



United States Department of the Interior



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Pacific West Region
333 Bush Street, Suite 500
San Francisco, California 94104-2828

IN REPLY REFER TO
L7617 (PWRO-P)

FEB 16 2017

Memorandum

To: Superintendent, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks

From: Regional Director, Pacific West

Subject: Environmental Compliance for Crystal Cave Visitor Facilities, Sequoia National Park

The finalized *Finding of No Significant Impact* (FONSI) for the plan selected to guide redevelopment of visitor use facilities in the Crystal Cave area is approved.

To complete the conservation planning and environmental impact analysis phase of this project, upon announcement of the decision the FONSI should be made available to interested individuals, agencies, and organizations that received or commented on the supporting environmental assessment.

The diligence and initiative which park staff invested towards completion of the plan (commencing with public scoping in 2009) are very much appreciated.

Laura E. Joss

Attachment

CC:
PWR-FM

**National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior**

**Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks
California**



CRYSTAL CAVE REDEVELOPMENT AND REHABILITATION PLAN

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

January 2017

The National Park Service (NPS) has proposed a plan for the redevelopment and rehabilitation of the visitor facilities in the Crystal Cave area within Sequoia National Park. This finding of no significant impact (FONSI), and the environmental assessment (EA) with Errata, constitute the record of the environmental impact analysis and decision-making process for the redevelopment and rehabilitation plan for the Crystal Cave area.

The purpose of the project is to provide an improved visitor experience at the Crystal Cave area in such a manner that reduces impacts, improves sustainability, meets legal requirements, and protects park natural and cultural resources. It is noted that the park has previously implemented selected actions that were recommended in an unrelated 2012 rock fall risk assessment conducted in the vicinity. These have been operational in nature and were accomplished outside the scope of this redevelopment plan.

This document records (1) a FONSI as required by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA); and, (2) a determination of no impairment as required by the NPS Organic Act of 1916. Also included are project-specific Mitigation Measures, and an Errata attachment to the EA.

SELECTED ALTERNATIVE

Based on the analysis presented in the EA, the NPS will implement alternative B (the NPS preferred alternative), which includes the elements common to all action alternatives, replacing the existing visitor kiosk, and adaptively reusing the historic comfort station for storage. The preferred alternative was selected after careful review of resource and visitor impacts and public comment.

Under alternative B, the elements common to all action alternatives will be implemented, the existing kiosk will be replaced, and the existing comfort station will be modified to be used as a storage facility. The following will occur as a result of the selected alternative:

- Install vault comfort stations.
- Stabilize the existing information kiosk to address life-health-safety deficiencies until the replacement kiosk is constructed.
- Rehabilitate the parking area.
- Rehabilitate the picnic area near the trailhead for ADA compliance.
- Improve interpretive media at the kiosk/trailhead area and along the cave access trail.
- Rehabilitate the Crystal Cave access trail.
- Redesign the tour introduction area.
- Improve the existing staff tent site.
- Rehabilitate the cave entrance gathering area.
- Replace the existing visitor kiosk with a new kiosk; demolish the existing kiosk.
- Convert the existing comfort station for adaptive reuse for administrative storage.

The EA, with modifications identified in the Errata, includes a detailed description of these elements.

RATIONALE

Alternative B was selected because it best meets the purpose and need for the project to: 1) provide a long-term vision for the Crystal Cave area; 2) protect natural and cultural resources; 3) comply with laws, regulations, mandates, and other guidance; 4) provide a better “sense of arrival” to the area; 5) improve tour operations and the visitor experience by providing an adequate visitor services kiosk; 6) improve the visitor experience on the cave access trail; and, 7) improve visitor flow at the cave entrance area.

RESOURCE PROTECTION MEASURES

To prevent and minimize potential adverse impacts associated with implementation of project work, the selected alternative incorporates best management practices (BMPs) and resource protection measures listed in Appendix B of this document.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Two additional alternatives were evaluated in the EA. Under the no action alternative, alternative A, the existing facilities in the Crystal Cave area would remain in place, and cyclic maintenance would continue to occur. There would be no substantial rehabilitation to the visitor kiosk and trailhead area, the cave access trail, or the cave entrance area. The facilities would remain similar to current conditions. Under alternative C, a larger visitor kiosk would be constructed to accommodate cave operations, interpretive and educational information, a store, and administrative storage. The existing comfort station would be removed. Neither alternative A nor C met the project objectives as well as alternative B.

The NPS considered, but rejected, several additional alternatives. Providing additional picnic sites in the Crystal Cave area was considered but ruled out because it was determined that additional picnicking options would create an undesirable effect of decreasing the area’s carrying capacity by increasing the length of time visitors may want to stay in the area. Also, additional picnic areas could create unintended pedestrian/vehicle conflicts by encouraging people to picnic and linger in a high use area that has steady traffic and limited space.

Improved accessibility to Crystal Cave was considered but dismissed because the scale and scope of the trail necessary to meet accessibility requirements would create unacceptable resource impacts (natural, cultural, and wilderness impacts). In addition, it is not feasible or reasonable to develop an internal cave trail to meet accessibility standards without the destruction of the cave resource.

Providing additional trails, including an accessible nature trail, near the parking lot, and a shaded amphitheater was suggested. Park staff evaluated the area around the parking lot and found the slopes in the area too steep for the development of an accessible trail or amphitheater. Reestablishing the abandoned loop trail at the cave entrance was also considered. Park staff found a population of Call’s Angelica (*Angelica callii*), a plant of limited distribution, on the historic loop trail site, which is also located in a wetlands area. Due to the sensitivity of the area, this alternative was ruled out.

Several commenters suggested improving the cave access road and adding a shuttle service from Lodgepole or Visalia to the cave area. This alternative will be considered in a future planning effort related to the road rehabilitation project, and is outside the scope of this project.

A long standing objective of this proposal was to restore the cave entrance area to improve conditions and habitat for endemic cave-adapted species. An option to remove the existing hardened surface and install a boardwalk-type walkway was considered to allow for unimpeded movement of cave-adapted species inhabiting the entrance area. However, because of rockfall concerns, the team determined that the cave

entrance area remain the primary gathering area for visitors to congregate before and after a cave tour, thus this element was removed from consideration.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, NATIVE AMERICAN, AND AGENCY CONSULTATION

Public scoping for this project occurred from August 24, 2009 to September 25, 2009. A news release was distributed to 56 local and regional media outlets, and a letter announcing public scoping was emailed or mailed to approximately 366 individuals, agencies, businesses, and interest groups, along with 24 tribal representatives and individuals affiliated with area tribes. Public scoping notices were published in several newspapers and internet sites, including the Orange Cove Area Chamber of Commerce website on August 26; the Visalia Times-Delta (website and newspaper) on August 26; the Kaweah Commonwealth Newspaper on August 28; the Fresno Bee website and newspaper on August 27; and the Valley Voice on August 27. In addition, on September 5 there was a link to scoping information on the MSN website through the local news link.

On September 1, 2009, the park hosted a public information meeting Crystal Cave to discuss potential alternatives and answer questions concerning the proposed project. A total of 29 people attended the meeting.

The parks received scoping comments from seven different sources. All commenters supported improvements to the Crystal Cave area and many provided recommendations for alternatives. Many of these recommendations were incorporated into the EA.

The EA was made available for public review and comment during a 30-day period from November 4, 2015 to December 4, 2015. A notification letter was mailed or emailed to nearly 700 stakeholders. The printed EA was provided to 30 parties on the parks' mailing list; a CD version was sent to an additional 107 people. Letters inviting tribal consultations and comment, along with a CD version of the EA, were mailed to 40 tribes or tribal organizations or representatives; a notification letter was sent or emailed to an additional 110 tribal entities. A press release was distributed to more than 160 media outlets.

There was a wide distribution of the press release by mail and email. Articles pertaining to the public review and comment period were published in: the Kaweah Commonwealth and on the sierra rec magazine website. The EA and supporting information was posted on the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website, with a link from the parks' website. The printed version of the EA was available at the following area libraries: California State University, San Joaquin Sierra Unit; Fresno County Libraries: Bear Mountain, Central, Sunnyside, Fowler, Kingsburg, Orange Cove, Parlier, Reedley, Sanger, and Selma; San Joaquin Valley College: Hanford Extension, Visalia Campus, and Fresno Campus; Tulare County Law Library; Tulare County Libraries: Exeter, Lindsay, and Three Rivers.

The park received eight comment letters during the public review of the EA. The NPS reviewed and considered the substantive comments and suggestions, and incorporated several modifications and mitigation measures into the EA / FONSI, as described in the Errata (Appendix C).

The park initiated the coordination of this project with the California SHPO on August 24, 2009 at the start of the public scoping period. A draft Determination of Eligibility (DOE) for the proposed *Crystal Cave Historic District* was sent to the SHPO for comment and review on May 4, 2012. SHPO was updated with project specifications on October 29, 2014. On January 2, 2015, the SHPO responded with a number of questions on the draft DOE and analysis. The NPS revised the draft DOE and sent documentation to the SHPO on May 24, 2016; and followed up with additional clarifying information and request for concurrence on October 11, 2016. The SHPO concurred with the parks' finding of no adverse effect on January 13, 2017. Modifications to the EA – associated with the revised DOE and correspondence with SHPO – are reflected in the Errata (Appendix C).

The California State Clearinghouse sent a letter acknowledging that the NPS has complied with the State Clearinghouse review requirements for draft environmental documents, pursuant to the CEQA; no additional comments were submitted through their review process. CEQA review was determined to be necessary for this project due to future state permitting requirements for potential instream work (such as work on the abutments of the Cascade Creek bridge).

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

As described in the EA, the selected alternative has the potential for short term adverse effects on visitor use and experience by the shorter operating seasons, for approximately 3-5 years, needed to accommodate project work; and, short term adverse effects on soils and vegetation during project activities, and long term adverse effects from the placement of a new kiosk. No potential for significant adverse impacts was identified.

The selected alternative will stay within the existing disturbed footprint for the majority of the project work. Subsurface soils will be disturbed from installing vault toilets, removing above-ground utility infrastructure, trail rehabilitation activities, expanding the tour introduction area, rehabilitation of the entrance area, and improving the existing staff tent site. There will be new disturbance of soils and vegetation associated with the relocation of the visitor kiosk. The site has been surveyed and site limits will be established to limit the disturbance. The kiosk site was selected to avoid known karst resources; therefore there will be no adverse effects on subsurface resources. Construction activities will have short term and slight adverse impacts to vegetation, soils, hydrology, and water quality from ground disturbances. A few small trees will be removed and common vegetation cleared to improve the tour introduction area and staff tent site. Ambient noise levels will be affected from noise generated by equipment and vehicles during construction.

Resource protection measures, as listed in Appendix B, will reduce adverse effects. Overall these impacts will be slight, localized, and short term and there is no potential for significant effects.

The Crystal Cave area is a known karst area with unique subsurface resources. Work will occur within the existing public entrance and gathering area of Crystal Cave and will create no new impacts to cave habitat. Cave-adapted species could be disturbed during project work. Many currently inhabit, or will likely seek available habitat, in the adjacent restored cave area, therefore the effects will be slight, limited in scale and temporary. In addition, project work will be scheduled in time periods to avoid impacting cave species. Site-specific design will be reviewed after geotechnical investigations to ensure that work will not affect the underlying cave resources.

This plan poses no change to visitation within the cave, and will result in no change from current conditions at Crystal Cave.

The selected alternative will maintain and protect the historic features that contribute to the area's eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). After applying Advisory Council on Historic Preservation criteria of adverse effects (36 CFR Part 800.5, Assessment of Adverse Effects), the NPS concludes that implementation of the selected alternative will have no adverse effect on archeological sites, historic resources, cultural landscapes, ethnographic resources, or museum collections. The SHPO concurred in their January 13, 2017 letter.

In accordance with the Endangered Species Act, the NPS accessed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service website on July 24, 2015, to obtain an official species list for threatened, endangered, and species of concern that may be in the project area and could be potentially affected by project activities. NPS biologists reviewed the USFWS list and lists of state-listed species and species of concern to determine which species could potentially be affected by implementation of the proposed project. There are no

federally listed plants or animals in the project area nor is there designated critical habitat. Because there are no listed species in the project area, the NPS has determined that there will be no effect on threatened or endangered species or modification of critical habitat from implementation of the selected alternative.

There will be no significant impacts on public health, public safety, or unique characteristics of the region. No highly uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, significant cumulative effects, or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the NPS selected alternative will not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection law.

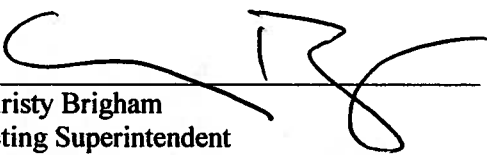
CONCLUSION

As described above, the selected alternative does not constitute an action meeting the criteria that normally requires the preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS). The selected alternative will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment in accordance with Section 102(2)(c) of NEPA. There will be no significant effect on the parks' cultural or natural resources, and there will be no effect on threatened or endangered species. The visitor experience will benefit from measures to improve the condition of the area's facilities. The efficiency and cost of park and partner operations will improve from better conditions and reduced maintenance requirements.

There are no unmitigated adverse impacts on public safety, sites, or districts listed in, or eligible for listing in, the National Register of Historic Places, or other unique characteristics of the region. No highly uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, cumulative effects or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the action will not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection law.

Based on the foregoing, it has been determined that an EIS is not required for this project and, thus, will not be prepared. The selected alternative may be implemented as soon as practicable.

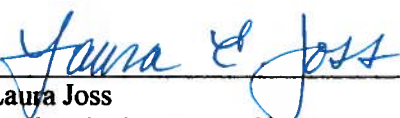
Recommended:



Christy Brigham
Acting Superintendent
Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks

1/17/2017
Date

Approved:



Laura Joss
Regional Director, Pacific West Region

2/17/2017
Date

