UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
Bureau of Land Management
Northeastern States District
Lower Potomac Field Station
10406 Gunston Road
Lorton, Virginia 22079

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

for Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail

DOI-BLM-Eastern States-M000-2025-0002-EA

INTRODUCTION:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) prepared an environmental assessment (EA), DOI-BLM-Eastern States-M000-2025-0002-EA, to develop the Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail, for all public land users with design features that provide improved recreational access and use of public lands for individuals on the autism spectrum, those with sensory processing disorders, and those with other neurodevelopmental disorders. The proposed location is within the Lower Potomac Field Station (LPFS) that manages the Meadowood Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA). This Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) applies to Alternative C – Proposed Action – Enchanted Pond Trail Development as described in Section 2.4 of the attached EA.

Under Alternative C, the BLM would authorize the development of the Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail, an approximately 1-mile accessible sensory trail with a potential connector trail, up to six activity stations, bench seating, and trailhead kiosk. The Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail would include a designated parking area and access road to be constructed. The BLM would authorize the installation of an all-inclusive vault toilet with an inside adult changing table. Visitors would enter near the Enchanted Pond off Gunston Road. To create the access road from Gunston Road, the western portion of the existing Mustang Loop Trail would be converted from a two-track trail to crushed gravel to create an access road to the Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail and parking area. The BLM would implement all the design features described in Section 2.2.8 of the EA. The intent of Section 2.2.8 is to enhance recreational access for all users, especially individuals on the autism spectrum, those with sensory processing disorders, and those with other neurodevelopmental disorders; accordingly, the decision would not preclude use of emerging technology that meets the purpose and need.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT:

Based on my review of the attached EA and supporting documents, I have determined that Alternative C – Proposed Action – Enchanted Pond Trail Development will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement (EIS) is not required. This finding is based on the degree of the effects described in the following sections within the identified affected environment.

Potentially Affected Environment

The proposed location is within the Meadowood SRMA, which is managed by the LPFS. The area was chosen due to its proximity to metropolitan areas where there is an abundance of public land users, and specifically the target audience. Classified by the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum, the Meadowood SRMA is rated as Urban, which is defined as "Area is characterized by a substantially urbanized environment, although the background may have natural-appealing elements. High levels of human activity and concentrated development, including recreation opportunities, are prevalent. Developed sites, roads and other recreation opportunities are designed for high use." Between 2022 and 2024, the average estimated annual visitation to Meadowood SRMA was 46,419.

The Meadowood SRMA is managed to meet the VRM Class III objective, which is defined as to partially retain the existing character of the landscape. The development of the Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail, activity stations, bench seat, kiosk, parking area, access road and vault toilet would create weak to negligible contrast relative to the existing landscape character. The level of contrast would meet VRM Class III objectives.

Trail usage has documented benefits for public health and quality of life including physical, social, and mental health benefits. Trails have empirically demonstrated public health cost benefits. Section 3.3.1 of the EA details the positive benefits of trail use.

Within the project area there are terrestrial wildlife, a variety of vegetation, soils, and wetlands. There are protected species, plants and animals, that may be threatened or endangered throughout a portion of the project area. There are five types of soil in the project area. The soils are classified as mineral soils; they are not organic soils and therefore do not experience subsidence from organic matter. There are 1.1 acres of seasonally flooded freshwater forested shrub wetlands. The design of the Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail will avoid the wetlands throughout the project area. For more information see Sections 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, and 3.8.

Degree of Effects

The following have been considered in my evaluation of the selected alternative:

i. Short- and long-term effects

There would be short-term impacts to recreation. To create the access road at Enchanted Pond off Gunston Road, northern portions of the Mustang Loop Trail would be closed. The portion of the Mustang Loop Trail converted to the access road would be relocated.

Long-term effects on health would be beneficial. Trail use promotes regular physical activity, which is essential for cardiovascular health, weight management, and reducing the risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and obesity. Hiking, walking, and running engage multiple muscle groups, improve balance, coordination, and bone density. The varied terrain of trails also challenges the body in ways that traditional workouts may not, further improving strength, agility, and endurance.

Trail use fosters social connections by providing opportunities for group activities with friends, family, or social and community groups. Shared experiences on trails can strengthen relationships, build community bonds, and reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. Spending time engaging in trail activities can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression.

ii. Beneficial and adverse effects

The Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail would provide safe, high quality outdoor recreation opportunities for all public land users, individuals on the autism spectrum, sensory processing disorders, and other neurodevelopmental disorders.

The Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail would include up to six unique activity stations to facilitate experiences including balancing, texture, learning, building, challenges, creating sound, listening, and reflection. These activity stations are beneficial because different types of sensory stimuli would be engaged including proprioceptive (the sense of limb and bodily position while moving), sight, smell, sound, taste, touch, vestibular (the sense of balance and spatial orientation while moving).

A portion of the existing Mustang Loop Trail would be relocated to be parallel with the new access road. Trail realignment would involve meadow grass mowing and brush removal; however, it would not include additional ground disturbance because the Mustang Loop Trail is already existing as a meadow grass trail.

iii. Effects on public health and safety

To ensure the Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail would promote comfort, independence, and enjoyment for people of all abilities, a collaborating process between the BLM and families highlighted the need for thoughtful, flexible design that considers both physical and sensory accessibility, predictable environments, sensory-friendly features, and areas for rest and calm. Further positive effects on public health can be found in Section 3.3 of the EA.

The new access road and accessible parking area will allow visitors accessing Enchanted Pond for fishing to no longer park along the side of Gunston Road, which will reduce safety concerns along Gunston Road.

iv. Economic effects

Economic effects were not analyzed in this EA. The development of the Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail will have no positive or negative effects on economics.

v. Effects on the quality of life of the American people.

The Meadowood SRMA currently offers a variety of recreational activities and opportunities; however, there are no opportunities specifically for those on the autism spectrum and those with sensory processing disorders. The Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail will provide recreation opportunities so that individuals on the autism spectrum, those with sensory processing disorders, and those with other neurodevelopmental disorders may enjoy public lands. Currently, there are limited trails with recreational developments on BLM-managed lands designed for these individuals and families.

Public health and safety are important factors for all public land users of the Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail because the trail will provide a safe and accessible environment for exercise to make it easier for people of all ages and fitness levels to incorporate physical activity into their daily routines. All public health and safety benefits are included in Section 3.3.1.

The Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail will provide a unique opportunity unlike other trails already offered at the Meadowood SRMA to enhance visitor enjoyment because the trail would include up to six unique activity stations to facilitate experiences. Activity stations would include, but would not be limited to, balancing, texture, learning, building, challenges, creating sound, listening, and reflection.

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Nick Weber Date

Field Manager, Lower Potomac Field Station

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Pamela A. Mathis Date

District Manager, Northeastern States District