INTRODUCTION

The Grand Mesa Water Conservancy District (Conservancy District) has submitted an application for a new special use authorizations (SUA) from the United States Forest Service (USFS). In the application, the Conservancy District proposes to rebuild an existing dam at Blanche Park Reservoir on 0.8 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands. Blanche Park Reservoir is located near National Forest System Road (NFSR) 125 on the Grand Mesa, approximately 10.5 miles to the north-northeast of Cedaredge, Colorado, on land managed by the Grand Valley Ranger District. The dam and reservoir is authorized under a right-of-way issued by the Department of Interior under the Act of March 3, 1891 (hereinafter “1891 Easement”). In the application, the Conservancy District proposes to construct a 1,290-foot access road on 0.9 acres and reconstruct a 300-foot dam on 0.8 acres and prior to construction, the access road and dam construction area (about 1.7 acres) would be cleared and grubbed. The Conservancy District proposes to use an estimated 11,452 cubic yards of fill in the new dam and shape the fill according to engineering specifications. A protective mat of 9-inch rip-rap to about 1-foot of thickness would be added to the dam. A new concrete headwall, concrete caissons, a head gate, stem and wheel, emergency spillway and erosion control facilities would be built. Following construction, all ground disturbance would be reclaimed, with an ATV track remaining permanently to provide administrative-only access the dam for operation and maintenance. The existing reservoir pool (15.5 acres) would be inundated for a period of four to six weeks annually. The capacity of the rebuilt reservoir would be about 125 acre feet (AF), with a normal pool elevation of about 10,088 feet.

The USFS has prepared an environmental analysis (Blanche Park Reservoir Environmental Assessment) to evaluate the effects of the proposed action on the human environment.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose and need of this project is to rebuild the dam at Blanche Park, a facility owned by the Grand Mesa Water Conservancy District and authorized on the national forest by an 1891 Easement. The original dam was breached about 1946 and the facility has not been operated since then. The Conservancy District needs to perfect a 125 acre foot water right associated with the site. Rebuilding the reservoir would provide additional water storage capacity for the Conservancy District and allow a conditional water right for the site to become absolute. While
the dam and reservoir are authorized by an 1891 Easement, special use authorizations are needed in conformance with the 1991 Amended Land and Resource Management Plan (USFS 1991) for the construction of the dam and access road, as well as the long term operation and maintenance of the administrative access road to the Reservoir.

**DECISION**

The Blanche Park Reservoir Environmental Assessment (EA) documents the environmental analysis and conclusions upon which this decision is based. Based upon my review of the EA and project file, as the Forest Supervisor of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests, I am approving the proposed Blanche Park Reservoir reconstruction as described in the Proposed Action. This action will allow the Grand Mesa Water Conservancy District to rebuild a dam, authorized by an 1891 Easement, which was breached about 1946. My decision, in accord with the analysis:

- Requires the inclusion of all practical measures (project design features, as described in the EA, and applicable agency enforced Conditions of Approval) to avoid, minimize, or offset project-related effects in order to conserve and protect resources in the interest of the public specific to NFS lands.
- Does not authorize the initiation of surface disturbing activities on NFS lands. Initiation of ground disturbance activities may commence only upon issuance of a Notice to Proceed (NTP) by the USFS.
- Approves issuance of SUAs authorizing construction of the dam, reservoir and access road, and operation and maintenance of the access road, on NFS lands.
- Approves issuance of appropriate permits for hauling on NRSRs, clearing timber and utilizing minerals materials on NFS lands.

**DECISION RATIONALE**

Approval of the Proposed Action is consistent with the purpose and need described above. I have considered the needs of State and local residents and their economies, maintained multiple-use values and implemented Forest Plan direction while accommodating the request for SUAs. Below is a summary of the primary resource concerns analyzed in the EA and which informed my decision.

*Water Resources and Water Rights*

Under the proposed project, the reservoir would fill annually for four to six weeks from an existing unnamed tributary fed by snowmelt and rainfall, temporarily expanding the open water from about 0.5 acres to about 15.5 acres and flooding a stretch of about 100 to 150 feet of unnamed tributary. Effects are expected to be negligible, due to the short-term nature of the
storage. Further, because the reservoir existed previously, the project represents a return to a previous condition within the watershed.

The reservoir is authorized by an 1891 Easement and was originally built to hold about 124 AF of water. The facility was used to store irrigation water until about 1946 at which time Trickle Park Reservoir (also known as Park Reservoir) was built downstream. The original water right was moved to the Trickle Park Reservoir, leaving a facility in place with no water right. The proposed project would comply with a State water right location change, approved November 2, 2015, allowing storage of 125 AF of water decreed for irrigation use to be transferred from the Gorsuch Reservoir (Cactus Park Reservoir) project to Blanche Park Reservoir and enable the District to meet existing and future needs of agriculture users downstream. Because water rights are existing, no adverse effects to water rights are expected associated with the project. There is no associated change of use and no intervening water rights.

Soils

The extent of soil disturbance as a result of the project is minor. About 15.5 acres of soils would be annually inundated for about four to six weeks and about 1.7 acres of temporary soil disturbance would occur as a result of the project. Following construction, about 1.6 acres would be re-seeded and reclaimed, leaving only an ATV track for ongoing maintenance and operation (about 0.1 acres) of the reservoir structures. This ATV track will remain open for administrative use only and will not be available for use by the public. The Conservancy District will install a gate at the junction of the administrative road and the access road in order to prevent public use.

Vegetation

Effects to vegetation are expected to be minor to negligible, due to design features including reseeding. Approximately 0.9 acres of vegetation would be disturbed during construction of the access road and dam. Some tree removal would be associated with access road construction. Approximately 0.1 acres, the footprint of the trail that will be maintained for administrative access to the site, would be permanently disturbed. Effects within the inundated area (15.5 acres) are expected to be negligible due to the short inundation period (four to six weeks). The existing plant community is diverse, and would persist. Transition to species more tolerant to inundation is likely to occur and willow and grasses may become more prevalent.

Wetlands

Effects to wetlands associated with the project are expected to be minor or negligible. About 12.8 acres of wetlands are present in the project area. A portion of these wetlands is a fen, a unique but locally abundant wetland type characterized by a direct connection to groundwater, low productivity, and peat accumulation. Impacts to wetlands are restricted to those within the facility’s footprint as authorized by the original 1891 Easement.
Threatened, Endangered, Candidate and Proposed (TECP) Species

Effects to TECP species, including the Canada Lynx and four species of Colorado River endangered fishes are expected to be negligible or minor. If lynx are in the area, the increased human activity and noise from construction vehicles could result in lynx avoiding the project vicinity. However, these effects would not occur during the winter season or during nighttime hours when lynx are sensitive to noise and human disturbance. Effects to lynx habitat from vegetation clearing is considered minor; most of the project area is not suitable habitat and about 2.3 acres of suitable habitat would be impacted. Endangered Colorado River fishes are not present in the project area, but may be affected due to water depletions. However, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s final Gunnison River Basin Programmatic Biological Opinion (PBO) applies to this project due to the small amount of water depletion resulting from the project on an annual basis (less than 100 acre feet per year). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provided consultation regarding the effects of this project on lynx and the Colorado River fishes in a letter dated September 7, 2016.

Visual Resources

Effects to visual resource are consistent with the 1991 Forest Plan. The proposed action includes construction of an administrative access road (entrance to the road would be blocked by a gate in order to prevent public use) on a south facing slope that is within view of NFSR 125, Trickle Park Reservoir, and a boat ramp. The construction of the road, including tree removal and grading activities, would alter the viewshed. Changes to the landscape as a result of the proposed project would be consistent with the VQO of partial retention for the area within view of NFSR 125 and consistent with the VQO of modification for the dam construction and inundated area. The new access road would be visible but shielded by forested areas surrounding the road. Following construction the road will be converted to a trail suitable for ATV travel necessary for the operation and maintenance of the reservoir. Public use of the road will not be allowed. The new dam structure would be screened by existing vegetation and topography, and the water surface would be concealed by the dam structure. The 300-foot width of the dam structure would be partially visible to viewers to the south, and would not dominate the characteristic landscape.

Hunting and Recreation

Effects to hunting and recreation that may occur as a result of the proposed action would be limited to the construction period and would be minor. Due to construction, a minor amount of increased traffic would occur on Surface Creek Road (NFSR 125) and Trickle Park Road (NFSR 121) and increased noise may affect recreational users or hikers within the area. Few recreational amenities are within the vicinity of the project. Effects from noise and to the viewshed may occur for users of a nearby boat ramp, drivers along NFSR 125, or hikers along NFST 718 (Cedar Mesa Trail) which is about 1.5 miles to the southeast of the project area.


PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

A legal notice soliciting scoping comments on the proposed Blanche Park Dam Reconstruction project was published in the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel and on the Forest Service website on November 4, 2016. The scoping period was held for 30 days, in conformance with 36 CFR 215, between November 4 and December 4, 2016. Other federal agencies were consulted with including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the State Historic Preservation Office, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. No public or agency comments were received during the 30-day scoping period.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

The EA explains in further detail the applicable statutes, regulations or other plans with which the Proposed Action must be in conformance (i.e., the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Historic Preservation Act, FLPMA, National Environmental Policy Act, etc.). The EA documents the Proposed Action is in conformance with USFS Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan (Amended 1991).

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

Based on my review of the EA, including appendices and supporting documents, it is my conclusion that the selected alternative is not a major federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment as defined in 40 CFR 1508.27. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. The context and intensity considerations are summarized below. My finding is based on the context and intensity of the project as described:

Context: The project is a site-specific action directly involving NFS administered land and only affects the local environment. For this reservoir reconstruction, the context of the environmental effects is based on the environmental analysis in this EA. The project entails a six to ten-month construction project occurring over two seasons to rebuild Blanche Park dam, as well as construction of a 1,290-foot access road which would be reclaimed to an ATV trail at the end of the project. The access road and trail will not be available for public use and will be maintained to the level necessary to facilitate operation and maintenance activities by the Grand Mesa Water Conservancy District. The project also entails inundation of a former reservoir for four to six weeks annually and operation and maintenance of the dam.

Effects of the action have also been analyzed in the context of the Grand Mesa ecosystem, including effects to wetland vegetation and soils, effects to the Canada Lynx and to Colorado’s endangered fish, and effects to the visual resources for the public visiting the scenic Grand Mesa area. See EA.
The following have been considered in evaluating intensity for this proposal:

1. **Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse.** The proposed action would affect resources as described in this EA. Minimization and avoidance measures to reduce impacts to the Canada Lynx and its habitat, visual resources, the Surface Creek watershed, and vegetation and soils on the Grand Mesa were incorporated in the design of the proposed action. Beneficial effects to the private landowners relying on irrigation water for agricultural production would occur from the rebuilding of the dam. I conclude impacts of the selected action are not significant in context of direct, indirect, and cumulative effects.

2. **The degree to which the selected alternative will affect public health or safety.** The EA considered impacts associated with hazardous and solid wastes, and air and water quality. There are no significant impacts relative to public health and safety. The proposed action is designed in accordance with federal laws and Forest Service standards and criteria for high hazard dams.

3. **Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.** The project area is located on the scenic Grand Mesa, which is the largest flat-topped mesa in the world with an area of about 500 square miles. Historic and cultural resources have been inventoried in the Blanche Park project area and no potential impacts are expected. According to the Forest Service’s fen inventory GIS layer, the project area includes a fen wetland which is of unique ecological importance; however, effects to the fen wetland as a result of seasonal inundation are expected to be minor or negligible and represent a return to a previous condition, as described in this EA. Although there is no farmland in the project area, the project will have beneficial effects to prime farmlands in the Surface Creek watershed. There are no wilderness areas, no wild and scenic rivers, and no other ecologically critical areas present and no impacts would occur to these areas.

4. **The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.** Effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be controversial. There are over 300 lakes on the Grand Mesa and many of these lakes are small reservoirs built by irrigators and municipalities to store water. Effects associated with dam construction and water reservoirs have been previously documented for NFS lands on the Grand Mesa. The proposed project would rebuild a reservoir breached in 1946, improving water storage capacity and converting a conditional water right to absolute storage to allow the Grand Mesa Water Conservancy District to meet existing and future needs of agriculture users downstream. I conclude that the environmental effects of the decision are not highly controversial.

5. **The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.** The project is not unique or unusual and there are no uncertain, unique, or unknown risks associated with the effects of the project on the...
human environment. The USFS has experience implementing similar actions in similar areas.

6. **The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.** The actions considered in this EA were considered by the USFS within the context of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. Significant cumulative effects are not predicted. An analysis of the effects of the proposed action is described in this EA. The proposed reconstruction of the Blanche Park Reservoir does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, or represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.

7. **Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts – which include connected actions regardless of land ownership.** The USFS evaluated the possible actions in context of past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions. Significant cumulative effects are not predicted. A complete disclosure of the effects of the project is contained in the EA.

8. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or other objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.** No historic properties eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places are present within the project area. The State Historic Preservation Office has concurred with this determination. Therefore, the proposed action will have no potential to adversely affect historic properties. No significant scientific or cultural resources occur within the project area and effects are not expected.

9. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, or the degree to which the action may adversely affect: 1) a proposed to be listed endangered or threatened species or its habitat, or 2) a species on BLM’s and USFS’s sensitive species lists.** Based on formal consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the proposed action may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect the Canada lynx, and may affect, is likely to adversely affect four species of Colorado River endangered fishes. No other federally-protected plants or animals are known to occur in the area. Timing of construction to reduce impacts to the Canada Lynx have been incorporated into the design of the proposed action. Temporarily disturbed areas will be reclaimed to reduce disturbance of sensitive species and their habitat.

10. **Whether the action threatens a violation of a federal, state, local, or tribal law, regulation or policy imposed for the protection of the environment, where non-federal requirements are consistent with federal requirements.** The project does not violate any known federal, state, local or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.
ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW (OBJECTION) OPPORTUNITIES

There are no parties that have standing to object to this decision under 36 CFR § 218 subparts A and B. Therefore, my decision may be implemented immediately.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

Ground disturbing activities will not occur until the USFS issues the Notice to Proceed.

CONTACT

For additional information concerning this decision, contact:

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Date

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