

Environmental Assessment

Jefferson County Parks and Recreation
Proposed Expansion of Moulton Park
Jefferson County, West Virginia

January 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1. Purpose and Need

- Purpose
- Need for Action
- Background

Chapter 2. Alternatives

- Alternative A (No Action)
- Alternative B (Proposed Action)

Chapter 3. Existing Environment

- Physical Location
- Soils
- Hydrology
- Air Quality
- Water Quality
- Vegetation and Wildlife
- Land Use
- Socioeconomic Condition
- Historic and Cultural Resources
- Park Administration

Chapter 4. Environmental Consequences

- Alternative A (No Action)
- Alternative B (Proposed Action)
- Soils
- Hydrology
- Air Quality
- Water Quality
- Vegetation and Wildlife
- Land Use
- Socioeconomic Condition
- Historic and Cultural Resources
- Park Administration

Chapter 5. Consultation and Coordination with Others

- Literature Cited
- Agencies and Specialist Consulted

- List of Preparers

Chapter 1. Purpose and Need for Action

Purpose

The purpose of this environmental assessment (EA) is to evaluate the addition of 82 acres of land to the existing Moulton Park in Jefferson County, West Virginia. The EA will evaluate the impacts of this proposed acquisition on the human environment in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and regulations governing state grant applications under the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF).

Need for Action

There is an increasing demand for public outdoor recreation lands and facilities across the United States, including Jefferson County. The typical park and recreation agency offers one park for every 2,281 residents served, with 9.9 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents. The US Census estimates there were more than 57,000 residents in Jefferson County in 2019. Currently, Jefferson County owns or operates roughly 400 acres of county parkland, which equates to one park for every 6,350 residents. Population estimates also indicate a shortage of more than 100 acres of parkland to meet national averages. This does not account for the robust river and park usage by out-of-state visitors to the area, which causes further congestion in our limited parks and roads. The deficit in public recreational lands in Jefferson County was made evident during the Covid-19 pandemic that began in 2020, when Americans who were forced to dramatically alter their day-to-day lives flocked to the outdoors for their physical and mental health. The existing 10-acre Moulton Park has experienced overcrowding of the boat ramp which the proposed acquisition will help alleviate. The proposed acquisition addresses priorities listed in the West Virginia Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan¹, including:

- “Assist park expansions to promote active lifestyles and innovate community cores,” and
- “Acquire lands for conservation values to preclude loss from development and promote healthy lifestyles.”

Background

Moulton Park was established in 1976 through the generosity of the Moulton family, who donated 10 acres of Shenandoah River frontage to the Jefferson County Parks and Recreation Commission. The one-half mile of river frontage makes the park a popular destination for residents and visitors. Existing amenities include campsites, fire pits, fishing areas, picnic tables, boat ramp and small parking area. These are some of the most popular and visited amenities in the Jefferson County Park System.

¹ Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), West Virginia, 2015-2020

The Moulton family has offered to convey the remaining 82 acres of their farm lying adjacent to the existing park to the Jefferson County Parks and Recreation Commission (JCPRC) at a significant sale price. They are committing \$250,000 in donated land value to the project. Their desire is that the land be protected and managed for multiple conservation values including recreation and public access, watershed protection and education, native species protection, and soils and forest regeneration. The wishes of the landowners, the mission and future management plans by the JCPRC, and the goals of the LWCF stateside grant program are in harmony.

Chapter 2. Alternatives

Since this is a straightforward land acquisition proposal without a list of options to consider, only two alternatives in this EA are evaluated: No Action and the Proposed Action.

Alternative A. No Action

The inclusion of a “no action” alternative is a requirement of NEPA to describe the potential impact on the human environment if the proposed action is not implemented. Under this alternative, the JCPRC would not pursue acquisition of the 82 acres owned by the Moulton family for addition to the existing park. They would forgo the opportunity to achieve priorities listed in the state outdoor recreation plan as well as a significant bargain sale offer from the Moulton family. Because of the layout and size of the existing park, there would be no opportunity to expand current recreational facilities there, leading to a continuance of overcrowding at the existing boat ramp. Jefferson County residents and visitors would not experience expanded outdoor recreational opportunities at this site. The future of the property would be far less certain, subjecting it to potential uses that may not be compatible with conservation or outdoor recreation.

Alternative B – Proposed Action

Under this alternative, the JCPRC would move forward to secure necessary funds, and with the willingness and generosity of the Moulton family, purchase at a bargain sale 82 acres of land that would expand the existing 10-acre Mouton Park. A perpetual conservation easement on the 82-acre addition will be held by the West Virginia Land Trust, offering an additional layer of protection to ensure the proposed uses will continue into the future.

The expanded Moulton Park property will remain a natural park by JCPRC, offering running/walking trail system, outdoor and environmental education, tent and cabin camping, as well as outdoor event space. The property has an existing single-family house and outdoor pavilion that may be utilized as an office/camp host/education space/special event space. Additional future construction on the property may include parking areas, trails, a limited number of camping cabins, and public restrooms. Portions of the existing agricultural lands will be restored to native hardwood forest. Protection and conservation principles will drive future construction necessary to provide responsible recreation and education for the community. See figure 1 for the type and location of proposed facilities and management activities.



Figure 1. Vision for Moulton Park Expansion includes reforestation and new grassland areas, additional camping opportunities, public trail systems, more waterfront access for fishing and recreation, future outdoor and environmental education and office spaces, and additional parking that will alleviate congestion on Bloomery Road.

Chapter 3. Existing Environment

This chapter briefly describes the physical, biological, and socioeconomic environment of the subject property and its surroundings. The information in this chapter acts as a reference for Chapter 4, which documents the Environmental Consequences of the two alternatives. The physical environment includes the geographic setting, its hydrogeomorphic features, soil information, and air and water quality. Biological resources include vegetation and wildlife. Also included is a brief description of the current socioeconomic environment, any known cultural or historic resources on the property, and park administration.

Physical Location

The physical address of the proposed Moulton Park addition is 1123 Bloomery Road, Charles Town, West Virginia. It consists of 82 acres and lies across Bloomery Road from the existing Moulton Park. The 82 acres does include additional frontage on the Shenandoah River, but is mostly separated by Bloomery Road and the existing park (see figure 2).



Figure 2. Current and proposed park boundaries.

The property is generally rectangular in shape with gently rolling topography, primarily comprised of open agricultural lands, surrounded by woodlands. There is one residential structure on the property, reportedly built in 1830. Surrounding properties consist of low density residential and agricultural uses.

Soils

Soils in Jefferson County can be generally characterized as dolomitic. The dominant soil types found on the proposed addition is the Landes fine sandy loam formed in recent alluvium from limestone uplands existing in and adjacent to the Shenandoah river floodplain.² The property is located one mile southwest of a large active limestone quarry.

Hydrology

Jefferson County is a karst region generally underlain by limestone or dolomite, in which the topography is formed chiefly by the dissolving of rock and which may be characterized by sinkholes, sinking streams, closed depressions, subterranean drainage, and caves³.

² Soil Survey of Jefferson County, WV, USDA, 1973

³ WV Tax Districts Containing Karst Terrain, West Virginia Geological and Economic Survey, 2016

The proposed addition has a small portion fronting the Shenandoah River, while the bulk is separated from the river by the existing Moulton Park and Bloomery Road. The West Virginia Flood Map Tool shows the portion of the property bordering Bloomery Road is within the 100-year floodplain. (See Figure 3)

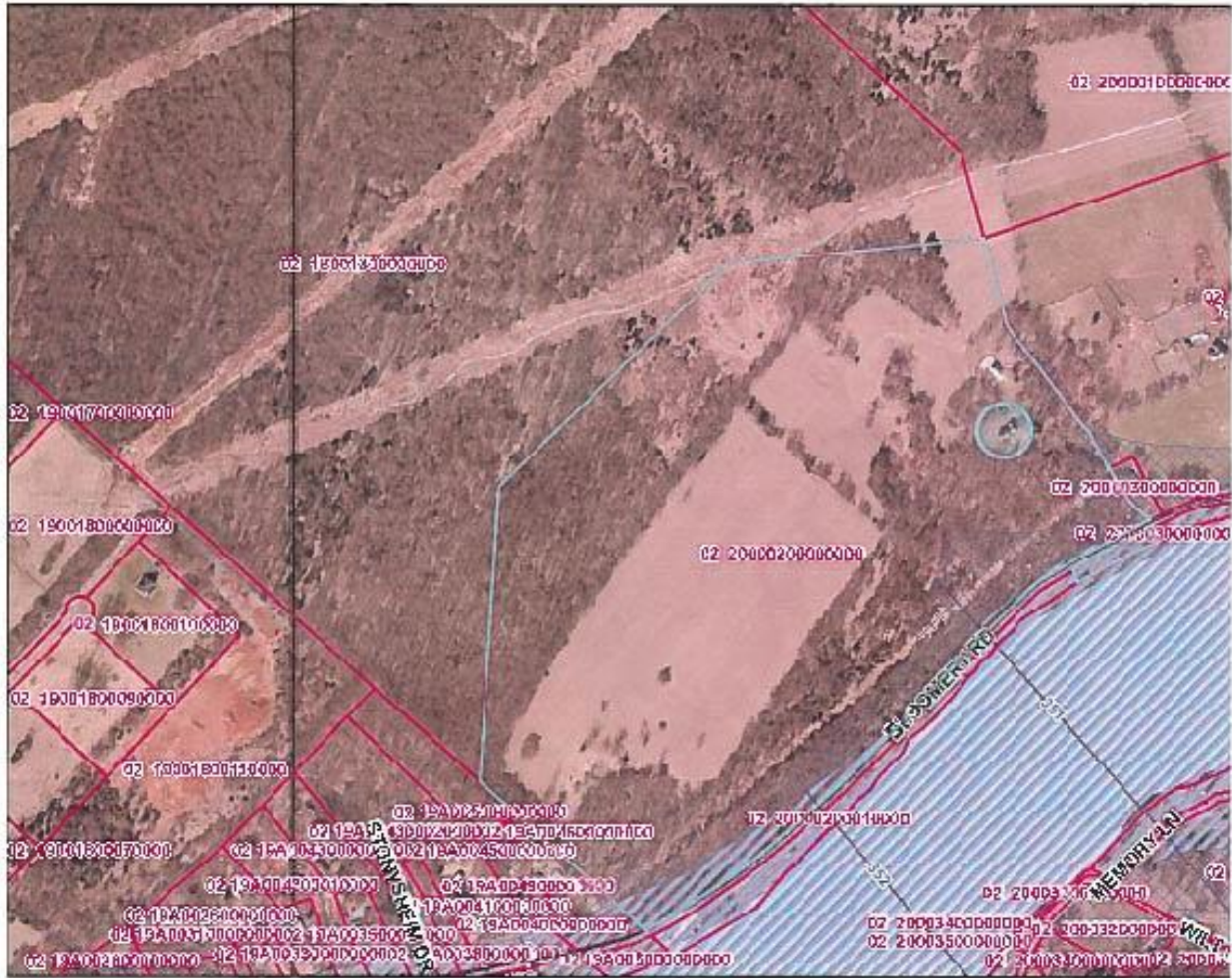


Figure 3. Floodplain map for the current park, and proposed park addition.

Air Quality

Jefferson County has good air quality and is not listed in the EPA Green Book of National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) non-attainment or maintenance areas. Berkeley County, located immediately to the west, is listed as a maintenance area for Particulate Matter 2.5 NAAQS from the 1997 report.

Water Quality

The property is situated on the Shenandoah River. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) describes Shenandoah River water quality as good for drinking water and aquatic life but impaired for recreation.⁴ The impairment is for Polychlorinated Biphenyls from effluent from the Avtex Fibers site. This site was subject to a superfund clean-up and the source has been eliminated.

During high flows, Shenandoah River water quality suffers from high levels of E. Coli pollution, often exceeding levels considered safe for swimming, due primarily to run-off from areas with poor livestock waste management practices.⁵

A United States Geological Survey (USGS) and Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (VADEQ) study predicts a 50% increase in Shenandoah River withdrawals to off-site uses by 2040 resulting in a negative impact to wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities especially during low-flow conditions.⁶

Vegetation and Wildlife

A biodiversity survey was conducted by the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources (WVDNR) on the proposed addition in January 2021. The survey was conducted mid-winter so not all possible plant species were observable. Based on the survey, the site was given a B4 Moderate Biodiversity Significance ranking due to the presence of two S2 species, the Halbard-leaved Rosemallow (*Hibiscus laevis*) and the Northern Red-bellied Cooter (*Pseudemys rubiventris*). Communication with the DNR indicated both species will benefit from an increased forested buffer along the riverfront.

The following narrative was provided by James Vanderhorst of WVDNR:

“The area has been developed for agriculture and other human uses for centuries. Soils have dolomite parent material and are highly calcareous. Cultural vegetation includes mowed pasture/hayfield, likely dominated by non-native, cool season grasses, and a utility corridor with heavy infestation of non-native wineberry (*Rubus phoenicolasius*). The riverside is mowed with a narrow border of trees including sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*) along the shore.

⁴<https://mywaterway.epa.gov/community/1123%20Bloomery%20Road,%20Charles%20Town,%20WV%2025414/overview>

⁵ Water Pollution from Livestock in the Shenandoah Valley, Environmental Integrity Project, 2017

⁶ Data Collection and Simulation of Ecological Habitat and Recreational Habitat in the Shenandoah River, Virginia, USGS, Scientific Investigations Report 2015-5005

Semi-natural forests have returned to much of the wetter, steeper, or rockier sites. These are ranked GNA, SNA (conservation ranking not applicable) because they are not considered natural vegetation. These include:

Upland deciduous forests with *Celtis occidentalis*, *Prunus serotina*, *Fraxinus americana*, *Juniperus virginiana*

(http://www.natureserve.org/explorer/servlet/NatureServe?searchCommunityUid=ELEMENT_GLOBAL.2.689790);

Small area of juniper (*Juniperus virginiana*) woodland with non-native cool season grasses, native purple-top *Tridens flavus*. Too moist for native cedar glade – prairie.

(http://www.natureserve.org/explorer/servlet/NatureServe?searchCommunityUid=ELEMENT_GLOBAL.2.685403);

Small patch of successional boxelder (*Acer negundo*) forest in floodplain across road from river, with Chinaroot (*Smilax tamnoides*), remnant large silver maple (*Acer saccharinum*)

http://www.natureserve.org/explorer/servlet/NatureServe?searchCommunityUid=ELEMENT_GLOBAL.2.686021

Cultural and semi-natural vegetation does not exclude possibility for rare species.”

Land Use

As previously described, the 82-acre proposed addition currently includes agricultural land and woodlands, with a small residential homestead. (Figure 4.)



Figure 4. Current Land Use of proposed property.

Socioeconomic Conditions

Data from 2019 show that Jefferson County has a population of 57,146, an increase of approximately 34.49% since 2000.⁷

Historic and Cultural Resources

The West Virginia Department of Arts, Culture, and History reviewed the referenced project to determine its effects on cultural resources. As required by Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, and its implementing regulations, 36 CFR 800: "Protection of Historic Properties," comments on Historic and Cultural Resources were given in a letter to the JCPRC dated January 21, 2021. Their findings indicate the following:

Archaeological Resources:

A search of our records indicates that there is one previously recorded archaeological resource located within the proposed project area, as well as several within a one-mile radius. However, it is our understanding that, at this time, JCPRC is only proposing the acquisition of property and that further project plans, including any plans involving ground disturbance, have not yet been finalized. We request that JCPRC provide project plans to our office prior to the initiation of any ground

⁷ www.cwnsus.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/jeffersoncountywestvirginia/HSG495219

disturbing activities, including trail building or other construction, and that we be given an opportunity to comment on any potential impacts at that time. No further consultation is necessary regarding archaeological resources for the purposes of acquiring the property; however, we will provide additional comments upon receipt of project plans.

Architectural Resources:

We have reviewed the submitted information and determined that three previously identified architectural resources potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places are located within or near the proposed park expansion. These resources include Allemont (JF-0008-0060); log residence off Bloomery Road (JF-0008-0059); and Riverside (JF-0008-0058). Additional research and survey would be needed to redocument these resources and properly evaluate the resources for eligibility in the National Register in their current condition.

However, because the currently proposed project consists of property acquisition and no future project plans have been developed, it is our opinion the proposed project has no potential to adversely affect any of these resources. No further consultation is necessary regarding architectural resources; however, we do ask that you contact our office if your project should change, particularly if any of the built resources will be affected.

As development of the park is explored, JCPRC will remain in contact with the West Virginia Department of Arts, Culture, and History as well as the Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission for guidance and to assure all guidelines on renovations to historic structures are followed.

Park Administration

The existing Moulton Park is operated by the JCPRC and they would assume management of the proposed addition. The JCPRC was established by the Jefferson County Commission in 1970 and currently manages nine county parks encompassing over 400 acres. Facilities include a community center, picnic pavilions, concession stands, walking trails, playgrounds, dog park, tennis courts, athletic fields and open space. Facilities specific to Moulton Park include boat ramp, camp sites, fire pits, fishing areas, and a small parking lot. A full-time director was hired in 1994 for the county Parks and Recreation Department, and the staff includes seven full-time, one part-time, and eight seasonal employees as well as numerous program instructors.

Chapter 4. Environmental Consequences

Alternative A. No Action

Under this alternative, the JCPRC would not move forward to acquire and manage the proposed 82-acre addition to Moulton Park. Future use of the property is unknown but in the near term, no changes are expected. Environmental impacts would be negligible. Impacts to the topography, soils, hydrology, air quality, water quality, vegetation and wildlife use of the property would remain static. Agricultural soils would be manipulated annually, as they are at present.

Land use impacts over the long term are unknown, but an appraisal conducted by Sirna in 2019 stated that the highest and best use of the property would be low density residential development or farmette estates. The appraisal report describes current zoning that would permit a maximum of 24 single family residential lots.

The socioeconomic impacts of no action are best described as opportunities that would not be realized by Jefferson County residents and visitors. They include the landowners being deprived of their goals for the property to be managed by Jefferson County for conservation and recreational purposes in perpetuity, and residents and visitors would not have access to additional recreational facilities (trails, dock, additional campsites, parking, and more), leading to a continuation of overcrowding and overuse of existing facilities.

Alternative B. Proposed Action

Under this alternative, the 82 acres adjoining the existing Moulton Park would be purchased from the Moulton family at a bargain sale and added to the park, with a conservation easement held by the West Virginia Land Trust. The size of the park would grow more than 8-fold. A general description of the proposed impacts from this alternative follows.

Soils

Soils would be impacted in a number of ways if the proposed action is implemented. Soils on new trails would be compacted as would soils under new campsite pads and parking areas. These impacts would be permanent as long as those types of facilities remain on the land. These impacts would be offset by cessation of farming and grazing with their respective annual manipulations and animal use. The areas being farmed or in pasture far exceed the areas planned for campsites, parking and trails, such that the overall impact on soils is likely to be positive.

Hydrology

Hydrological impacts are expected to be negligible under the proposed action. Any wetlands on the property would be avoided and buffered during and after any construction activities. Facilities would be constructed to allow surface flow to continue with minimal or no changes in topography. Flooding from the Shenandoah River will remain a possibility no matter which alternative is selected, but should be a consideration when placing and constructing facilities.

Air Quality

Emissions from vehicles entering the park would increase under this alternative, but would be offset by plans to restore agricultural fields into forest habitats. As the trees grow, they would have a greater and greater positive impact on air quality. Overall, air quality is not expected to measurably change under this alternative.

Water Quality

The nearest water body to the proposed addition is the Shenandoah River. Reforestation of agricultural lands will help reduce farm-related runoff from entering into the river, but is not expected to have a measurable impact on the river's water quality ranking.

Vegetation and Wildlife

Lands that are owned and managed by public bodies for recreation and conservation purposes generally provide added benefits to vegetation and wildlife. Public ownership often provides incentive and opportunity to control invasive species, for example. One specific example of habitat improvement from this alternative is the proposed restoration of agricultural lands into forest or grasslands using native species. This will improve both the natural vegetative structure on the property and its use by migratory birds and other wildlife. This alternative would have a positive impact on vegetation and wildlife use of the property.

Land Use

The most dramatic impact of this alternative would be changing the land use from homestead and agriculture to permanent conservation and recreation. As mentioned previously, the most significant change is removing 46 acres from agriculture and restoring the area into forest or grasslands.

Socioeconomic Conditions

Jefferson County has experienced significant population growth over the past decade. With rapid growth comes an increased demand for amenities like parks and river access. This increased demand has become apparent at the existing Moulton Park, where the small parking area is often at and over capacity and campsites are in high demand. Overcrowding often results in a decline of visitor enjoyment and in negative impacts to facilities and natural areas. The 8-fold increase in park area under this alternative would provide additional facilities to residents and visitors and alleviate existing crowding, thereby enhancing the quality of life in Jefferson County.

With the removal of productive agricultural, this alternative could result in some lost economic activity through agriculture; however, additional revenue could be generated through recreation and tourism.

Historic and Cultural Resources

It is the intent of the JCPRC to utilize the property for community recreation activities including trails and camping. This will require some ground disruption, however minimal. It is NOT the intent of the JCPRC to move forward with any projects until an assessment from SHIPPO can be provided.

Park Administration

With the acquisition of this property, it will be necessary for JCPRC to hire additional full-time and/or seasonal staff to help maintain and manage the park. Furthermore, once the park is realized and a nature/conservancy component is added, additional full time naturalist and seasonal staff may be hired.

Chapter 5. Consultation and Coordination with Others

This draft EA will be released for a 30-day public review and comment period on February 17, 2021. A news release announcing its availability will be sent to the following media outlets:

Spirit of Jefferson

The Journal

The Herald-Mail

Copies of the draft EA will be available for public review on the Jefferson County Parks & Recreation Commission website at www.jcprc.org, and at the JCPRC office, 235 Sam Michaels Lane, Shenandoah Junction, WV 25442. In addition, a link will be provided on park social media outlets.

Discussion of the EA will take place at a JCPRC public board meeting on February 17, 2021 and at a Jefferson County Commission meeting on February 18, 2021.

Comments will be received through March 15, 2021 and will then be reviewed at a public meeting of the JCPRC on March 17, 2021.

Literature Cited

Jefferson County Parks & Recreation Commission Park Master Plan-2016

Envision Jefferson 2035 Comprehensive Plan & Future Land Use Guide-2015

Biodiversity assessment WVNHP_OHCF_Moulton Park

Moulton restricted use report rev 041019

NRPA Park Metrics- <https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/ParkMetrics/>

US Census Bureau

Agencies and Specialists Consulted

WV Department of Natural Resources

National Park & Recreation Association

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