

Brief Project Summary for the South Fork Teton River boat ramp project

Goals or objectives

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) propose to construct a dedicated, long-term angler access point to the South Fork Teton River that will ensure public access to the lower river persists for the next 25 years or longer. Currently, all access to the lower end of the South Fork Teton is across private ground, or via a difficult easement through the highway right-of-way. The lower South Fork Teton River is part of the Public Trust, and is owned by the State of Idaho (Idaho Dept of Lands). As a Public Trust asset, it should be managed for the benefit of the public, but must also be consistent with the local community views and desires while still meeting the intended purpose of creating the access site. Creating a boat ramp here would be consistent with past efforts to provide public access to rivers, both upstream on the Teton River, and in most surrounding waterways and across the state. The river supports a quality trout fishery comprised mainly of Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout, with lesser numbers of rainbow and brown trout. Fishing and angler-related spending is an important component of the Idaho economy, contributing over 150 million to Idaho's economy annually. The fish resources in Madison County generated over 11 million in angler spending in 2011. As such, increased access to fishing resources benefits more than just anglers. Local businesses (grocery stores, convenience stores, guides and outfitters, etc) also benefit from access to quality fishing opportunities. The overarching goal of developing this access site is to connect the public with the natural resources and existing fishery via a safe and appropriately designed launch site.

As proposed, the site would disturb less than 0.5 acres of ground, and would include a 15ft.wide X 68ft long concrete boat ramp, restroom facilities, ADA parking, a gravel access way from 3000W to the ramp and parking lot, educational and regulatory signs, fences to define boundaries and separate the access area from private ground nearby. IDFG is also interested in modifying this design as appropriate to address the concerns of the public while still providing the intended benefits outlined throughout this document. Funding will be obtained from federal sources (Dingell-Johnson excise tax on motorboat fuel and sporting equipment) as well as IDFG license sales revenues. Additional funding is being sought from Idaho Dept of Parks and Rec through a waterways grant, and from additional partners as possible.

Benefits

The proposed development of a new ramp will provide safe public access to a section of the Teton River that currently offers no public access except across private ground or via a highway right of way. If constructed, this access point would allow the public to use the high-quality fishery of the river, and would also provide a safe, efficient location for law enforcement or safety (aka, Search and Rescue) personnel to quickly and safely access the river as needed. Development will also condense current launching activity to one small area which should reduce impacts to the stream banks in surrounding areas. This also provides the opportunity to place signage to help educate river users about surrounding land ownership, and the need to respect private land owners by staying below the high water mark. Signage can also include general information on the risks of floating rivers, as well as general timelines for making the trip downstream to the Beaver Dick takeout. This signage should help make this site safer and reduce issues with trespass and unprepared boaters that currently occurs. The development of restroom facilities will reduce impacts from river users by providing a clean, sanitary location for biological needs.

This project will primarily benefit non-motorized river users that would use the site as an access point for float trips, but it will also provide the opportunity for limited motorized boat use. When completed, the site will meet all ADA-ABA guidelines, and provide a boat landing that is safe, accessible, and inexpensive to maintain, thus representing a financially sound investment in public access to the river.

Urgency

In general terms, securing public access to public resources is an urgent proposition. As communities grow, and land ownership changes hands, access areas that have been used in the past, and considered sufficient to meet the needs of anglers and recreationists can become posted, and the public loses access to entire reaches of water. This has been documented in several places throughout the region, and across the State. As such, the need to secure these locations is urgent.

More specifically, the landowner on the northwest corner of the bridge on 3000 W offered Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) a 25 year easement to the proposed site, conditional that all construction would be completed within 18 months of the signing of the easement (by April 16, 2017). This leaves only the 2016 field season to comply with this requirement. If adequate funding is not secured prior to the 2016 field season (July-October), the landowner could withdraw his offer. That said, IDFG is interested in putting forth an acceptable project, and not rushing to push a less than desirable project forward. As such, if the process to identify and plan for a more appropriate project is not consistent with the 18-month construction window specified in the easement, we will engage with the landowner and see if adjustments can be made to that schedule.

Potential impacts

Currently, the project location is likely comprised of Coyote Willows, Red Osier Dogwood, Black Hawthorne and Cottonwood trees. Big game species found along the South Fork Teton corridor include moose and whitetail deer although mule deer and elk may infrequently use this area. Many furbearers can be found here, including muskrat, mink, beaver, otter and raccoon. Bald eagles are reported to nest in this reach as well. Habitat along the river also likely supports Yellow Billed Cuckoo, and the river probably is home to Utah Valvata as well as other non-game species.

We expect the project construction and footprint to have a negligible effect on wildlife, given its small size (less than ½ acre) and the impacted nature of the land in its current form. The proposed boat ramp is adjacent to the bridge crossing the river on 3000 W. This existing road/bridge impact results in a more significant intrusion than what the boat ramp would cause, and likely limits wildlife use of this particular property compared to other riparian areas along the river. Further, due to the existing road and bridge, combined with the peninsula shape of the proposed location, this parcel likely does not provide high quality connectivity to adjacent lands, as animals likely use nearby lands to migrate along the river corridor. Construction activities are being designed to not impact existing large trees, and to have a minimal impact on existing habitat although some disturbance of willow habitat is inevitable. We also believe that increased use of the river corridor by recreational boaters and anglers will not have a detrimental effect on wildlife. Many similar nearby rivers sustain much greater use than that anticipated at this location and also support healthy wildlife populations.

This site is located within the Sensitive Lands Overlay of Madison County. This ordinance was put in place to protect property and public safety from flooding, geologic and other natural and manmade hazards as well as preservation of significant geologic features and view corridors, biologically viable watercourses, wetlands and wildlife habitat; cultural resources and open space. As such, we will likely be required to seek additional permission from Madison County to address impacts that may occur from this project within the Sensitive Lands Overlay. Additional regulatory compliance will be required through the USACOE, NEPA, Cultural Compliance and other governmental processes before construction would occur.

Post-project

Idaho Department of Fish and Game maintains over 50 fishing and boating access sites across the region. These sites are maintained weekly during high use periods and less frequently when use drops off. We will be maintaining this new site on a weekly basis during the summer to ensure trash and litter is picked up, and rest room facilities are clean and sanitary. Additionally, a local fishing club has already offered to assist with

periodically cleaning up the site. IDFG will also be pursuing partners who may be interested in an annual “river clean up” project or “adopt a river” program that could leave the entire 7 miles of river in better shape than it is currently in.

Monitoring and Implications if no Action Taken

IDFG will continue to monitor the fishery for impacts resulting from increased use, as well as frequent monitoring of the new access site for wear and tear, trash accumulation and overall cleanliness. If this project is not implemented, we do not anticipate any immediate changes. However, the public will remain without dedicated, long-term access to a Public Trust resource that provides a high-quality recreational fishery and wildlife viewing opportunity. Threat of losing the existing and difficult access across private land or the highway right of way will remain a possibility for the foreseeable future.