

Spirit Lake Outflow Draft Record of Decision Public Talking Points & FAQ

July 21, 2026

Draft Decision Overview

Forest Supervisor Johanna Kovarik has selected Alternative 7 for the Spirit Lake Outflow Safety Improvement Project. This alternative provides the most reliable long-term method for managing lake levels and reducing downstream risk while supporting ecological, cultural, and operational needs.

Key Components of Alternative 7

- **New Pressure Tunnel:** A modern tunnel built next to the existing one, improving safety, access, maintenance, and long-term reliability.
- **Access Road Across the Pumice Plain:** A new permanent access route, generally following the Truman Trail alignment, will support construction, maintenance, and emergency response.
- **Repair and Continued Use of the Existing Tunnel:** The current tunnel will be repaired and maintained as a backup outflow option.
- **Habitat Channel Process:** The decision begins the process of reconnecting Spirit Lake to the North Fork Toutle River through a naturalized habitat channel, pending further analysis and review. The new pressure tunnel must be fully operational before any habitat channel connection is made.

Implementation Approach

- Implementation will occur in three major phases:
 - **Phase 1:** Detailed design of the new pressure tunnel, access road, and repairs to the existing tunnel.
 - **Phase 2:** Construction of a new pressure tunnel, repair of the existing tunnel where necessary, construction of the Truman Trail Access Road, and establishment of temporary staging areas and facilities to support construction.
 - **Phase 3:** Commissioning and initial operation of the new pressure tunnel infrastructure. During this phase, the Forest Service will conduct system testing, and controlled operations to ensure safe and reliable functioning of the new tunnel before long-term use.
- Concurrently with the tunnel design and construction (Phases 1 & 2), work on the feasibility, design, and development of a natural habitat channel connecting Spirit Lake with the North Fork Toutle River will occur. The input, leadership, and expertise of Tribes, other federal and state agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the public will be instrumental to this success.

Safety and Risk Reduction

- The existing tunnel is aging and increasingly difficult to access safely. Alternative 7 addresses long-term risk by providing:
 - A modern outflow structure with downstream access.
 - Redundant systems to prevent catastrophic failure.
 - Improved access for emergency response.
- This decision reflects decades of scientific analysis, risk modeling, and lessons learned from past tunnel maintenance challenges.

Design, Funding, and Timeline

- Detailed engineering designs must be completed before construction contracts can be awarded.
- Funding will be required for design, permitting, and construction; the Forest will work with regional and national offices to secure necessary resources.
- Timelines remain uncertain, but Phase 1 will take multiple years due to engineering complexity, permitting requirements, and seasonal access constraints.
- Design work for the habitat channel may proceed concurrently with pressure tunnel design.

Ecological and Cultural Considerations

- The habitat channel represents a long-term vision to restore a natural hydrologic connection between Spirit Lake and the North Fork Toutle River.
- Additional geotechnical, hydrologic, and ecological analysis is required to ensure channel stability and ecological benefit.
- The Forest is committed to minimizing impacts on the Pumice Plain, a globally significant research landscape, and to working closely with scientists to protect ongoing research.

Tribal and Partner Engagement

- All project phases will require coordination with tribes, downstream communities, state and federal partners, and researchers.
- The Forest is committed to government-to-government consultation and ensuring tribal perspectives are integrated into long-term planning.
- Engagement will continue throughout design and implementation.

Communication and Transparency

- The Draft Record of Decision and Final Environmental Impact Statement are available for public review right now. Objections will be open to qualified commentors through:
 - **August 21, 2026** for project & project-specific plan amendment objections.
 - **September 8, 2026** for programmatic plan objections.
- The Forest will maintain open communication as design progresses and timelines become clearer.

FAQ's

Q: Does Alternative 7 include a permanent or temporary 40-foot lake drawdown? How long is 'temporary' in this case?

A: No, a permanent drawdown of the lake of up to 40 feet is not proposed as a part of the draft decision. Any drawdowns would be temporary and only occur as needed for activities such as construction, maintenance, or anticipated hydrologic events, such as major storms.

Q: Will there be an opportunity for the public to participate at this point?

A: Release of the FEIS and draft ROD begins the formal objection period. Only individuals or organizations that previously submitted timely comments are eligible to file objections, within the legal timelines published in The Columbian:

- For project activities and project-specific amendments: for 45 days following the publication of the legal notice (**August 21, 2026**).
- For programmatic forest plan amendments: for 60 days following the publication of the legal notice (**September 8, 2026**).

Q. What is the next step after the objection period?

A. The reviewing official will evaluate any objections. If objections require resolution, meetings may be held with objectors. Resolutions may be incorporated before the responsible official signs the final Record of Decision. If no objections are received, the responsible official may sign the final record of decision. Notification of Availability for the Final Environmental Impact Statement will be posted in the Federal Register.

Q: Why can't you just let the water in Spirit Lake naturally create a new river channel itself?

A: The debris avalanche contains highly erodible materials. If Spirit Lake were allowed to fill up, a natural breach could cause a catastrophic release of water, ash, and mud flooding downstream communities. Any channel across the debris avalanche must be well studied, designed, and adaptively managed to ensure long-term safety.