

The Forest Service is considering a proposal to implement the 2002 Record of Decision for the Uncompahgre National Forest Travel Plan on a portion of the Norwood Ranger District. The project area includes National Forest system lands in the Red Canyon area of the Uncompahgre Plateau.

This letter provides an overview, a description of the need to take action, and the proposed action. I am asking for your written comments regarding the proposed action, and that they be sent to the address above within the next 30 days. Based on your comments, an interdisciplinary team will identify the significant issues that focus the analysis and generate possible alternatives to the proposed action. This interdisciplinary analysis will be documented in an environmental assessment, which should be completed by the spring of 2007.

Overview

In March of 2002 the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forest completed a six-year process of public involvement and analysis to revise the travel plan for the Uncompahgre National Forest. Travel management decisions were made for the Forest at two levels. The first level addressed area-wide uses during the summer and winter seasons. Currently all motorized and mechanized travel in the summer is restricted to designated routes. Certain areas of the Forest are also seasonally closed to all motorized and mechanized travel to protect big game animals on their winter range. The second level addressed route-specific decisions of what routes would be designated and maintained for public use, and what uses are allowed on those designated routes. Seasonal restrictions also apply to certain motorized and mechanized trails on the Forest to provide security areas for big game and to prevent disturbance during big game calving and fawning periods.

Certain specific actions are called for in the implementation of the 2002 Record of Decision (ROD) for the travel plan. These include signing of designated routes to show uses allowed, the closure of areas and routes using various means, the decommissioning of selected routes, and the construction or reconstruction of others.

Simple actions necessary for the designation or closure of routes, and changes in use restrictions, are covered by the 2002 ROD and may proceed with no further study. These types of activities require minimal ground disturbance and are typically associated with maintenance, e.g. sign and gate installation or barrier construction. The more substantial actions involved with route decommissioning, construction and/or reconstruction, are site-specific actions that will require additional environmental analysis.

Purpose and Need for Action in the Project Area

Implementation of the 2002 Record of Decision (ROD) for the Uncompahgre National Forest travel plan is an ongoing process. Within the project area this decision includes a combination of roads and trails that provide a base transportation system and a series of motorized recreational trails. Several local access roads and spurs associated with the

base transportation system have been identified for decommissioning, while others are identified as routes that would be reduced in width and established as part of a single-track motorized trail system. The ROD also identified two sections of the Red Canyon trail as proposed routes (please refer to the Uncompahgre ROD map for the Plateau Division, available online at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/gmug/policy/>).

Recreation managers with the Forest Service have worked with public recreational user groups to establish two of the three motorized trails in the project area. These trails include the Hornet trail and the Aspen trail. The Hornet trail is presently a single-track trail that begins near the Antone Spring campground, crosses old Highway 90 near the head of Red Canyon, and ends at the States Draw road (FSR 549). The Aspen trail is a single-track loop trail south of the Divide road (FSR 402) and east of the States Draw road. An extensive network of renegade ATV trails has developed on the old logging roads and meadows located within the vicinity of the Aspen trail and the upper Red Canyon trail. A single-track trail has also developed connecting the Aspen trail to the Red Canyon trail through States Draw. Based on the resource damage occurring from off-route travel, improperly designed renegade trails, and the extensive ATV use occurring on closed roads and the trails designated as single-track trails, there is a need to decommission a variety of unauthorized routes and redesign access to the Aspen trail to manage for the permitted uses in this area.

Forest Service recreation managers and resource specialists have inventoried the Red Canyon trail system identified in the 2002 ROD and recognized several resource concerns. This trail is a user-developed trail that evolved from ATV's connecting previously closed temporary logging roads and livestock trails with sections of new construction on very steep slopes. As established, this trail is causing extensive resource damage and is continuing to be utilized and expanded in several directions by ATV's. There is a need to establish this trail as a seasonal-use single-track motorcycle trail as identified in the 2002 ROD. Sections of this trail need to be redesigned or re-routed to meet Forest Service design standards to establish a safe and sustainable route for the type of use permitted in the 2002 ROD.

Red Canyon is an important big game security area and provides valuable elk calving grounds for this portion of the Uncompahgre Plateau. These values were recognized in the Uncompahgre National Forest travel plan analysis and the 2002 ROD includes a seasonal restriction on the Red Canyon trail system to mitigate adverse impacts of motorized recreational use on big game animals. The continued unauthorized use of ATV's and proliferation of unauthorized trails within the project area is having an adverse effect on big game habitat capability and effectiveness. There is a need to reduce the density of open roads and motorized trails, and to effectively manage seasonal use of the Red Canyon trail system to improve big game habitat effectiveness within the project area.

The Proposed Action

The proposed action includes a combination of signing, gates, road closures, road and trail decommissioning, and re-routing a portion of the Red Canyon trail to implement the 2002 Record of Decision for the Uncompahgre National Forest travel plan in a manner that will reduce impacts to watershed, soils, and wildlife resources and provide a safe and sustainable motorized trail system within the project area (project map enclosed). As shown on the map legend the proposed action includes the installation of two locking gates and four levels of road/trail decommissioning. It also includes the relocation of the upper section of the Red Canyon trail from the States Draw ridge to the bench above Red Canyon.

The Hornet trail would be shortened in length and maintained as single-track trail that would be open to motorcycles, bicycles, horses, and hikers. As currently directed in the 2002 ROD, there are no seasonal restrictions on this trail. The Hornet trail would originate at the Antone Spring Campground and end at old highway 90. The short section from old highway 90 to the proposed Red Canyon trail relocation would be obliterated using Level 7 decommissioning techniques. Level 7 includes the removal of the existing culvert and fill material at the Red Canyon creek crossing and reshaping the cut and fill slopes of the old logging road. Areas of disturbed ground would be seeded with a mix of native plant species.

The Aspen trail would be maintained as single-track trail that would be open to motorcycles, bicycles, horses, and hikers. As currently directed in the 2002 ROD, there are no seasonal restrictions on this trail system. Several unauthorized roads and trails are located in this area that would be decommissioned using a combination of Level 3 and 5 techniques. Level 3 includes the use of rock, slash, trees, and other debris to barricade and camouflage the road template to prevent unauthorized use by ATV's and other vehicles. Level 5 includes ripping, disking, and seeding the full length of the roadbed, and placing debris such as rock and slash on the road to further impede traffic and camouflage the road template. Areas of disturbed ground would be seeded with a mix of native plant species. Travel management signs would be placed at the beginning of each decommissioned route to further define the closure.

The Red Canyon trail would be redesigned as a single-track trail that would be open to motorcycles, bicycles, horses, and hikers. As currently directed in the 2002 ROD, this trail system will continue to have seasonal restrictions on recreational use. The trail will be open to motorized use from the Fourth of July weekend to Labor Day weekend. The upper portions of the Red Canyon trail would be decommissioned and relocated to an existing old logging road on a bench above Red Canyon. The current location of the upper section of this trail utilizes an old system of temporary logging roads that cannot be managed for the intended uses or seasonal use restriction. This area continues to receive extensive ATV and other unauthorized vehicle use. The steep section off the end of the States Draw ridge does not meet Forest Service design standards and current uses are causing extensive resource damage. Level 5 techniques would be used on the upper section of this trail to decommission this route. Relocation of the upper section would involve using the eastern portion of the existing Hornet trail and the existing old logging road that is located on the bench above Red Canyon.

Additional unauthorized roads and trails are located in the area between the Aspen trail and the current location of the upper Red Canyon trail. There is also an unauthorized user-developed single-track trail connecting the Aspen trail to the lower Red Canyon trail that is improperly designed and is causing extensive resource damage. Unauthorized routes have also developed that cross lower Red Canyon or connect the lower portion of the Red Canyon trail to the Hanks Valley road (FSR 512). Many of these are previously closed temporary logging roads that have been reopened by ATV's and other vehicles. The proposed action includes a combination of Level 3 and 5 decommissioning to close the unauthorized routes within the project area to establish the planned single-track trail systems according to Forest Service design standards, and to prevent the current unauthorized uses and the expansion of renegade trails.

The States Draw ridge area near the Aspen trail is also grazed by domestic sheep and the current grazing permittee has a few sheep campsites that need to be accessed with a full-size vehicle. The 2002 ROD for the travel plan provides for administrative access when needed for resource management purposes. The proposed action includes the installation of two locking gates that would provide administrative access in the vicinity of the Aspen trail system for the current grazing permittee to access sheep campsites in this area. Other livestock management activities within the project area will comply with the 2002 Record of Decision. Access for special projects or unique management actions needed for range management purposes would be considered by the District Ranger and could be authorized through their respective grazing permits.

Participation in the Planning Process

Your participation in this process is very important to us. We hope you will have additional ideas or information that will help us to improve the proposed action. When responding to our proposal, please keep your comments specific to the actions proposed to implement the travel plan in this area. In addition, please indicate if you wish to be put on the mailing list to receive further information on this project. Only those indicating a desire to be put on the mailing list will receive further mailings.

This 30-day opportunity to comment is required at 36 CFR 215.3. The Responsible Official for this project will be Judy Schutza, District Ranger for the Norwood Ranger District of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests. The opportunity to comment on the Proposed Action ends 30 days following the date of publication of the legal notice (of opportunity to comment) in the Telluride Daily Planet, the official newspaper of record. Comments may be submitted in hard copy through the mail, e-mail, FAX, or delivered by hand. Office hours for hand delivery are 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., weekdays.

Mail comments to: Attention: Red Canyon Travel Management Project
 Norwood Ranger District
 P.O. Box 388
 Norwood, CO 81423

FAX comments to: (970) 327-4854

E-mail comments to: comments-rocky-mountain-gmug-norwood@fs.fed.us

At this time, the Forest Service plans to document the effects of this proposal in an environmental assessment (EA). As the 30-day opportunity to comment is being offered at this time, a Decision Notice (DN) documenting the Responsible Official's decision will be issued shortly after the EA is completed. The DN will be sent to those requesting it or expressing interest by commenting at this time. A legal Notice of Decision will be published in the Telluride Daily Planet shortly after the Decision is made. This Decision is subject to appeal. An appeal may be filed by any person who, or any non-federal organization or entity that has provided comment or otherwise expressed an interest in the proposed action by the close of the comment period.

I appreciate your interest and involvement in the management of the Norwood Ranger District. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Craig Grother, Wildlife Biologist, at this office at (970) 327-4261.