



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

White Mountain National Forest
Saco Ranger District

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Conway, NH 03818
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File Code: 1950

Date: April 18, 2008

Dear Interested Citizen,

I would like to thank you for commenting on the Lower Falls Site Improvement Project. Three comments were received and considered during the comment period. I have reviewed the comments and the analysis documents and an effort has been made to address all questions and concerns. I am satisfied that this project is beneficial, and can safely proceed with no significant adverse environmental effect to the National Forest.

My decision is to move forward with the Lower Falls Site Improvement Project. The enclosed Decision Memo provides detail as to the reasons for my decision. These documents are also posted on our White Mountain National Forest web site:

www.fs.fed.us/r9/forests/white_mountain/projects/projects/.

Our planning staff has appreciated the public involvement on this project. The goal of public involvement efforts in our programs and projects are to improve decisions. We look forward to your continued involvement in projects on the Saco Ranger District. Again, thank you for your interest in the management of the White Mountain National Forest.

Sincerely,

/S/ Terry Miller
TERRY MILLER
District Ranger

Enclosures (1)





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April 2008

Lower Falls Site Improvement Project

Decision Memo Saco Ranger District



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**Lower Falls Site Improvement Project
Table of Contents
White Mountain National Forest
Saco Ranger District**

DECISION 3

PROJECT AREA AND BACKGROUND 3

PURPOSE AND NEED 3

PROPOSED ACTION 4

DESCRIPTION AND REASONS FOR DECISION 4

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED 4

NO ACTION 4

REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION 5

CATEGORY OF THE EXCLUSION 5

RELATIONSHIP TO EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES 5

THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES OR THEIR CRITICAL HABITAT 5

FLOODPLAINS, WETLANDS, OR MUNICIPAL WATERSHEDS 5

CONGRESSIONALLY DESIGNATED AREAS 5

INVENTORIED ROADLESS AREAS (IRA) 5

RESEARCH NATURAL AREAS 6

**AMERICAN INDIANS AND ALASKA NATIVE RELIGIOUS OR CULTURAL SITES & ARCHAEOLOGICAL
SITES, OR HISTORIC PROPERTIES OR AREAS 6**

SUMMARY 6

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT 6

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS 7

FOREST PLAN CONSISTENCY 7

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL 7

IMPLEMENTATION DATE 7

CONTACT PERSON 7

SIGNATURE AND DATE 7

Decision

Project Area and Background

The Lower Falls Recreation Site is a frequently used picnic area and swimming recreation site that is found between the Kancamagus Scenic Byway and the Swift River. This site is a popular destination for visitors looking for scenic viewing opportunities, picnicking and water based recreation activities, including wading, swimming and, to a much lesser degree, boating during high spring runoff. Facilities at the site include a toilet facility, picnic tables, pavilion, parking area and grills. The site currently has no defined trails or designated viewing areas, and heavy pedestrian traffic has caused severe compaction throughout this site. Elimination of ground vegetation and tree mortality are occurring throughout the Lower Falls area.

Purpose and Need

In 2007, the Saco Ranger District completed the Lower Falls Site Management Plan to examine the site and determine how to best manage it to provide a high quality visitor experience in an ecologically sustainable manner. The Management Plan made recommendations for specific site improvement work.

The Lower Falls Site Improvement Project was designed to implement the recommendations in the Management Plan to address past and ongoing resource concerns, including damage to riparian vegetation, erosion, and high levels of tree mortality due to soil compaction. The goal is to rehabilitate the Lower Falls Scenic Area to more resemble less trampled areas along the Swift River and the Kancamagus Scenic Highway, while providing for high quality visitor experience. The project also would implement the 2007 White Mountain National Forest Water Safety Action Plan.

The Lower Falls Site Improvement Project will:

- Manage the site to meet recreation management goals and provide safe public access.
- Address past and ongoing resource concerns associated with damage to riparian vegetation, erosion, and high levels of tree mortality due to soil compaction
- Provide effective accessible travel routes and viewing areas.
- Sign the site appropriately to address safety concerns, administrative issues, and visitor information needs.

The project area is primarily in Management Area 2.1 (MA 2.1; General Forest Area). The proposed improvements are compatible with the Forest-wide and MA 2.1 standards and objectives identified in the 2005 Land and Resource Management Plan (USDA-Forest Service, 2005). The Forest Plan directs that the White Mountain National Forest should manage high use areas and facilities to meet visitor needs, while providing for long-term sustainability. The Forest Plan also directs that existing day use areas may be improved; however use should not be allowed to increase indefinitely at high use sites. The proposed improvements will also be consistent with the Built Environment Image Guide (USDA Forest Service, FS-710, September 2001), intended to maintain a consistent architectural character for facilities and signs.

Proposed Action

The proposed action includes four components;

1. The designation of a travel route, with distinct river entry points and accessible viewing areas. The travel route will be designed using universal design standards and defined using split rail fencing.
2. The aeration of soil, and the introduction of organic matter, to prepare the site for the planting of vegetation. The reclamation areas will be posted as closed to foot travel, to avoid soil compaction. Aerating the soil will increase the availability of water and nutrients, increase oxygen levels in the soil, stimulate root growth, and reduce water runoff.
3. The establishment of vegetation in rehabilitated areas. Specific area plant layout and plant choices will be determined in collaboration with a Landscape Architect and the Forest Botanist.
4. Sign the site appropriately to address safety concerns, administrative issues, and visitor information needs. This will primarily be accomplished by relocation or removal of redundant or poorly located signs.

Project components one, two and four will be completed prior to the coordinated planting efforts. The trail establishment, fencing, soil aeration and organic matter addition would be implemented within one season. Plantings would occur after the completion of the first two components.

Description and Reasons for Decision

After careful consideration of public input, the recommendations of an interdisciplinary team of resource specialists, and the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act, I have decided to proceed with the proposed action to rehabilitate the Lower Falls Scenic Area, as described above and in the Lower Falls Site Management Plan.

This decision is based on my review of the project file and past experience with similar activities on the White Mountain National Forest. It is my decision to implement the recommendations of the Lower Falls Management Plan in its entirety. The Lower Falls project will facilitate vital resource management at this immensely popular public destination. The Lower Falls Site improvements will help us to provide a quality visitor experience in an ecologically sustainable manner.

This project is planned under the regulation at 36CFR 219.35 (2000) and the Interpretative Rule of September 29, 2004. As required by 36 CFR 219.35, I have considered the best available science in making this decision. The project record demonstrates a thorough review of relevant scientific information, consideration of responsible opposing views, and, where appropriate, the acknowledgment of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk.

Alternatives Considered

No action

The no action alternative would allow the ongoing resource damage associated with recreation use of this site to continue unchecked, including damage to riparian vegetation, erosion, and high levels of tree mortality due to soil compaction. The visitor experience at the Lower Falls site would significantly degrade as the site continues to decline under the current use patterns.

Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Decision

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment when they are within one of the categories identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 7 CFR 1b or one of the categories identified by the Chief of the Forest Service in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 chapter 30 sections 31.12 or 31.2, and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative environmental effect.

Category of the Exclusion

This project is within Category 5 of FSH 1909.15, section 31.12. This category of exclusion includes “*Repair and maintenance of recreation sites and facilities.*” This category requires a project file and decision memo. This category is appropriate because the proposed action is specifically designed to repair the Lower Falls site and associated facilities.

Relationship to Extraordinary Circumstances

Threatened and Endangered Species or Their Critical Habitat

To date, no federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species have been observed or are known to be present. Botanical surveys were completed in June 2007. A complete, Biological Evaluation (BE) was completed in 1999 and was reviewed for this project in February 2008. The BE indicated the project will have no effect.

Floodplains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds

The project will not result in an adverse effect to any floodplains, wetlands, or any municipal water supply. The project area is located adjacent to the Swift River. This project will reduce compaction and establish vegetation, reducing runoff and sedimentation. The site improvement will also direct visitors to use defined river entry points, which will reduce the amount of disturbance along the bank of the Swift River.

Congressionally Designated Areas

The project area does not occur within or adjacent to any Congressionally Designated Areas, Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, or National Recreation Areas. The closest designated Wilderness is the Sandwich Range Wilderness, which is located approximately 5 miles from the project area. Given the location of the project area in relation to congressionally designate areas no effect to wilderness or wilderness characteristics is anticipated.

Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRA)

The project area does not occur within or adjacent to any inventoried roadless areas. The closest inventoried roadless area is the Table Mountain IRA, which is located approximately 500 feet from the project area on the northern side of the Swift River. Based on the location of the project area in relation to the Swift River and the Kancamagus Highway no effect to roadless or roadless characteristics is expected.

Research Natural Areas

The proposed project area is not located within or adjacent to a Research Natural Area (RNA) or a candidate RNA (CRNA). The closest RNA is The Bowl, which is located approximately 5 miles from the project area. There is no potential this project will effect any RNA or CNRA.

American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites & Archaeological Sites, or Historic Properties or Areas.

The Lower Falls Recreation site hosts a 1930's era Civilian Conservation Corps Pavilion. This pavilion is frequently used, with approximately 6 large picnic tables and a grill. On most summer days the picnic tables and grill at the pavilion are utilized by visitors seeking shade or picnicking. No changes to this feature are proposed, but the pavilion will receive general maintenance.

The WMNF Cultural Atlas shows no known archeological sites within the project area. A site specific survey has been completed and an Archaeological Resource Report was submitted for review by the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO). There are identified cultural sites near the project area; these sites will not be affected by this project. Any sites located during the implementation of the improvement project will be protected and avoided.

Summary

No extraordinary circumstances related to this project were identified. Based on this and past experience with similar actions I have determined there are no extraordinary circumstances for this project likely to produce significant effects. Therefore a higher level of environmental analysis is not required.

Public Involvement

This project was listed in the White Mountain National Forest Quarterly Newsletter (Schedule of Proposed Actions). Public involvement for the project included a scoping notice issued on December 7, 2007. Direct mailings were sent on December 7, 2007 to approximately 21 interested parties (households) (Planning Record, mailing list), and posted on the White Mountain Website. Consultation included the Town of Albany Selectmen, Town of Conway Selectmen, Town of Waterville Selectmen, and Town of Bartlett Selectmen, Swift River Advisory Committee and the NH Department of Transportation. Comments received from all scoping efforts were used to refine the project, to explore the possibility of extraordinary circumstances and potential effects of proposed activities on resources.

Three comments were received for this project. All three of the comments demonstrated support for this project proposal. Two commenters had specific questions in regard to proposal components, including questions in regard to planned fencing and planting materials. One commenter provided information in regard to the history of the Passaconaway Valley.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

My decision will comply with all applicable laws and regulations.

Forest Plan Consistency

The Forest Plan has been reviewed in consideration of this project. This decision is consistent with the standards and guidelines contained in the Forest Plan (USDA-Forest Service, 2005, pg. 2.16-2.17, 3.3). This decision is responsive to guiding direction contained in the Plan, as summarized in Section 1 of this document.

Administrative Review or Appeal

This decision is not subject to a higher level of administrative review or appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.8.

Implementation Date

The site improvement work will likely begin in the Fall of 2008. Implementation of this project is planned to occur between 2008 and 2011.

Contact Person

Further information about this decision can be obtained from Lauren Oswald, Recreation Planner, Saco Ranger District, (33 Kancamagus Hwy, White Mountain National Forest, Conway, NH 03818) Phone: 603 447-5448 X109 Fax: 603 447-8405. Or lmoswald@fs.fed.us.

Signature and Date

I have concluded that this decision may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment as it is within one of the categories identified by the Chief of the Forest Service in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 sections 31.12, and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative environmental effect. My conclusion is based on information presented in this document and the entirety of the Planning Record.

<u>/S/Terry Miller</u>	<u>April 18, 2008</u>
TERRY MILLER	DATE
District Ranger	

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Lower Falls Site Improvement Project



LOWER FALLS RECREATION AREA
Proposed Project Area



Kancamagus Scenic HWY
Dugway Road

Swift River

NH HWY 112

SACO RANGER STATION

NH HWY 16- White Mountain Highway

Legend

-  SACO RANGER STATION
-  Improved_Roads
-  Streams_and_Rivers
-  Forest_Service_Ownership



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