

**Decision Notice
And
Finding of No Significant Impact
For
Road 18 Caves Project Environmental Assessment
Deschutes National Forest
Bend-Fort Rock Ranger District
Deschutes County, Oregon**

Location

The Road 18 Caves Project area is located approximately eight miles southeast of Bend, Oregon, in the northeastern portion of the Bend/Ft. Rock Ranger District of the Deschutes National Forest. The project lies within portions of T19S, R13E; Sections 4, 8, 14, and 27 Willamette Meridian. The area is located east of the Northwest Forest Plan boundary line, and lies outside the range of the northern spotted owl. It is located in the Kelsey Butte/Arnold Subwatershed.

Decision

I have decided to authorize implementation of Alternative B with modifications for the [Road 18 Caves Project Environmental Assessment \(EA\)](#). Although Alternative C was the preferred alternative identified in the 30-day public review and comment period notice, published June 6, 2001 in The Bulletin, I have decided to implement a modified Alternative B because it best responds to concerns identified by the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs during the comment period as well as best meeting the purpose and need identified during the scoping process.

Specifically, the Tribe holds Hidden Forest Cave in high regard as a spiritual site. As such, as well as per the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 {36 CFR 800.49(a)(4)} and Executive Order 13007 for Indian Sacred Sites, I have decided to eliminate climbing and bolted routes as described in Alternative B.

In response to public comment regarding a ban on the possession of paint within the caves, I have included this measure. No adverse effects to the public have been identified.

Alternative B will implement the following:

The existing bolted routes in all caves discussed in this EA would not be authorized and bolts would be removed. Climbing without devices, or "bouldering" would be allowed in areas not posted as closed. It

would also authorize a restriction on the use of hand-drying agents to eliminate any adverse impacts to scenic resources and the potential effect to dependent wildlife.

An information kiosk would be installed at the Boyd Cave parking area/trailhead near Road 18. The kiosk would direct visitors to the caves. It would provide useful cave information such as existing closures and "leave no trace" ethics. The kiosk would inform visitors of cave etiquette and restrictions and provide information to promote a better understanding and appreciation for caves and caves resources. Self-issued permits for Boyd, Skeleton, Wind and Arnold Ice caves would be available at the Kiosk. (See Appendix D)

Boyd Cave: The existing parking area will be improved with rock barriers to eliminate motor vehicles driving near the cave entrance and over vegetation. The parking lot would be better defined to accommodate large RVs and vehicles towing horse trailers. A trail would be improved to provide a defined footpath to the cave entrance. The area would remain open for equestrians using this site to ride shorter loop trails rather than those using the Horse Butte Trailhead. Also, an information kiosk would be installed near Road 18. The kiosk would direct visitors to the caves. It would provide useful cave information such as existing closures and "leave no trace" ethics.

Skeleton Cave: Relocate the parking area away from the cave entrance to minimize impacts to vegetation and cave resources. The alteration of rocks on the floor of Skeleton Cave would be designed to provide for public/climber safety, but in a manner that would be more natural appearing (to be determined by the Forest Service, spelunkers, and the local climbing community). There would be a seasonal closure during the bat winter hibernation period (October 15 - May 1). This was analyzed under Alternative C.

Wind Cave: Relocate the parking area away from the cave entrance to minimize impacts to vegetation and cave resources. Two bat gates would be installed (one at the main entrance to the cave and one at the skylight area) to improve habitat conditions for the western big-eared bat. The gate at the main entrance would be locked during the bat winter hibernation period (October 15 - May 1). This was analyzed under Alternative C.

Hidden Forest Cave: Existing bolted routes in caves would not be authorized and bolts would be removed. It would also authorize a restriction on the use of hand-drying agents. New climbing routes would not be authorized in this or any other cave in the project area.

Bat Cave: Two bat gates would be installed (one at the main entrance to the cave and one at the skylight area) to improve habitat conditions for the western big-eared bat. The gate at the main entrance would be locked during the bat winter hibernation period (October 15 - May 1). This was analyzed under Alternative C.

Charlie-the-Cave: A bat gate would be installed to protect and maintain bat habitat.

Charcoal Cave #1: A year around closure order would remain in place until further analysis is completed.

Deg Cave: closed year-round to protect and maintain bat habitat.

The following would also occur:

- For caves with parking facilities, institute a self-issuing permit program to collect information on the visitor's name, purpose, number in party, comments and use patterns. There would be cave information and proposed cave etiquette on the permits or information board.
- Should the need arise; allow additional Special Use tours under authorized permit. Permittees should display a public need with an approved operating plan. Limit existing and future group size to 6-8 people at one time and no more than three tours per cave per day. Appropriate caves for this activity include Boyd, Skeleton, and Wind. Permittees would be responsible to include cave sensitivity/conservation etiquette for each group. Other special uses, such as movie making, would be authorized on a case-by-case basis.
- Restrict access to foot traffic only to promote public safety and to protect cave resources. Do not allow mountain bikes, horses, or motorized vehicles in caves. Continue to evaluate new recreational attractions and make recommendations based on impacts to cave resources and visitor safety.
- Prohibit use of internal combustion engines (such as generators) in caves.
- Prohibit the use of glass containers within caves to reduce litter and provide a safer environment to visitors.
- Maintain current populations of unique plant species in and near cave entrances by encouraging foot traffic in designated areas only.
- Add the wording ". . .and possession of" to the ban on use of hand drying agents {36 CFR 261.9 (a)(j)}. Possession of paint will also be added to the wording.
- Prohibit possession and use of alcoholic beverages as defined by state law in all caves. Current restrictions are from sunset to sunrise.
- To provide multi-agency consistency with seasonal closure periods, hibernacula closure dates would be October 15 to May 1. Maternity closure dates would be April 15 to September 30.

Additional Alternatives Considered in Detail

In addition to Alternative B, two other alternatives were developed and analyzed for the Road 18 Caves Project Environmental Assessment but not selected.

Alternative A is the No Action Alternative. Under the No Action alternative no change to facilities would be implemented and no changes in current management practices would take place. No improvements, except those required to protect public health and safety and provide immediate emergency resource protection, would occur.

I did not select this alternative because it would not meet the purpose and need for the project. Under this alternative cave resources and vegetation would continue to be impacted and trampled as a result of unrestricted vehicle traffic and the lack of vehicular controls. Use would continue to increase concurrent with the population growth of Bend and central Oregon as a whole. Impacted areas at the parking areas would expand with an increase in use and lack of management controls.

Alternative C was developed to address concerns identified during the scoping process about the lack of bolted climbing opportunities in the caves. It attempted to balance the need for reducing impacts to cave resources while maintaining a quality recreation experience. Along with "Actions Common to All", Alternative C proposed the following:

Boyd Cave: The existing parking area will be improved with rock barriers to eliminate motor vehicles driving near the cave entrance and over vegetation. The parking lot would be better defined to accommodate large RVs and vehicles towing horse trailers. A trail would be improved to provide a defined footpath to the cave entrance. The area would remain open for equestrians using this site to ride shorter loop trails rather than those using the Horse Butte Trailhead. Also, an information kiosk would be installed near Road 18. The kiosk would direct visitors to the caves. It would provide useful cave information such as existing closures and "leave no trace" ethics.

Skeleton Cave: Relocate the parking area away from the cave entrance to minimize impacts to vegetation and cave resources. The alteration of rocks on the floor of Skeleton Cave would be designed to provide for public/climber safety, but in a manner that would be more natural appearing (to be determined by the Forest Service, spelunkers, and the local climbing community). There would be a seasonal closure during the bat winter hibernation period (October 15 - May 1).

Wind Cave: Relocate the parking area away from the cave entrance to minimize impacts to vegetation and cave resources. Two bat gates would be installed (one at the main entrance to the cave and one at the skylight area) to improve habitat conditions for the western big-eared bat. The gate at the main entrance would be locked during the bat winter hibernation period (October 15 - May 1).

Hidden Forest Cave: Completed existing bolted routes would be authorized for climbing. Incomplete routes would be removed. New climbing routes would not be authorized in this or any other cave in the project area.

Bat Cave: Two bat gates would be installed (one at the main entrance to the cave and one at the skylight area) to improve habitat conditions for the western big-eared bat. The gate at the main entrance would be locked during the bat winter hibernation period (October 15 - May 1).

Charlie-the-Cave: A bat gate would be installed to improve bat habitat.

Charcoal Cave #1: A year around closure order would remain in place until further analysis is completed.

I did not select this alternative because of tribal concerns and to be compliant with Executive Order 13007 for Indian Sacred Sites and the National Historic Preservation Act.

Public Participation

This project evolved from discussions between the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), members of both the caving and climbing communities, and other interested parties in 1994. At two meetings between these parties, the Federal agencies agreed to work towards common management of the caves in the Road 18 area. A "Cave Strategy" was developed by the Forest Service and BLM, from which the proposed action for this project was developed. Additionally, a summary of the proposed action was included in the Spring 2000 through Spring 2001 Schedule of Projects (SOP).

A notification of completion of the EA and a thirty-day comment period letter was mailed to the project mailing list (approximately 150 households). The thirty-day notice and comment period for the Environmental Assessment and Preferred Alternative ended July 5, 2001. A request for public comment was published in The Bulletin on June 6, 2001.

Finding of No Significant Impact

Based on the site-specific analysis documented in the EA, I have determined that this decision does not constitute a major Federal action, individually or cumulatively, that will significantly affect the quality of the human environment; therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be necessary.

Beneficial and adverse direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts discussed in the Environmental Assessment have been disclosed within the appropriate context. No significant effects to the human environment have been identified. This determination is based on the mitigation measures designed into the selected alternative and the following factors:

- (1) Based on the analysis, I expect only slightly adverse, short duration impacts from implementation of this alternative. These have been disclosed in the analysis. This and other impacts are limited in scope and intensity and can be considered negligible (EA pages 35-41).
- (2) No adverse effects to public health or safety have been identified. This finding is based on past similar projects and no effects to public health or safety have been identified (EA p. 41).
- (3) There will be no significant adverse impacts to unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.
- (4) The effects of implementation of this decision are not likely to rise to the level of scientific controversy as defined by the Council of Environmental Quality.

- (5) Based on previous similar actions in the area the probable effects of this decision on the human environment, as described in the Environmental Assessment, are well known and do not involve unique or unknown risks.
- (6) This action does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.
- (7) This decision is made with consideration of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions on National Forest land and other ownerships within potentially affected areas that could have a cumulatively significant effect on the quality of the human environment. I find there to be no such cumulative significance.
- (8) The Forest Archeologist applied criteria of effect and adverse effect as found in 36 CFR 800.9, and determined that implementation of this decision will have no adverse effect to sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources (EA, page 42).
- (9) The Biological Evaluation for the area indicates that the proposed project will have no significant adverse impacts on any Proposed, Endangered, Sensitive or Threatened plant or animal species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (see Biological Evaluation and EA).
- (10) This decision is in compliance with relevant Federal, State, and local laws, regulations, and requirements designed for the protection of the environment. Effects from this action will meet or exceed state water quality standards.

Other Findings

This action is consistent with the goals, objectives, and direction contained in the Record of Decision (ROD) for the Deschutes LRMP and accompanying Final Environmental Impact Statement dated August 27, 1990. It also is consistent with the preferred alternative of the Final Environmental Impact Statement for Forest Service Roadless Area Conservation (published November 2000), the Federal Caves Resource Protection Act of 1988, the Executive Order 13007 for Indian Sacred Sites, and the National Historic Resources Protection Act of 1966.

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.7. Any written appeal must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.4 (Content of an Appeal). Two copies of a written notice of appeal must postmarked and submitted to the Regional Forester, Pacific Northwest Region, P.O. Box 3623, Portland, Oregon, 97208-3623 within 45 days of the date the legal notice of this decision appears in The Bulletin. For additional information, contact Leslie Moscoso, Bend-Fort Rock Ranger District, 1230 NE Third, Ste. A-262, Bend Oregon, 97701, (phone 541-383-4712, email lmoscoso@fs.fed.us, or fax 541-383-4700).

/s/Walt Schloer
WALTER C. SCHLOER, JR
District Ranger

August 30, 2001
Date

[Deschutes and Ochoco National Forests Website](http://www.fs.fed.us/centraloregon/manageinfo/nepa/documents/bendfort/caves/decisionnotice.html)

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Last Update: 9/6/01

R.A. Jensen