



Dolores River Boating Advocates

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Dolores River Boating Advocates promotes responsible recreational use and balanced flow management of the Dolores River, while working to protect the watershed for the health of the natural environment and the livelihood of future generations.

February 18, 2020

Bureau of Reclamation

Attn: Ed Warner, Area Manager

445 West Gunnison Ave, Suite 221

Grand Junction, CO 81501

Sent via email: paradoxeis@usbr.gov

Re: Paradox Valley Unit Draft EIS

Dear Mr. Warner:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Paradox Valley Unit Draft EIS. Please accept these comments submitted on behalf of Dolores River Boating Advocates (DRBA). DRBA is a local non-profit organization based in Dolores, Colorado. We are focused on the Dolores River watershed from both recreational and ecological perspectives.

After considering all of the alternatives presented by BOR in the Paradox Valley EIS, the only one that can reasonably be supported is Alternative A – No Action. We recommend that BOR adopt Alternative A given the existing level of analysis. We also recommend that BOR develop a broader analysis that considers other options that are not so detrimental to local communities, recreation, the natural environment, wildlife, and cultural resources.

We are especially concerned about Alternative B. It would have significant impacts to recreation in the river corridor, including boating and hiking. This alternative it is also incompatible with the non-impairment standard required for management of the adjoining BLM lands in the Dolores River Canyon Wilderness Study Area and is in violation of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act's requirement to retain the outstandingly remarkable values of segments of river that have been found 'eligible.' Alternatives C and D come at too high a cost to local communities, cultural resources, and wildlife.

SIGNIFICANT UNACCEPTABLE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF ALTERNATIVE B

Recreation

Alternative B1 would have a massive and irreversible impact to recreation in the Dolores River corridor. The construction of 1.3 miles of access roads, 2 new bridges over the Dolores River, surface facilities, a power line, and a pipeline along with drilling and operating an new injection well can only be considered a major impact.

BLM's Tres Rios Field Office estimates that 5,300 people utilized the Gypsum Valley boat launch in 2019. That is the last boat launch before entering the Dolores River Canyon Wilderness Study Area and the stretch of river that Alternative B1 would significantly impact. While that is already a large number it does not represent the total use since there are other put ins upstream. So that number does not include float throughs and dispersed use not directly associated with that boat launch. Tres Rios estimates that an additional 6,700 people launched from the Dove Creek Pump Station and 12,500 people launched from Bradfield Bridge. It is common to float from Bradfield or the Pump Station all the way to the Bedrock take out. Launches were also occurring at Slick Rock from private property so those numbers were not recorded by the BLM. Based on their Recreation Management Information System, the BLM Uncompahgre Field Office estimates that there were up to 49,400 visitors to the area and that 8,098 visitors used the staging areas just before entering the Dolores River Canyon WSA.

While the BLM extrapolates these numbers to some extent because not all recreational users sign in a launch sites, these numbers make it clear without a doubt that the recreational use of the stretch of river between Big Gypsum Valley and Bedrock is very high. From a whitewater boating perspective, the Dolores River is one of the most cherished floats in the West, and this particular section is one of the crown jewel sections of the entire river.

The DEIS does not adequately recognize the level of recreation taking place where B1 is being proposed and the analysis is not complete. The area is managed as a primitive recreation opportunity setting by the BLM. This means it offers opportunities for solitude, natural quiet, and unconfined recreation for non-motorized and non-mechanized travel year-round. Changing from a primitive recreation setting to a roaded natural setting is a significant change

and will have a huge negative impact to river runners as well as to hikers and horseback riders on the trail adjacent to the river.

The analysis does not adequately address this change and is incorrect in its conclusion that impacts to recreation would be minimal.

Dolores River Canyon Wilderness Study Area Impairment

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) directed BLM to analyze wilderness qualities on BLM lands and to designate Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) where those values were found. Following that direction, Dolores River Canyon WSA was designated by the BLM in 1980 and the WSA was subsequently recommended for Wilderness designation by the Department of Interior to Congress in 1991. BLM must manage and protect WSAs in a way that preserves the wilderness characteristics they possess in a manner that does not impair their suitability for designation by Congress as Wilderness. BLM's obligation to manage WSAs to protect the wilderness characteristics is undermined by Alternative B.

The non-impairment standard for WSAs has two-part test when there are proposed actions such as the proposed new injection well site. The standard assesses if the action will be temporary and if it would create surface disturbance. Though subsurface, Alternative B1 would create a permanent action within the WSA, so it fails the non-impairment standard test. Further, the proposed project does not qualify as an exception to the non-impairment rule and there are other alternatives that can be considered that do not impact the WSA.

Alternative B1 violates FLPMA and should be rejected from further consideration.

Impacts to Wild and Scenic ORVs

Alternative B1 would have significant negative impacts to Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORVs) associated with Wild and Scenic River eligibility. As determined by the BLM, the area is considered to be eligible based on numerous ORVs. These include recreation and scenery (specifically rafting), fish and wildlife (native fish), geology, ecology, and archaeology.

The DEIS does acknowledge that there would be negative impacts. The DEIS state that, "Under Alternative B in Area B1, the scenic and recreational ORVs for eligible river segments, with a preliminary classification of recreational and wild, would be negatively affected. There would be direct effects to the recreational segment and indirect effects to the wild segment."

On the same page, however, the DEIS inaccurately concludes that, "Impacts on scenic ORVs would be minor since the topographic features—the canyon walls and hills—and dense riparian vegetation along the banks screen views from the river" (3-59). This is inaccurate for several reasons. Bridges have a significant impact from water or land and Alternative B1 proposes two of them. Bridges significantly modify the recreational experience of boaters floating on the river. There is also a trail from the Bedrock take out along the Dolores River in the area that would be disturbed and impacted in Alternative B1. The trail provides for hiking

and horseback riding. Boaters also stop and hike as well. The DEIS analysis of impacts to ORVs and impacts to recreation and scenery falls considerably short. To assume that recreationists won't see the impacts, thus making the impact to their experience minimal, is a completely false conclusion.

Alternative B1 would require a right-of-way across BLM land. The proposed ROW is not compatible with the protection and enhancement of identified ORVs, and BLM should deny application for this alternative in conformance with its own policy direction and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Conclusion: Alternative B1 must be rejected based on significant long-term impacts to recreation, impairment of wilderness values which violated FLPMA, and the degradation of wild and scenic values.

PURPOSE AND NEED AND PROJECT GOALS

Purpose and Need

The DEIS identifies that the purpose identified for this project is to “control salinity in the Colorado River contributed by sources in the Paradox Valley to decrease the adverse effects of high salt concentrations in the Lower Colorado Basin.” The need is established based on the fact that the existing well is reaching capacity and will not be able to be used for much longer. Given that the purpose is to reduce salinity and that there has been an existing injection well in operation since 1996, the BOR needs to be able to prove that this program is actually having the desired impact in order for the public to gauge if the purpose and need would be met. The DEIS does not, however, clearly identify the actual impact of the existing well since it began being used in 1996. In fact, it leaves a great deal of ambiguity around what impact the well has actually had and if it is indeed having a large impact. The DEIS states that, “no complete models of salt control in the Paradox Valley exist with which to determine the salinity control effect of PVU operations; therefore, based on best available scientific information, **Reclamation is continuing to estimate salt control in the Paradox Valley** based on its historical determination.”

Alternative B, C, and D in this DEIS have an incredibly high price tag both monetarily and in impacts to natural, cultural, wildlife, recreational, and socioeconomic resources of the study area. Such negative impacts should not be inflicted, especially without demonstrating a clear impact on the overall salinity issues in the Colorado Basin. Further, this action needs to be considered in the context of all possible actions that could be taken to reduce salinity more broadly. Would it be more cost effective to look at other sources of salinity introduction to the Colorado River in other locations? The public needs to be assured that anything approved in the Paradox Valley is the highest and best use of funding and public land resources and will have the greatest possible impact within the bigger picture.

Project Goals

Alternatives B, C, and D fail to meet several of the project goals identified in the DEIS. In particular, none of the action alternatives meet the following goals identified in the DEIS: “Avoid and minimize adverse impacts on physical, biological, social, economic, cultural, and tribal resources in the affected environment”; and “Be in the best interest of the public, including considerations of health and safety and the local community’s desired future conditions.” Further, some action alternatives do not meet the following goal: “Be consistent with existing BLM resource management plans (RMPs), where applicable.”

Conclusion: None of the action alternatives should be selected unless it can be demonstrated that they meet the purpose and need and fit within the project goals.

RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement does not present a reasonable range of alternative as is required by the National Environmental Policy Act. As noted above, deciding to implement Alternatives B, C, or D as considered in this DEIS would inflict major inarguably negative impacts to natural, cultural, wildlife, recreational, and socioeconomic resources of the study area.

Alternative B includes serious impacts to the Dolores River and its canyons including significantly impacting recreation, impairment to the wilderness study area and suitability for wild and scenic river designation, destruction of habitat for desert bighorn sheep and the Gunnison sage grouse, and potentially creating additional earthquakes in the region. Alternative C includes evaporation ponds that could harm migratory birds and would damage the scenic and rural nature of the Paradox Valley. Alternative D includes more industrial development that would damage the scenic and rural nature of the Paradox Valley and burning fossil fuels to power the crystallizers would require a pipeline to bring natural gas as well as create a new source of greenhouse gas use contributing to climate change. The impacts from all of these action alternatives are unacceptable and not in the best interest of the public.

At the same time, the DEIS did not consider other possible alternatives such as other potential injection well locations, addressing other salinity inputs instead, or adding more fresh water to the system. The DEIS should describe all other alternative injection well locations that have been evaluated, including why they were discarded.

Conclusion: the BOR needs to develop a more reasonable range of alternatives to present to the public, including alternatives that have less harmful impacts to local communities and to natural, cultural, wildlife, recreational, and socioeconomic resources.

IMPACTS TO WILDLIFE

The three action alternatives presented in the DEIS all have unacceptable impacts to wildlife and their habitat. Alternative B1 would impact bighorn sheep habitat and lambing areas. The sheep are of interest to wildlife managers and also add to the recreational experience of the area. B2 would impact potential Gunnison sage grouse habitat. Both B1 and B2 would reduce critical elk winter range. Alternative C poses significant threats to birds and bats and destroys 1500 acres of critical elk winter range. Alternative D eliminates critical elk winter range and returning water to the river at a different (warmer) temperature could have impacts to river habitat and species.

Conclusion: All three action alternatives in the DEIS include significant negative impacts to wildlife that are unacceptable.

All of the action alternatives presented in the DEIS have significant issues associated with them that are not in the best interest of the public and the No Action alternative is the only reasonable choice presented. Alternative B1 obviously poses a significant negative impact to boating, but we still cannot recommend any of the other action alternatives because the impacts they would create come at too high a price for public lands, recreation, wildlife, cultural resources, and local communities.

Again, thank for the opportunity to provide comments on the Paradox Valley Unit Draft EIS.

Sincerely,
Amber Clark



Executive Director
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