

Update on the Curecanti National Recreation Area Motorized Vehicle Access Plan

April 2009



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Introduction and Background

Curecanti National Recreation Area is preparing a plan and environmental assessment (plan/EA) for managing motorized vehicle access. Traditionally, the National Park Service (NPS) policy has allowed motorized vehicle access in certain off-road areas within the recreation area, unless specifically closed pursuant to regulation. This includes lake-bottom routes below the high water line of Blue Mesa Reservoir (also referred to as Blue Mesa Lake) for the purpose of fishing access, boat launching, and other recreational activities.

Curecanti National Recreation Area initiated this planning process to comply with Executive Orders 11644 and 11989, which require that all units of the NPS establish policies and procedures that ensure that off-road vehicle use is managed to protect the natural and cultural resources of the Recreation Area and provide for the safety of all visitors. As part of this requirement, the NPS must designate particular routes and areas as open to motorized vehicle access, with the understanding that all other areas would be closed.

Progress to Date

In June 2008, the NPS held public meetings to solicit comments on the purpose, need, objectives, and preliminary alternative elements of the plan/EA. Those comments are summarized and available online at: <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/cure>. During fall and winter 2008 – 09, NPS staff and contractors held an alternatives development meeting (October 2008) to examine the range of actions the NPS could potentially take to manage motorized vehicle access at Curecanti National Recreation Area; and prepared a literature review of off-road vehicle impacts and management. Since October 2008, the NPS has worked to identify routes and areas that would be designated as open under each of the draft alternatives. This included coordination with surrounding land management agencies (the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service) to ensure consistency between this NPS planning effort and the other agencies' travel management planning efforts. We are now asking the public for comments on those draft alternatives.

Scope of this Plan/EA

This plan/EA addresses the use of motorized vehicles to access appropriate recreational opportunities throughout Curecanti National Recreation Area, including the boundary expansion lands proposed in the park unit's 2008 Resource Protection Study. This plan/EA does not address motorized vehicle access on maintained federal, state, county, or NPS roads, pullouts, or parking lots that occur within the boundaries of the recreation area. For the purposes of this planning effort, "motorized vehicles" are self-propelled vehicles operated by the public below the mean high water line of Blue Mesa Reservoir, on the frozen surface of the reservoir, or on travel routes designated by the NPS at the recreation area. Motorized vehicles include cars, trucks, sport utility vehicles, recreational vehicles, snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles, off-road vehicles, motorcycles, and other similar self-propelled vehicles.

Current regulations (36 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 7.51c) limit snowmobiles at the recreation area to the frozen surface of Blue Mesa Reservoir and designated access roads. This plan does not change or address the pattern of snowmobile use at Curecanti National Recreation Area, but does seek to establish routes between designated access points and the frozen surface of Blue Mesa Reservoir.

Upon conclusion of this environmental assessment, the alternative selected for implementation would become the plan and special regulation for managing motorized vehicle access at the recreation area for the next 15 to 20 years.

Purpose of the Plan/EA

The purpose of the proposed motorized vehicle access plan/EA 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 Unit, and adjacent lands.

Need for the Plan/EA

A motorized vehicle access plan is needed

- 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.
- To protect natural and cultural resources and natural processes from potential effects of motorized vehicle access.
- To establish an approved plan incorporating public input that provides access for appropriate recreational opportunities.
- To more appropriately define snowmobile use as it relates to travel below the high water line.



Objectives of the Plan/EA

All alternatives selected for detailed analysis must meet project objectives and the purpose and need for action. The objectives of this plan include the following:

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 and 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; and 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 and 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; and 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; and prevent impacts to the works and facilities of the Aspinall Unit, including dams, power plants, transmission lines, and access roads from motorized vehicle access.

Although the most common motorized vehicles at the recreation area are cars and trucks, snowmobiles are often used to access popular ice fishing locations during the winter months.



Preliminary Alternatives Summary

Please see the table on pages 5 – 7 for more details about the preliminary alternatives.

Alternative A—No Action (Continuation of Current Management): This alternative would formalize motorized vehicle access management identified in the 2007 Off-Highway Vehicle Evaluation and Interim Management Plan (interim management plan) and regulations contained in the Superintendent’s Compendium. As a result, all motorized vehicle routes and areas not currently designated closed to such use would remain open. In addition, cultural and paleontological resource areas would be buffered from vehicle use. All areas below the high water line of Blue Mesa Reservoir would be open to motorized vehicle access, unless closed for resource concerns. This would include areas that are currently considered open, but are not traditionally used because of access limitations created by terrain and reservoir level. All routes and areas currently open for administrative access would remain open and legal private access would be maintained.

Some of the other routes that would remain open, including some above the Blue Mesa Reservoir, are located in zones designated Semi-Primitive/Non-Motorized in the recreation area’s 1997 general management plan. Although inconsistent with the management prescriptions for this zone, these routes would remain open under this alternative. For more information on the management prescriptions related to motorized vehicle access, please see the Recreation Area’s general management plan at <http://www.nps.gov/cure//parkmgmt>.

Appropriate snowmobile use and access would continue to be provided in accordance with the recreation area’s existing rule (36 CFR 7.51c), but there would be no specific routes

for reaching the frozen surface of Blue Mesa Reservoir from designated access points.

Maps 1 – 5 show the designation of routes and areas under alternative A.

Alternative B—Designate Routes and Areas Open to Motorized Vehicle Access Consistent with 1997 General Management Plan: Under this alternative, routes and areas would be designated consistent with management prescriptions in the park unit’s 1997 general management plan. Similar to alternative A, unless closed for resource concerns, all areas below the high water line of Blue Mesa Reservoir would be open to motorized vehicle access. This would include areas not traditionally used because of access limitations created by terrain and reservoir level. Cultural and paleontological resource areas would continue to be buffered from vehicle use.

However, consistent with the management prescriptions of the 1997 general management plan, this alternative would not allow motorized vehicle access within areas zoned as Semi-Primitive/Non-Motorized, unless needed for specific administrative functions (i.e., routes that provide access to power lines, dams, NPS facilities, etc., would remain open). This would affect some routes traditionally open to the public, including some above the high water line of Blue Mesa Reservoir, as well as those currently open for administrative use that are not specifically associated with an administrative function.

All other administrative routes currently open would remain open and legal private access would be maintained.

In order to increase safety and resource protection, this alternative would require a certain level of visitor education prior to the operation of vehicles along or in designated routes and areas. Visitor safety would also be improved by establishing specific speed limits and recommending certain routes and areas for four-wheel-drive or high-clearance vehicles only.

Appropriate snowmobile use and access would continue in accordance with the park unit’s existing rule (36 CFR 7.51c), but specific routes would be established between designated access points and the frozen surface of Blue Mesa Reservoir. In addition, two new snowmobile access points would be formalized: one at the Lake Fork Visitor Center boat ramp (maps 8, 13) and one on the southeast shore of Iola Basin near Willow Creek (see maps 6, 11).

Maps 6 – 10 show the designation of routes and areas under alternative B.



Alternative C—Designate Routes/Areas Open to Motorized Vehicle Access and Amend 1997 General Management Plan: As with alternative B, this alternative would designate routes and areas throughout the recreation area as open to motorized access, including areas below the high water line of Blue Mesa Reservoir. Cultural and paleontological resource buffers, visitor education, speed limits, and recommendations on four-wheel-drive or high-clearance vehicles described for alternative B would also apply under alternative C.

However, a minor amendment to the 1997 general management plan would create a new “Semi-Primitive/Motorized” zone. This zone would have the same management prescriptions as the existing “Semi-Primitive/Non-Motorized” zone, except public motorized vehicle access would be allowed in designated areas and routes. Routes designated open in this new zone would have traditionally been open, but would have been inconsistent with the prescriptions in the general management plan. This would include, among others, the power line and associated spur roads to the shoreline on the south side of Blue Mesa Reservoir. Some administrative routes that would have been closed under alternative B because they did not serve a specific administrative function would also remain open to provide management flexibility. All other administrative and legal private access would be maintained.

In addition, alternative C would close those areas currently open but not traditionally used below the high water line of Blue Mesa Reservoir. This would protect park resources that could be damaged if exposed by a drop in reservoir levels, or if vehicles are developed that could overcome access issues created by terrain.

Appropriate snowmobile use and access under alternative C would be the same as described for alternative B.

Maps 11 – 15 show the designation of routes and areas under alternative C.

Under alternatives B and C appropriate snowmobile use and access would continue in accordance with the park unit’s existing rule (36 CFR 7.51c), but specific routes would be established between designated access points and the frozen surface of Blue Mesa Reservoir. In addition, two new snowmobile access points would be formalized: one at the Lake Fork Visitor Center boat ramp (maps 8, 13) and one on the southeast shore of Iola Basin near Willow Creek (see maps 6, 11).



Management Activity	Alternative A-No Action (Continuation of Current Management)	Alternative B-Designate Motorized Vehicle Access Consistent with 1997 General Management Plan	Alternative C-Designate Motorized Vehicle Access and Amend 1997 General Management Plan
Designation of Motorized Vehicle Routes/Areas	Motorized vehicle use within Curecanti would be allowed except where an area is designated closed, including routes and areas above and below the high water line of Blue Mesa Reservoir. See maps 1 – 5 of this information packet for a depiction of those areas open/closed to motorized vehicle access.	Motorized vehicle use within the recreation area is allowed only in areas designated as open, including routes/areas above and below the high water line of Blue Mesa Reservoir. Routes and areas in Semi-Primitive/ Non-Motorized zone of the 1997 general management plan would be closed. See maps 6 – 10 of this information packet for a depiction of those areas open/closed to motorized vehicle access.	Same as alternative B, except routes and areas zoned as Semi-Primitive/ Non-Motorized in the 1997 general management plan could remain open if located within the new Semi-Primitive/Motorized zone. See maps 11 – 15 of this information packet for a depiction of those areas open/closed to motorized vehicle access.
Snowmobile Use and Designated Access Routes	Based on the existing rule for snowmobiles (36 CFR 7.51c), snowmobiles would be permitted to operate within the boundaries of Curecanti National Recreation Area provided that their use is confined to the frozen surface of Blue Mesa Reservoir, and designated access roads. Designated access points for the frozen surface of Blue Mesa Reservoir are shown on maps 1 – 3 of this informational packet.	Same as alternative A, but routes would be designated from snowmobile access points to the frozen surface of Blue Mesa Reservoir. These routes would be considered the most direct route from the access points to the frozen surface. Use of snowmobiles below the high water line parallel to the shoreline would not be permitted. Designated access points for the frozen surface of Blue Mesa Reservoir are shown on maps 6 – 8 of this informational packet.	Same as alternative B. Designated access points for the frozen surface of Blue Mesa Reservoir are shown on maps 11 – 13 of this informational packet.
Motorized Vehicle Access Points for Areas Below the High Water Line of Blue Mesa Reservoir (Land-based)	Access to below the high water line would be primarily from maintained roads although a few areas of non-maintained access exist. See maps 1 – 3 of this information packet for a depiction of those areas open/closed to motorized vehicle access.	Access to below the high water line would only be from routes and areas designated as open. Access points in areas zoned as Semi-Primitive/ Non-Motorized would be closed. See maps 6 – 8 of this information packet for a depiction of these motorized vehicle access points.	Same as alternative B, except access points in areas zoned as Semi-Primitive/Non-Motorized in the 1997 general management plan could be opened if located within the new Semi-Primitive/Motorized zone. See maps 11 – 13 of this information packet for a depiction of these motorized vehicle access points.
Mileage of Routes Open to Public Motorized Vehicle Access	55.6 miles	8.5 miles	23.6 miles
Acreage Below High Water Line at Blue Mesa Reservoir Open to Public Motorized Vehicle Access	8,239 acres, of which 7,280 are open but not traditionally used because of access limitations created by terrain or reservoir levels.	Same as alternative A	959 acres (Note: this alternative closes areas not traditionally used below the high water line of Blue Mesa Reservoir for resource protection)

Management Activity	Alternative A-No Action (Continuation of Current Management)	Alternative B-Designate Motorized Vehicle Access Consistent with 1997 General Management Plan	Alternative C-Designate Motorized Vehicle Access and Amend 1997 General Management Plan
Motorized Vehicle Closures	<p>Per the 2007 Superintendent's Compendium, the following areas would be closed to vehicle travel as indicated by carsonite markers (all for cultural resource purposes, except numbers 2 and 9):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dry Creek, from boat ramp west along shoreline at the approximate 7500-foot elevation mark 2. Two track along north side of highway from MP 144 to Rainbow Lake road 3. Two track on Sometime Island 4. Two track access above high water line from Old Stevens 5. Travel from North Willow restroom east to next drainage 6. From South Willow west to lola 7. Along shoreline of Dillon Pinnacles where marked (during low water) 8. Barricaded access from Hwy 149 to south shore 9. Barricaded access from Soap Creek road to shore <p>See maps 1 – 5 of this information packet for a depiction of those areas open or closed to motorized vehicle access.</p> <p>Per the interim management plan, closures would be implemented if and when testing reveals a potential for disturbance of cultural deposits from off-road vehicle travel.</p> <p>Designated routes, areas, and snowmobile access routes would be subject to year-round, seasonal, and/or site-specific closures listed in the Superintendent's Compendium and/or implemented under the authority of 36 CFR 1.5(a).</p>	<p>All routes/areas not officially designated open would be closed to motorized vehicle access. This includes, but is not limited to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Routes/areas within the Semi-Primitive/Non-Motorized, Semi-Primitive Flatwater, or Protected Resource Areas zones in the general management plan 2. Dry Creek, from boat ramp west along shoreline at the approximate 7500-foot elevation mark 3. Two track on Sometime Island 4. Travel from North Willow restroom east to next drainage 5. From South Willow west to lola <p>See maps 6 – 10 of this information packet for a depiction of those areas open/closed to motorized vehicle access.</p> <p>Designated routes, areas, and snowmobile access routes would be subject to year-round, seasonal, and/or site-specific closures listed in the Superintendent's Compendium and/or implemented under the authority of 36 CFR 1.5(a).</p>	<p>All routes/areas not officially designated open would be closed to motorized vehicle access. This includes, but is not limited to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Areas not traditionally used below the high water line of Blue Mesa Reservoir 2. Dry Creek, from boat ramp west along shoreline at the approximate 7500-foot elevation mark 3. Two track on Sometime Island 4. Travel from North Willow restroom east to next drainage 5. From South Willow west to lola <p>See maps 11 – 15 of this information packet for a depiction of those areas open/closed to motorized vehicle access.</p> <p>Designated routes, areas, and snowmobile access routes would be subject to year-round, seasonal, and/or site-specific closures listed in the Superintendent's Compendium and/or implemented under the authority of 36 CFR 1.5(a).</p>

Management Activity	Alternative A-No Action (Continuation of Current Management)	Alternative B-Designate Motorized Vehicle Access Consistent with 1997 General Management Plan	Alternative C-Designate Motorized Vehicle Access and Amend 1997 General Management Plan
Vehicle Requirements	<p>Colorado Department of Transportation Road Regulations would apply to motorized vehicles in the park unit.</p> <p>Snowmobiles would be permitted to operate within the boundaries of Curecanti National Recreation Area provided that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The operators and machines conform to the laws and regulations governing the use of snowmobiles as stated in Title 36, Section 7.51 of the Code of Federal Regulations and those applicable to snowmobile use promulgated by the State of Colorado where they prove to be more stringent or restrictive than those of the Department of the Interior. • Snowmobile gross weight would be limited to a maximum of 1200 pounds (machine and cargo) unless prior permission is granted by the superintendent. (36 CFR 7.51) 	<p>Same as alternative A, plus implement maximum wheel width (track) requirement for public vehicles.</p> <p>The NPS may also recommend, but not require, four-wheel-drive and/or high-clearance vehicles on particular routes above the high water line.</p>	Same as alternative B.
Speed Limits	<p>Snowmobiles: 45 miles per hour (mph) (36 CFR 2.18d.4)</p> <p>Other motorized vehicles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No speed limits on designated routes and areas above or below the high water line or on the frozen surface of Blue Mesa Reservoir. 	<p>Snowmobiles: 45 mph (36 CFR 2.18d.4)</p> <p>Other motorized vehicles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On designated routes and areas above the high water line: 15 mph unless posted otherwise. • On designated routes and areas below high water line and on the frozen surface of the reservoir: 15 mph. 	Same as alternative B.
Education/Outreach Component (includes signage, brochures, etc.)	Per the interim management plan, during the main visitor use season, interpretive staff would provide visitors with motorized vehicle access information and restrictions during roving contacts, visitor center contacts, interpretive programs, press releases, and on the recreation area's website.	<p>Same as alternative A plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide education about driving below high water and how to avoid getting stuck and how to dig out without causing major soil damage. • Additional signage, bulletin boards, marking, speed limits, details of new plan on park website, and in press releases. • Provide postings about four-wheel-drive and high-clearance vehicle recommendations. • Invasive species education – reduce spread through education (staying on routes, recognizing that seeds can spread on vehicle tires). • All prescriptions for visitor education/interpretation in the 1997 general management plan would be applied. 	Same as alternative B.



Elements Common to All Alternatives

Hours of Vehicle Operation: Motorized vehicle access would be permitted 24-hours a day.

Access for Mobility-impaired Visitors: The use of Segways and motor driven cycles in park areas off of the established roadways, routes, and areas by persons with disabilities may be allowed in accordance with an individual special use permit issued by the superintendent under 36 CFR 1.6.

Monitoring/Enforcement: Per the interim management plan, all areas within Curecanti National 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. Vehicle tracks in unauthorized areas would be promptly mitigated to avoid repetitive use by others. Traffic counters would be used to gauge vehicle use and visitation. Condition assessments would be conducted annually to determine if any routes are in need of maintenance. Condition assessments would be conducted for cultural sites every one to five years and would inform resource management decisions related to motorized vehicle access.

Guiding Questions for Public Comment

1. Which alternative or alternative elements best address the objective statements on pages 1 – 2?
2. What other alternatives or measures could be implemented that are not already presented?
3. What additional information, concerns, or comments about the draft alternatives do you have?

How to Comment on Draft Alternatives

COMMENTS ARE DUE May 18, 2009

To comment on the draft alternatives for the Curecanti National Recreation Area Motorized Vehicle Access Plan/Environmental Assessment, go to: <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/cure>

- Then click “Motorized Access Plan/Environmental Assessment”
- Then click “Open For Public Comment”
- Then click “Comment on Document.” You can also download this brochure at this screen.

Written comments can be sent to:

Superintendent
Curecanti National Recreation Area
Re: Motorized Vehicle Access Plan/EA
102 Elk Creek
Gunnison, CO 81230

IMPORTANT: Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, be advised that your entire comment – including your personal identifying information – may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold from public review your personal identifying information, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

Next Steps

After considering all comments received on the draft alternatives, the park will finalize the alternatives and begin to analyze their impacts. After the impact analysis is complete, a draft plan/EA will be available for public comment.

Timeline

Internal Scoping.....	October 2007
Public Scoping.....	June 2008
Alternatives.....	Fall/Winter 2008-2009
Development	(WE ARE HERE)
Preparation of.....	Spring/Summer 2009
Environmental Assessment	
Public Comments.....	Fall 2009
on Environmental Assessment and Draft Rule	
Final Decision.....	Winter 2009/2010
Document and Final Rule	
Implement Plan.....	Winter/Spring 2010
and Regulations	



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

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