

# Chapter 4 Environmental Consequences

This chapter assesses the environmental impacts expected to occur from the implementation of alternatives A or B, as described in chapter 2. Environmental impacts are analyzed by issues for each alternative and appear in the same order as discussed in Chapter 2.

## *Effects on the Biological Environment*

This section describes the estimated effects on wildlife habitat of carrying out alternatives A and B.

### Wildlife Habitat

The effects on wildlife habitat are described below.

- the impact of development activities and the disturbance to wintering sage grouse within the project area
- the impact of habitat fragmentation and loss of habitat connectivity resulting from future development activities

### *Alternative A (no action)*

If the Service does not accept the Chandler Ranch donation, it is likely that some form of development would occur in the future. This would significantly fragment the area, making it less attractive to wildlife, especially sage-obligate species such as sage grouse. Threats to sagebrush communities include fragmentation from increased housing development, energy development, mining activities, and new roads. Invasive species such as cheatgrass can dramatically alter fire regimes, resulting in negative impacts sagebrush communities, thereby impacting the animals that use this important habitat type. This would have farther reaching impact by the Sentinel mountain remaining in protected status due to BLM land ownership, but severing the important wet-meadow areas for sage-grouse broods and other wildlife that depend on sagebrush for nesting and meadow areas for brood rearing habitat. Though birds would have protected nesting areas, higher mortality for broods would likely occur with increased development and habitat fragmentation.

### *Alternative B (proposed action)*

Successful transfer of donated Chandler ranch land would protect in perpetuity key wintering areas for the greater sage grouse. By accepting the land in fee title, the Service ensures increased protection and connectivity for both the Chandler Ranch and adjoining BLM land. No habitat fragmentation would occur. Key corridors between larger BLM lands at Sentinel Mountain and National Forest lands to the north and east would be maintained and protected along Pinkham creek.

With oil and gas exploration and development occurring in North Park, undisturbed areas of sagebrush are important for sage grouse, sage thrashers and other sage-obligate species. The land is located in proximity to know leks. With the sagebrush nesting areas close to the irrigated meadows, it is likely that the area is used by grouse broods in the spring to feed on forbs in the meadows. The land also wraps around Sentinel Mountain, protected by BLM ownership. This juxtaposition of federal land ownership, provides a significant area of habitat for grouse and

other species. It is presumed that other sage-obligate species also use this area due to the mix of habitats to provide for life-cycle needs.

## *Effects on the Socioeconomic Environment*

This section describes the estimated effects of alternatives A and B on landownership, land use, and public use.

- public access for hunting or other recreational activities
- Rights of an individual to donate land through last will and testament
- lands owned by the Federal Government
- use of historic buildings as a public interpretive site

### **Landownership**

The effects of land ownership are described below

#### *Alternative A (no action)*

Ms. Chandler was the sole owner of this ranch. Her wishes were to donate this ranch to the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Service would not establish a refuge boundary and would not accept the donated property. If the Service fails to act and accept this donation, the executor of the Chandler estate may be forced to change course. There is a distinct possibility that this property, because of its desirable location and existing access by all-weather roads, would be developed and subdivided.

#### *Alternative B (proposed action)*

Ms. Chandler was the sole owner of this ranch. Her wishes were to donate this ranch to the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Service would establish a refuge boundary so to accept the transfer of the Chandler Ranch property and honor the wishes of Mrs. Chandler as expressed in her Will. The Service would develop a comprehensive management plan, for the property, that will guide the management of plant and animal resources for the next fifteen years.

### **Public access and recreational activities**

The effects of land ownership and uses are described below

#### *Alternative A (no action)*

With the private ownership of Gloria Chandler and now the estate, the property is currently closed to public access. Ms. Chandler did not allow public hunting or access on the property. If the property was not accepted by the Service, it would likely be accepted into private ownership. It is unlikely that private ownership would allow public access. The private owner could sell the rights to hunt on the property to individuals.

#### *Alternative B (proposed action)*

The Service would evaluate the species population base and make a determination on what species could be hunted according to State regulations. The Service would write a hunting plan to determine the type of hunting, access issues, and safety issues. It would be very likely that

some type of hunting would be allowed on the property to coincide with the State of Colorado. Wildlife observation is increasing in popularity in the United States. The 2006 National Survey of fishing, hunting and wildlife associated recreation reports the following for people 16 and older in the US:

71 million, or 31% observed wildlife and spent 45 billion on their activities

30 million, or 13% fished and spent \$41 billion on their activities

12.5 million or 5% hunted and spent \$23 billion on their activities

In Colorado-residents and non-residents:

1.8 million observed wildlife

660,000 fished

259,000 hunted

This demonstrates the opportunity the Service can provide for public use activities. Currently, no known viable fishery occurs in Pinkham creek, but opportunities for wildlife observation could easily be developed. Potentials exist for working with Colorado Department of Transportation to develop wildlife observation/interpretation areas just off of Colorado Highways 125 and 127. When a management plan is developed, the potential for hiking trails will be evaluated to ensure compatibility and appropriate resources to manage these uses.

The historic Davis Ranch buildings, particularly the existing barn, located on the property could be developed into an interpretive/educational area. This area, due to its location on the historic trail to Laramie, Wyoming has history as a stage-stop, post office and overnight lodging for travelers. It is believed on the property is also the location of the first home in North Park, built by James Pinkham. Surveys and research will confirm or refute this. These ties to the history of the area could provide public interpretation and education for visitors interested in the history of the United States.

## **Property taxes**

The effects of property taxes paid on the property are described below.

### *Alternative A (no action)*

According to the Jackson County officials the current taxes for the Chandler Ranch is \$3,449.29 (Appraisal Report of the Gloria Chandler Property January 2008). If the ranch is not accepted into the refuge system, development of houses would likely occur. This development would add revenue to the local economy through building expenses, permitting, and other costs associated with developing property.

### *Alternative B (proposed action)*

Annual refuge revenue sharing cost is estimated to be \$3,442 based on values paid to Jackson County for 2008. BLM payment-in-lieu-of-taxes (PILT) are estimated to be \$193 for a total of \$3,635.00.

## ***Unavoidable Adverse Impacts***

Any adverse effects that may be unavoidable while carrying out alternatives A and B are described below.

### **Alternative A (no action)**

The adverse impacts of degradation and habitat fragmentation would be expected to be more widespread and prevalent in the project area. Increased human-presence and the disturbance and habitat fragmentation and its effects on the greater sage grouse would occur.

### **Alternative B (proposed action)**

No direct or indirect unavoidable adverse impacts to the environment would result from the selection of alternative B. The acceptance of the property in fee title would not result in unavoidable adverse impacts on the physical or biological environment.

## **Irreversible and Irrecoverable Commitments of Resources**

Any commitments of resources that may be irreversible or irretrievable as a result of carrying out alternatives A and B are described below.

### **Alternative A (no action)**

There would be no additional commitment of resources by the Service if no action is taken.

### **Alternative B (proposed action)**

There would not be any irreversible or irretrievable commitments of resources associated with the property being accepted into the refuge system. Once the property is transferred, irreversible and irretrievable commitments of funds would exist to ensure the management of the property, such as, expenditure for fuel and staff time. Given that the property is within several miles of the refuge complex headquarters, these expenditures are expected to be minimal.

## ***Short-term Use versus Long-term Productivity***

### **Alternative A (no action)**

The Chandler Ranch may eventually be sold to developers for short term gains, which if developed into residential housing units would result in negative impacts to the long-term biological productivity and ecological integrity of the area.

### **Alternative B (proposed action)**

The acceptance of the Chandler ranch in donation would secure and maintain the long-term biological productivity of both the upland habitats and riparian wetlands. The long-term productivity of the site as a wintering area for greater sage grouse would be secure. Increased

protection of trust resources and maintenance of biological diversity would likely result. The public would gain long-term opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreational activities.

## ***Cumulative Impacts***

This section describes the cumulative impacts that may result from the combination of expected actions in alternatives A or B, together with other biological and socioeconomic conditions, events, and developments. Cumulative impacts are the incremental environmental impact or effect of the proposed action, together with impacts of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions, regardless of what agency (Federal or non-Federal) or person undertakes such other actions. Cumulative effects can result from individually minor but collectively significant actions taking place over a period of time (40 CFR 1508.7).

### **Alternative A (no action)**

If this property is developed into residential housing or commercial facilities, such as a large campground, there exists the possibility of major negative impacts to the greater sage grouse using this site in the future. Sage grouse are relatively intolerant of human disturbances. Fragmentation caused by roads, utility, water, and sewer lines, increased ambient noise levels, increased likelihood of invasive plants, and increased predation rates on birds are possible if widespread development occurs within the project area.

### **Alternative B (proposed action)**

If the property is accepted as a donation by the Service, fragmentation and negative impacts to riparian and sagebrush habitat caused by development can be avoided. Intact riparian areas will continue to provide valuable habitat for Neotropical migratory birds, moose, waterfowl, and fish. Acceptance of this land will also maintain the riparian travel corridor utilized by a variety of other species as they move through the north end of the county. Sagebrush habitat quality will be maintained for pronghorn, greater sage grouse and other upland bird species.

Future revenue generated through taxes on possible residential or commercial facilities would not exist. The property would continue to be assessed as an agriculturally-dominated property, and the county would continue to receive those taxes. We believe this would have negligible cumulative effects on the citizens of the county.

