

Actions Scenario (**Section 3.3**) of this EA for more information about the effects to the NCA.

3.5.3. Issue 3: How would the Land Exchange and reasonably foreseeable land uses impact recreational uses of the Federal Parcel and the Non-Federal Parcel?

The spatial scope of analysis associated with this issue is Washington County, Utah because it provides important context for the type, intensity, and projected trends of recreational use in the region, including on the Federal and Non-Federal Parcels.

3.5.3.1. *Affected Environment*

Washington County hosts numerous outdoor recreation areas, including one National Park (Zion) and four State Parks (Snow Canyon, Sand Hollow, Quail Creek, and Gunlock). The 62,000-acre Red Cliffs Desert Reserve is also located in the county. The BLM SGFO manages approximately 630,000 acres of public land in the county, including five Special Recreation Management Areas (SRMA) totaling 127,375 acres. These are the Sand Mountain, Red Mountain/Santa Clara, Deep Creek, La Verkin Creek/Black Ridge, and Canaan Mountain SRMAs (BLM 1999). Approximately 21,442 acres of BLM-administered public land in the County (3.4 percent) have been designated as open to OHV use, including the Sand Mountain Area (BLM 2016). On lands managed by the St. George Field Office, approximately 386,563 acres have been designated as Limited to Designated Routes, while 112,427 acres have been closed to OHV use. In the Red Cliffs NCA, travel is Limited to Designated Routes on 24,870 acres, with approximately 19,989 acres Closed to OHV Use, while in the Beaver Dam Wash NCA, travel is Limited to Designated Routes on 63,480 acres.

Federal Parcel

The Federal Parcel is located entirely within the 40,725-acre Sand Mountain SRMA and partially within the Sand Mountain Open OHV Area (BLM 1999). The Federal Parcel includes designated OHV trails, informal staging, and dispersed camping areas. OHV-use levels in the area are high, and permitted events are common. Traffic counters maintained by SGFO BLM personnel show that trail usage within the SRMA and Open OHV area increased from 551,275 people in Fiscal Year (October 1-September 30) 2022 to 718,277 visitors in Fiscal Year 2023. The population in Washington County, Utah, is projected to increase from 182,111 in 2020 to more than 464,000 by 2060 (Gardner Policy Institute 2024b). Given the projected population increase and the popularity for motorized recreation, usage of the Warner Valley area is expected to continue to increase for the foreseeable future.

The northeastern portion of the Federal Parcel is used as a staging area for unloading and loading vehicles and for camping. The adjacent Long Valley area also contains dispersed campsites and an informal staging area. Waddy's Corral was also constructed within the Sand Mountain SRMA to accommodate increased parking needs (BLM 2022). Eighteen companies have obtained Special Recreation Permits (SRPs) to operate commercially on the Federal Parcel.

In October 2020, as part of the Sand Hollow regional Pipeline Project (BLM 2018), the BLM and the WCWCD signed a Cooperative Management Agreement (CMA) for the Sand

Mountain dispersed campsites located adjacent to and within the Federal Parcel. As part of the CMA, the WCWCD paid for and installed one vault toilet and developed eight designated dispersed campsites along Pipeline Road. The vault toilet and four campsites are located on the BLM-administered lands, and four other campsites are located on WCWCD property. Under the CMA, the BLM manages and maintains all eight campsites and the vault toilet.

Non-Federal Parcel

The Non-Federal Parcel is private property located within the Reserve. No public recreation activity currently occurs on the Non-Federal Parcel. Because it is private property, no designated roads or trails are located within the Non-Federal Parcel.

3.5.3.2. Environmental Effects—Proposed Action

Federal Parcel

Under the Proposed Action, recreational use on the Federal Parcel would no longer be under the purview of the BLM SGFO because ownership would transfer to the WCWCD. An initial review of the Federal Parcel as documented in the Checklist (**Appendix B**) determined that approximately 417 acres within the Sand Mountain Open OHV Area and 929.14 acres within the SRMA would be transferred from BLM management to WCWCD ownership. As detailed in a formal Resolution, the WCWCD would coordinate with OHV groups to maintain the portion of the Federal Parcel not impacted by the Reservoir and associated infrastructure as open OHV. Any users displaced due to construction of a reservoir would likely relocate to BLM-administered lands outside of the Federal Parcel. These lands and Sand Hollow State Park are located immediately east of the Parcel and are designated as open to OHV use. This would increase use on these adjacent lands for camping, staging, and OHV use. Exact data regarding displaced users are not available. However, as described in the Affected Environment, recreation use in the area is growing.

If the Land Exchange and the reasonably foreseeable land use of a reservoir occurs, commercial operators (SRP Holders) would no longer be able to operate on the 742-acres that would be inundated by the Reservoir. However, each of the existing 18 permits also includes other portions of the Sand Mountain Open OHV area, and operators would still be able to provide services to the public. Authorized recreational activities would continue on the remaining 39,799 acres of the SRMA located outside of the Federal Parcel. Under the Proposed Action, the CMA agreed to by the BLM and WCWCD would be updated to include any OHV-related changes resulting from the Land Exchange, including management of the Parcel, and management and maintenance of the campsites and vault toilet. The Reservoir may have beneficial impacts to the community by providing water-based recreational opportunities, however, this would depend on the future management of the Reservoir by the WCWCD.

Non-Federal Parcel

Under the Proposed Action, 89.43 acres of private land would be transferred to BLM ownership and be enveloped within the NCA. Because the Non-Federal Parcel is private property, no designated roads or trails are located within the Non-Federal Parcel. It is also

expected that recreational activities would not increase after the Exchange due to the recreational restrictions that would be put in place under the NCA RMP (BLM 2016).

3.5.3.3. *Reasonably Foreseeable Effects*

Implementation of the Proposed Action would result in approximately 417 acres of the Sand Mountain Open OHV Area and 926 acres of the Sand Mountain SRMA being removed from federal management, which would be additive to the present and reasonably foreseeable actions as described in the Present and Reasonably Foreseeable Future Trends and Actions Scenario (**Section 3.3**). The SRMA would reduce in size from 40,725 acres to 39,799 acres and would continue to be managed by the BLM. As lands identified for disposal in the SGFO RMP (BLM 1999) continue to be exchanged out of public ownership in traditional OHV riding areas near the outskirts of communities such as St. George and Washington City, riders would be displaced into other outlying areas. The loss of OHV riding opportunities would be additive to other BLM land exchanges that have already occurred on BLM-administered public land in Washington County. This would include 605 acres of habitat adjacent to the Federal Parcel that was recently transferred to private ownership (Long Valley Land Exchange). The Long Valley parcel is being developed for residential housing and is not suitable for recreational access or use. The remainder of public lands within Washington County would remain open for various forms of recreational use. Hiking, rock climbing, sightseeing, camping, equestrian use, fishing, hunting, OHV use, and other recreational uses would continue to be accommodated. As lands previously open to recreation are closed or developed, surrounding areas that are still open to recreational use are expected to see higher numbers of visitation. Limitations due to resource conflict would restrict some activities in specific areas identified in the SGFO RMP (BLM 1999).

3.5.4. Issue 4: How would the Land Exchange and reasonably foreseeable land uses impact water resources in Washington County?

The spatial scope of analysis associated with this issue is Washington County, UT, primarily focusing on the Gould Wash – Virgin River HUC 10 watershed (ID: 1501000809) and the mainstem of the Virgin River, both within and downstream of the HUC 10 watershed to the Utah state line. This area was chosen as the reasonably foreseeable land use of a reservoir would impact groundwater and surface water resources throughout the county, as well as the riparian and wetland areas associated with those water resources. The primary focus on the Gould Wash – Virgin River HUC 10 watershed is because both the Federal and Non-Federal Parcels are located within this watershed as well as two major reservoirs (Quail Creek and Sand Hollow) and other key water resource infrastructure.

3.5.4.1. *Affected Environment*

The main source of water within Washington County is the Virgin River. Within the HUC 10 Gould Wash – Virgin River watershed, and down to the Utah state line, there are approximately 39.4 miles of river, of which 15.5 miles are on BLM-managed land. The river is characterized by a snowmelt hydrograph in the spring, baseflows throughout the remainder of the year, and monsoonal flood events throughout late summer and early