

**DECISION NOTICE
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

**RANCH CREEK
RESTORATION PROJECT**

**Garfield County, Utah
Escalante Ranger District
Dixie National Forest
USDA Forest Service**

INTRODUCTION

The Escalante Ranger District of the Dixie National Forest has completed an Environmental Assessment (EA) documenting the analysis for a fish habitat restoration project in the Ranch Creek area 20 miles northwest of Escalante, Utah. Ranch Creek contains the only known Bonneville cutthroat trout (BCT) native fishery that exists on the Escalante Ranger District. The suitability of this fishery has been compromised by past unauthorized stream alterations which have resulted in substantial stream down cutting and a reduction in the number of resting pools. The objective of the proposal is to correct the noted deficiencies and re-establish Ranch Creek as a quality trout fishery.

The 445-acre restoration project area is located east of Johns Valley and northeast of the old Widtsoe town site. The legal description is: Sections 25 and 36, Township 33 South, Range 2 West, Sections 30 and 31, Township 33 South, Range 1 West, Salt Lake Base Meridian.

The EA for the Ranch Creek Restoration Project is a site-specific analysis that discloses the effects of implementing either the Modified Proposed Action or the No Action alternative. An interdisciplinary team made up of Dixie National Forest employees determined the environmental effects. The analysis is documented in the EA, and is supported by the Project File located in the Escalante Ranger District office.

The EA was developed under the implementing regulations of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA); Council on Environmental Quality; Title 40, Code of Federal Regulations, Parts 1500-1508; the National Forest Management Act (NFMA); and Title 36, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 219. Further direction was provided in the Dixie National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP).

DECISION

Based on the analysis documented in the Ranch Creek Restoration Project EA, it is my decision to implement the Modified Proposed Action. This action will provide for an array of treatments which will enhance BCT habitat. These treatments include placing rocks and large woody debris in the stream bed, removing or reconfiguring the unauthorized rock barriers which have been installed in the stream, constructing a gated wooden fence enclosure, reinforcing a water gap for livestock with rock, placing boulders, trees, and brush along portions of the stream banks, rehabilitation of a dispersed camping site, planting water birch cuttings, obliteration of a skid trail, and amendment of the Dixie National Forest LRMP, which will show Ranch Creek as Management Area 9A (Riparian Management), and the prior location as 5A (Big Game Winter Range). There will be a net increase of 16 acres of 5A, and a net decrease of 16 acres of 9A. The complete Modified Proposed Action description may be viewed in Chapters 1 and 2 of the EA.

During the public Comment and Review period, a commenter requested that only hand tools be used in obliterating the skid trail. This request resulted in an alternative; one that was considered but eliminated from detailed study. Another alternative, the Proposed Action, was considered but eliminated because it was scoped prior to IDT awareness that the LRMP mapping did not accurately reflect actual site conditions in the Ranch Creek area.

Because the restoration activities expressly meet the purpose and need and are consistent with the Dixie National Forest LRMP, and because the ecological, social, and environmental effects are well within all resource parameters, I believe implementation of the Modified Proposed Action is clearly the best choice. This alternative will enhance the viability of the BCT and increase the likelihood that the species will not have to be listed.

The monitoring activities described in Appendix A-3 will be implemented as part of this decision. Relevant mitigation measures have been described in 2.4, Chapter 2, pages 3-4.

DECISION RATIONALE

The detailed analysis in Chapter 4 of the EA describes how each alternative affects various resources within the area. Based on my close review of these effects, I have selected the Modified Proposed Action because it best meets the purpose and need, effectively addresses the resource problems identified in the area, and will have no harmful effects.

Specifically, I believe that selection of the Modified Proposed Action is very important for long-term fish habitat establishment for the Bonneville cutthroat trout (BCT). The Dixie National Forest is committed to completing actions that are consistent with the Utah Interagency Conservation Agreement and Strategy for BCT. Increasing the carrying capacity within Ranch Creek is an important step in meeting this commitment.

I also feel strongly about properly managing dispersed recreation use and correcting LRMP errors. The selection of the Modified Proposed Action will bring dispersed recreation use into plan compliance, and through amendment, will correctly display the location of Management Area 9A.

Finally, after the field trip with interested publics and the concerns they have for water availability, I have decided to use the planting of only water birch trees rather than cottonwood or willow. Although cottonwood and willow will likely establish through time, I am sensitive to the public's comment about a preference for birch, and have elected to use only birch when planting actions are implemented.

The Modified Proposed Action is consistent with the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 in meeting the management requirements detailed in implementing regulations 36 CFR 219.27 (a), (b), (e), (f) and (g). Specifically, management actions for the Modified Proposed Action provide for the protection of soil, water, air, wildlife, fisheries, and other multiple uses. Specific to the LRMP amendment that is part of this decision, I have thoughtfully reviewed this action and have carefully considered these factors.

- Timing – The change in correctly mapping the riparian area as 9A would take place immediately. Correcting the mapping error so that on site conditions are accurately reflected in the LRMP is not significant in this regard.
- Location and Size – This change will move 16 acres of Management Area 9A (Riparian Management), to 16 acres of Management 5A (Big Game Winter Range). It will actually place Ranch Creek into a 9A prescription rather than 5A. Given the context of Management Areas across the entire 1.9 million acres of the Dixie National Forest, the affected area is small.
- Goals, Outputs and Objectives – With this minor change, there are no foreseen changes in the level of outputs projected by the forest plan. This amendment would not forego any opportunities to achieve the outputs described.
- Management Prescription – This change will be permanent, and will become part of any future decisions associated with Ranch Creek. The changes however will not alter desired land conditions, and anticipated delivery of goods and services will not change.

Based on this review of the action and consideration for these circumstances, I have determined that this change in the forest plan is not significant.

No conflicts have been identified with other Federal, State and Local governmental agencies.

The Modified Proposed Action complies with the Endangered Species Act.

No floodplains or wetlands will be affected as defined in Executive Orders 11988 and 11990.

The goal of NEPA is: “to achieve a productive and enjoyable harmony between man and his environment; to promote efforts which will prevent or eliminate damage to the environment and biosphere and stimulate the health and welfare of man...” I believe that the Modified Proposed Action meets this goal of harmonious balance for the reasons stated.

I have read the public comments and have noted that many of the letters received in response to the Comment and Review EA, preferred selection of the No Action alternative. I have not selected No Action because doing nothing at this point simply leaves too many needs unmet. The Purpose and Need Table in Chapter 2, page 4 clearly shows that in order to achieve desired conditions, actions are needed. I believe the best way to accomplish this will be with implementation of the Modified Proposed Action as described above.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Analysis of the Modified Proposed Action was initiated through a public scoping process. On August 13, 1999, a scoping notice was mailed to a total of 191 interested individuals, organizations, and governmental agencies. Twenty-six written responses were received. The Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) analyzed each comment of each response and no significant issues were identified.

On October 29, 1999, some members of the IDT met with interested citizens on site to discuss the proposed project. On August 15, 2000, another meeting was held on site to answer any questions regarding the proposal. Copies of the Comment and Review EA were mailed to all scoping respondents and selected government agencies on July 20, 2000. This began the formal 30-day Notice and Comment period which resulted in our receiving ten more written responses.

I appreciate the time and effort that all interested parties spent participating in this analysis process. Each comment was carefully considered in my decision. The responses to all of the public comments received during the scoping process are documented in 5.4, Chapter 5, pages 6-22. The EA also considers each of the public comments expressed during the Comment and Review period, and the effects of the selected alternative are appropriately disclosed. Comment and Review responses are documented in 5.5 of Chapter 5 of the EA. The record of all public contacts and mailing lists are in the Project File located at the Escalante Ranger District office.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

Two alternatives, the Modified Proposed Action and No Action, were evaluated in detail. These alternatives represent a range of management strategies and outputs, and meet the Forest Plan and proposal objectives. A detailed description of the Modified Proposed Action can be found in 1.2.1, Chapter 1, page 1-2 and in 2.3.2, Chapter 2, page 2. A

detailed description of No Action can be viewed in 2.3.1, Chapter 2, page 2. A Comparison Table showing both alternatives is located in 2.5, Chapter 2, page 4.

Two other alternatives were considered, but not analyzed in detail by the IDT (see 2.2.1, Chapter 2, page 1 of the EA). These were the Proposed Action and an alternative to Use Only Hand Tools to Rehabilitate the Skid Trail.

Upon close examination, it became apparent to the IDT that the allocation of MA 9A in the LRMP needed to be amended in order to reflect current conditions in and adjacent to the analysis area. It was determined that the Proposed Action, as scoped with the public, would need to be modified to reflect an appropriate LRMP amendment. Because of this consideration, the original Proposed Action was eliminated from detailed analysis.

In response to a public comment received during the 30 day Notice and Comment Period for the EA, an alternative using only hand tools to rehabilitate the skid trail was considered. This alternative was considered but eliminated from detailed analysis because implementation would have been labor intensive, costly, and time consuming. Further, the transportation of large boulders and logs would require heavy equipment and the use of such equipment would reduce the period of soil disturbance and, consequently, the amount of sediment entering the stream.

COMPLIANCE WITH THE LRMP, OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

The Modified Proposed Action is in compliance with the Dixie National Forest LRMP, the National Forest Management Act of 1976, and the Endangered Species Act. In addition, no wetlands or floodplains will be affected as defined in Executive Orders 11988 and 11990.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

I have determined that this action is not a major federal action, individually or cumulatively, and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not needed. This determination is based upon the following factors:

CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT:

The project will occur on a local level. No significant effects are expected to occur within this project area (EA, Chapter 4).

INTENSITY OF THE PROJECT:

Intensity refers to the severity of impact. The following ten factors were evaluated in determining the intensity of the effects of the proposed project.

1. Beneficial and adverse effects from the selected alternative (Modified Proposed Action) are not significant. The effects described in the EA, Chapter 4 (pgs. 1-19), support this determination.

2. Public health and safety are not adversely affected by the selected alternative. This is documented in 2.4 (Mitigations), Chapter 2, (pgs. 3 and 4).
3. There are no areas within the project area or cumulative effects area, with unique geographic characteristics such as historical or cultural resources, parklands, prime farmlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas that are significantly affected by the selected alternative. This is documented in Chapter 3 of the EA, (pgs. 3, 4 and 10) and in the Project File.
4. The effects of the selected alternative on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial. These effects are disclosed in detail in the EA, Chapter 4, (pgs 1-19).
5. There are no known effects on the human environment that are highly uncertain or that involve unique or unknown risks. All known effects are adequately discussed in the EA, Chapter 4, (pgs 1-19), and were professionally determined and disclosed.
6. These actions do not set a precedent for any other projects that may be implemented to meet the goals and objectives of the LRMP. The selected alternative specifically addresses and takes measures to correct site-specific problems within the analysis area. The prescribed treatments are relative to this project only, and do not set a precedent for these types of actions for vegetation treatment projects. The action is described in Chapter 2, pages 2 and 3.
7. There are no known significant cumulative effects between this project and other projects implemented or planned in the area. This is substantiated in the various cumulative effects discussions in Chapter 4 (pgs. 1-19) of the EA.
8. There are no known historic or cultural resources that will be affected. This is documented in Chapters 3, (pg 10) and 4 (pgs. 13 and 17) of the EA.
9. There are no known endangered, threatened, or sensitive plant or animal species within the Ranch Creek analysis area that will be adversely affected by the selected alternative. Relevant documentation is referenced in Chapters 3 (pgs. 9-10) and 4 (pgs. 12 and 17) of the EA, and within the Biological Assessment and Biological Evaluation located in the Project File.
10. These actions do not threaten a violation of Federal, State, or local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment (EA Chpt. 4, pgs. 16-19).

This conclusion is based on my review of the EA and my review of the public input that has been received for this project.

IMPLEMENTATION AND ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to Forest Service Regulations at 36 CFR 215.7. Any written appeal must be postmarked or received by the Appeal Deciding Officer, Regional Forester, Jack Blackwell, Intermountain Regional Office, 324 25th Street, Ogden, Utah 84401, 45 days following the date that the legal notice of this decision was published in the Daily Spectrum newspaper, St. George, Utah. Appeals must meet content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14.

This decision may be implemented no sooner than 5 business days following the close of the appeal filing period.

For additional information, contact Richard D. Wheeler, Team Leader, at the Escalante Ranger District, Dixie National Forest, P.O. Box 246, Escalante, Utah 84726.

Mary Wagner
Mary Wagner
Dixie NF Supervisor

10/5/00
Date

United States
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Intermountain Region

Dixie National Forest
Escalante Ranger District

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RANCH CREEK

RESTORATION PROJECT

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

OCTOBER 2000

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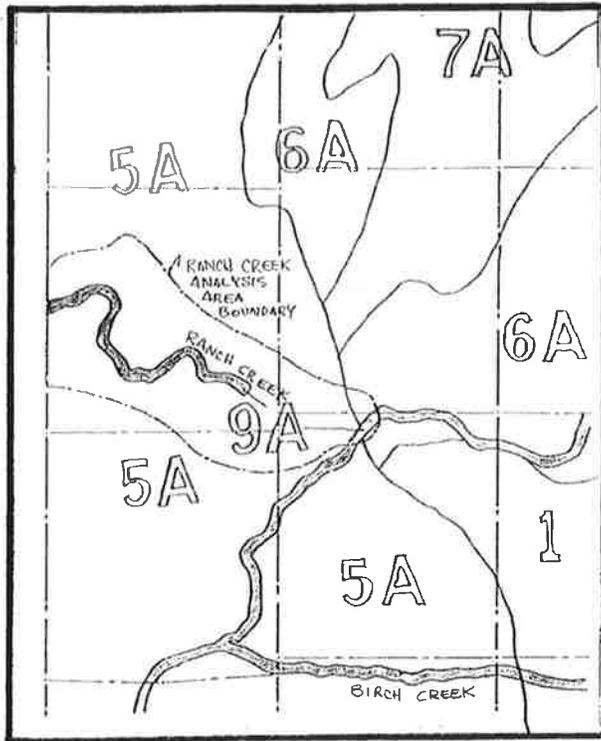
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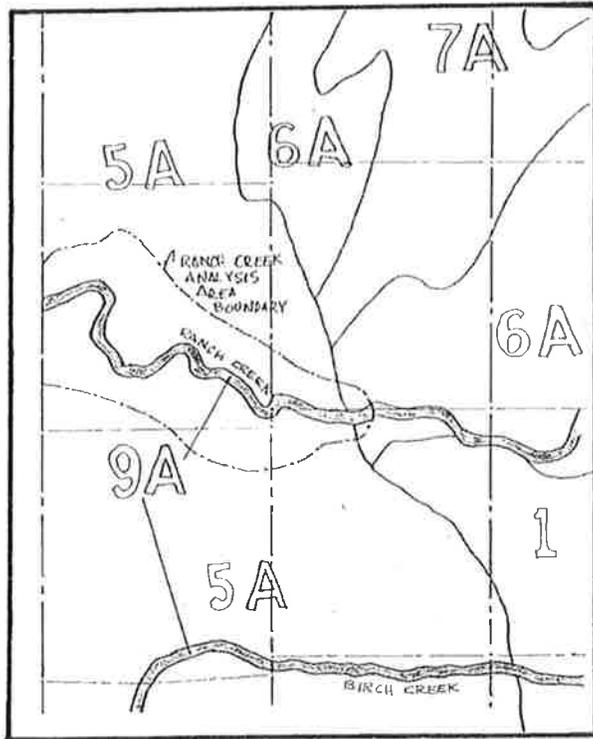
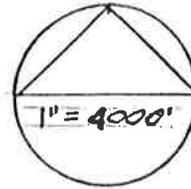
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EXISTING

NORTH



PROPOSED

LRMP AMENDMENT