

Environmental Assessment

for

Blue Gulch Trailhead

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Bureau of Land Management

Casper Field Office

Casper, Wyoming

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MISSION STATEMENT

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1.0 INTRODUCTION AND PROPOSED ACTION

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Casper Field Office (CFO) recently purchased 7 ½ acres of private property adjacent to the Redds Day Use Area. The property is located at T.30 N., R.82 W. sec. 18 SE¼NE¼ and is within the boundary of the North Platte River special recreation management area (SRMA) as defined by the Casper Field Office Resource Management Plan (BLM 2007) and shown on Figure 1. The SRMA is managed in accordance with the Trapper's Route Recreation Area Management Plan (RAMP) (BLM 2006), and will be referred to as Trapper's Route in this document.

1.1 Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action

The private property was acquired to expand public recreation opportunities and to protect important wildlife habitat by increasing and consolidating public lands within Trapper's Route. Trapper's Route RAMP is an adaptive management plan that incorporates resource monitoring and provides administrative flexibility within a defined set of management guidelines. This environmental assessment (EA) implements the "rural-developed" site-specific management category in which this property is to be managed. Impacts of proposed infrastructure improvements are also analyzed in this EA. The Decision Record derived from this document will be an addendum to the Trapper's Route RAMP.

Decision to be Made: The BLM will decide whether or not to manage this site within the management guidelines for rural-developed areas, to construct the Blue Gulch Trailhead, **extend the pedestrian trail** and to complete reclamation of disturbed sites.

1.2 Relationship to Statutes, Regulations, Plans or Other Environmental Analyses

In accordance with 43 CFR 1610.5-3(a), the proposed action is in conformance with the Casper Resource Management Plan (RMP) approved on December 7, 2007, and the Record of Decision for the Trapper's Route RAMP (July 2006) as well as other applicable documents, guidance, and regulations. The parcel has been determined to be suitable for recreational infrastructure and meets the objectives and management guidelines for rural developed recreation management areas. The incorporated mitigation measures are consistent with the land use decisions and resource management goals and objectives of the Casper RMP. The objectives from the RMP are as follows.

SD: 7.1 Manage the public lands and mineral estate in a manner that enhances the natural character and preserves wildlife and fisheries habitats.

SD: 7.2 Manage activities on public lands and mineral estate in a manner that minimizes surface disturbance.

Trapper's Route Special Recreation Management Area

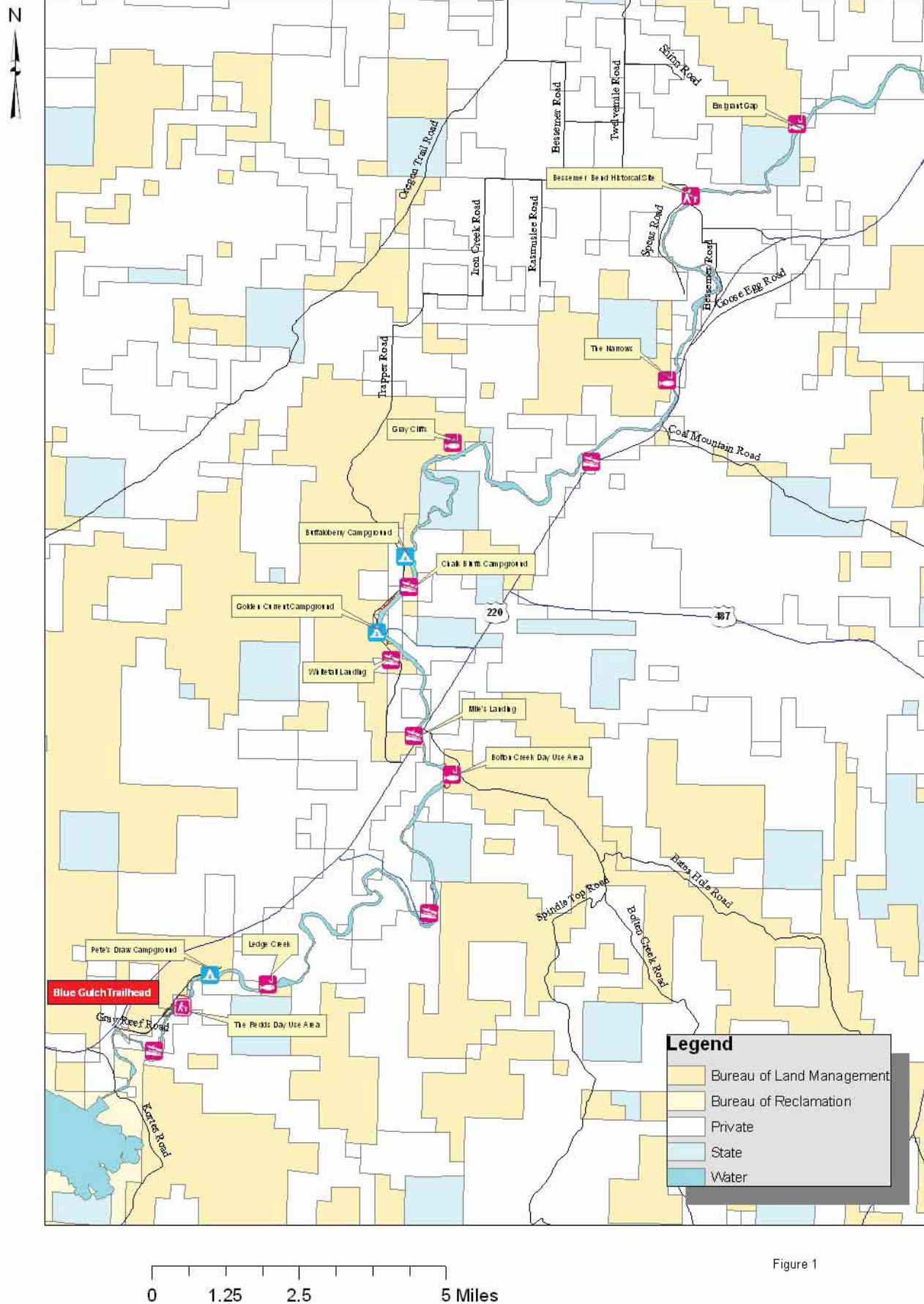


Figure 1

SD: 7.3 Manage riparian habitats on public lands and mineral estates for Proper Function Condition and Desired Plant Community.

SD: 8.1 Provide a diverse array of quality water-based recreation opportunities while minimizing user conflicts and promoting public safety.

SD: 8.2 Support and collaborate with local governments and service providers in adjoining communities to produce recreation opportunities for visitors and local residents to achieve health and fitness goals and quality of life benefits.

SD: 8.3 Emphasize and support collaborative public outreach, awareness events, and programs that promote public service and stewardship.

The RMP specified the following decisions/management actions to achieve the above objectives:

4057: To provide for long-term protection of Artificial Nesting Structures, a combination of No Surface Occupancy and Timing Limit Stipulations buffer zones will be applied around the nesting structures. The Timing Limit Stipulations restriction will be from February 1st through July 31st, or until the young fledge. For ferruginous hawk Artificial Nesting Structures, apply a ½-mile No Surface Occupancy buffer with an additional ½-mile seasonal buffer (total of a 1-mile buffer). For golden eagle Artificial Nesting Structures, apply a ½- No Surface Occupancy buffer without an additional seasonal buffer (total ½-mile buffer). This restriction is intended to preclude the placement of permanent facilities within the No Surface Occupancy buffers. Development and placement of Artificial Nesting Structures targeting ferruginous hawk should be managed intensively to maintain a majority of the population utilizing natural nesting substraights. Strive to maintain overall Artificial Nesting Structures usage that does not exceed 25 percent of the total nesting population for ferruginous hawks.

7036: Restoration projects will focus on improving wildlife and fisheries habitats and recreational opportunities.

7037: Defines the boundaries of the North Platte River SRMA. Generally within ¼ mile of the high water mark either side of the river between Pathfinder Dam east to the Natrona County line.

7040: No surface occupancy within the North Platte River SRMA, unless it is to benefit recreation, fisheries, wildlife habitats, and cultural values.

7042: Those lands used as recreational landing sites and lands acquired along the entire river to enhance public access by purchase, donation, or exchange are not available for livestock grazing.

7043: Lands used for recreational landing sites acquired along the North Platte River are not available for livestock grazing.

Trapper's Route Special Recreation Area Management Plan

This document provides recreation and habitat management guidelines for all public lands within ¼ mile of the North Platte River between Alcova Dam and Casper, WY. All BLM-administered surface within Trapper's Route was divided into recreational management categories, which provide a broad spectrum of opportunities and define the administrative sideboards for each area. The acquired property is within an area that is to be managed for "rural-developed" recreation opportunities. The following guidelines have been set for this management category.

The rural-developed management category is characterized by substantial modification of the natural environment. Modifications are made to enhance specific recreational opportunities. The sights and sounds of human activity are readily apparent, and interaction with other users is common. Facilities may include campgrounds, improved access roads, fences, walking trails, interpretive panels, parking lots, vault toilets, and boat ramps. Landing sites are designed to accommodate a large number of visitors and incorporate American with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards whenever possible. Site designs use available space and are largely defined by visitor demand. Landing sites under this category include Pete's Draw, Government Bridge, Whitetail Campground, and Bessemer Bend.

Landscape designs for developed landings include natural-appearing barriers such as vegetative screens and rock placement whenever possible. Mitigation measures would be used during construction to control the spread of non-native plant species.

Management Guidelines for Rural Developed Areas

Visual quality objective: modification of landscape

Degree of visitor concentration: moderate to high

Degree of developed recreation sites: prevalent, common

Campgrounds will be rustic (no utilities)

Camping allowed in designated campsites

Campsite per acre in developed campground: 3 to 5 per acre

Paved boat ramp: appropriate and common

Vault Toilets: appropriate and common

Fire rings and grills will be designed into campsites

Potable water will be evaluated

Fencing

Motorized Use

OHV travel within a 1-mile corridor of the North Platte River between Alcova and Casper would be allowed only on designated roads and trails. Exceptions to this rule would be allowed for administrative purposes. Recreational, off-road travel for purposes such as game retrieval and dispersed camping will be limited to 300 feet from the designated

routes as long as no resource damage occurs. Road and trail designations are marked on site.

1.3 Other Applicable Documents, Guidance and Regulations

Federal Land Policy and Management Act, 43 U.S.C 1701. Land use plans and revisions should be based on principles of multiple use and sustained yield.

National Environmental Policy Act, 42 U.S.C. 4321

Archeological Resources Protection Act, 1979, as amended.

Taylor Grazing Act, 43 U.S.C. 315a

Endangered Species Act, 16 U.S.C. 1531. Federal agencies shall give consideration to ensure agency actions do not jeopardize the continued existence of any endangered species.

Land and Water Conservation Fund Act, 16 U.S.C. 460 1-6a

National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, 1966

Executive Order No. 12898, 1994. States that federal planning efforts should give consideration to how plans will affect local economies.

Washington Office (WO) Instruction Memorandum (IM) No. 2007-030. Clarification of Cultural Resource Considerations for Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) Designation and Travel Management.

WO IM No. 2008-014, Clarification of Guidance and Integration of Comprehensive Travel and Transportation Management Planning into Land Use Planning.

WO IM 2004-005, Clarification of OHV Designations and Travel Management in the BLM Land Use Planning Process

WO IM 2006-173, Implementation of Roads and Trails Terminology Report

1.4 Scoping, Public Involvement, and Issues

The management guidance for this area was outlined in the Trapper's Route RAMP. This plan set water recreation opportunity spectrum (WROS) guidelines for recreational settings, new developments, and habitat improvement projects as well as limits on recreational activities. The location of the acquired property is categorized as rural-developed based on the existing setting and possible recreation opportunities. Public involvement was an important part of the planning process.

This EA is an addendum to the RAMP and is limited to accepting the WROS category as inventoried and the proposed infrastructure development within the newly acquired property. The BLM consulted with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD), the Wyoming Fly Casters, the Conservation Fund, and professional fly fishing guides during the fall of 2007. Additionally, the BLM held a public meeting for further discussion on this specific project and allowed for a public comment period.

The majority of comments focused on not over-developing recreational opportunities near the spawning beds, in order to maintain and improve the existing terrestrial and aquatic habitats. Members of the Wyoming Fly Casters Association and commercial fly-fishing guides were concerned about the environmental impacts of an additional boat ramp. The majority of those in attendance favored the walk-in access, parking areas, and interpretive hiking trails. There was discussion about using the asphalt for parking. The possible future location of a universal accessibility was a concern for some members of the public. One additional comment was received which disclosed an existing right-of-way for a water well and pipeline. Due to comments and additional information minor changes and clarifications were made to this environmental assessment and are reflected in the Decision Record.

2.0 PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

2.1 No Action Alternative

The property lies between Grey Reef Campground, which is managed by the Natrona County Parks Department for the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR), and the Redds Day Use Area, which is administered by the BLM (Figure 2). The No Action Alternative would not allow for additional infrastructure. The area would be cleared of the remaining structures, facilities, and debris shown in Figure 3. Wildlife habitat improvement projects would be completed in accordance with the Trapper's Route RAMP. Reclamation efforts would focus on disturbed areas, and native plant communities would be restored. The WROS category would be accepted as inventoried but would not include future developments. Dispersed camping would not be allowed, as no overnight sites would be provided.

2.2 Proposed Action

The Proposed Action would be to construct a small trailhead and trail extension to connect the Grey Reef Campground and Redds Day Use Area, **if acceptable to the Bureau of Reclamation and the Natrona County Parks.** New recreational infrastructure would include a vault toilet, a parking lot, an access road, a pedestrian bridge and extension of the existing accessible pedestrian trail, which includes a bridge and interpretive signs. The formalized trailhead would be known as the Blue Gulch Trailhead, named after one of the two existing drainages that meander through the property. **The final designs** depicted in Figure 4.

The existing road would be realigned, resurfaced and delineated with bollards if needed to prevent off-road motorized use and would provide access to a surfaced parking locations. **The asphalt that surfaced in the inner floor would be utilized as surfaced** parking area. The parking area would be located on the bench above the riparian zone and would be large enough to accommodate 10 to 15 vehicles. Up to **six** picnic sites would also be developed and connected by the access road. Motorized travel and parking would be limited to the defined parking area and individual picnic sites. Parking along the access road would not be allowed. No other routes would be made available

Trapper's Route Special Recreation Management Area

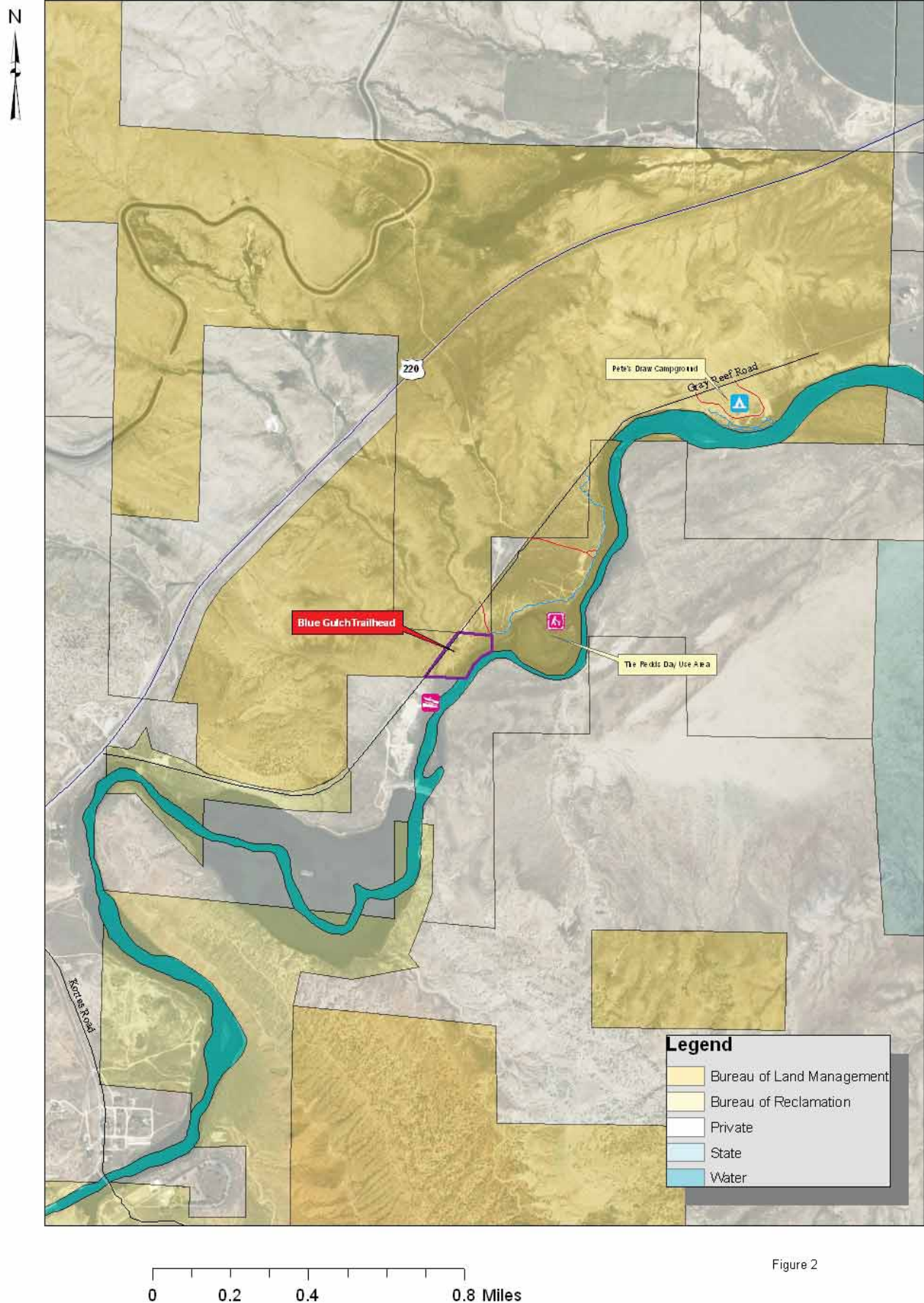


Figure 2

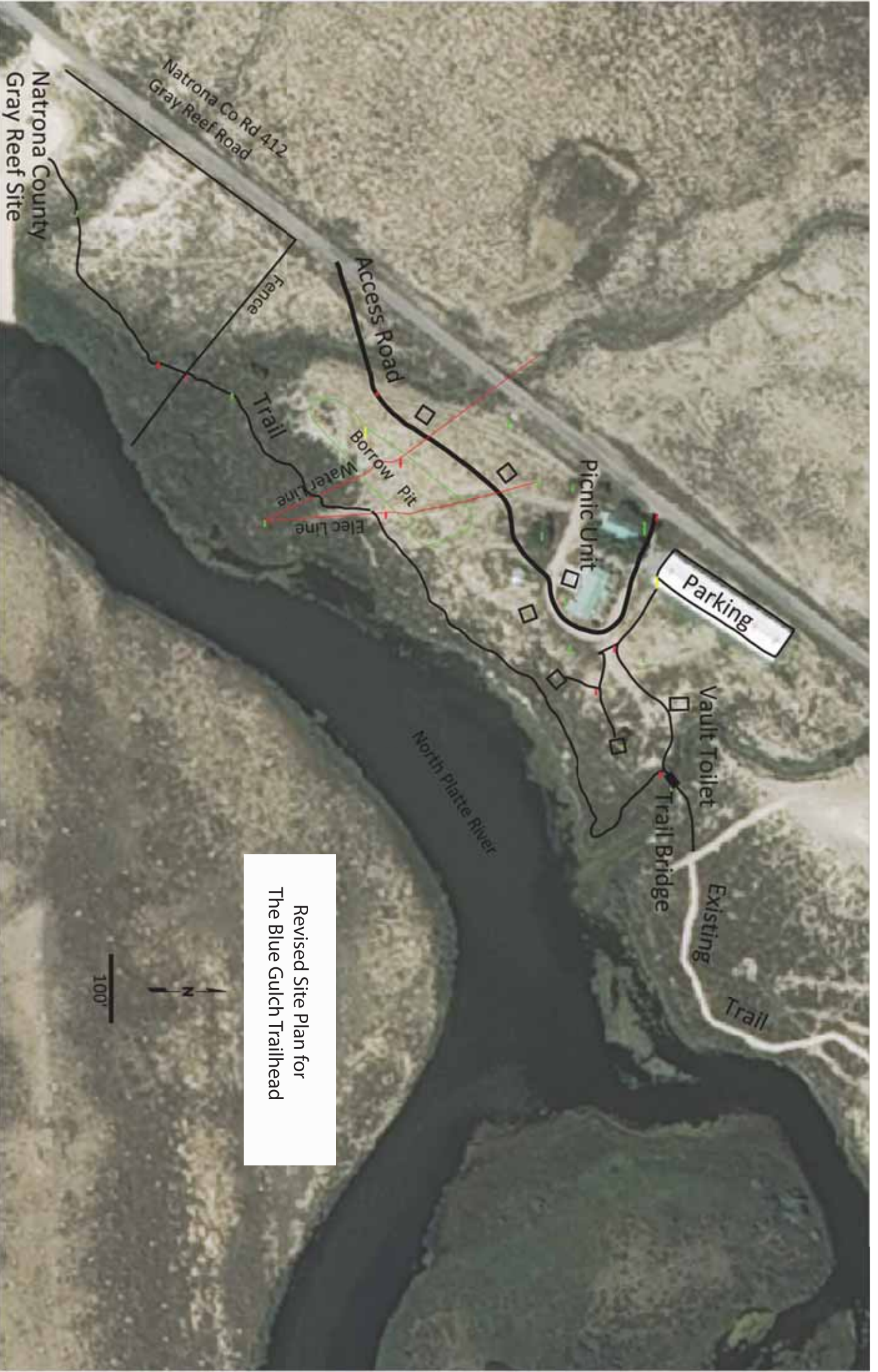


UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

BRETY PROPERTY EXISTING
BRETY PROPERTY

WYOMING





Revised Site Plan for
The Blue Gulch Trailhead

for motorized use. Any portion of the existing road not used during construction would be barricaded and reclaimed.

The existing septic system would be filled in, and the water well utilized for reclamation projects after which it would be plugged and abandoned. This process would follow chapter 4, section 4 of the Wyoming State Engineers "Water Well Minimum Construction Standards." Under item (b)(ii) it states that "The upper surface portion of the cased well must be cut off a minimum of 18 inches below ground level and the area back-filled with enough clean soil material to allow for settling (Wyoming State Engineer Office 2010)." A second water well would be maintained by the owner of that well and would be utilized in accordance with the existing water right. Potable water would not be made available.

Areas that are disturbed because of removing the buildings would be used in the development of the trailhead or would be reclaimed. The space occupied by the larger of the two houses would require some re-contouring, prior to development or reseeding. Facilities associated with electric power, including the transformer, power pole, and lines would be removed from the site.

A high priority would be placed on reclamation efforts, in order to improve the overall condition of the site and to reduce the potential for soil erosion. As funding is made available, the BLM would complete wildlife habitat improvement projects and other reclamation efforts described in the Trapper's Route RAMP. These projects would include installation of bat boxes, treatment of noxious weeds, seeding of native plant species, and bank stabilization. Russian olive trees would also be cut down and the area chemically treated. Woody species that would be planted during reclamation are listed in appendix B of the Trapper's Route RAMP.

In accordance with the existing guidelines for rural-developed recreation sites, camping would be limited to designated campgrounds. Therefore, dispersed camping would not be allowed at this location.

2.3 Alternatives Considered but not Analyzed in Detail

Management actions considered but not analyzed further include ~~maintaining the asphalt as an improved parking area~~, removing all of the underground septic system, installing a boat ramp, and constructing an overnight campground. Public use of the existing water well and electric power was also considered but not carried forward.

Maintaining the asphalt parking area and constructing an additional campground would lead to increased congestion at the site. Locating the day use parking and campground near the county road, which would reduce the quality of the recreational experience through over development, would not meet with visual objectives for this area and would have negative impacts on riparian and other important wildlife habitats.

An additional boat ramp in this area in order to relieve congestion at Gray Reef was **considered**. After further **coordination** with interested parties, comments identified in public meetings and during comment periods in the planning process for the Redds Day Use Area it was **determined** that a second boat ramp would allow drift boats to loop the spawning beds resulting in increased congestion and negative impacts to in-stream habitats. Therefore, this will not be analyzed further in this EA.

Providing a public water source at this area would increase use beyond the capacity of the proposed development, as there is not a source for potable water at either of the two campgrounds within a mile of this site. Visitors staying at Pete's Draw and Grey Reef would increase traffic at this site for the sole purpose of obtaining potable water. Additionally, there is no assurance that the well is in good condition, has reliable, potable water, or could support the demands of public use.

Providing electric power was not included in the Proposed Action as lighting and electric hook-ups would encourage overnight camping and would not fit within the defined "rustic" setting described for rural-developed areas. Additionally, the artificial lighting may have a potential impact on bats roosting in the area. Limiting recreational developments in this area provides a natural buffer between developed recreation sites, allowing visitors to disperse over a wider area and increases the range of opportunities along this highly popular recreation area.

3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The following are not present and will not be analyzed: air quality **concerns**; areas of critical environmental concern (ACEC); environmental justice **issues**; prime or unique farmlands; hazardous or solid wastes; livestock grazing; mineral resources; Native American religious concerns; paleontology; threatened and endangered species; traditional cultural properties; wild and scenic rivers; and wilderness values.

3.1 Cultural and Historic Uses

People have utilized the study area for over 12,000 years. The activities have been documented through a number of well-known prehistoric and historic sites. Sites such as the Casper Site, and the Butler-Rissler Site well represent the prehistoric occupation. The Oregon/Mormon/California/Pony Express National Historic Trails represent some of the historic uses along the North Platte River corridor. The main factor of human occupation and use of the area is the North Platte River. This permanent water source was critical to these activities. The river provided water, source resources for fish and shellfish, a wide variety of edible plants, a source of shelter, and also supported a significant population of large and small game. This continuous corridor of high quality resources also enabled human populations to exploit these resources and provided a travel corridor through the western edge of the Great Plains, into the Rocky Mountains, and beyond.

A cultural resource study has not been completed for the 7.5 acres of the newly acquired property. Due to its location adjacent to the major permanent water source of this region, it is anticipated that there is a high likelihood to encounter evidence of

prehistoric activity. Further, deeply buried and stratified remains could exist but would be constrained by the yearly cycles of erosion and flooding which essentially ended with the construction of the Pathfinder Dam in 1905. Finally, the study area has been highly impacted by human activity within the last 50 years as evidenced by the recent structures built by the previous landowners. This recent activity would also impact any historic period site.

3.2 Native American Religious Concerns

There is no current evidence to suggest these may be present in the study area. However, if any such sites are encountered during the cultural resource inventory of the area, the appropriate tribes will be consulted.

3.3 Soils

The basic ecological site for this location is a clay loam complex comprised of Theedle-Shingle-Kishona soils. These moderately deep, well-drained soils are dominated by siltstone, sandstone, and shale. Clay loam is intermixed throughout the soil complex, creating moderately sloping hills, gullies, and drainages. Water available from the soil complex is low, run-off is rapid, and the hazard of water erosion is severe. Alluvium type soils are intermixed throughout this soil complex (UDSA, NRCS 1997).

3.4 Wetland and Riparian Zones

There are two ephemeral drainages at this location: Blue Gulch and Hogback Draw. These drainages confine spring run-off and limit available surface and construction activities. Hogback Draw is a well-defined narrow drainage that marks the south end of the parcel creating a physical barrier between the new parcel and the adjoining BLM surface. This is a deep drainage with relatively steep slopes. The banks are sparsely vegetated with a variety of grasses and several species of sagebrush. Native woody species and riparian vegetative species are found in this drainage on a limited basis only. This drainage contains highly erodible soils and is easily impacted from rapid spring run-off.

Blue Gulch is shallow, wide and much less defined than Hogback Draw. This drainage is located on the northern boundary of the parcel and is heavily vegetated with a mixture of grasses, forbs and woody species such as big sagebrush. During periods of high precipitation and or heavy spring run-off, surface water would be dispersed over a much wider area. The shallow bottom and dispersed water flows, reduces the potential for severe erosion events and sediment loading in the spawning bed of the river. Alluvium soils are more predominate in this drainage.

3.5 Flood Plains

The North Platte River is a channelized river as a result of a series of larger dams and controlled flows. It is a slow moving river, with braided channels and numerous islands.

Summer flows range from 2,000 to 3,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) with winter flows averaging 500 cfs. The flood size and number of flood plains have expanded over the past few years as a result of flushing flows that are meant to mimic the natural cycle of river prior to the construction of the dams.

The project area is located less than one mile downstream from Grey Reef Reservoir. This reservoir was built to control water flows more than to store water for use. In this area, the flood plain is restricted to no more than 100 yards of the existing bank.

3.6 Water Quality, Prime or Sole Source Water

Located about 2 miles downstream of Alcova Dam, Gray Reef Dam and reservoir were constructed by the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR). Construction of Gray Reef Dam, which is a rock and earth fill structure, was completed in 1961. The reservoir helps regulate widely fluctuating water releases from Alcova power plant. The main stem of the North Platte River flows through the power plant and services the communities of Casper, Glenrock, Douglas, and Guernsey. Water quality is monitored by the BOR and by the Department of Environmental Quality. No issues with water quality have been identified.

Two wells are located onsite and within the area delineated for Platte River water depletion issues. This well has not been used in a number of years, and testing on the well has not been done. No other potable water sources currently exist within the project boundary or at either of the two nearby campgrounds.

3.7 Vegetation and Plant Communities

Potential plant communities for this soil complex are mainly western wheatgrass, bluebunch wheatgrass, mutton bluegrass, needle-and-thread, and big sagebrush. However, the range condition at this site has deteriorated, and the area is dominated by annual species including grasses, mustards, and forbs (globemallow, prickly pear cactus, western yarrow, and prairie clovers) (NRCS 1997). This is most evident near the building sites and along the main access route. Perennial species are present on site and can provide some native seed sources. Areas with reasonable vegetative cover and productive plant communities are located between the building sites and the Grey Reef Landing, in the Blue Gulch drainage, and along the riparian area. Evidence of past soil erosion is moderate to severe in Hogback Draw, and some woody species, including Russian olive trees, are present. Upland shrubs such as big sagebrush, black sagebrush, birdsfoot sagebrush, and rabbit brush provide some natural cover. Gardner's saltbush and greasewood are also present. The overall condition, including plant vigor and species composition for the upland communities at the proposed location for site development is in poor to fair condition due to past and present surface disturbance.

3.8 Invasive, Non-Native Species

A detailed inventory of invasive, non-native plant species has not been completed for this site. However, there is a dense population of Russian olive trees located in the bottom of Hogback Draw, where both surface and subsurface water is more readily available. Native species normally found in these areas have not been successful at competing with this non-native plant. The second species present on location is cheatgrass, an annual grass species that is commonly found in disturbed areas. This species is well established throughout the project area and is especially well adapted for this location, as it is drought tolerant, quick to propagate, and is easily dispersed. Both of these species are common to the region, easily established, and difficult to control or eradicate.

3.9 Wildlife and Habitats

The North Platte River corridor provides crucial winter range and yearlong habitat for pronghorn antelope, mule deer, and white-tailed deer. Small mammals including shrew, muskrat, beaver, badger, skunk, raccoon, white-tailed jackrabbit, thirteen-lined ground squirrel, Ord's kangaroo rat, desert cottontail, coyote, and red fox also inhabit the area. Shore birds, waterfowl, and various other avian species including red-winged blackbird, bank swallow, magpie, raven, crow, great blue heron, mallard, common goldeneye, common merganser, Canada goose, and pelican can be found in the area. Raptor nests are not known to be in the immediate area. Various raptor species use the area and routinely nest in trees growing along the river.

3.10 Special Status Species

Wintering eagles are common in the area managed by the CFO, as they migrate from northern Canada, and arrive in October. These birds use the river from November through March as they forage for fish and waterfowl in ice-free, open water areas. Within the proposed project area, the North Platte River is recognized as a bald eagle winter-feeding concentration area. In this delineated area, public lands within ½-mile of the river are protected by BLM from surface disturbance beginning November 1 through March 31. Eagles are also known to forage far away from the river in areas near winter concentrations of big game and/or livestock. Rangelands can provide important feeding habitat for bald eagles.

During migration and in winter, eagles often tend to roost communally concentrated in areas where food is abundant. Communal roosts usually are located in stands of mature old growth conifers or cottonwoods. Large, live trees in sheltered areas provide a favorable thermal environment and help minimize the energy stress encountered by wintering eagles.

3.11 Visual Resources

The proposed project area is within a visual resource management (VRM) class II area, as defined by the Casper RMP. Overall, management objectives for visual resources are to manage public lands in such a manner as to maintain the visual quality of these lands. Objectives specific to VRM class II are to retain the character of the landscape. The level of change should be low. Management activities should be seen but not attract the attention of the casual viewer. The basic elements of line, form, color, and texture should be repeated.

3.12 Recreation

The natural appearing landscape provides an opportunity for visitors to enjoy the sights and sounds of nature. Secondary roads, residences, power lines, and local establishments in close proximity contribute to the rural setting and may provide an occasional convenience and some sense of security. Management activities within the areas are noticeable in the form of signage, recreational infrastructure, and occasional personnel. Agriculture, tourism, and recreation are the primary industries. Details of the economic value of this area can be found in the Casper Field Office Recreation Business Plan (BLM 2010).

The upper two miles of the Gray Reef section of the North Platte River is a valued recreation area. Visitation use numbers are generally divided into three categories: bank anglers, boating use, and other recreational activities. The angler use report will be made available later this year; however, early estimations indicate that 75% of bank anglers are non-residents, representing 42 states and 3 foreign countries. The number of boats launched at the Gray Reef area exceeds 2,500 of which over 51% are commercial guides (WGFD 2011).

The project area is within the boundaries of a highly valued trout spawning area as defined by the WGFD. The property connects two important recreation areas, the Grey Reef Campground and boat launch, which are managed by the Natrona County Parks for the BOR and the Redds Day Use Area, which was acquired by the BLM in 2007.

A one-mile hiking trail, located on the Redds Day Use Area follows the curvature of the river and transverses the day use area. The specifications for this trail meet universal standards for non-motorized recreation trails, and annual maintenance is required. Interpretive signs will be installed this year and will interpret the ecology of the river corridor and the importance of the spawning beds. Sign bases are exposed aggregate and low profile, blending well with the natural surroundings. Informational signs have also been installed and are located at the site of a small parking area. Future developments for the day use area are limited to a single fishing pier that would meet the American Disability Act for accessibility.

This site has motorized public access from Natrona County Road 414. The adjacent recreation sites are most heavily used in the spring by wading fly fishermen, who take

advantage of the rainbow trout spawning season. Most weekend visitors are from Colorado. A smaller peak in visitor numbers occurs early in the fall. Approximately 70% of visitation occurs during the weekend. Local visitors use the area heavily for day trips throughout the season.

The buildings that were located on site at the time of purchase have been sold and are in the process of being removed. The structures included two houses, one small storage building, a newer pole barn, and a smaller dilapidated barn. Some surface disturbance has occurred. Most of the existing cottonwoods and blue spruce trees have been cut down so that the buildings could be removed safely from the location. The remaining debris was removed. The remaining infrastructure includes the septic system, a water well, underground pipes, electric poles, and the asphalt flooring used for the pole barn.

4.0 ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

4.1 No Action Alternative

Impacts of the No Action Alternative would be derived from concentrated recreational use of the area. The upper two miles of the Gray Reef section of the North Platte River is a valued recreation area. Visitation use numbers are generally divided into three categories, bank anglers, boating use and other recreational use. The angler use report will be made available later this year, however, early estimations indicate that 75% of bank anglers are non-residents, representing 42 states and three foreign countries. The number of boats launched at the Gray Reef area exceeds 2,500 of which over 51% are commercial guides. The fishing on this section of the river is a well-known trout fishery and recreational use continues to grow.

The prolonged heavy use of this area, especially in the spring months, would lead to increased erosion rates along the existing motorized routes and foot trails. Compaction of soils would occur immediately adjacent to the county road because of the lack of parking in the area. Restoration efforts are unlikely to be successful without controlling visitor traffic and use patterns. Benefits to soils, vegetation communities, wildlife habitats and visual resources would be minimal with implementation of the No Action Alternative.

This property is located along the spawning beds and is one of the most heavily used areas in the state. Parking areas available to the public are extremely limited, and visitation use numbers show no sign of declining. The No Action Alternative would delineate some parking but would not meet user expectations, no trail head would be constructed, and the recreational sites would not be linked for pedestrian traffic. Increased traffic congestion and conflicts among visitors would be expected, while the overall visitor satisfaction for this specific area would decrease.

The No Action Alternative does not address issues brought forth during public meetings or those derived from visitor satisfaction surveys. Therefore, this alternative was not selected.

4.2 Proposed Action

4.2.1 Cultural and Historic Uses

A Class III cultural resource inventory will be completed prior to any new surface disturbing activities. If any sites are encountered, specific project elements will be redesigned to adequately avoid these resources. If any resources are encountered that may have Native American religious concerns and cannot be avoided, appropriate tribal consultation will be conducted. Further, additional inventory will be completed for the entire parcel acquired by BLM to identify any other cultural resources. These resources will be considered in future actions on the property. No direct effects are anticipated from ground disturbing activities associated with the proposed action.

4.2.2 Soils

Some soil loss would occur, during the construction of the trailhead, however, this impact would be short term and minimal, as the majority of these activities would occur in previously disturbed areas. Top soil would be salvaged when feasible to be used for reclamation purposes. Reclamation efforts would be utilized to improve the overall condition of the area. Salvaged top soils would be used to re-contour the slope to fit the surrounding landscape and where erosion or compaction has limited seed viability or the success of bare root plantings. The reclamation efforts would improve soil condition and mitigate further loss of soils due to heavy utilization of the area.

The bladed road has caused soil compaction. The road would be crowned and ditched and minor rerouting would be required to meet design specifications. These upgrades would alleviate erosion problems related to run-off and would delineate motorized use.

The recreational facilities that would be developed on location would delineate most recreation activities such as parking but would also include picnicking, preparation for bank fishing and trail use. The proposed action includes extending the non-motorized trail so as to link the adjoining recreational sites. This would reduce the likelihood of creating numerous pedestrians' trails as visitors seek easy access to the river bank. User created general result in gulling, rills, increased soil erosion and disturb vegetation communities.

4.2.3 Wetlands and Riparian Zones

No permanent facilities would be constructed in either of the drainages. A single pedestrian bridge would be installed providing access across Hogback Draw. The bridge would reduce if not eliminate foot traffic across the drainage, reducing the potential impact that would otherwise result from recreational use. The extension of the

existing trail would be kept out of the riparian areas whenever possible. Impacts to these areas are expected to be minimal.

4.2.4 Flood Plains

The only man-made feature that may be placed within the flood plain would be small sections of the pedestrian trail. The trail would be placed outside this area whenever possible. However, as it is designed to provide access to the river bank, small segments of this trail may be required to be located inside the flood plain. This trail would be maintained on a regular basis and would mitigate damage caused by uncontrolled recreational activities. Impacts are expected to be negligible.

4.2.5 Water Quality, Prime or Sole Source Water

Water quality would not be negatively impacted as a result of the proposed project. Chemical treatments of invasive, non-native plant species would follow best management practices for areas near surface and subsurface water. Reclamation efforts would result in a reduction of sediment loading in the spawning beds and would have a beneficial impact to water quality in the immediate area.

The water well would not be used. Water is available at the nearby Alcova store and other public facilities. There would be no impact to the site in relationship to water quality, prime or sole source water.

4.2.6 Vegetation and Plant Communities

There would be only a negligible loss of vegetative cover during construction, as the location of the proposed infrastructure has minimal vegetative cover. Impacts to vegetation communities from construction of the proposed improvements would be minimal.

Reclamation efforts would increase species richness, diversity and vigor. The overall health of the plant communities would benefit from the proposed action.

4.2.7 Invasive, Non- Native Plant Species

Treatments for invasive non-native plant species would begin as soon as possible, in order to reduce the potential spread of these species. These efforts would include controlling the spread of non-native invasive species, re-contouring, planting, and reseeding. These activities would be concentrated in currently disturbed areas or areas that have only minimal vegetative cover. Vegetative treatments would include the use of chemical herbicides such as Roundup, Glyphosate, Monsanto, Telar, Chorsulfuron, Dupont, Oust, Sulfometuron, and Plateau. Species lists to be used for habitat improvement efforts are detailed in the Trapper's Route RAMP (BLM 2006).

Russian olives would be cut down and chemically treated during the 2012 field season. These trees would then be removed from site and disposed of. Cottonwoods and willows would be planted as replacements and would be watered when feasible. Cheetgrass would be chemical treated and the area would be reseeded with native species in the fall. A detailed inventory of the site would be completed, and all other plant species that are categorized as invasive, non-native plants would be treated accordingly, using best management practices.

Because these species would be treated throughout the life of this project, the composition of native to non-native species would change over time and increase the overall health of the plant communities. This treatment plan is part of a larger, long-term implementation project for the North Platter River and the benefits would be wide spread.

4.2.8 Wildlife and Habitats

Mitigation measures may be identified later to protect wildlife habitats. No negative impacts to these resources would occur as a result of the proposed action. However, the proposed design would confine motorized access and guide activities to set locations, reducing the likelihood of long-term negative impacts related to recreational use of the site. Moreover, the reclamation efforts would benefit wildlife and improve the quality of important habitats. Woody species would also be planted for screening, visual enhancements, and use by numerous wildlife species.

4.2.9 Special Status Species

Construction activities would be limited to between July 1 and November 15 in order to meet timing stipulations for bald and golden eagles feeding in concentration areas and to reduce conflicts among recreationists using the area. This stipulations would apply unless it is determined that the proposed activities would not be likely to affect any special status species.

4.2.10 Visual Resources

The proposed project area is required to meet VRM class II objectives, which state that the visual intrusion may be seen but should not draw the attention of the viewer, and that the basic elements of line, form, color, and texture should be repeated as part of the project design. The removal of the existing structures that are sky-lined within the viewshed and reclamation efforts associated with this project would significantly improve the visual quality of this area (BLM 2004). This includes removing power lines and electric poles and reducing the visual footprint caused by the removal of the buildings.

All improvements identified in the Proposed Action would be subordinate to the surrounding environment and would repeat the line, form, color and texture found within the existing landscape. The proposed upgrades to the site (access road, parking area,

and pedestrian trail and bridge) are generally low profile. The selected color and placement of comfort stations would mitigate the visual intrusions and only create a minor contrast with the natural landscape features. Management actions would be seen, but not draw the attention of the casual observer, as they are well suited for the rural-developed area (BLM 2004).

Construction of the trailhead would also benefit visual resources in the area as the project components repeat the basic elements within the existing landscape and provides much-needed additional parking spaces. This would result in less parking along the county road mitigating the visual impacts of the existing land uses.

4.2.11 Recreation

The proposed Blue Gulch Trailhead would extend recreational developments that exist on the adjacent parcel and would be accessible to more users. The Proposed Action would help to sustain recreational opportunities and enhance the quality of the experience. Visitor use numbers are at an estimated 90% of capacity during the peak season, which runs from mid-March to mid-July. Visitation tapers off slightly during the hot summer months when the water is at its highest level. The fishing season can run through September and November but at a much-reduced level, with average use being at only 25% capacity during the colder months (Haas, G.E., M.D. Wells, V. Lovejoy, and D. Welch 2007).

The designation of an access road for motorized use and the construction of the parking area would not significantly change the existing transportation system or projected use levels. However, the additional parking would control motorized activities at the trailhead, **meets accessibility standards**, could reduce illegal parking along the county road, and may alleviate conflicts among users.

Extending the hiking trail would provide an accessible path from the parking area to the proposed bridge that would connect to the existing interpretive trail and would reduce the likelihood of multiple pedestrian trails being created through Hogback Draw. The long-term benefits of this trail include stabilization of soils and a reduction in gullies and rills created by heavy foot traffic.

4.3 Cumulative Effects

The cumulative impacts derived from the Proposed Action would be beneficial to the natural resource as well as to the human environment. The newly acquired parcel provides the BLM with the ability to better manage use along this section of river. It provides the area required to construct a much needed parking area, decreasing the threat to public health and safety. The proposed project allows for the area to be managed for recreational purposes and to better fit with the rural developed setting.

By providing recreational facilities, the BLM directs visitor use to locations suited for these types of activities and away from areas that would be easily impacted by concentrated visitor use (BOR 2004). Additionally, the presence of management activities has an impact on behavior of visitors to public lands. Adequate parking areas provide access to the site, while non-motorized trails direct pedestrian traffic, reducing impacts to the site location. Well maintained recreation areas are valued by the public and generally have less vandalism and less impact to the natural environment.

The proposed action would be likely to not have a negative impact in the context of past (culture resources), present resource use, future allocations or reasonably foreseeable actions which may occur.

There is an increased possibility of impacts to any existing cultural resources as the parcel becomes increasingly utilized as an outdoor recreation area within the larger North Platte River corridor. All newly identified cultural resources will be monitored.

4.4 Mitigation Measures Considered

The proposed action is a mitigation measure. The development of the trailhead would concentrate visitor use to areas defined by the BLM and provide for pedestrian access to the adjoining recreation areas. The majority of the Proposed Action focuses on mitigation of disturbed areas and reclamation of the site. Reclamation efforts would include the use of top soils and re-contouring of specific areas located on site. All invasive, non-native plant species would be eradicated and monitored for possible regeneration.

A seasonal limitation on construction activities would be applied as deemed necessary and native species including woody varieties would be planted to improve wildlife habitats.

All cultural resources known or newly identified will be physically avoided by all new surface disturbing activities and, if needed, other protective measures (such as fencing) will be implemented. Avoidance is the preferred mitigation method. If any significant cultural resources cannot be avoided, a mitigation plan will be developed and implemented in consultation with the Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office. Further, if any sites with Native American religious concerns are discovered and cannot be avoided then the appropriate tribal consultation will be conducted and mitigation measures developed. Finally, if appropriate and applicable, cultural resource manifestations, occurring on or near the parcel may be incorporated into the overall visitor experience through interpretation, public education, or permanent protective facilities.

4.5 Residual Effects

There may be some increased visitation to the area, immediately after completion of the project; however, this is one of several recreational enhancement projects that have been identified for public lands within Trapper's Route. Visitors seeking more primitive recreational experiences or those who wish to avoid crowded areas would move downstream as other projects are being completed. The Trapper's Route RAMP evaluated the impacts of all of these projects, with the residual and cumulative effects allowing for a wider distribution of recreational visitors.

Overall visitor satisfaction should increase as a result implementing the Proposed Action as this project addresses a number of issues brought forth by the public. No negative impacts would be result to other agencies or private stake holders who depend on overnight stays as this site is limited to day use only.

Long-term maintenance of this site would be required. However, maintenance of this site would be minor as it is located near two existing BLM developed recreation sites. No other residual impacts are expected.

5.0 TRIBES, INDIVIDUALS, ORGANIZATIONS, or AGENCIES CONSULTED

Wyoming Game and Fish Department
Natrona County Parks
Conservation Fund
Wyoming Fly Caster's

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