

Curecanti National Recreation Area

Motorized Vehicle Access Plan and Regulations / Environmental Assessment

Internal Scoping Meeting Summary

The National Park Service (NPS) is preparing a plan to manage motorized vehicle access at Curecanti National Recreation Area (Recreation Area) near Gunnison, Colorado. To comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Recreation Area is preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the proposed plan. NEPA planning is needed to address the scope of motorized vehicle access at the Recreation Area.

Internal scoping meetings were held at the Recreation Area on October 23, 2007, and at the Fred Field Western Heritage Center in Gunnison on October 24 and 25, 2007. Internal scoping is the use of NPS staff to decide what topics need to be analyzed in the EA. Personnel from Curecanti National Recreation Area and the NPS Environmental Quality Division attended these meetings to define the purpose, need, and objectives of the plan, identify potential issues, discuss preliminary alternatives, and define data needs.

Background of Curecanti National Recreation Area and Motorized Vehicle Access

The area administered as Curecanti National Recreation Area is located in Gunnison and Montrose Counties in southwestern Colorado along the Gunnison River. It is approximately 40 miles long from east to west, and comprises 41,790 acres of federal lands (see map at the end of this document). Curecanti National Recreation Area includes three reservoirs, named for corresponding dams on the Gunnison River: Blue Mesa Dam and Reservoir, Morrow Point Dam and Reservoir, and Crystal Dam and Reservoir. These three dams and reservoirs make up the Wayne N. Aspinall Storage Unit (Aspinall Unit), named after the Colorado congressman instrumental in implementing the project. The Aspinall Unit is one of the four main units of the Colorado River Storage Project authorized by Congress in 1956. The Recreation Area is managed to provide for public use and enjoyment while ensuring visitor safety, resource preservation, and the conservation of scenic, natural, historic, archaeological, and wildlife values.

Traditionally, motor vehicles travel below the high water line of Blue Mesa Reservoir (also referred to as Blue Mesa Lake), which is considered to be the point at which the reservoir level is at maximum capacity (full pool), an elevation of 7,519 feet. Park policy has been to allow the operation of motor vehicles on lake-bottom routes within the pool area of Blue Mesa Reservoir, but only between the high water line and water surface level for the purpose of fishing access and boat launching. In addition, power line access roads have been designated as routes open for motor vehicle use. This activity has occurred within the Recreation Area since its creation in 1965.

In all park service units, the superintendent is permitted to outline regulations that supplement the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) and apply specifically to the lands under his or her supervision. These regulations are held in the park unit's compendium. Curecanti National Recreation Area's compendium files from the 1980s show that the Superintendent used discretionary authority to allow vehicle travel below the high water line of Blue Mesa Reservoir. In 1984, an EA for off-road operation of motor vehicles was completed and a draft proposed rule was written, but the rulemaking process was never completed.

Access to areas below the high water line is primarily from maintained roads. However, tracks off of established roads formed over the years provide access for travel below the high water line in a few areas. Vehicle access to these areas is highest in the spring when shore fishing is most popular. Monitoring conducted around Labor Day 2005 indicated that approximately 300 vehicles used the area below the high water line for fishing or recreating during a seven-day period.

Although the most common motor vehicles at the Recreation Area are cars and trucks, snowmobiles are often used to access popular ice fishing locations during the winter months. Traditional snowmobile use at the Recreation Area has been confined to the frozen surface of Blue Mesa Reservoir, snow-covered land exposures in the pool area below high water line, and designated access roads.

Currently, law enforcement personnel at the Recreation Area monitor all motorized vehicle use by observation, because the terrain allows for an open view of the reservoir, shoreline areas, and vehicle access routes. Violation notices are issued to drivers who travel off established roadways or in areas above the high water line.

Description of Motor Vehicles

For the purposes of this motorized vehicle access plan, “motorized vehicles” are self-propelled vehicles operated by the public below the mean high water line, on the frozen surface of the reservoir, or on travel routes designated by the NPS. Motorized vehicles include cars, trucks, sport utility vehicles, recreational vehicles, snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles, motorcycles, and other similar self-propelled vehicles.

Draft Purpose of and Need for the Motorized Vehicle Access Plan

The following draft purpose and need statements are the initial thoughts developed by NPS staff at the internal scoping meetings and revised in subsequent discussions. These statements will be available for comment during public and agency scoping and may be modified based on comments received or additional staff analysis.

The purpose of the proposed motorized vehicle access plan is to:

- Protect and preserve natural and cultural resources and natural processes while providing access for appropriate recreational opportunities.
- Promote the safety of all visitors and employees.
- Assure that management of motorized vehicle access considers the purposes and operational needs of the Recreation Area, Aspinall project, and adjacent lands.

The need for the proposed motorized vehicle access plan is to:

- Comply with Executive Orders 11644 and 11989 regarding off-road vehicle use, and with NPS laws, regulations, and policies to minimize impacts to Recreation Area resources and values.
- Protect natural and cultural resources and natural processes from potential effects of motorized vehicle access.
- Establish an approved plan incorporating public input that provides access for appropriate recreational opportunities.
- More appropriately define snowmobile use as it relates to travel below the high water line.

Draft Objectives of the Motorized Vehicle Access Plan/EA

Objectives define the range of alternatives for the motorized vehicle access plan, set the framework for analysis, and must be stated clearly, because the alternatives will be measured against the objectives. The NPS has identified the following preliminary objectives for the plan/EA, which may be modified based on further analysis and feedback from public and agency scoping:

Management Methodology

- Identify criteria to designate motorized vehicle access areas and routes.

Soils

- Minimize impacts of motorized vehicle access on soil erosion and compaction.

Vegetation

- Minimize adverse impacts to native plant species related to motorized vehicle access.
- Minimize the potential introduction or spread of non-native plant species.

Wildlife

- Minimize impacts to native wildlife and their habitats related to motorized vehicle access.

Species of Special Concern

- Provide protection for threatened, endangered, and other protected species (e.g., state-listed species) and their habitats.
- Minimize impacts related to motorized vehicle access as required by laws and policies, such as the Endangered Species Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and NPS laws and management policies.

Aquatic species and habitat

- Minimize impacts to aquatic species and habitat from motorized vehicle access.

Water quality

- Minimize impacts to water quality from motorized vehicle access.

Paleontological resources

- Protect known localities of paleontological resources from adverse impacts related to motorized vehicle access.
- Minimize impacts to geologic formations with the potential to contain paleontological resources.

Cultural resources

- Protect cultural resources such as pre-historic and historic archeological sites, and cultural landscapes from adverse impacts related to motorized vehicle access.

Visitor Use and Experience

- Manage access for motorized vehicles for appropriate recreational opportunities.
- Minimize conflicts between motorized vehicle access and other uses.
- Ensure that motorized vehicle operators are informed about the rules and regulations regarding motorized vehicle access at the Recreation Area.

Visitor and Employee Safety

- Ensure that management of motorized vehicle access promotes the safety of all visitors and employees.

Recreation Area Operations and Management

- Minimize operational and maintenance needs and costs to fully implement a motorized vehicle access plan.
- Consult with adjacent landowners regarding management of motorized vehicle access.
- Prevent impacts to the works and facilities of the Aspinall Unit, including dams, powerplants, transmission lines, and access roads from motorized vehicle access.

Draft Issues and Impact Topics

Issues are problems caused by current management of motorized vehicle access, or problems that might be caused by any of the alternatives being considered. Recreation Area staff identified the following issues associated with motorized vehicle access:

- Impacts to sensitive paleontological resources.

- Coordination of motorized vehicle access with agencies that manage the Aspinall Unit (Bureau of Reclamation and Western Area Power Administration)
- Coordination of land and vehicle management with adjacent landowners, including the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Colorado Division of Wildlife.
- Damage to cultural landscapes, prehistoric and historic resources, and archeological resources.
- Impacts to all users resulting from restrictions on level of use.
- The spread of non-native species and impacts on vegetation, including plant species of special concern (e.g., adobe thistle – a state-listed rare plant).
- Impacts on wildlife, including species of special concern (e.g., the Gunnison's sage grouse – formerly a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act), and their habitat.
- Erosion and soil damage.

These issues become the basis for identifying the topics that will be analyzed for potential impacts in the EA, which are referred to as impact topics. Based on the issues identified, it is expected that the following impact topics will be included in the EA: geologic resources (soils); paleontological resources; vegetation (including invasive species); wildlife and wildlife habitat; species of special concern (both plants and animals); cultural resources (cultural landscapes, prehistoric and historic resources, and archaeological resources); visitor experience (including recreation resources); and land management surrounding the Recreation Area (agency coordination). Impact topics and issues that need to be addressed will be discussed further at upcoming NPS and public meetings. The NPS requires additional data to determine whether the topics of socioeconomics or floodplains will be analyzed in detail in the EA.

Draft Preliminary Alternative Elements

At the internal scoping meetings, potential alternatives or components of alternatives were discussed, including components of the “no action” alternative.

No Action Alternative

Under NEPA, the no action alternative must be considered and analyzed. This alternative represents taking no new actions to manage motorized vehicles (i.e., it is the continuation of the interim vehicle management plan), and it provides a baseline against which to compare the impacts of the other alternatives. Under the no action alternative, motor vehicle access would be allowed below the high water line of Blue Mesa Reservoir as currently regulated and described below. Power line access roads would continue to be designated routes for motor vehicle use. Recreation area staff would implement vehicle closures pursuant to 36 CFR 1.5 during periods of low water to prohibit travel on or adjacent to known cultural sites. Snowmobiles would continue to be allowed on the frozen surface of Blue Mesa Reservoir, snow-covered land exposures in the pool area below high water line, and on designated access roads.

Temporary fencing and/or posts would continue to be erected around cultural sites to prevent vehicle trespass. These barriers would be removed during periods of high water to prevent boating hazards. In addition, specific access roads would be closed permanently in strategic areas to prevent vehicle trespass. During low water periods, cultural sites below the high water line would be surveyed to help determine their extent. Closures would be implemented if and when testing revealed a potential for disturbance of cultural deposits from motorized vehicle use.

During the main visitor use season, interpretative personnel would provide visitors with motorized vehicle access information and restrictions during roving contacts, visitor center contacts, and interpretive programs. The interim management plan and related planning process would also be explained on the Recreation Area's website.

All areas within the Recreation Area would continue to be routinely monitored by law enforcement rangers as part of existing resource protection and education programs. Motorized vehicle access would be closely

monitored and violations would be addressed with verbal warnings, citations, or arrest, especially during periods of seasonal closures pursuant to 36 CFR 1.5. All Recreation Area staff would be informed of the motorized vehicle access planning process and interim management plan and tasked with reporting violations of vehicle trespass to management personnel. Vehicle tracks in unauthorized areas would be promptly mitigated to avoid use by others.

Preliminary Action Alternative Elements

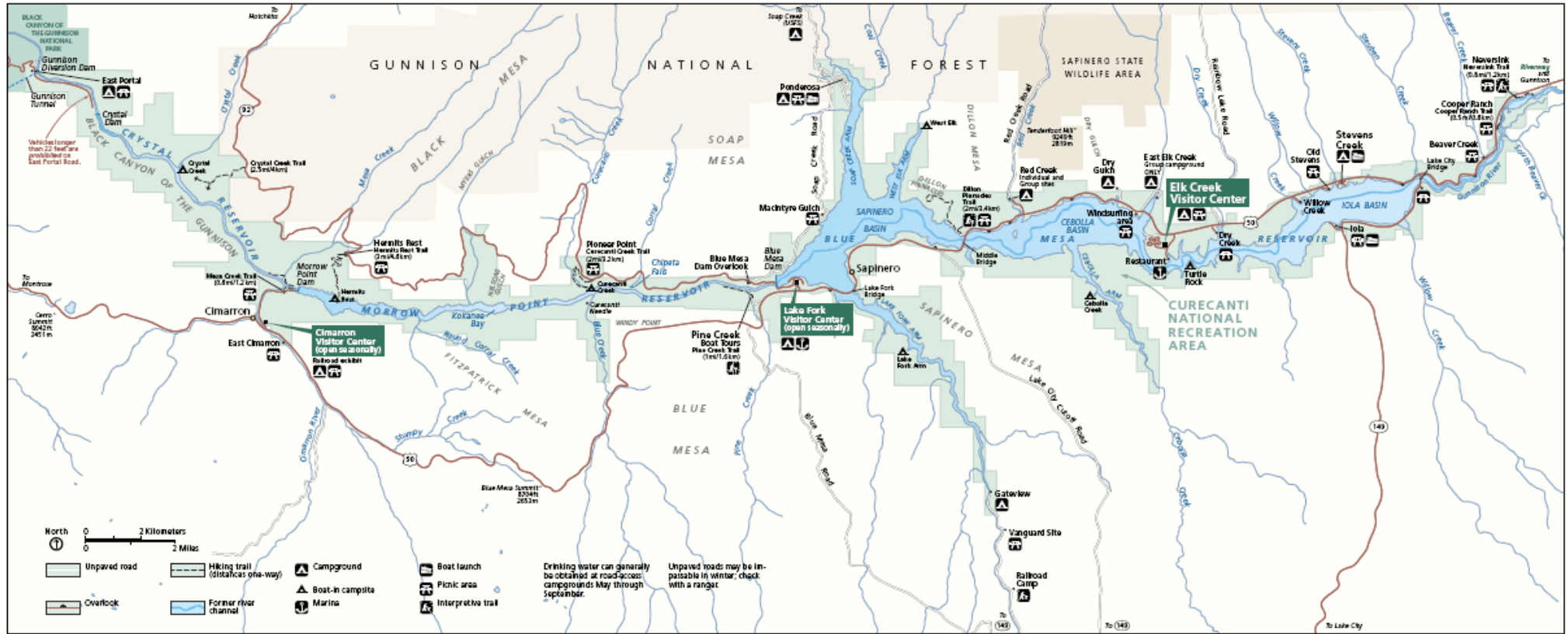
The group also discussed preliminary components of action alternatives that could be used to address the purpose, need, and objectives identified by the planning team. The following preliminary alternatives or elements of alternatives were identified during the meetings:

- Motorized vehicle access could be confined to designated routes, areas, and points below high water, and in other parts of the Recreation Area, based on the location of resources. Additional parking areas and pull outs could be developed where lake-bottom driving is currently prohibited. Signage and maps could be used at access points and at closure areas. Informational brochures could be made available to all Recreation Area visitors.
- This plan would seek to address the inconsistency in the existing rule for snowmobiles, which allows them to be operated only on the frozen surface of Blue Mesa Reservoir, but does not address travel to the reservoir across areas above the high water line. The motorized vehicle access plan would not expand snowmobile use to any other new locations in the Recreation Area.
- Seasonal closures could occur to protect wet soils. Depending on the reservoir level, temporary closures could also be implemented to protect paleontological resources. Access could be restricted in some areas by fencing, staking, berming or other methods.
- “Zones” could be established to separate different types of visitor use, and buffers could be used around sensitive resource areas. All or certain parts of the Recreation Area could be closed to motorized vehicle use, including known cultural resource sites found below high water, and those that are discovered in the future. Appropriate access for mobility-impaired visitors would be maintained.
- A permit system could be used to educate visitors about motor vehicle access at the Recreation Area. This system could help provide information about the nature of the Recreation Area’s motorized vehicle users. A self-certification process could be used that requires the applicant to answer a series of educational questions before printing out a permit.
- Educational opportunities could be provided regarding vehicle access and resource protection.
- Access to motor vehicles could be allowed but with restrictions on “play areas.”
- Speed limits could be set and enforced. Vehicle requirements could be established to protect resources and promote vehicle safety.

These do not represent all possible alternatives that could be considered, and these and other options to address the issues will be discussed at upcoming internal NPS meetings and at public meetings before the plan/EA is written.

Next Steps

The next step in the NEPA process is for NPS staff to work with agency partners and the public to determine their concerns and get input on the purpose, need, objectives, impact topics, and preliminary alternatives that have been developed so far. Public meetings will be held on June 24 and 25, 2008 in Gunnison and Montrose, Colorado. The public will be encouraged to comment on all of the topics discussed above. Additional information on meeting locations and times, as well as guidance on submitting comments, can be found in the scoping brochure available at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/cure>.



Curecanti National Recreation Area Map