

Chapter 1: Purpose and Need

Purpose of and Need for the Resource Management Plan (RMP)

The federal action being considered in this Environmental Assessment (EA) is the development and implementation of a Resource Management Plan (RMP) for Steinaker Reservoir, located in northeastern Utah approximately 2 miles north of Vernal City in Uintah County (Figure 1-1).

The U.S. Department of the Interior (USDI), Bureau of Reclamation's (Reclamation's) authority to prepare RMPs is vested in the broad authority of the Reclamation Act of 1902 (Chapter 1093, 32 Statute 388); the Reclamation Project Act of 1939 (Chapter 418, 53 Statute 1187); the Federal Water Project Recreation Act (Public Law [P.L.] 89-72, 79 Statute 213); and, more specifically, in the Reclamation Recreation Management Act of 1992 (P.L. 102-575, Title 28 (2805(c)(1)(A))). The Reclamation Recreation Management Act of 1992, Title 28 (P.L. 102-575) authorized the preparation of RMPs to "provide for the development, use, conservation, protection, enhancement, and management of resources on Reclamation lands in a manner that is compatible with the authorized purposes of the Reclamation Project associated with the Reclamation lands."

The purpose of the RMP is to produce a document that will guide Reclamation, along with local, state, federal, and other participating agencies, in managing, allocating, and appropriately using Steinaker Reservoir's land and water resources. The RMP is also important in assisting Reclamation in making decisions regarding the management of recreational resources. Resource management issues and problems at Steinaker Reservoir are addressed through various management solutions. The RMP document will include long-term management Goals and Objectives for the Steinaker Reservoir RMP Study Area, which includes the reservoir and its associated lands. (Study Area) (Figure 1-2).

Scope of the Environmental Assessment (EA)

As part of the RMP development process, Reclamation has prepared this EA in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), as amended, which requires federal agencies to consider the potential impact(s) of a federal action on the human environment before implementing the action. This EA is intended to meet the disclosure and environmental resource consideration requirements of NEPA for the preparation of the RMP. Resource management alternatives and development scenarios are presented and analyzed for environmental impacts. This EA specifically analyzes and discusses the consequences associated with each of two RMP action alternatives (developed as part of the resource management planning process) and the No Action Alternative (as required by NEPA as the base alternative for making comparisons). This EA evaluates potential impacts associated with alternatives proposed for the RMP to determine if the impacts would be significant and would therefore require preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement. The responsible official has decided that impacts from the proposed RMP are not significant, and a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) has been prepared. The FONSI is a document briefly presenting the reasons why the action will not have significant impacts on environmental quality (40 CFR 1508.13) and can be found at the beginning of this document prior to the Table of Contents.

STEINKER RESERVOIR RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN

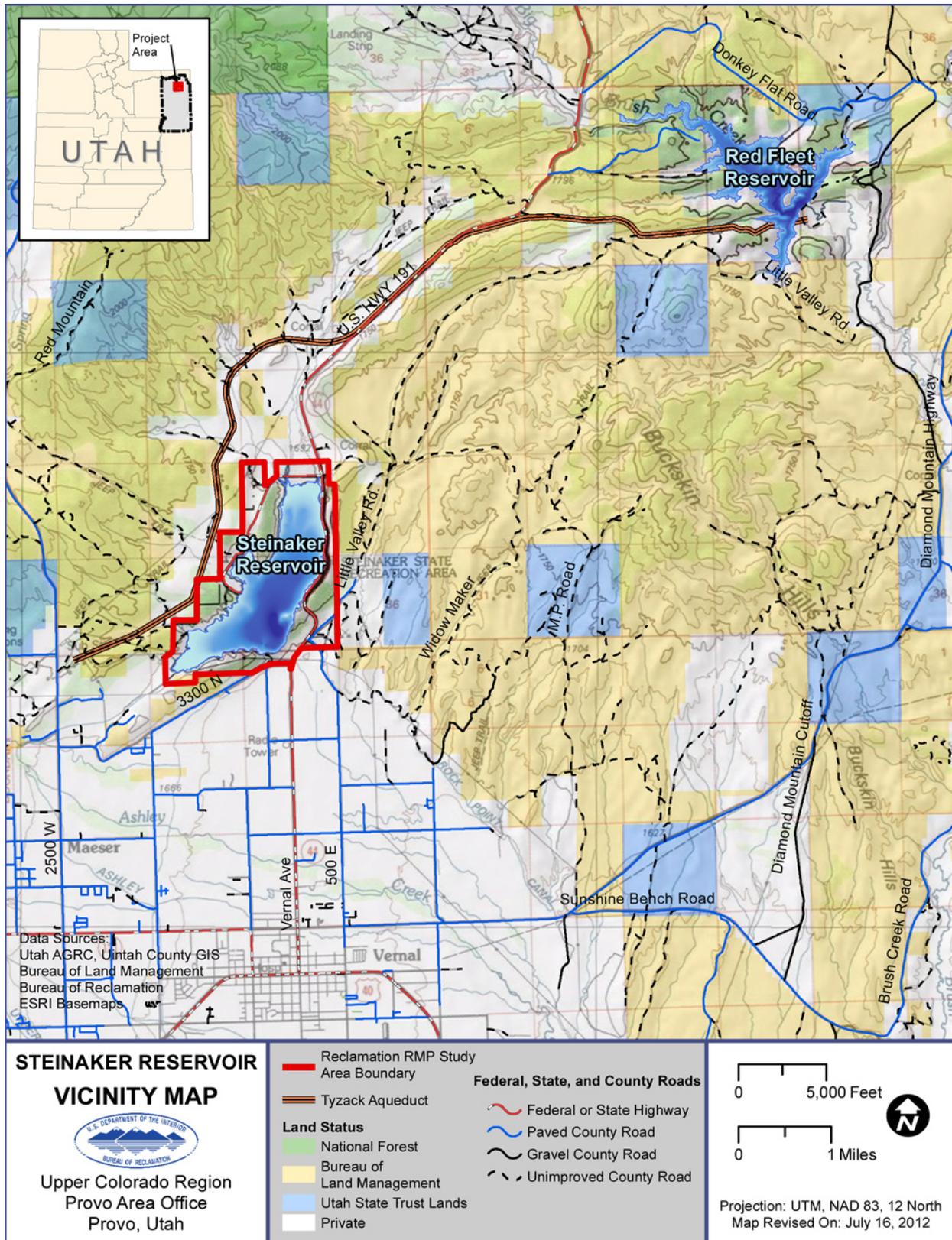


Figure 1-1. Vicinity Map for the Steinkler Reservoir Resource Management Plan (RMP).

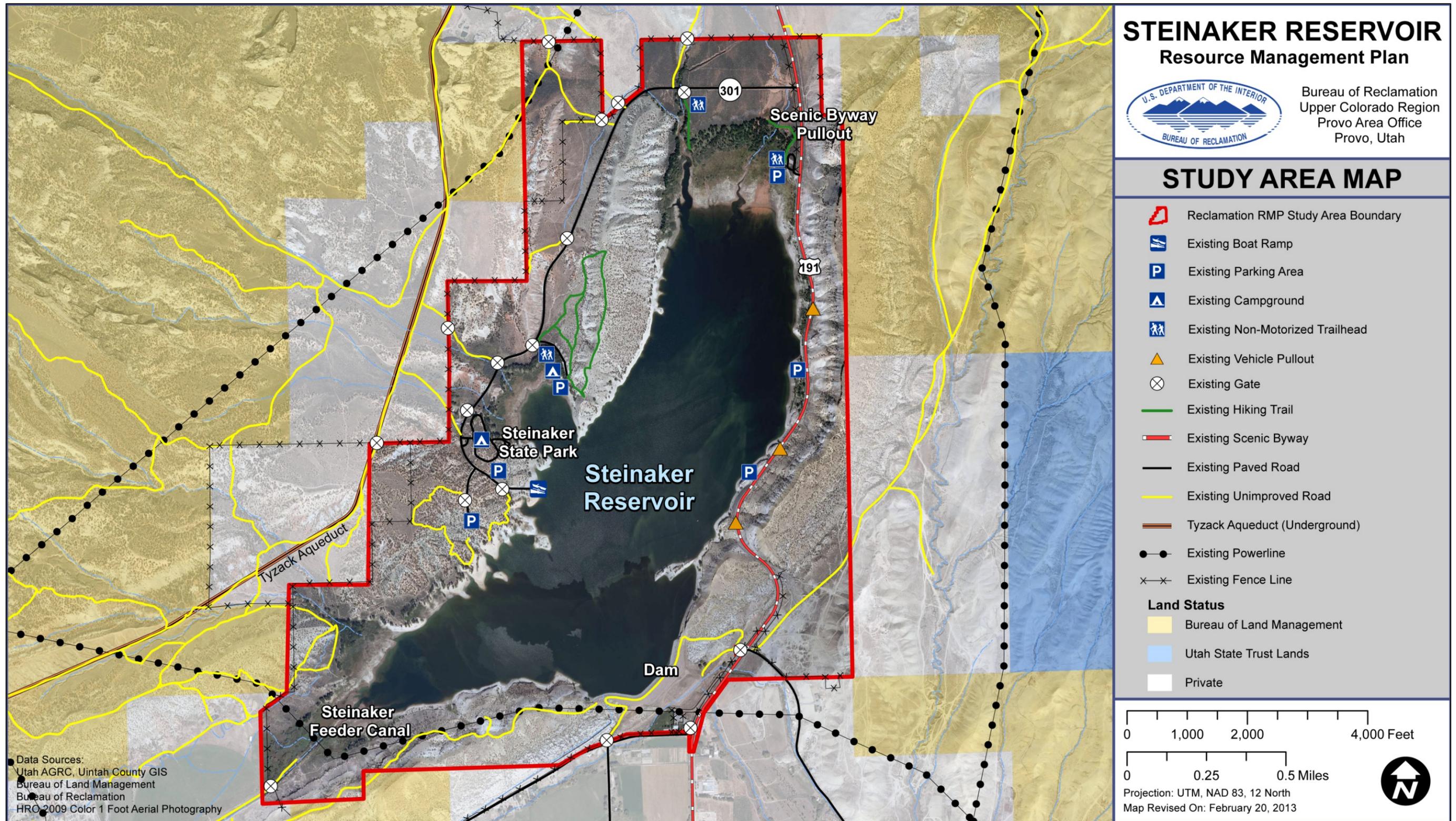


Figure 1-2. Study Area Map for the Steinaker Reservoir Resource Management Plan (RMP).

The RMP will establish a conceptual framework for managing resources at Steinaker Reservoir. Therefore, the scope (level of detail) of this EA focuses on the broadest scale of potential impacts associated with selection of a RMP alternative. The planning-level scope of this EA does not address site-specific impacts. Selection of any site specific plans that could be proposed under a selected RMP would represent a separate federal action and would therefore require site-specific NEPA compliance.

Existing contracts and agreements between Reclamation and other entities are also outside the scope of the RMP decision and evaluation of alternatives in this EA. Legal constraints include legislative acts, compacts, and agreements that govern the diversion and use of water from Ashley Creek and, specifically, water stored in Steinaker Reservoir. Institutional constraints include water delivery contracts or water rights and Reclamation's administrative procedures that govern the management and use of Project facilities. Land use constraints include existing Memorandums of Understanding, contracts, lease agreements, permits, easements, and rights-of-way (ROWs) that govern the management and use of Study Area resources. These land use planning constraints are described in Chapter 3 of this EA.

Management Areas

For purposes of developing alternatives and describing existing resource conditions, the Study Area was divided into separate management areas based upon natural resource features, land management considerations, recreational activities, and existing facilities. These geographical areas are illustrated in Figure 1-3 and defined below.

State Park Area

This area encompasses the existing Steinaker State Park developed recreation facilities including the boat launch, boat parking areas, day use parking, day use areas, overnight campground, group use area, and State Park administrative facilities.

Entrance Area

This area includes the northwestern portion of the Study Area where the main access road, State Route (SR) 301, enters the State Park. There is also an existing private land access location from the main access road. There are currently no developed public facilities in this area.

Scenic Byway Area

This area is characterized by U.S. Route 191, a designated National Scenic Byway and includes an existing parking area, vault-type restrooms, and interpretive boardwalk along the northeastern shoreline of Steinaker Reservoir.

Honda Hills Area

This area was once a source of material for Steinaker Dam that is currently used as an off-highway vehicle trailhead and open-riding area by motorized recreationists. There are currently no developed public facilities in this area.

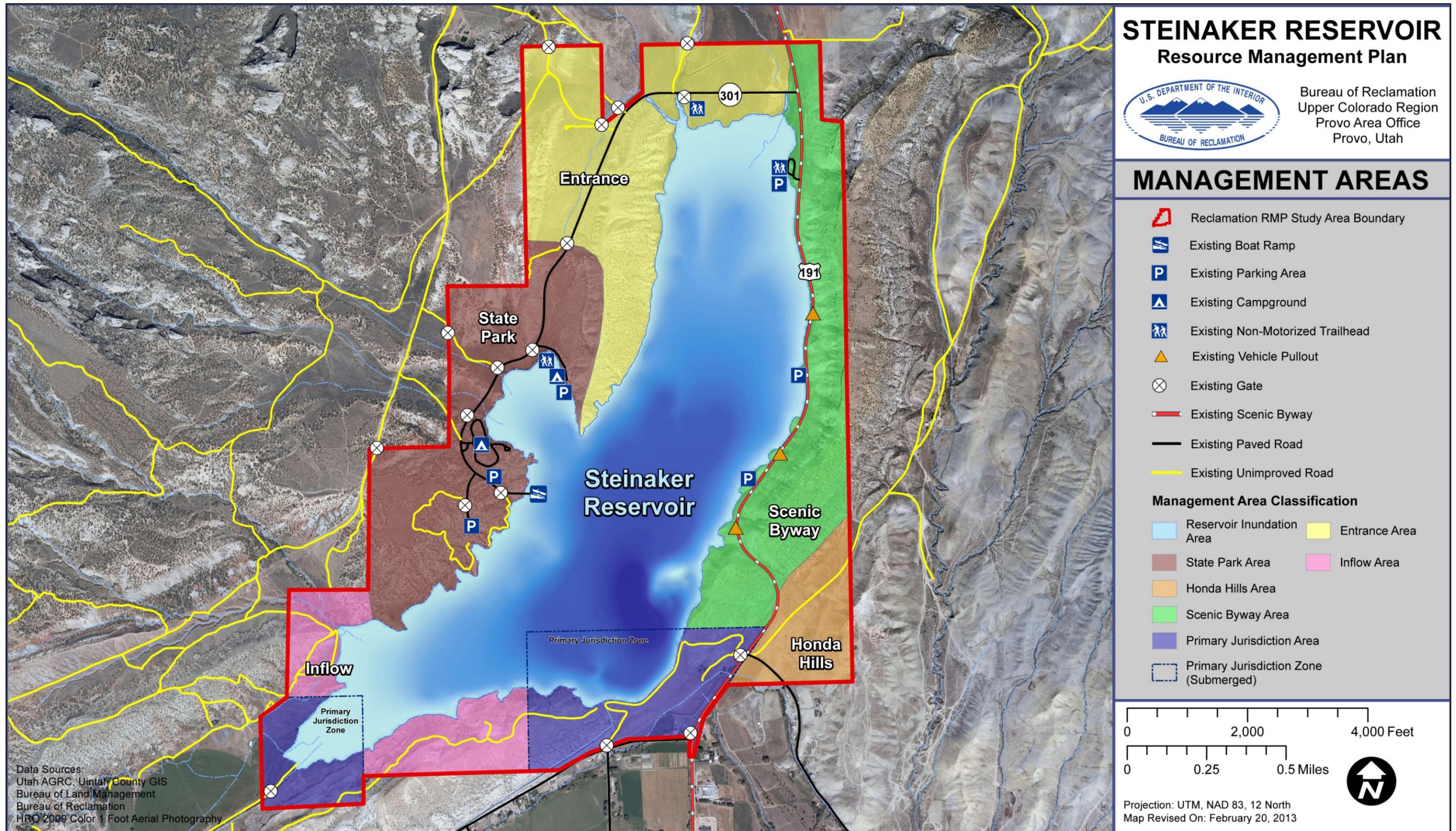


Figure 1-3. Management Areas Map for the Steinaker Reservoir Resource Management Plan (RMP).

Primary Jurisdiction Area

This area includes Steinaker Dam and lands surrounding the dam and the Steinaker Feeder Canal inflow. For the protection of public health, safety, and welfare, public access to this area and recreational uses (including trail use) are not permitted unless approved by Reclamation and the Uintah Water Conservancy District.

Inflow Area

This is an undeveloped area surrounding the portion of the Primary Jurisdiction Zone where Steinaker Feeder Canal enters Steinaker Reservoir. There are currently no developed public facilities in this area.

Reservoir Inundation Area

This area delineates the extent of the reservoir at full pool. Permanent recreational facilities (with the exception of water-based facilities), administrative facilities, camping, and the use of motor vehicles are not permitted in this area. Recreational activities (e.g., dispersed day use) may be allowed during periods of low water levels.

Background

Plan Location and Setting

The Study Area is located in northeastern Utah approximately 2 miles north of Vernal City in Uintah County. Uintah County has a semi-arid climate with average annual rainfall of 10.9 inches and average snowfall of 40.6 inches (Bestplaces.net 2012, Desertusa.com 2012). Uintah County is well known for fossil deposits found in the region, valuable mineral resources, and oil and gas development. Vernal, the county seat, is located in the Ashley Valley at an elevation of just over 5,000 feet above sea level. Ashley Valley, approximately 6 miles wide and 9 miles long, contains the largest population concentration in Uintah County, including the municipalities Maeser, Vernal, Naples, and Jensen.

Settlement of the Ashley Valley by cattle ranchers began in 1873 in the Ashley Creek drainage. Farm crops were difficult to grow in the area due to lack of water late in the growing season. In 1879 a group of farmers united to build the Ashley Central Canal. A second canal company formed shortly thereafter and constructed the Ashley Upper Canal. Rights to the entire flow of Ashley Creek had been claimed by 1897 (Eastman 2012).

Plan History

While canal companies were successfully utilizing Ashley Creek for crop irrigation, they recognized a need to store water for late-season crop watering. Beginning in 1903, surveys by Reclamation identified Steinaker Draw as a good location for an off-channel reservoir site. However, other federal- and state-funded projects took precedence over the construction of Steinaker Dam. Local irrigation districts explored a number of other potential reservoir projects and watershed diversions and then in 1938 Reclamation established a Vernal office. The Vernal Unit was eventually approved as a component of the Colorado River Storage Project, passed by Congress in 1956. Local interests formed the Uintah Water Conservancy District (UWCD) as a repayment agency. Construction of Steinaker Dam, the Fort Thornburgh Diversion Dam on Ashley Creek, and the Steinaker Feeder Canal were complete in 1961 (Eastman 2012). Steinaker

Dam is a 162-foot-tall, rolled-earthfill structure. Total reservoir capacity is 38,173 acre-feet and surface area is 820 acres (Reclamation 2007). The crest elevation of the spillway is at an elevation of 5,520.5 feet. The mean depth at full pool is 46 feet with a maximum depth of approximately 130 feet (UDWQ 2011, Reclamation 2011a). These figures reflect a decision in 2007 by Reclamation to increase the normal water surface elevation at the request of the UWCD (Reclamation 2007).

The Steinaker Dam, Steinaker Feeder Canal, and Fort Thornburgh Diversion Dam are operated and maintained by the UWCD under a partnership agreement with Reclamation. Recreation facilities and public access are managed by the Utah Division of State Parks and Recreation (State Parks) through a Memorandum of Agreement. Chapter 3 of this EA includes additional details regarding interagency partnerships and contracts. To date, an RMP document has not been completed for Steinaker Reservoir.

Participating Agencies and their Management Responsibilities

Reclamation is the lead agency charged with preparing the RMP document and this EA. Other government agencies having resource management responsibilities within the Study Area include the UWCD, State Parks, the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the Utah State Historic Preservation Office. Additional participants in the RMP planning process include the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Uintah County, and Vernal City.

Scoping Summary and Issues of Concern

The Steinaker Reservoir RMP/EA scoping process was initiated in October 2011 concurrently and in conjunction with the Red Fleet Reservoir RMP/EA. The purpose of scoping was to receive interagency and public input on the appropriate scope of the EA, consistent with NEPA requirements and associated implementing regulations. An effort was made to notify all potentially interested parties about the RMP scoping process and to provide opportunities for comment. The following methods for soliciting input were utilized: (1) the formation of a Resource Management Planning Work Group (PWG), (2) facilitation of public workshops, and (3) distribution of RMP newsletters. Media releases were used to inform the public of scheduled meetings and events. Each method is described in detail below. A more detailed discussion of consultation and coordination activities is provided in Chapter 5 of this EA.

Resource Management Planning Work Group (PWG)

The PWG was formed to serve as a broad representation of agencies and special interest groups that have a significant interest in the future management and use of Study Area resources. Members of the PWG were selected primarily from those organizations and agencies directly involved with management of resources within the Study Area and included representatives of the UWCD, State Parks, UDWR, USFWS, BLM, Uintah County, and Vernal City. The purpose of the PWG was to facilitate information exchange and to provide an open forum for discussing all aspects of the RMP and the planning process. In addition, the PWG provided input into the identification of issues, development of goals and objectives, and formulation of a full range of RMP alternatives. The PWG initially met in October 2011, and subsequently in February and May 2012, and in March 2013.

Public Workshops

Public workshops were also held at each stage of the RMP planning process to inform interested parties of progress on the RMP and to solicit comments from the general public. Resource and management issues, future resource management goals and objectives, and potential management approaches for the Study Area were discussed at these workshops. Workshops were held in November 2011, May 2012, and March 2013.

Newsletters

Three newsletters designed to inform the public about progress of the planning process were sent to individuals, landowners, and agency personnel involved with the RMP. The distribution list was updated throughout the resource management planning process.

Public Issues and Concerns

Many key issues, problems, and concerns for the Study Area were identified by the public, participating agencies, and special interest groups during the RMP/EA scoping process. These elements were classified into Issue Categories to aid in understanding the scope of each concern and to assist in the development of Goals and Objectives for the RMP. A summary of the Issue Categories is presented in Table 1-1. Table 1-2 summarizes the Goals and Objectives identified to address RMP issues. However, each issue may not require a specific set of Goals and Objectives and, in some cases, a set of Goals and Objectives may address several issues simultaneously.

Table 1-1. Summary of Issue Categories Identified for the Steinaker Reservoir Resource Management Plan (RMP) Study Area.

PARTNERSHIPS
Partnership Contracts
WATER RESOURCES
Water Quality
RECREATIONAL AND VISUAL RESOURCES
Recreation Development
Visual Quality
NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES
Reservoir Fishery
Aquatic Invasive Species and Pathogens
Vegetation Communities
Wildlife and Special Status Species
Soil Erosion and Deposition
Paleontological Resources
Cultural Resources
LAND MANAGEMENT
Access Control
Fencing and Grazing
Mineral Development

Table 1-2. Summary of Goal Categories Identified for the Steinaker Reservoir Resource Management Plan (RMP) Study Area.

PARTNERSHIPS
Support Existing Agreements and Contracts and Encourage New Partnerships that Improve Management Practices for Steinaker Reservoir’s Associated Lands and Resources
WATER RESOURCES
Protect Water Quality in Steinaker Reservoir
RECREATIONAL AND VISUAL RESOURCES
Increase Visitation and Revenue by Improving Existing Recreational Facilities, Expanding and Enhancing Recreation Opportunities, and Providing Access to Regional Recreation Resources
Provide for Safe, Quality Recreation Opportunities that Minimize Conflicts
Protect and Manage Visual Resources
NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES
Protect and Enhance the Quality of the Fishery and Fishing Opportunities
Protect and Enhance Native Vegetation and Wildlife Habitat
Determine Occurrence of Special Status Species and Identify Important Habitat Areas
Control Erosion
Protect and Manage Paleontological Resources
Protect and Manage Cultural Resources
LAND MANAGEMENT
Provide Appropriate and Safe Access to Public Use Areas
Address Fencing and Cattle Trespass Issues
Manage Mineral Development

Goals and Objectives serve as a primary foundation on which alternatives for the RMP were developed and evaluated. Each Goal provides a description of the desired future condition within the Study Area. Along with each Goal is a set of Objectives describing a series of activities that must be accomplished in order to achieve each Goal. When each of the Objectives is implemented, the corresponding Goal will be attained. The complete text of Issue Statements and Goals and Objectives can be found in Appendix A.