

## Decision Memo for the Mill Falls Campground Improvements

U.S.D.A. Forest Service, Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest

Rocky Mountain Ranger District

(Teton County, Montana)

### Decision

I have decided to complete the Mill Falls Campground Improvements project located in T 24N, R 9W, Section 4 SW ¼ on the Rocky Mountain Ranger District of the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest along the South Fork Teton Road near Choteau, Montana. Mill Falls campground currently offers limited amenities including four small campsites, a newer SST, and an information kiosk. Due to tight site layout and lack of potable water, it is only suitable for tents and small campers, and cannot accommodate larger RVs or be designated as a fee site. The area is heavily used for dispersed recreation such as hiking, hunting, and camping, especially near popular trails like Our Lake and Mill Falls Creek Trail #185. Planned improvements include expanding camping, day use, and parking opportunities for larger vehicles, installing a potable water source, improving parking and traffic circulation, updated signage, an additional restroom and a fee station. All site features and facilities will meet full accessibility standards.

Resource protection measures as listed below are incorporated into this decision for implementation.

*Heritage:* If any previously undiscovered heritage resources are found during implementation, project activity will cease immediately within 100 feet of the unanticipated discovery pending consultation with Forest Service heritage personnel.

*Botany:* Revegetation/seeding will require a minimum of blue-tag certified, native seed mix approved by the forest botanist. Seed will be applied promptly after management activities which disturb or expose soil but done under environmental conditions favorable for germination. This is typically just before snow or heavy rainfall in the fall or in the spring just after snowmelt depending on the approved seed mix. The most genetically appropriate and localized seed will be used when available. (FW-VEGT-GDL-04. FW-INV-GDL-05. FW-SOIL-STD-01. FW-SOIL-GDL-04. FW-SOIL-GDL-06. FW-SOIL-GDL-07. FSM 2070. Pollinator Friendly BMPs for Federal Lands.)

#### *Pollinators:*

- Surfactants will only be used when explicitly recommended by the herbicide label, with careful consideration given to the specific herbicide, target plant species, and current weather conditions. When feasible, alcohol-based surfactants will be prioritized over silicone-based alternatives. (FW-POLL-GDL-01. FW-INV-STD-01. FW-INV-GDL-02. FW-INV-GDL-03.)
- If bumble bee nests are encountered during project implementation, they will not be disturbed. Instead, the Forest Service liaison will be contacted to document the nest and determine appropriate mitigation measures.

#### *Soils:*

- Construction activities will be conducted only when soil is dry to avoid compaction and rutting caused by mechanized equipment.

- Equipment will be staged in a single designated area, when feasible, to limit additional soil disturbance.
- Equipment operations will be restricted to the planned disturbance footprint and/or designated routes.
- Slash and existing organic material will be used to cover bare ground outside planned footprints, where practical, to prevent erosion and aid natural recovery.
- All disturbed, non-permanent infrastructure sites within the new campground will be reseeded using Forest Service-approved weed-free seed mix.

#### *Hydrology:*

- Best management practices will be applied to minimize erosion and sedimentation. All disturbed ground, including fill slopes for the new access road and obliterated road areas, will be seeded and mulched.
- Slash generated during project activities will be distributed on obliterated road areas, fill slopes, and other disturbed sites in lieu of mulch, where practicable.
- Heavy equipment will be washed and inspected prior to mobilization to prevent the spread of noxious weeds.
- Fuel storage and filling activities will occur outside the riparian management zone or at least 50 feet from the wetland and Mill Creek, and a fuel spill kit will be maintained onsite during these activities.

#### *Wildlife:*

- In order to avoid adverse effects to grizzly bears, the campground project shall include interpretive signage informing users of the food storage order and that they are in grizzly bear country. This will increase public understanding and awareness of human-bear conflict avoidance measures.
- Any human-grizzly bear conflicts that take place at the site will be reported to the district ranger or delegated acting district ranger within 24 hours of it being reported to forest personnel. A human-grizzly bear conflict is defined in the NCDE Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy (2019) as “an interaction between a grizzly bear and human in which bears either do, or attempt to, damage property, kill or injure livestock, damage beehives, injure people, or obtain anthropogenic foods or attractants or agricultural crops”.
- Due to a previous increase in developed overnight use associated with the Ear Mountain Cabin Conversion project, the forest will eliminate four dispersed camping sites in the South Fork Teton River drainage that provide the same recreational camping opportunity as this project. These closures are in place and the area (South Fork Teton Road) is monitored to ensure no new dispersed sites are created in this drainage concurrent with the existence of the expanded campground and its new campsites. If new sites are created by forest users, the forest will immediately close each site once it is discovered.

### **Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Action**

It is my determination that this action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment because it fits within the USDA-44d-USFS – Recreation:

Construction, reconstruction, decommissioning, or disposal of buildings, infrastructure, or improvements at an existing recreation site, including infrastructure or improvements that are adjacent or connected to an existing recreation site and provide access or utilities for that site. Recreation sites include but are not limited to campgrounds and camping areas, picnic areas, day use areas, fishing sites,

interpretive sites, visitor centers, trailheads, ski areas, and observation sites. Activities within this category are intended to apply to facilities located at recreation sites managed by the Forest Service and those managed by concessioners under a special use authorization.

Our interdisciplinary analysis found that no extraordinary circumstances to resource conditions exist that would preclude use of the category or warrant further analysis and documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement. The following resource conditions were evaluated as part of our analysis for extraordinary circumstances and additional documentation is available in the project record.

- Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service species of conservation concern.
  - Plants – No extraordinary circumstances exist regarding plant resources.
    - i. A “No Effect” determination has been made for the federally listed species whitebark pine (*Pinus albicaulis*). The project area is outside of modeled whitebark pine potential habitat. The site was surveyed on August 15, 2023, and no whitebark pine trees or suitable habitat were located.
    - ii. A “May impact individuals or habitat but will not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing or loss of viability to the population or species,” determination has been made pertaining to plant species of conservation concern (SCC). Effects on individual plant SCC with known populations within the project area are unlikely, as there are no known populations within the project implementation footprint. Suitable habitat in the project area is predicted to be of low, moderate and optimal suitability, according to Montana Natural Heritage Program predicted habitat models.
  - Pollinators – No extraordinary circumstances exist regarding pollinator resources.
    - i. A “No Effect” determination has been made for the proposed for federal listing species Monarch Butterfly (*Danaus Plexippus*). The Montana Natural Heritage Program suitable habitat model predicts no suitable habitat for the Monarch Butterfly or any of the native milkweed species in the action area. Should Monarch Butterflies pass through the action area during a migratory period, floral and roosting resources will remain available outside the action area. Also, roosting and nectar resources for adults would remain available in the action area during and following project implementation. Therefore, no effect to Monarch Butterflies is anticipated from this project.
    - ii. A “Not Likely to Jeopardize” determination has been made for the proposed for federal listing species Suckley’s Cuckoo Bumble Bee (*Bombus suckleyi*).
      1. There are no known occurrences of these proposed species in the action area.
      2. The stressors identified as likely to substantially impact the Suckley’s Cuckoo Bumble Bee’s species viability will not be affected by the project.
      3. Design features and Forest Plan compliance will buffer the Suckley’s Cuckoo Bumble Bee from many potential effects to their potential habitat (see relevant resource protection measures in this document).
      4. The project is consistent with the 2021 Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest Land Management Plan and therefore has been designed to provide the ecological conditions necessary for the long-term persistence of invertebrate pollinators.
  - Wildlife – No extraordinary circumstances exist regarding wildlife resources.

- i. A “may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect” determination has been made for the federally listed species grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*).
    - 1. There will be no net increase in overnight camping by the public associated with this action since the forest will be closing a commensurate amount and type of dispersed sites to offset the increase at the campground.
    - 2. The project will not increase total or open motorized route density (TMRD/OMRD) or decrease secure core (CORE).
    - 3. The project will not impact grizzly bear spring, summer, fall, or denning habitat as no vegetation work, treatments, or winter operations are proposed.
    - 4. The Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Food Storage Order is in effect. Workers associated with this project will be required to follow the Order at all times. Users of the campground will also be required to follow the order.
    - 5. Effects to bears will result from an increase in human activity and mechanical equipment noises, but these effects will be temporary and not impact a bear’s key life history needs of feeding, breeding, and sheltering in the action area. Thus, these effects will be insignificant and discountable.
    - 6. The project complies with all Forest Plan grizzly bear direction.
  - ii. A “may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect” determination has been made for the federally listed species Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) and federally designated lynx critical habitat.
    - 1. Use of heavy equipment during implementation activities has the potential for an increase in noise disturbance related effects.
    - 2. There would be no direct or future loss of snowshoe hare habitat - the existing site is already a developed campground and the expansion will not occur in areas where there presently exists snowshoe hare habitat.
    - 3. There will be sufficient habitat in the action area for lynx to use for feeding, breeding, and sheltering before, during, and after the proposed actions are implemented.
    - 4. There will be no impact to winter snowshoe hare habitat in the mature multistory or stand initiation structural stages (PCE1a).
    - 5. The proposed action will not create barriers to lynx movements across the landscape.
  - iii. A “may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect” determination has been made for the federally listed species wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*).
    - 1. Federal land management actions are not considered a threat to the species (U.S. Department of the Interior 2014).
    - 2. The overall amount of modelled wolverine habitat will remain unchanged.
    - 3. The project will not impact the availability or persistence of snow.
    - 4. Prey resources will be available to wolverine throughout the action area.
    - 5. Disturbances to wolverine and their prey resulting from the proposed action will be temporary and lasting only during the construction of the new camping sites.
    - 6. Wolverine will have sufficient habitat in the action area before, during, and after the project is implemented to carry out their critical life history needs (feeding, breeding, and sheltering).
- o Fisheries – No extraordinary circumstances exist regarding fisheries resources.

- i. A “No Effect” determination has been made for the federally listed species bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*). The project occurs outside of historic or current Bull Trout range and distribution.
  - ii. A “No Effect” determination has been made regarding federally designated bull trout critical habitat. The project occurs outside of Bull Trout Designated Critical Habitat.
  - iii. A determination of “No Impact” has been made pertaining to Westslope cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkia lewisi*): Given the location of the project activities and the proximity to fish bearing streams, it is unlikely that the project will have any negative effect upon Westslope cutthroat trout. No negative measurable effects to aquatic or riparian habitat are expected to result from the proposed project.
  - iv. A determination of “No Impact” has been made pertaining to western pearlshell mussel (*Margaritifera falcata*): There are no known western pearlshell mussels in proximity to the project area. In addition, project activities are unlikely to produce any riparian or water resource impacts that will affect mussels even if present.
- Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds – The project meets forest plan standards and guidelines for activities and their proximity to wetlands and other sensitive areas. Therefore, no extraordinary circumstances exist.
  - Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas – The project area is not within or adjacent to a wilderness area, wilderness study areas, or a national recreation area, and therefore no extraordinary circumstances exist.
  - Inventoried roadless areas or Wilderness areas – There are no inventoried roadless areas or Wilderness areas within the project area, and therefore no extraordinary circumstances exist.
  - Research natural areas – There are no research natural areas in or near the project area, and therefore no extraordinary circumstances exist.
  - American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites – There are no known sites in the proposed area. If unknown sites are encountered during implementation, these sites will be subject to appropriate Tribal Historic Preservation Officer review and comment, as per the 36 Code of Federal Regulations 800 compliance process. Therefore, no extraordinary circumstances exist.
  - Archeological sites, or historic properties or areas – Portions of the project area have been previously surveyed for archeological resources. This project may go forward as planned now or at any time in the future. Any undocumented archeological resources found during project implementation will be reported to a Forest Service archaeologist and, if necessary, project design will be modified to avoid impacts to those resources. Therefore, no extraordinary circumstances exist.

### Findings and Consistency with Laws, Regulation, and Forest Service Policies

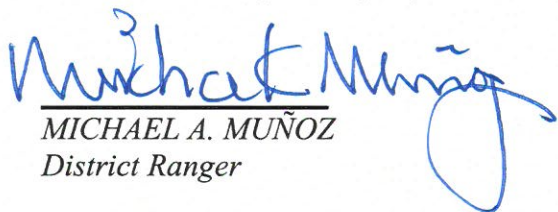
This project is consistent with the 2021 Helena-Lewis and Clark Land Management Plan components. This project meets requirements found in, but not limited to, the National Forest Management Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act.

## Public Involvement

This project was originally listed as a proposal on the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest public website. Input has been considered from an interdisciplinary team and through project analysis. No project specific comments were raised in the scoping of this project.

## Implementation

This project is not subject to administrative review procedures (appeal/objection process). Implementation is anticipated to begin immediately. For specific project information, please contact Barb Long, Forestry Technician (mailing address: Rocky Mountain Ranger District, 1102 Main Ave N, PO Box 340, Choteau, Montana 59422; phone: (406) 466-5341; email: [barbara.long@usda.gov](mailto:barbara.long@usda.gov)).

  
MICHAEL A. MUÑOZ  
District Ranger

01/23/2026  
Date

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