
DECISION MEMO FOREST ROAD AND CAMPING PROJECT

**Bridger-Teton National Forest
Jackson and Blackrock Ranger District
Teton County, Wyoming**

BACKGROUND

The Forest Road and Camping Project responds to the increase in campsite development and associated undesirable impacts, increasing public safety concerns, and road conditions that have changed since 2009 relative to the current motor vehicle use map. The project area includes the Spread Creek/Toppings Lake drainages, Shadow Mountain, lower Gros Ventre drainage, and the Curtis Canyon/lower Flat Creek drainage on the Bridger-Teton National Forest adjacent to Grand Teton National Park and the National Elk Refuge. The project also includes a small change in the Cache Creek Day Use picnic area.

Visitor use on the Jackson and Blackrock Districts of the Bridger-Teton National Forest has rapidly increased in the project area due to a combination of overflow from visitation to Grand Teton National Park, technological advances that have made camping easier and more comfortable, people increasingly seeking camping opportunities close to town, and a lack of available and affordable housing that forces many summer workers to try to live on the Forest. This increase in visitor use has resulted in several undesirable impacts, notably unattended campfires, food storage/litter violations, public safety concerns, improper human sanitation, damage to soil and vegetation from off-route motor vehicle use, and some conflict between day use and camping use in locations such as in the Wedding Tree area. Regular patrols and monitoring by Forest staff indicates that the number of campsites in the project area remained relatively stable for many years. However in the last two years, staff have observed a notable increase in the number of new campsites and associated road spur development. This rapid expansion of campsites in combination with the associated impacts (e.g. campfires, sanitation, food storage) parallel the increase in visitation occurring in Jackson Hole and is driving the urgency to improve how dispersed camping is managed in these popular locations.

Regarding the road system in the project area, some conditions have changed since the North Zone Off-Highway Vehicle Designated Route system was established in 2009. Examples include loss of a portion of Spread Creek road #30290 due to high water in 2017 and deterioration of some roads in the Curtis Canyon and lower Gros Ventre area.

These changes are prompting the need to re-examine the motor vehicle route system in targeted areas and improve how dispersed camping is managed to improve resource conditions, public safety and the quality of the visitor experience.

DECISION

After reviewing the public comment and consulting with resource specialists, we have made the following decisions regarding the projects described in the June 2018 scoping document.

Area	Current Condition	Proposed Action	Decision
Spread Creek/ Toppings Lake road, Shadow Mountain, Lower Gros Ventre road, Curtis Canyon/lower Flat Creek road	Motor vehicles may travel up to 300 feet off designated roads to access campsites. No system is in place to manage the number and location of campsites. As a result, impacts associated with camping are becoming unacceptable.	<u>Dispersed camping.</u> Implement a set of criteria to determine the number and location of designated sites within the project area. The new system would require motor vehicles to park at marked sites within the project area.	Implement the new system of “designated site” parking for dispersed camping in the selected locations as described in the scoping document. Monitoring will be conducted to adjust the system over time. On-site signing and additional education efforts and enforcement patrols will occur.
Curtis Canyon overlook and bench; Wedding Tree in Gros Ventre corridor	No regulations are in place to prevent overnight camping in these locations. As a result, camping use is rapidly expanding creating excessive bare ground adjacent to a campground and interfering with day use activities at these popular locations.	<u>Dispersed camping.</u> Do not designate marked campsites at Curtis Canyon overlook/bench and at the Wedding Tree. This would have the effect of prohibiting camping in these locations.	Prohibit overnight camping in Curtis Canyon within ¼ mile of the developed campground. The Curtis overlook and bench area will be managed for day use only. Prohibit camping in the Wedding Tree area.
Spread Creek/Toppings Lake area	Camping or otherwise occupying a location (site plus area in 5 mile radius) is allowed for a maximum of 16 days. After leaving the location, a minimum of 7 days is required before the group or person may return to the original location.	<u>Dispersed camping.</u> Camping or otherwise occupying a location would be allowed for a maximum of 5 days in the Spread Creek/Toppings Lake area. After leaving the location, a minimum of 30 days would be required before the group or person may return to the location.	Modify the Jackson Ranger District Forest Special Order to include the Spread Creek/Toppings Lake area in the 5 day camping stay limit (applicable May 1 through Labor Day).
Spread Creek/Toppings Lake area. Map A	Portion of road #30290 exists on MVUM but was barricaded in 2017 due to washout. The 1.68 miles of road to be added to the MVUM exists on the ground and more accurately reflects what is actually occurring on the	<u>MVUM update.</u> Remove 1 mile of road #30290 from the MVUM due to washout. Decommission this mile of road plus 4 miles of closed road for watershed and wildlife benefit. Add 1.68 miles of existing road to connect Spread Creek	Update the MVUM to reflect the route changes described in the scoping document. The closed portion of road #30290 per this decision will be physically closed with barriers but not

	ground. The 0.15 miles of road #30312 to be removed and the 0.50 miles of road to be added more accurately reflect what is actually occurring on the ground.	with Toppings Lake road. Remove 0.15 miles of road #30312 that doesn't exist on the ground and add approximately 0.50 miles of road to access campsites.	decommissioned with machinery. Culverts would be removed to enhance fish passage.
Shadow Mountain. Map B	The lower portion of road #30340E is not sustainable and has led to undesirable campsite impacts including vehicles that have crashed and been stuck trying to push the road further.	<u>MVUM update.</u> Remove 0.30 miles of road #30340E. Retain the first part of the road to access marked campsites.	Update the MVUM to reflect the route change as described in the scoping document.
Lower Gros Ventre corridor Map C	Road #30361 is in poor condition. The lower portion of road #30359 is extremely steep, unsustainable and very difficult to patrol. The spur off Gunsight Pass is an existing road that is frequently used and is sustainable.	<u>MVUM update.</u> Remove road #30361 from the MVUM (0.50 miles) Remove portion of road #30359 from the MVUM (0.35 miles) Add viewpoint spur near Gunsight Pass (0.45 miles)	Retain route #30361 but convert the route to a special designation trail open to all vehicles 64" or less in width on the condition that the end of the route can be secured with barriers and eroded sections can be repaired. If the conditions cannot be met in the next 2 years, the route will be closed. Retain 0.33 miles of route #30359 but convert the route to a special designation trail open to all vehicles 64" or less in width. Convert the bottom 0.02 miles (steep drop off) to a non-motorized trail). Add viewpoint spur near Gunsight Pass
Cache Creek picnic area	Approximately 6 pedestal charcoal grills exists at each picnic table located in the Cache Creek trailhead area.	Remove approx. 6 pedestal grills at picnic tables located at the trailhead and at the end of the accessible boardwalk. Add information to let people know that personal gas stoves and grills can be used.	Remove the pedestal grills at the picnic tables in the Cache Creek trailhead area and add information to let people know personal stoves/grills can be used.

RATIONALE FOR DECISION

Dispersed Camping

We believe that implementing a system of parking for overnight camping only in “designated sites” within selected areas of the Bridger-Teton National Forest is the best course of action to meet the purpose and need outlined in the scoping document. The summer of 2018 has seen continued growth in dispersed camping use and impacts, reinforcing the need to more intensively manage dispersed camping. Preliminary work to pilot this new system occurred in the Pacific Creek drainage in 2016 and in Shadow Mountain in 2018. This pilot effort yielded positive results in terms of improved responsible use and the feedback from visitors indicated that implementing the designated site system is the right approach. Along with our decision to implement the designated site system, we are also deciding to prohibit overnight camping within a ¼ mile of the Curtis Campground, prohibit camping in the Wedding Tree area, and implement a 5-day camp stay limit between May 1 and Labor Day in the Spread Creek and Toppings Lake area. These actions are necessary to reduce conflicts, improve consistency in the regulations applicable to these popular areas, and help reduce problems associated with people trying to live on the National Forest.

In making this decision, we want to emphasize that our decision is not about reducing overall camping opportunities; rather our intent is to better manage where campsites are located to improve overall resource conditions and the visitor experience. Monitoring will be a key component of implementation to track campsite occupancy rates within each area. If monitoring reveals high occupancy rates and visitor feedback suggests people are having difficulty finding a site, this information will inform potential future actions. We are committed to being able to adapt how camping is managed over time to accommodate people to the maximum extent possible while sustaining the land and experiences that make people want to return. Additionally, we don’t intend to apply the designated site system everywhere. Focal areas are within road-accessible Wild and Scenic River corridors and areas of the National Forest located within 5 miles of Grand Teton National Park or towns, particularly Jackson and Wilson.

Motor Vehicle Use Maps Updates

We believe the updates to the motor vehicle use map in the Spread Creek/Toppings Lake area better reflect what actually exists on the ground. We have decided not to physically decommission the Spread Creek road beyond the washout due to the inability to get heavy equipment into the area without creating unacceptable resource impact and the fact that much of the road is naturally recovering on its own. We believe that removing the culverts will be sufficient to enhance watershed conditions as well as effectively provide secure habitat for wildlife. The decision to slightly reduce the length of road #30340E is necessary to address persistent issues with campfires, large parties, and violations of the current motor vehicle use map. We believe reducing the length of the road will permit camping in the most durable sites while allowing for placement of a more effective end of route barrier. In the Gros Ventre corridor, we have decided to retain the majority of routes #30359 and #30361 but convert them to special designation trails available for vehicles 64” or less in width. Route #30359 provides valuable access to the Gros Ventre River for fishing and other river-related activities. The extremely steep drop-off at the end of the route is not sustainable with no viable options for reconstruction. The majority of visitors are walking the last part of this route. This use pattern coupled with known safety incidents suggests the best course of action is to create a functional turn-around for 64” vehicles and turn the steep section into a foot trail. By converting most of this route to a 64” motorized trail, there is an

opportunity to improve drainage and create a more viable turn-around. Route #30361 provides valuable access to a scenic viewpoint offering a unique experience for people exploring the Gros Ventre corridor. However, this route is currently not sustainable and there is evidence of people driving past the end the route. Converting this to a 64" motorized trail offers a better opportunity to address the erosion issues and create an effective barrier at the end of the route. However, our decision to retain this route for motor vehicles is dependent on being able to address the issues over the next two years which we believe represents a reasonable balance between providing access while also addressing resource and safety concerns.

Cache Creek Picnic Grills

We believe the decision to remove the fixed pedestal grills will reduce the potential for wildfire in an area with tall grass vegetation or conifer duff, both of which could easily lead to fire spread within an area close to residential homes. We believe this decision will not greatly alter people's ability to use the picnic area and will help reduce maintenance costs in addition to lessening wildfire risk.

RATIONALE FOR CATEGORIAL EXCLUSION

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA). The applicable category of actions is identified in agency procedures as 36 CFR 220.6(e)(20) described in Forest Handbook 1909.15, May 28, 28, 2014. *Activities that restore, rehabilitate, or stabilize lands occupied by roads and trails, excluding National Forest System roads and National Forest System trails to a more natural condition that may include removing, replacing, or modifying drainage structures and ditches, reestablishing vegetation, reshaping natural contours and slopes, reestablishing drainage-ways, or other activities that would restore site productivity and reduce environmental impacts.*

Based on public comment and resource analysis, we find that there are no extraordinary circumstances that would warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS. We took into account resource conditions identified in agency procedures that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist:

- **Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species** – Wildlife analysis concluded that the proposal would not have negative effects on critical lynx habitat or sage grouse habitat. This conclusion is based on the fact that roads proposed to be added already exist and no vegetation removal is proposed as part of the project. Botany analysis found no impact on sensitive plant species except potentially on Payson's Bladderpod which may occur in the area and should be surveyed. No impact is expected on sensitive fish species.
- **Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds** – none are present or potentially impacted
- **Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas** – none are present or potentially impacted

- **Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas** – none are present or potentially impacts. There is some benefit to the Spread Creek-Gros Ventre River inventoried roadless area.
- **Research natural areas** – none are present or potentially impacted
- **American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites** – See below.
- **Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas** – The Forest archeologist noted that some recorded cultural resources are within the general project area. While no ground disturbing activity is proposed with this project other than installing sign or barrier posts, surveys are recommended in areas not previously surveyed to ensure visitor-created campsites are not impacting cultural sites.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

This project was listed on the Bridger-Teton National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions. Two public workshops were held along with interagency meetings and an opportunity to submit written comments between January and March 2018. The project also received media coverage during this period. This input was used to help develop the proposal that was released for public comment on June 28, 2018 (scoping document – Forest Road and Camping Project). The scoping document was mailed to 33 individuals and groups, yielding 10 responses. Volunteers spent 6 days in the Shadow Mountain area during July talking with campers about responsible use and the proposed designated site system. In general, there was universal support for the proposed changes in dispersed camping management with one commenter opposed to the change to a 5-day stay limit in the Spread Creek-Toppings Lake area. Some of the commenters felt the proposed actions did not go far enough to address the issues with visitor use in the areas. Notable concerns include the increase in off highway vehicle use on the roads and recreational shooting near campsites. Commenters requested speed limits for off highway vehicle use, more education and enforcement, implementation of the designated site system for camping in other areas such as Phillips Ridge and Granite Creek, and ideas such as requiring self-contained toilets for dispersed camping. We recognize that the decisions we are making today will not address all of the visitor use issues in the easily accessible front-country areas around Jackson. Some of the concerns can be mitigated by more aggressive education and patrol efforts which are being pursued. Other options such as changes to travel management, addressing trails in the Shadow Mountain and lower Ditch Creek area, and potential expansion of campgrounds will require additional environmental analysis.

Public comment indicated universal support for the proposed changes to the motor vehicle use map in the Spread Creek-Toppings Lake area as well as removal of pedestal grills in the Cache Creek picnic area. The majority of comments received regarding routes #30359 and #30361 requested modifying the routes to accommodate smaller motorized vehicles in order to retain valuable access.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

This decision is consistent with the Bridger-Teton National Forest Land Management Plan as documented in the table below.

Table 1: Summary of Project Compliance with Relevant Forest Plan Direction

Forest Plan Direction	Is Decision Consistent	Remarks
Road and trail drainage standard: Roads and trails will be designed and maintained so that drainage from the road or trail surface does not directly enter water-bodies	Yes	For the most part, roads included in this project are not located near water bodies. The decision is intended to improve the sustainability of routes
OHV standard: Motorized off-highway vehicles (OHVs) will be restricted to routes or open roads designated for that use. Vehicle use will be consistent with State law and federal regulations for both licensed and unlicensed vehicles and operators.	Yes	Designated routes have not been clearly identified in the Spread Creek – Toppings Lake area. This project will improve compliance with the MVUM
Desired Future Condition 10: The management emphasis is to provide long-term and short-term habitat to meet the needs of wildlife managed in balance with timber harvest, grazing, and minerals development.	Yes	Improved management of dispersed camping will improve compliance with food storage regulations.
Desired Future Condition 12: Management emphasis is on providing important habitat for big game such as calving areas and security areas.	Yes	The updates to the MVUM in the Spread Creek/Toppings Lake area combined with more attention to implementation will improve wildlife habitat security.

IMPLEMENTATION

On January 17, 2014, the President signed into law the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 (Pub. L. No. 113-76). Among other things, Section 431 of that Act directs that the 1992 and 2012 legislation establishing the 36 CFR 215 (post-decisional appeals) and 36 CFR 218 (pre-decisional objections) processes “shall not apply to any project or activity implementing a land and resource management plan ... that is categorically excludedunder the National Environmental Policy Act [NEPA].” On February 7, 2014, the President signed into law the Agricultural Act of 2014 (Farm Bill) (Pub. L. No. 113-79). Section 8006 of the 2014 Farm Bill repealed the Appeals Reform Act (ARA) (Pub. L. No. 102-381). The ARA’s implementing regulation was 36 CFR 215. The 2014 Farm Bill also directs that the pre-decisional objection process established in the Consolidated Appropriation Act of 2012 shall not be applicable to categorically excluded projects or activities. Therefore, this decision is not subject to appeal or objection. Implementation of approved projects may occur immediately.

Implementation of the new system is expected to be an adaptive process. Visitor education will be the focus for the remainder of the 2018 summer/fall season. Enforcement of the new designated site system, combined with education, will begin in 2019 in those areas where signage has been installed, site markers are in place, and forest special orders are in place.

We intend to use the full suite of tools available for successful management: (1) Education, (2) Engineering (e.g. road work, barriers/restoration), (3) Enforcement, and (4) Evaluation. Actions include

establishing permanent markers in the ground at each official designated site. Each marker would display a campsite number, tent symbol, campfire message, and sometimes a directional arrow to the site location. In addition to Forest Service education and enforcement patrols, there is an opportunity to build a volunteer ambassador program to help the public understand dispersed camping requirements on the Forest. The volunteer ambassador team would also assist the Forest Service with daily monitoring and obtain public feedback regarding their experience with the new system. Other monitoring actions may include traffic counters to obtain daily, weekly and seasonal use in high use dispersed camping areas of the Forest. Noxious weeds are known to occur in these areas which will require on-going prevention and treatment work to reduce the potential of vehicles and campers spreading weeds. Motor vehicle routes to be added, removed or modified will be displayed on the 2019 MVUM and signage or barrier work will occur on the ground. Road and motorized trail maintenance, including drainage work will occur as Forest Service funding and partner funding is available.

CONTACT

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Linda Merigliano, Program Manager, (307) 739-5428 or David Wilkinson, Recreation Technician, (307) 739-5544.

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