



United States Department of the Interior



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
George Washington Memorial Parkway
c/o Turkey Run Park
McLean, Virginia 22101

MAY - 7 2008

IN REPLY REFER TO:

D1800U (GWMP)

RD LOG NO. 5/13 (3)

Memorandum

To: Joe Lawler, Regional Director, National Capital Region

From: David Vela, Superintendent, George Washington Memorial Parkway 

Subject: Record of Decision for the Great Falls Park, Virginia Final General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement

We are pleased to submit to you a copy of the Record of Decision for the Great Falls Park, Virginia General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (GWMP/EIS). The Notice of Availability (NOA) of the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the General Management Plan was published in the Federal Register by the National Park Service (NPS) on December 11, 2007, and by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on January 4, 2008.

In accordance with regulations, the NPS did not execute a Record of Decision until after the 30 days following EPA's NOA. There were three public comments; two of the comments referred to connecting county trails with park trails, which will be considered in the development of a trails management plan recommended by the preferred alternative. There was one non-substantive comment. The EPA sent a letter that they had no further concerns with the final document.

Alternative B (Preferred Alternative) is based on an overall goal for the park of balancing opportunities for recreation at the park while protecting sensitive natural and cultural resources. Implementation of the preferred alternative will not constitute an impairment of the park's resources and values. This conclusion is based on the thorough analysis of the public impacts described in the EIS and our professional judgment. No highly uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, significant cumulative effects, or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of actions will not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection laws.

I am, therefore, recommending this Record of Decision for your signature. If you have any questions, please give me a call at (703) 289-2500. Thank you for your continued support and assistance with this matter.

Attachment



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Great Falls Park
Virginia

**GENERAL MANAGEMENT PLAN &
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT
Record of Decision**

Approved:


Regional Director, National Capital Region

5/21/08
Date

**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE**

RECORD OF DECISION

**GENERAL MANAGEMENT PLAN
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT**

**Great Falls Park, Virginia
George Washington Memorial Parkway**

The Department of the Interior, National Park Service (NPS) has prepared this Record of Decision (ROD) on the *Final General Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement* (GMP/EIS) for Great Falls Park, Virginia. This ROD includes the following items: a description of the project background, a decision statement, synopses of other alternatives considered, the basis for the final decision, findings on any impairment of the park's resources and values, a description of the environmentally preferable alternative, and an overview of public and agency involvement in the planning process.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

The GMP/EIS (also referred to as the plan) establishes a vision for managing Great Falls Park, which is administered by the George Washington Memorial Parkway, over the next ten to fifteen years. The purpose of the GMP/EIS is to specify the future resource conditions and visitor experiences to be achieved in Great Falls Park. The plan provides a basic framework for decision making regarding management of the park, and establishes the direction and values that should be considered in planning to achieve the purposes defined in the established legislation of the park. Federal law and NPS policies require all units managed by the NPS to have a GMP in place to guide the management of the unit. This is the first such plan for Great Falls Park.

DECISION (SELECTED ACTION)

The decision is to implement the *Final General Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement* for Great Falls Park, Virginia as described below. The official responsible for this decision is the Regional Director for the National Capital Region of the National Park Service.

Description of the Selected Action

The selected action (Alternative B, the preferred alternative, as described in the Final GMP/EIS) is based on an overall goal of balancing opportunities for recreation at the park while protecting sensitive natural and cultural resources. Under this alternative, various resources in the park will be managed as described below.

Cultural Resource Management

A plan to stabilize the ruins of Matildaville will be prepared. Visitor access will be managed in areas where sensitive cultural resources are present. Also, in most cases, NPS will not disturb existing ruins and other archeological resources in order to best protect these sensitive sites. In select locations, the park will uncover a resource for the primary purpose of interpretation, provided such measures do not damage the resource.

NPS will prepare an Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRMP) to protect sensitive cultural resources from potential vegetation damage. In addition, NPS will adopt Best Management Practices (BMP) that will include maintenance and removal of vegetation endangering the integrity of cultural resources, especially those listed, or eligible for listing, on the National Register of Historic Places.

The park will prepare a viewshed management plan that will identify important scenic views from vantage points within the park and from adjacent areas (including the Potomac River and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park) looking towards the park. The plan will identify policies for the preservation and, if necessary, restoration of these scenic views.

Natural Resource Management

NPS will improve interpretation of the natural systems present within the park and their linkages to resources outside the park boundary. Park staff will develop a technical assistance program to demonstrate best practices in water resource management within the park and convey this information to visitors and park neighbors.

The park will designate an access trail in the area between the southern end of Overlook #3 and the Sand Box climbing area due to NPS concerns about possible impacts from foot traffic on the globally rare Central Appalachian/Piedmont riverside prairie and State-listed rare plant species. On a trial basis, an access pass would be issued to visitors seeking to engage in climbing, fishing, or scientific research in this sensitive area. The purpose of the pass is to provide visitors with educational information about appropriate recreational practices and to discourage casual visitors from entering this area. This access pass will be issued seasonally, in unlimited quantities and free of charge, until the park prepares a climbing management plan, as discussed below under Recreation Management.

Recreation Management

NPS will continue to provide traditional recreational opportunities in the park with an emphasis on reducing and avoiding potential conflicts with sensitive natural and cultural resources. Various recreational activities will be managed as follows:

- *Climbing Management Plan (CMP)* – In partnership with the public and the climbing community, the park will prepare a CMP to ensure climbing as a traditional visitor use in a manner that is consistent with the NPS' responsibility of protecting park resources. An ongoing study to assess the impacts climbing may have on cliff habitat and rare plant species is presently underway. The CMP will be based on the information gathered from this study and will determine appropriate strategies to manage climbing activities in the park. In general, the CMP will address the following:
 - Examine climbing routes on a case-by-case basis and recommend whether the climbing areas should be expanded, kept the same, or reduced.
 - Examine access to the climbing areas from adjacent trails. In areas where access is provided on undesignated trails, the park will explore designating the trail or developing alternative access routes in situations where the trail adversely impacts sensitive resources.
 - Recommend best climbing practices, especially in areas within or adjacent to sensitive resources. These practices could include the limited use of fixed anchors or an access pass for specific areas if necessary to avoid sensitive resources.

- Potentially close specific areas on a temporary, periodic, or permanent basis, if necessary for resource protection, along with describing the process that would be undertaken if such closure is recommended.
- *Temporary Measures* – Prior to preparing the CMP, the park will implement the following measures on a trial basis. These measures will be reexamined and continued or modified as necessary during the preparation of the CMP.
 - The park will designate a specific trail that will provide access to three climbing routes (Gorky Park, Microdome, and Flat Iron). This trail will be developed to avoid possible impacts from foot traffic on the globally rare Central Appalachian/Piedmont riverside prairie and State-listed rare plant species in the area between the southern end of Overlook #3 and the Sand Box climbing area. Climbers will be issued an access pass to enter this area. The pass will be issued seasonally, in unlimited quantities and free of charge, until the CMP is prepared. Temporarily, the park will install a fence along the River Trail to preclude visitors from entering the area other than at the designated trail head. In addition, the park will use signage to inform visitors that an ‘access pass’ is required to use the trail, as well as identify the level of difficulty of the trail, and whether it is open or closed for access due to river conditions.
 - As a temporary measure, the park will formalize an existing undesigned trail commonly used by climbers as an access route to the Sand Box climbing area. This trail will be the only access route to the Sand Box area.
- *Trails*: In conjunction with the public (including the local horseback riding, hiking, mountain biking, rock climbing communities, and park neighbors), the park will prepare a trails management plan. The purpose of the plan will be to ensure horseback riding, hiking, and mountain biking activities, as well as access to key areas for other activities such as climbing or interpretation, continue on designated trails in the park in a manner that is consistent with the NPS responsibility of protecting park resources. As part of the plan, the park will conduct a study to evaluate impacts of trail activities on sensitive natural and cultural resources. In some cases, undesigned trails that are found to conflict with sensitive resources will be eliminated. Designated trails to resources for interpretation purposes will be redesigned to minimize the potential for visitor-related impacts.
 - *Trails Management Plan (TMP)* – In general, the TMP will address the following:
 - Examine what management strategies are necessary.
 - Examine the existing system of designated and undesigned trails on a case-by-case basis.
 - Recommend whether the designated trail system should be expanded, realigned, kept the same, or closed in segments where resource impacts are identified.
 - Potentially close specific trails on a temporary, periodic, or permanent basis, if necessary for resource protection.
 - Focus on reducing the number of undesigned trails in the park and adopting practices to avoid the creation of new undesigned trails. Recommend best practices, especially in areas where trails are located within or adjacent to sensitive resources. Such practices

could include requiring a free access pass for specific areas or uses or fencing off areas to avoid sensitive resources.

Specific use of trails for various user groups will be managed as follows:

- *Horseback Riding:* Opportunities for horseback riding on designated trails will remain available. Portions or entire trails may need to be redesigned, realigned, or closed to riding in areas where the TMP identifies adverse impacts to a sensitive resource.
- *Mountain Biking:* Opportunities for mountain biking on designated trails will also remain available and may require portions or entire trails to be realigned or closed to biking in areas where the TMP identifies impacts to a sensitive resource.
- *Hiking:* Opportunities for hiking on designated trails will remain available, similar to existing conditions, with adjustments where the TMP identifies adverse impacts to resources.
- *Regional Trail Connections:* The proposed Cross County Trail, Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail, and the Georgetown Pike Trail will be connected to existing trails within the park. To indicate a trail within the park functions both as a park trail and a regional trail, the trail will be identified by its original name as well as the name(s) of the regional trail(s) that would connect to it.
- *Whitewater Boating and Kayaking:* Access to the Potomac River for whitewater boating and kayaking will remain available from Fisherman's Eddy (located between Overlooks 2 and 3) and AA Gorge (located to the south of Overlook 3 along River Trail).
- *Fishing:* Access to the Potomac River for fishing will remain available to visitors with a Virginia or Maryland fishing license from Fisherman's Eddy and other locations including near the Aqueduct Dam and AA Gorge. Visitors seeking to access the river between Overlook 3 and the Sand Box area will temporarily be required to obtain a free access pass (as described above under Natural Resource Management).
- *Nature Study:* Access to the park for nature study will remain available similar to existing conditions. Visitors seeking to access the shoreline between Overlook 3 and the Sand Box area will either be temporarily required to accompany a park ranger or obtain a free access pass (as described above under Natural Resource Management).

Visitor and Administrative Services

- *Interpretation:* Management efforts at Great Falls Park will be focused on efforts to improve visitor understanding of the sensitive resources of the park and provide guidance on how to safely and responsibly enjoy their park experience. The interpretive programs will be expanded and designed to enhance a visitor's experience and understanding of the cultural and natural features that contribute to the park significance. These features include the Patowmack Canal, Matildaville, the Potomac Gorge, presence of the park within the Potomac River watershed, and the linkage to the area's American Indian heritage. The programs will also focus on promoting safety and providing guidance on how to recreate in a manner that minimizes impacts on the park resources. The existing interpretation programs will be enhanced with additional educational materials and exhibits that would be located at the visitor center and on-site at some of the resources.

- *Facilities:* The current maintenance facility and adjoining United States Park Police (USPP) trailer will be replaced with a new facility to accommodate operations and maintenance functions. Park staff offices will be relocated from the visitor center to the new replacement facility, although park staff will continue to be present in the visitor center. The space currently occupied by park staff will be converted for visitor use and may include new exhibits and classrooms. Also, the appearance of the visitor center (including the courtyard) will be enhanced, the interior spaces will be configured more efficiently, and one of the entrance ramps will be modified to meet ADA requirements. NPS will rehabilitate existing restroom facilities at the visitor center and at the remote comfort facility to the south of the picnic area.

The new replacement facility will be designed to accommodate most park staff, including maintenance and USPP staffs and incorporate a holding facility for arrests. The new facility will also be designed to accommodate maintenance equipment. Since the site is already disturbed, the potential to impact sensitive resources is least at this location. However, since the existing maintenance facility borders the western edge of the Potomac River's 100-year floodplain, the NPS will undertake a detailed study of this site to identify the extent of the floodplain. If possible, the new facility will be located outside the floodplain. If any of the new facility would be within the 100-year floodplain, the structure will be designed in a sustainable manner, where habitable space will be located above the flood zone, and mitigation measures will be identified to minimize potential loss of property during a flood event. The new facility will also be designed in an aesthetically sensitive manner.

NPS will explore constructing stables and a paddock area to accommodate USPP horses within the park at a site off Jackson Lane. Before finalizing such a decision, NPS will undertake further studies of the site including additional environmental documentation and a survey for potential archaeological resources.

The current well-based water systems will continue to be used. An existing holding tank that stores water from an on-site well near Jackson Lane will be expanded. The additional capacity that would be added to the tank will be determined on further study. Also, if necessary in the future, NPS will explore extending public water to the park facilities.

Traffic Management

NPS will maintain current public vehicular access points and will not develop new vehicular access points into the park. In addition, the NPS will consider introducing technology that expedites payment and other operational functions at the entrance station to provide easier and more efficient visitor entry into the park. Traffic and parking message boards will be provided at satellite locations along transportation routes leading to the park. Signs along Georgetown Pike will be sensitively designed in recognition of the scenic byway designation of the road. Also, NPS will provide a periodic radio announcement to inform visitors about traffic conditions at the entrance station. During severe crowding, the park will initiate a one-vehicle-in and one-vehicle-out policy.

Partnerships

NPS will routinely conduct meetings, publish newsletters, and post updates on its website to continue engaging the public in its decision-making process. These meetings, newsletters and web postings will provide an update on actions recommended in the Final GMP/EIS and will be utilized to solicit individual opinions on specific issues.

Boundary Changes

NPS will encourage boundary changes where there is an interested property owner and land can be added to the park through acquisition, donation, or other mechanisms (such as conservation easements). The land addition will be based on the following criteria:

- The land parcel is contiguous to the park;
- It helps to reduce fragmentation by connecting separate portions of the park;
- It is the site of sensitive cultural resources that may not be identified currently; or
- It benefits the preservation of a sensitive natural resource such as Mine Run or Difficult Run.

Management Prescriptions

In accordance with the Final GMP/EIS, the selected action would result in the application of four management prescription zones in the park. They are the Canal Zone, Cultural and Natural Zone, Mather Gorge Zone, and Development Zone. These zones are summarized below with more detail provided in the Final GMP/EIS.

- The Canal Zone will include those areas of Great Falls Park that contain remnants of the historic Patowmack Canal and related structural features, including Matildaville. This zone will be managed with the principal focus being the preservation of historic canal resources. Visitor use will be limited to staying on maintained trails and learning about canal features and ruins from brochures, printed materials, and exhibit panels.
- The Cultural and Natural Zone will consist of those areas of the park that have any archeological, cultural, or ethnographic resources related to the park prehistoric and historic periods and those areas of the park that have any natural resources related to the diversity of fauna and flora in the Great Falls of the Potomac region. This zone will be managed with the primary goal of preserving a variety of cultural/natural resources, some of which include unexcavated archeological sites, the Old Graveyard, the Native American Indian Stout site, wetland areas, wildlife habitats and areas containing rare plant communities.

Visitor access and use will be regulated and will be mainly dependent upon cultural/natural resource preservation needs.

- The Mather Gorge Zone will be located within Mather Gorge of the Potomac River, including the adjacent cliffs and shoreline. The zone will be managed to mainly preserve important cultural and natural resources and to protect employees and visitors. The cliffs, gorge, and river have inherent natural dangers and are popular areas for recreational users who must have special skills (i.e., white water kayaking, rafting, and technical rock climbing). Visitors will be restricted to designated special use areas and alerted to potentially hazardous conditions and dangerous locations.
- The Development Zone is where administrative, maintenance, parking, and visitor facilities for Great Falls Park will be located. The developments in this zone will serve the needs of park management and park visitors (i.e., maintenance facility, park water system, and visitor center). These developments will be located to minimize impacts on cultural, ethnographic, and natural resources in the park and to provide basic visitor services. The public use areas of this zone will receive high visitation on a seasonal basis and other areas within this zone will be restricted to official use only.

Measures to Minimize Environmental Harm

In the Organic Act of 1916, Congress charged NPS with managing lands under the stewardship “in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” NPS routinely evaluates and implements mitigation measures if conditions occur that could adversely affect the sustainability of park resources. Mitigation and best management practices (BMPs) were included throughout the formulation of the preferred alternative and are discussed in the Final GMP/EIS.

Specific measures to minimize environmental harm will be included in plans recommended in the Final GMP/EIS. They include the Matildaville Stabilization Plan; Integrated Resources Management Plan; Viewshed Management Plan; Trails Management Plan; Climbing Management Plan; plans and construction of the replacement facility at the site of the maintenance facility; and plans and construction of the stables and a paddock area to accommodate USPP horses within the park.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

The planning team considered and analyzed two alternatives, the preferred alternative (Alternative B), as well as the Continuation of Current Conditions Alternative (Alternative A) in the Final GMP/EIS.

Alternative A maintains the status quo in the park, describes resource conditions where existing practices continue to guide park management, and serves as a basis for comparison in evaluating the preferred alternative.

Prior to developing the two alternatives, the planning team investigated ten preliminary alternative scenarios during the GMP/EIS planning process. These are briefly discussed in the Final GMP/EIS. In a newsletter that was published in November 2003 (Newsletter 2), three of the GMP alternatives were carried forward and presented for public evaluation. Subsequent to public and agency comments that were received, as well as additional review by the internal planning team, these alternatives were revised to two consolidated alternatives that were presented and evaluated in the June 2005 Draft GMP/EIS.

Following more than 190 public and agency comments that were received on the Draft GMP/EIS, the two alternatives were further revised and resulted in the two final alternatives.

ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The environmentally preferred alternative is determined by applying the criteria suggested in the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, which is guided by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). The CEQ provides direction that the environmentally preferable alternative is the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in Section 101 of the National Environmental Policy Act, which considers:

1. Fulfilling the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations;
2. Assuring for all generations safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings;
3. Attaining the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk of health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences;

4. Preserving important historic, cultural and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintaining, wherever possible, an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice;
5. Achieving a balance between population and resource use that will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities; and
6. Enhancing the quality of renewable resources and approaching the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources (National Environmental Policy Act, section 101).

Alternative B (the Preferred Alternative) is identified as the environmentally preferred alternative. By protecting the sensitive natural and cultural resources while also providing opportunities to recreate, the park would meet its responsibility as a "trustee of the environment for succeeding generations;" assure "for all generations safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings;" attain "the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk of health or safety;" and preserve "important historic, cultural and natural aspects of our national heritage."

BASIS FOR DECISION

The selected alternative best supports the park purpose and significance. It accomplishes the statutory mission of the National Park Service to provide long-term protection of park resources while providing opportunities for recreation. The selected alternative also does the best job of addressing issues identified during internal and public scoping while minimizing environmental harm.

ANTICIPATED ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES AND IMPAIRMENT FINDINGS

Specific resources and values, called impact topics, were used to focus the planning process and the assessment of potential consequences of the alternatives.

The criteria used to identify these impact topics include: resources cited in the establishing legislation for the park, resources critical to maintaining the significance and character of the park, resources recognized as important by laws or regulations, and values of concern to the public during scoping.

After careful analysis of the anticipated consequences that could result due to the implementation of the proposed action, the NPS determined that no moderate or major adverse effects would result on the following resources:

- Land use resources including socio-economic conditions and visitor experience;
- Cultural resources including archaeological, historical, and visual resources;
- Natural environment including geophysical resources, water resources, biological resources, air quality, and noise;
- Transportation resources including traffic and parking conditions; and
- Site utilities including water, sewer, and electricity.

Therefore, NPS has determined there will be no impairment of resources or values as a result of implementing the selected action.

PUBLIC AND AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

NPS officially began the GMP/EIS process with the publication of a *Notice of Intent* to prepare a GMP/EIS in the *Federal Register* on December 24, 2002. The planning process was initiated in September 2002. The NPS assembled an internal team to develop a preliminary list of issues that needed to be addressed in the GMP/EIS. Public scoping was conducted between December 2002 and February 2003. The park published a newsletter (Newsletter 1, dated January 2002) when it sought input on the concerns and issues that needed to be addressed in the GMP/EIS. This newsletter was sent to area residents and governmental agencies and made available to park visitors. As part of the public scoping process, the park also held a public open house on January 28, 2003.

Following the scoping process, the planning team explored several alternative scenarios to manage the park. A second public consultation process was undertaken in the Fall/Winter 2003 when the park presented three alternatives for evaluation in a second newsletter (Newsletter 2, dated November 2003). These alternatives were revised and consolidated after more than 190 public and agency comments were received and the internal planning team provided additional review.

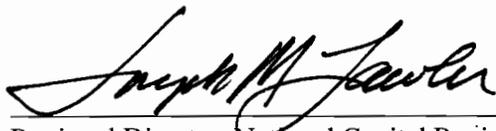
The NPS issued a *Notice of Availability* in the *Federal Register* on August 15, 2005, announcing the availability of the Draft GMP/EIS for public review. In addition, the park conducted an open house on September 17, 2005, to receive comments on the draft plan. Another newsletter (Newsletter 3) was published in October 2005 to clarify some concerns that were raised at the open house and to correct some inconsistencies in the draft plan. The park received more than 200 comments during the public comment period that ended on December 15, 2005.

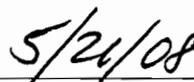
On December 11, 2007, the NPS issued a *Notice of Availability* in the *Federal Register* announcing the availability of the Final GMP/EIS. The 30-day comment period ended on February 6, 2008, after a Notice of Availability was placed in the *Federal Register* by the Environmental Protection Agency. Three comments were received that were non-substantive focusing on the future preparation of the Climbing Management Plan and Trails Management Plan. The preferred alternative recommended writing both of these plans.

CONCLUSION

The National Park Service has selected the preferred alternative (Alternative B) as its course of action for the Great Falls Park in Virginia. Among the alternatives considered, this alternative best protects the cultural and natural resources of the park while also providing quality visitor experiences. It meets NPS interests for a unit of the National Park System, and meets national environmental policy goals. As described in the Final GMP/EIS, all practical means to avoid or minimize environmental harm from the selected action have either been adopted or will be pursued as the subsequent recommended plans are prepared. Therefore, the alternative selected for implementation will not impair park resources or values and will not violate the NPS Organic Act.

Approved:


Regional Director, National Capital Region


Date