

National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior

**Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument
Colorado**



VISITOR EDUCATION AND RESEARCH/MUSEUM FACILITY

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Visitor services within the Monument are currently situated in a 1924 farmhouse. The Monument's museum collection of 6,000 objects and archives are stored in the basement of a 1965 A-frame cabin (Jones Residence). Some objects from the fossil collection are displayed in the farmhouse visitor center. The new visitor education and research/museum facility will replace the existing A-frame cabin and the 1924 farmhouse, and all visitor services and curatorial storage will be relocated to the new building.

The proposal to remove the farmhouse and cabin and replace them with a new building is needed in part to address human health and safety risks associated with both of the existing buildings. In particular, the levels of rodent infestation in these facilities are unacceptably high, which increases the risk to employees and visitors of being exposed to diseases carried by rodents, particularly Hantavirus. Although still safe for occupancy and use, both of these facilities have structural deficiencies that foster other health and safety problems. The farmhouse deficiencies include: lack of a sound foundation, a sagging roof, undersized electrical wiring, inadequate climate and humidity controls, limited ADA accessibility, a flood-prone crawlspace and subsequent mold/mildew occurrences, and lack of fire detection and suppression systems. The A-frame cabin deficiencies include: lack of fire detection and suppression systems, no telephone connection, no climate control, and high levels of radon. A new visitor education and research/museum building will eliminate the health and safety risks from these deficiencies by removing these two buildings, and will also consolidate visitor services and museum and research functions into one permanent facility.

An Environmental Assessment was prepared in 2007 to provide the decision-making framework that 1) analyzes a reasonable range of alternatives to meet objectives of the proposal, 2) evaluates potential issues and impacts to Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument's resources and values, and 3) identifies mitigation measures to lessen the degree or extent of these impacts. Resource topics that were addressed in that document included paleontological resources, museum collections, visitor use and experience, and park operations. All other resource topics were dismissed because the project will result in negligible or minor effects to those resources. No major effects are anticipated as a result of this project. Public scoping was conducted to assist with the development of this document and comments were received, mostly in support of the proposed project.

PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The preferred alternative consists of constructing a new visitor education and research/museum facility sited in approximately the same location as the existing 1924 farmhouse, but slightly more to the north. This general area has been previously disturbed by the construction of the parking area, utility corridors, trails, yurt structures, and the farmhouse visitor center, itself. The existing farmhouse and A-frame cabin would be removed and disposed of off-site.

The new visitor education and research/museum facility will be approximately 4,050 square feet in size. The building will include a visitor education center, curatorial storage, fossil exhibits, small auditorium, fossil laboratory, public restrooms, cooperating association retail space, and limited administrative office space. The building will be handicapped accessible and will also be equipped with a modern climate control system (HVAC), a security system, and a fire protection system. In an effort to “green the parks,” construction of the new building would utilize renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources, to the extent possible. Energy conservation measures will be incorporated throughout the design and construction of the facility to the maximum extent possible.

MITIGATING MEASURES

The following mitigation measures have been developed to minimize the degree and/or severity of adverse effects, and would be implemented during construction of the action alternative, as needed:

- To minimize the amount of ground disturbance, staging and stockpiling areas would be located in previously disturbed sites, away from visitor use areas to the extent possible. All staging and stockpiling areas would be returned to pre-construction conditions following construction.
- To minimize impacts to unknown paleontological specimens during construction, the Monument’s paleontologist would monitor all ground disturbing activities. If any paleontological materials are inadvertently discovered during construction, construction activities would be halted until the materials can be analyzed and recovered by the Monument’s paleontologist and staff.
- To minimize impacts and risks to visitors and staff, construction zones would be identified and fenced with construction tape, snow fencing, or some similar material prior to any construction activity. The fencing would define the construction zone and confine activity to the minimum area required for construction. All protection measures would be clearly stated in the construction specifications and workers would be instructed to avoid conducting activities beyond the construction zone as defined by the construction zone fencing. Visitor access routes/trails would be re-directed as necessary to keep visitors safely away from construction zones.
- Employees and construction crews would be required to park away from the temporary visitor center to ensure adequate parking capacity and easier access to the Monument for visitors.
- Revegetation and re-contouring of disturbed areas would take place following construction, and would be designed to minimize the visual intrusion of the structure. Revegetation efforts would strive to reconstruct the natural spacing, abundance, and diversity of native plant species using native species. All disturbed areas would be restored as nearly as possible to pre-construction conditions shortly after construction activities are completed. Weed

control methods would be implemented to minimize the introduction of noxious weeds. Some trees may be removed, but other existing vegetation at the site would remain undisturbed to the extent possible.

- Because disturbed soils are susceptible to erosion until revegetation takes place, standard erosion control measures such as silt fences and/or sand bags would be used to minimize any potential soil erosion.
- Fugitive dust generated by construction would be controlled by spraying water on the construction site, if necessary.
- To reduce noise and emissions, construction equipment would not be permitted to idle for long periods of time.
- To minimize possible petrochemical leaks from construction equipment, the contractor would regularly monitor and check construction equipment to identify and repair any leaks.
- Should construction unearth previously undiscovered cultural resources, work would be stopped in the area of any discovery and the Monument would consult with the state historic preservation officer and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, as necessary, according to §36 CFR 800.13, *Post Review Discoveries*. In the unlikely event that human remains are discovered during construction, provisions outlined in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990) would be followed.
- The National Park Service would ensure that all contractors and subcontractors are informed of the penalties for illegally collecting artifacts or intentionally damaging paleontological materials, archeological sites, or historic properties. Contractors and subcontractors would also be instructed on procedures to follow in case previously unknown paleontological or archeological resources are uncovered during construction.
- To minimize the potential for impacts to park neighbors and the surrounding area from noise and traffic, construction activity would be limited to daylight hours that coincide with normal area activity and park staffing times.
- Construction workers and supervisors would be informed about the special sensitivity of Monument's values, regulations, and appropriate housekeeping.
- According to *Management Policies 2006*, the National Park Service would strive to construct facilities with sustainable designs and systems to minimize potential environmental impacts. Development would not compete with or dominate Monument's features, or interfere with natural processes, such as the seasonal migration of wildlife or hydrologic activity associated with wetlands. To the extent possible, the design and management of facilities would emphasize environmental sensitivity in construction, use of nontoxic materials, resource conservation, recycling, and integration of visitors with natural and cultural settings. The National Park Service also reduces energy costs, eliminates waste, and conserves energy resources by using energy-efficient and cost-effective technology. Energy efficiency is incorporated into the decision-making process during the design and acquisition of buildings, facilities, and transportation systems that emphasize the use of renewable energy sources.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

The Environmental Assessment evaluated two alternatives; a no-action alternative and an action alternative (Construct Visitor Education and Research/Museum Facility). The no-action alternative describes the current conditions if no visitor education and research/museum building is constructed, while the action alternative addressed the removal of two existing buildings and construction of the new visitor education and research/museum building in roughly the same area as the farmhouse/interim visitor center. The action alternative also addressed the use of a temporary visitor center building during construction of the new building, as well as other connected actions such as building demolition, relocating and/or installing utilities (electric, water, sewer, etc.), landscaping and disturbed site restoration, and site work.

Alternative B, Construct Visitor Education and Research/Museum Facility, is both the action alternative and the environmentally preferred alternative. The environmentally preferred alternative is the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed by §101 of the National Environmental Policy Act. This includes alternatives that:

- (1) fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations;
- (2) assure safe, healthful, productive, and esthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings for all generations;
- (3) attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk of health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences;
- (4) preserve important historic, cultural and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintain, wherever possible, an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice;
- (5) achieve a balance between population and resource use that will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities; and
- (6) enhance the quality of renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources.

Alternative B is the environmentally preferred alternative because it best addresses these six evaluation factors. Alternative B, *Construct Visitor Education and Research/Museum Facility*, would provide a working environment for Monument staff that meets health and safety recommendations, while minimizing environmental impacts to the extent possible. The new facility would also provide a safe and pleasant environment for park visitors to learn about and enjoy the resources of the park, and gain a sense of stewardship for those resources. As a permanent facility, the new visitor education and research/museum facility would be used by future generations. The park's 6,000 museum objects will be stored in a facility that meets NPS standards for museum collection storage, eliminating the threat of loss of these valuable resources. The new building would also be more energy efficient and more environmentally-friendly than the existing visitor center and curatorial facility. Alternative B would also reduce the NPS backlog of maintenance deficiencies by \$250,000.

WHY THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE WILL NOT HAVE A SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

As defined in 40 CFR §1508.27, significance is determined by examining the following criteria:

Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse

The Preferred Alternative will result in minor to moderate long-term beneficial impacts to the museum collection. The over 6,000 specimens and archives currently housed in an inadequate facility will be moved to a facility that meets the NPS curatorial standards for museum collections. The visitor education and research/museum facility will be equipped with a modern climate control system, which will include heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC). A security system will be installed to protect from unauthorized entry, in addition to a fire protection system for the entire building, which will consist of smoke and heat detection alarms and sprinklers. The building will also be pest-proof, ensuring that the museum collections will not be damaged due to mice and/or insects.

While all care will be taken during the move, there may be negligible adverse impacts to individual pieces in the museum collection during the move from the a-frame cabin to the new facility. The park's resource specialist (paleontologist) will oversee the move to reduce the risk of damage.

The Preferred Alternative will result in negligible to minor adverse impacts to paleontological materials from ground disturbance and excavation activities. The results of the paleontological survey conducted in September 2006 included a total of one hot spot (approximately 4m²) of a high concentration of freshly broken petrified wood fragments located within a moderate to high concern area (approximately 14 m²) containing concentrations of petrified wood pieces throughout at a depth from 0.4 to 1 meter. It is unknown how deep, extensive, or important these resources are at this time. These areas will not be avoided during construction unless they present an insurmountable obstacle to construction. If it is determined during construction that these resources should be avoided, additional options for the buildings foundation will be considered. No other concentrations of petrified wood are known to exist within other areas that will be excavated during this project; however, in another location, the auger encountered a hard and impenetrable material at 0.5 meter deep, but the material was not identified.

Any excavation or ground disturbance activities related to construction of the new visitor education and research/museum building or connected activities such as utility relocates have the potential to reveal and disturb unknown paleontological resources. To minimize potential harm to these resources, the Monument's paleontologist will monitor all excavation activities. If a paleontological deposit is discovered during construction, all construction activities will cease until the Monument's paleontologist assesses the resource and determines the appropriate manner in which to proceed.

Under the Preferred Alternative, structural improvements and the additional space and uses created by the new facility would have a moderate beneficial effect on visitor use and experience. Construction disturbances (noise, dust, limited areas) and the demolition of the visitor center and A-frame cabin would have a minor, temporary adverse effect to visitor use and experience. Impacts to visitor safety would be long-term, moderate and beneficial due to the elimination of the hantavirus risk and ADA compliance.

Construction of a new visitor education and research/museum facility would have moderate, beneficial and long-term impacts on park operations because the new building would provide a safer and healthier work environment and would reduce the amount of work required to maintain the building. The new building would rectify the structural deficiencies and rodent problems associated with the existing visitor center and a-frame building. Adverse effects to

park operations would occur during construction which would require employees to move visitor center operations and manage the construction of the project.

Degree of effect on public health or safety

The Preferred Alternative will have an overall beneficial effect on public health and safety, particularly for the Monument's employees that will regularly use the new visitor education and research/museum building. The new visitor education and research/museum building will minimize many of the current unsafe conditions associated with the existing a-frame cabin and visitor center including structural deficiencies and rodent infestations, thereby providing a safer, cleaner environment for the Monument's staff and visitors.

Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas

The Preferred Alternative will not impact unique characteristics of the area including historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas because these resources do not exist in the project area.

Degree to which effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial

Throughout the environmental process, the proposal to construct a new visitor education and research/museum facility was not highly controversial, nor are the effects expected to generate future controversy.

Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks

The effects of constructing a new visitor education and research/museum building are fairly straightforward and do not pose uncertainties. The environmental process has not identified any effects that may involve highly unique or unknown risks.

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 Preferred Alternative is not expected to set a precedent for future actions with significant effects, nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.

Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts

Cumulative effects were analyzed in the Environmental Assessment, and no significant cumulative impacts were identified.

Degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed on National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

Consultation with the Colorado State Historic Preservation Officer (Colorado Historical Society) affirmed that the preferred alternative will not affect any historic properties. Letters dated March 31, 2007 and May 22, 2007 confirm the "no historic properties affected" determination for the project under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (CHS 2007). The visitor center is a historic 1924 farmhouse, but it was determined ineligible for the National Register of Historic Places by the Colorado State Historic Preservation Office on July 27, 1984. A regional historic architect determined that the A-frame cabin is not eligible for the

National Register and sent a letter to the SHPO on May 16, 2007. The SHPO responded with a concurrence of ineligibility for the A-frame cabin (Jones Residence) on May 22, 2007.

Degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its critical habitat

During the NEPA process for the construction of the new Administrative Building, a letter was received from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service dated January 15, 2004 indicating that there were no records of threatened or endangered species in the project area. The project area for this project and the project area for the Administrative Building overlap. An initial scoping letter for the Visitor Education and Research Museum Facility was sent to the FWS in April 2005. A follow-up letter indicating that there is no threatened, endangered, or species of special interest in the park and requesting concurrence of that was sent in March 2007. No response was received from the FWS from either letter.

Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, state, or local environmental protection law

This action violates no federal, state, or local environmental protection laws.

Impairment

The National Park Service has determined that implementation of the proposal will not constitute an impairment to the resources and values at Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument. This conclusion is based on a thorough analysis of the environmental impacts described in the Environmental Assessment, the public comments received, relevant scientific studies, and the professional judgment of the decision-maker guided by the direction in NPS *Management Policies* (NPS, 2006). Although the plan/project has some negative impacts, in all cases these adverse impacts are the result of actions taken to preserve and restore park resources and values. Overall, implementation of the plan would benefit park resources and values, provide opportunities for their enjoyment, and would not result in their impairment.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The environmental assessment was made available for public review and comment during a 30-day period ending September 28, 2007. A total of three responses were received; all were in favor of the project. There were no substantive comments or changes to the text of the environmental assessment; therefore, there are no errata sheets attached to this FONSI.

CONCLUSION

The preferred alternative does not constitute an action that normally requires preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS). The preferred alternative will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Negative environmental impacts that could occur are minor or moderate in intensity. There are no significant impacts on public health, public safety, threatened or endangered species, sites or districts listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or other unique characteristics of the region. No highly uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, significant cumulative effects, or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the action will not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection law.

Based on the foregoing, it has been determined that an EIS is not required for this project and thus will not be prepared.

Recommended:	<u>/s/ Keith D. Payne</u>	<u>10/18/2007</u>
	Superintendent	Date
Approved:	<u><i>Jaura H. Joss</i></u>	<u>9/15/09</u>
<i>for</i>	Intermountain Regional Director	Date