

1.0 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

1.1 Introduction

This Environmental Assessment (EA) evaluates the proposed Minidoka North Side Resource Management Plan (RMP). The RMP is being developed by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) to manage resources, facilities, and access on their lands and waters. Reclamation's lands in the Minidoka North Side RMP Study Area are shown on Figure 1.1-1, *Location Map*.

1.2 Authority

Title 28 of Public Law 102-575, Section 2805 (106 Stat. 4690; Reclamation Recreation Management Act of October 30, 1992) provides Reclamation with authority to prepare resource management plans.

1.3 Proposed Federal Action

The proposed Federal action is implementation of an RMP for Reclamation lands located at Minidoka Dam and in the Minidoka North Side Study Area. The intent of the RMP is to serve as a blueprint for the future use, management, and site development of Reclamation lands and resources in the RMP Study Area for the next 15 years. Development of the RMP has identified goals and objectives for resource management, specifies desired land and resource use patterns, and explains the policies and actions that would be implemented or allowed during the 15-year life of the plan to achieve these goals and objectives.

1.4 Purpose and Need for Action

1.4.1 Purpose of the Environmental Assessment

The purpose of this Federal action is to prepare an RMP to effectively manage scattered parcels of Reclamation land throughout the Minidoka North Side area. A plan is needed to address current and anticipated future uses to allow the orderly and coordinated development and management of lands and facilities under Reclamation jurisdiction. This RMP is needed to address Reclamation's future management of the 119 separate parcels (approximately 17,700 acres) that make up the Minidoka North Side area, and are spread out over approximately 527,000 acres. Reclamation obtained the majority of these parcels at the beginning of the 20th century. The parcels were withdrawn from the public land base specifically for Reclamation's irrigation projects. Now, however, it is apparent that not all of the parcels are required for operation and maintenance of the irrigation projects. In the long term, some of these parcels are likely to be relinquished—that is, put back in public land status and managed by the U. S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The majority of the parcels will remain under

Reclamation's jurisdiction. The RMP is a 15-year plan to address management of the existing land base (all 119 parcels), and interim management for parcels that are no longer needed for Project purposes. The determination of parcels no longer needed for Project purposes, and the future relinquishment of these parcels, will be addressed in a separate process.

The Minidoka North Side lands are currently managed without the guidance of a Reclamation RMP. The purpose of the RMP process is to develop a comprehensive vision to guide future uses and define land and resource management objectives. The 15-year RMP will be used as the basis for directing activities on Reclamation lands in a way that maximizes overall public and resource benefits consistent with Reclamation goals. The RMP will be reviewed, reevaluated, and amended to reflect changing conditions and management objectives on an as-needed basis. Future opportunities for public involvement would be provided on significant changes that affect resources or public use.

Several management issues exist to varying degrees throughout the 119 parcels. Many parcels contain agricultural trespass. Others have been grazed in the past, and several people in the area would like to have additional grazing leases. Some parcels are used as locations for target practice, which is in violation of Reclamation policy. Other violations include dumping and off-road vehicle (ORV) use. Some of the parcels contain remnant native habitat that benefits several wildlife species and would benefit from protection against unauthorized use. Fire management is addressed on a case-by-case basis and rehabilitation efforts are not consistent. Currently, Reclamation manages some of these parcels on an ad-hoc basis. Two large parcels are associated with Lake Walcott State Park, which is managed by the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation (IDPR) for Reclamation. By developing an RMP, Reclamation's goal is to accumulate information about the parcels, and to provide staff and the public with a resource for approaching management issues in a uniform manner across all the parcels, based on Project needs and the features and resources of that parcel.

This EA is being prepared to assist Reclamation in finalizing a decision on a preferred RMP alternative and to determine whether to issue a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) or a Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). An environmental analysis is required by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) for any Federal action that may have a significant impact on the environment.

NEPA requires Reclamation to explore a reasonable range of possible alternative management approaches and the environmental effects of these actions. Three alternatives are evaluated and compared in this document, including a No Action Alternative and a Preferred Alternative. The impacts of each alternative were evaluated for the affected resource areas, including soils; water quality and contaminants; vegetation; wildlife; aquatic biology; threatened, endangered, proposed, and candidate species; recreation and access; land use and management; socioeconomics; public services and utilities; environmental justice; cultural resources; Indian sacred sites; and Indian Trust Assets. Geology, visual quality, climate and air quality, water resources and hydrology, topography, and transportation were also evaluated, but are not included in this document because it was determined that no impacts would occur on these resources.

Insert Figure 1.1-1

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1.5 Location and Background

The Minidoka North Side RMP Study Area is located in parts of Minidoka, Cassia, Jerome, Lincoln, and Blaine counties, Idaho. The Study Area includes Minidoka Dam and 119 scattered land parcels, covering approximately 17,700 acres. The immediate Study Area includes the three counties where all of Reclamation's parcels are located—i.e., Minidoka, Cassia, and Jerome Counties. The Gravity Division and the North Side Pumping Division of the Minidoka Project were designed primarily to provide irrigation to the new communities of Heyburn, Paul, Acequia, and Rupert.

Minidoka Dam impounds Lake Walcott, one of five reservoirs associated within the larger Minidoka Project on the Snake River. Lake Walcott State Park is located on Reclamation property adjacent to the lake, and Reclamation is coordinating its RMP closely with Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation (IDPR) for future planning related to park lands. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) manages the reservoir water surface and lands on the adjacent Minidoka National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Unlike Lake Walcott State Park, the Minidoka NWR is considered outside the RMP Study Area. President Teddy Roosevelt designated this 25,000-acre area as the Minidoka NWR in 1909. Other lands in the vicinity are owned or managed by the BLM and private individuals and entities who use the land primarily for agriculture. A&B Irrigation District (A&B), formerly the Northside Pumping Division, and the Minidoka Irrigation District (MID), formerly the Gravity Division, operate and maintain the irrigation water system on these properties.

1.5.1 Historical Overview

Minidoka Dam was Reclamation's first Project in Idaho, with construction completed in 1906. The United States Congress designated its Project authorization to include irrigation and power generation, and the dam and powerplant were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. At the time the Project was initiated, large tracts of public land were withdrawn and transferred to Reclamation for homestead entry purposes and for the construction of Project facilities. Most of the Minidoka North Side Study Area lands were originally included in the North Side Extension Division, and were expected to become private irrigated farmland. However, because of economic conditions and water shortages, these lands were never developed. A portion of these remaining lands and land in MID are used for Project purposes. These parcels, many of which have trespass issues or other unauthorized uses, are scattered throughout the RMP Study Area among BLM and privately owned lands.

1.5.2 River and Reservoir System Operations

Minidoka Dam is one of five storage dams and two diversion dams included in the Minidoka Project. The lands that the Minidoka Project serves extend from Ashton, Idaho, to Bliss. The Project furnishes a full or supplemental water supply to 1.2 million acres. The actual acreage that Reclamation has acquired or withdrawn for the Minidoka Project is approximately 140,000 acres. Minidoka Dam is a multi-purpose structure with functions including irrigation, power production, flood control, recreation, and fish and wildlife conservation. The dam is

located on the mainstem of the Snake River, 13 miles northeast of Rupert, Idaho, and is an earth and rock filled structure. The dam forms Lake Walcott, which is used as part of the water supply for irrigating approximately 126,000 acres. Lake Walcott serves as a storage and regulation reservoir as well as a diversion point for two canals. Water is diverted at the dam and into a canal on each side of the river. The North Side Canal delivers water to MID and the South Side Canal delivers water to Burley Irrigation District (BID) and a small portion of MID.

Topography prohibits A&B from using gravity fed conveyance systems to divert irrigation water. A&B pumps water from the Snake River for Unit A (2 miles upstream from Milner) and delivers water to Unit B from 177 deep wells. Unit A serves approximately 14,000 acres and Unit B approximately 63,000 acres. By far the majority of the lands in the Study Area are within the boundaries of the A&B district. The lake extends 26 miles up the Snake River. Additional details are provided in Table 1.5-1, *Project Specifications*.

TABLE 1.5-1
Project Specifications

Lake Walcott at Normal Maximum Water Surface	
Elevation	4,195 feet
Total Storage Capacity	210,000 acre-feet
Active Storage for Irrigation	95,200 acre-feet
Shoreline	80 miles

Minidoka Dam	
Structural Height	86 feet
Crest Elevation	4,200 feet
Crest Length	4,475 feet
Spillway Capacity at Elevation 4245.0 feet	89,000 cubic feet per second
Powerplant Capacity	27,700 kW

Source: Reclamation 1999

1.6 Scoping

Public scoping activities were held prior to the development of this Draft EA, including the following:

- Conducting an initial public meeting
- Reviewing comments generated from the first public information newsbrief
- Gathering input on issues from the first Ad Hoc Work Group meeting

An initial public scoping meeting was held on March 6, 2002, in Burley, Idaho. The meeting was advertised through media announcements sent to local outlets and a public information newsbrief that was sent to nearly 200 people. The purpose of the initial meeting and the newsbrief was to

collect public input on the issues that should be addressed in the alternatives for the RMP and Draft EA. Following this meeting, an Ad Hoc Work Group was formed to assist with alternatives development and participation throughout the process. This group consisted of Tribal, agency, and interest group representatives, and met for the first time to discuss issues on April 11, 2002. The public involvement process is described fully in Chapter 4, *Consultation and Coordination*.

1.7 Summary of Issues

The RMP addresses all activities on Reclamation lands in the Study Area. Reclamation identified several issues that need to be addressed by the RMP. These issues were presented to the public, and the list was expanded through this process. A summary list of the primary issues follows.

- Overarching Concerns
 - Maintain a view of the “big picture,” i.e., look beyond a tract-by-tract perspective to include area/regional needs & opportunities.
 - Consider area economic development in management decisions.
 - Availability of water and water rights.
- Land Status
 - Keep lands needed for Project purposes in Reclamation’s jurisdiction.
 - Define criteria for Project purposes.
 - Support Irrigation District needs as a first priority.
 - Dispose of lands not needed for Project purposes.
 - Give preferences to adjoining owners in land sales or exchanges.
 - Expand agricultural and grazing lease opportunities on Reclamation lands.
 - Protect Reclamation Zone at Minidoka Dam.
 - Keep all lands in Reclamation jurisdiction—do not relinquish to BLM.
 - Allow exchanges/sales to “square up” farm units.
- Natural Resources
 - Inventory vegetation and wildlife resources on Reclamation lands.
 - Identify parcels with high resource value and restrict other uses.
 - Reduce impacts from ORV use, fire, weeds, dumping, and trespass.
 - Protect wetlands and sensitive species.
 - Explore opportunities with farmers for cooperative wildlife habitat/farming.
 - Coordinate efforts for weed/insect control (e.g., BLM/Reclamation).
 - Water quality management & protection, including recharge of aquifer.

- Recreation
 - Provide more recreation opportunities, such as interpretation/education opportunities for cultural resources and wildlife viewing.
 - Promote economic benefits through recreation.
 - Examine expanded use opportunities at the State Park.
 - Protect public access to the river.
 - Manage current unauthorized camping, examine potential for allowing/providing camping outside of State Park.
- Enforcement
 - Prevent illegal dumping, ORV use, and vandalism on Reclamation lands.
 - Address trespass and encroachment on Reclamation lands.
 - Protect public safety.
 - Need for boundary signage and/or fencing.
 - Need to control fires—fire management.
- Coordination
 - Conduct government-to-government consultation with affected Tribes.
 - Define relationships with other agencies (e.g., FWS, Idaho Fish and Game [IDFG], Irrigation Districts, BLM, Counties).
- Cultural Resources
 - Comply with Federal laws related to Tribes and cultural resources (e.g., Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act [NAGPRA]).
 - Need to protect historic cultural sites (e.g., Oregon Trail).
 - Need to protect archaeological resources.
- Indian Trust Assets (ITAs): Keep all lands in Federal ownership for protection of ITAs.