to exist in the analysis area or with the potential to occur within the project area.
2. This analysis was completed using maps, surveys completed to date, literature, experts, and professional knowledge about the requirements of each suspected plant species of concern.

Species List

The most recent official species list issued by the Idaho Office of the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) for Fremont County was dated August 17, 2011 and accessed on May 21, 2012 (<http://www.fws.gov/idaho/species/IdahoSpeciesList.pdf>).

Ute ladies'-tresses (*Spiranthes diluvialis*)

Threatened

Assessment and Determination

In Fremont County, Ute ladies'-tresses is found at Chester Wetlands near St. Anthony within riparian/wetland habitat. Past surveys have found no populations on the Ashton/Island Park District (Varga and Lehman 1999, 2000). Range-wide, Ute ladies'-tresses is found below the coniferous forest zone and 7'000 feet. Project is not considered to be within known or suspect habitat suitable for Ute

ladies' -tresses. No Effect.

Whitebark Pine (*Pinus albicaulis*)

Intermountain Region, Forest Service Sensitive & Candidate for listing under the ESA

Assessment and Determination

Project area is too low in elevation to expect whitebark pine trees. No Effect.

Sensitive Species

Of the eleven other sensitive plant species known to occur within the Caribou-Targhee National Forest there are no known occurrences within the project, nor is there suitable habitat, all effect calls are, No Impact.

WILDLIFE (*Excerpted from Wildlife Report and BA/BE*)

The wildlife reports considered effects to all threatened, endangered, candidate, sensitive species, migratory birds and bald & golden eagles. Of these species the determination of impacts from this project was determined to be no effect or no impact for all but the grizzly bear which received a determination of May Affect Not Likely to Adversely Affect. Only grizzly bear will be discussed further within the context of this EA, information on other species may be found within the BA and BE and wildlife specialist reports. The USFWS provided a letter of concurrence based upon these affect calls on April 16, 2012.

Existing Conditions

The project area is not within a Bear Management Unit/the Primary Conservation Area (PCA). Radiotelemetry data indicates 1 grizzly bear location in the Bear Gulch drainage in a ten-year period. Grizzly bears may pass through the project area, but utilize habitats to the east or north. Grizzly bear dens on the Ashton-Island Park District are present in the Centennial and Henrys Lake Mountains. However, last fall, a den was located on Big Bend Ridge, which is 8 miles west of the project area. This is an unusual den (very low in elevation) and is not expected to be used in subsequent years. The GYE grizzly bear population has met all recovery goals and continues to increase in number and distribution.

The primary threat to grizzly bears on public land is human activities that results in displacement or mortality to bears. Consequently, conservation issues for grizzly bears include secure habitat, developed sites, livestock grazing within the PCA, the four key food sources, food storage, hunter numbers, and habitat connectivity. Secure habitat is large tracts of public land where human contact is infrequent. These areas are very important for adult female grizzly bears and their young. The most powerful tool to maintain secure habitat is through motorized access management.

Environmental Effects

Direct and Indirect Effects

Project activities may create a short-term disturbance for grizzly bears. Road and ATV trail closure (approximately 1.2 miles) will decrease road density and may be beneficial to grizzly bears.

Cumulative Effects

The cumulative effects analysis area is the Ashton-Island Park Ranger District outside of the PCA. Habitat disturbance (development and human presence) and human-caused mortality decreased grizzly bear populations in the past. Today, habitat conservation and the reduction of human-caused mortality are still primary conservation challenges (USFWS, 1993). Food conditioning, elk hunter interactions, and secure habitat are paramount conservation issues (ICST, 2007). In the future, human population will continue to increase adjacent to the District. Meanwhile, the grizzly bear population also continues to increase. This suggests that secure habitat and human-caused mortality will continue to be the primary conservation challenges.

Finding

All management direction (1997 Targhee National Forest Plan, 2006 Forest Plan Amendment for Grizzly Bear Habitat Conservation for the Greater Yellowstone Area National Forests, and 2003 Final Conservation Strategy for the Grizzly Bear in the Greater Yellowstone Area) will be met. Project activities will have no impact on secure habitat, the four key food sources, or habitat connectivity. Project activities may disturb grizzly bears, but these will be of short duration: heavy equipment disturbance would last 2 or 3 days, while trail construction activities will last 2 weeks. Removal of approximately 1.2 miles of open ATV and high-clearance vehicle roads may be beneficial to grizzly bears. Thus, it is determined that project activities May Affect, Not Likely to Adversely Affect Grizzly Bears.

CULTURAL RESOURCES

A cultural resource survey of the project's area of potential effects (APE) has been completed (Harris 2009). Two cultural sites are located within the APE. Project plans will avoid and protect both sites.

RECREATIONAL ACCESS *(excerpted from Recreation Report)*

Existing Conditions

The project is located within Forest Management Prescription 2.3 (Eligible Wild River). Prescription 2.3 is a corridor, along Henrys Fork, that is ¼ mile wide from the high water mark of the river. The purpose of this prescription is to maintain and protect the free flowing character and the outstanding remarkable values which qualify the river to be considered eligible as Wild River in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System pending a suitability determination. The prescription allows for a few inconspicuous roads in the area and non-motorized and mechanized trail use is allowed. Any recreation facilities within the prescription should be very primitive and use pack-it-in, pack-it-out philosophy. The area is intended to be managed as primitive to semi primitive non-motorized within the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum.

The project is also located within Forest Management Prescription 4.1 (Developed Recreation Sites). The purpose of this prescription is to provide management direction for developed recreation sites such as campgrounds, picnic area, trailheads, snow parks, etc. Development of these areas varies from native surface roads and campsites to highly developed sites with paved parking areas and vault toilets.

The Bear Gulch Winter Snow Park serves as a trailhead in the winter for the groomed snowmobile trail system as well as a trailhead for the cross country ski trails in the area. During the summer season it serves as a trailhead for the Railroad Grade Trail. It receives use as picnic area and is used as parking area by people who are accessing Henrys Fork on foot and by ATV. There is a paved parking area, vault toilet, and picnic tables at the site. The ATV use in the area of the project occurs primarily on the road that would be closed as well as on a route that used to be a part of a ski run at the ski area that used to be in the area. Both of these routes would be closed in this project and rehabilitated to prevent erosion.

Proposed Management

ATV access to the river would be closed and a non-motorized trail constructed providing foot, bike, and horse access to the river. Closure of the ATV access will displace some users of the site. However the parking area provides access to the Railroad Grade Trail which is managed as an ATV trail so it is likely that the closure would only affect those users specifically seeking motorized access to Henrys Fork. Non-motorized access would continue to be available. The non-motorized trail would be constructed to Forest Service Standards. The trail would be built within or near the existing travel corridor of the existing road. It would be constructed on a grade that can be maintained over time with drainage structures to prevent future erosion.

Closure of the motorized access within the 2.3 prescription (Eligible Wild River) would bring the area closer to the desirable conditions for the area to be considered as an Eligible Wild River. The construction of a non-motorized trail in the area is likely to have minimal effect on any future suitability analysis for eligibility as Wild River in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

The project is unlikely to have any effect on the Bear Gulch Winter Snow Park designated as a Developed Recreation Site.

WILD RIVER ELIGIBILITY STATUS

Existing Conditions

The 1997 Revised Forest Plan (RFP) designated sections of this river corridor including ¼ mile on each side to be managed as Eligible Wild Rivers. Rivers eligible under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSR) on the Targhee National Forest were determined preliminarily in the Analysis of the Management Situation (AMS) in 1992 and formerly recognized in the 1997 RFP. A study to determine the suitability of these rivers has not been done nor is it expected to be done.

Eligible Wild Rivers are to maintain and protect the free-flowing character and the “outstandingly remarkable” values which qualify the river to be considered eligible. The “outstandingly remarkable” values identified in the Analysis of the Management Situation (AMS) in 1992 (chapter 3, pg. 4) are “geological, wildness, scenic and visual, fish and wildlife, and recreational opportunities.” “No new roads may be constructed that would change or modify the classification for which the river was designated (S). Recreation facilities will be of a primitive nature, using a pack it in pack it out philosophy.” (1997 RFP pp. III-89).

In order for this stretch of river to become a Scenic or Recreational River, a suitability study would be done to determine actual boundaries. As of now this section has been determined as potentially “eligible.” A suitability study, though needed, is not foreseeable at this time.

Effects

This project eliminates roads within ¼ mile of the river as compared to the historical use when eligibility was first determined and protects the outstandingly remarkable values geological, wildness, scenic and visual, fish and wildlife, and recreational opportunities, by eliminating the road.

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CHAPTER 4 – CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

The Forest Service consulted the following individuals, Federal, State, and local agencies, tribes and non-Forest Service persons during the development of this environmental assessment:

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US Army Corps of Engineers
US Fish and Wildlife Service

TRIBES:

Shoshone-Bannock Tribes

OTHERS:

Project proposal was sent to the Ashton/Island Park Ranger District mailing list.