

PROJECT INFORMATION

Leicester Hollow (FT 130) and Ridge Trails (Ft 177.01) Project

The USDA Forest Service (USFS) is initiating an environmental analysis process for the proposed Leicester Hollow and Ridge Trails Project pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act. The project area is located on the Green Mountain National Forest (GMNF), Middlebury Ranger District in the Towns of Leicester and Brandon, Addison and Rutland Counties, Vermont (see attached map). The proposed action consists of reconstructing portions of the Leicester Hollow Trail out of the floodplain; eliminating recreation uses on Leicester Hollow Trail; designating snowmobile use on the Ridge Trail; and conducting watershed restoration activities to Leicester Hollow Brook. A detailed description of the proposal is included below.

BACKGROUND

Record rainfall on August 6, 2008 produced some of the most severe storm damage seen on the GMNF in many years. Many roads, bridges, trails, recreation sites, and watersheds were damaged. The heaviest amount of damage occurred on the north half of the forest, primarily in the towns of Goshen, Leicester, Brandon, Ripton, Rochester, and Hancock on the Rochester and Middlebury Ranger Districts. The slow moving storm produced between five and seven inches of rain in a short time period, resulting in widespread damage to public and private infrastructure. Many flood-impacted areas, trails, and roads became unsafe for public travel and access to many popular areas, including the Leicester Hollow Trail, was restricted or closed. Historically, the Leicester Hollow Trail, a multiple use trail managed for snowmobile, bicycle, equestrian, and foot travel (hike, ski, snowshoe), has been damaged by over five different flood events in the past decade. Currently the Leicester Hollow Trail is severely washed out to the extent that repair in its current location is not feasible or sustainable against future flood events. Due to the 2008 flood event, six trail bridges that cross Leicester Hollow Brook have been completely destroyed and the stream course has changed substantially within the valley to areas that used to be the trail. This has resulted in limited public access to the area and trails that are popular amongst local residents and visitors to Vermont. In addition, connectivity to a portion of the state-wide snowmobile trail system (VAST Corridor 7A) has been cut off and inoperable for one year due to a temporary trail closure of the Leicester Hollow Trail.

The Leicester Hollow and Ridge Trails Project Area (project area) is approximately 860 acres and is contained within the Moosalamoo National Recreation Area. The project area is located within the Green Mountain Escarpment and Moosalamoo Recreation and Education Area Management Areas (MAs 8.5 and 8.9, respectively) as designated by the 2006 GMNF Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). Portions of the project area are also within the Eligible Wild, Scenic, and Recreational Rivers Management Area (MA 9.4). The Leicester Hollow Brook is eligible to be further considered as a Recreational River for addition to the National Wild and Scenic River System (Forest Plan, North Half Management Map).

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose and need for these actions is to:

- Repair public recreation resources damaged by the August 2008 flood incident
- Restore a piece of the GMNF transportation system that has historically provided public access to popular recreation areas and trails

- Improve watershed health by rerouting trails out of the floodplain and removing damaged infrastructure, restoring natural channel dimensions, and stabilizing banks
- Enhance the effective use of partnerships to maintain the GMNF trail system by reconstructing trails and restoring recreation uses that are supported by long-standing partnerships with the Moosalamoo Association, Vermont Mountain Bike Association and the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers.
- Provide a diverse range of high quality recreation opportunities that complement those off of the GMNF by retaining connectivity of the statewide snowmobile trail system through the GMNF
- Reduce public health and safety risk by eliminating dangerous bridge crossings and removing damaged culverts
- Reduce deferred maintenance on the trail system by reconstructing trails to standard

Important management goals and objectives associated with this proposal include providing “a diverse range of high-quality, sustainable recreation opportunities that complement those provided off National Forest System lands” while increasing “the effective use of partnerships in the improvement, maintenance, and operation of the Forest trails system” (Goal 12 and Objective, Forest Plan p.15). In addition, the proposal addresses the management objective to “reduce the total deferred maintenance on the GMNF trail system” (Goal 12 Objective , Forest Plan p.15). Another important management goal associated with this proposal is to “Provide a safe, efficient, and effective Forest transportation system that meets both the needs of the Forest Service and the public” (Goal 14, Forest Plan, p. 16). The direction and desired future condition for MA 8.9 is to provide a full range of recreation opportunities including snowmobile trails (Forest Plan, p. 47).

- Presently, the Leicester Hollow Trail (FT130) has limited access and has been closed to public use due to extensive flood damage since August 2008. Proposed repairs to the trail involve reconstructing the trail tread out of the floodplain to improve the ecological integrity of the watershed and to establish a more sustainable trail that requires less long-term maintenance costs.
- Due to terrain limitations, reconstruction of the Leicester Hollow Trail will not be able to accommodate future recreation opportunities for snowmobile and equestrian uses. This trail provides an important link within the statewide snowmobile trail system between the GMNF and other State and private lands. This trail also provided equestrian recreation opportunities within the Moosalamoo NRA. There is a desire to reroute these uses from the Leicester Hollow Trail to the Ridge Trail (FT 177.01) to maintain high quality and diverse recreation opportunities and minimize the long-term ecological impacts to Leicester Hollow Brook.

PROPOSED ACTION

Leicester Hollow Trail (FT130)

Reconstruct an approximate 1.0 mile section of Leicester Hollow Trail to a higher elevation in the ravine outside of the floodplain to connect with the Minnie Baker Trail (FT253) on the west side of Leicester Hollow Brook (see Figure 1). Specifically the connected actions are to:

- Re-designate approximately 0.2 mile section of the Minnie Baker Trail (FT253) as the Leicester Hollow Trail (FT130) from the point where the proposed reconstructed section of the Leicester Hollow Trail intersects with the Minnie Baker Trail east to the point where it intersects with the existing Leicester Hollow Trail (see bottom of Figure 1, Point A to Point B).
- The reconstructed trail sections from Silver Lake south to the junction of the Minnie Baker Trail (FT253) will be designed and managed to Class 3 mountain bike trail design standards. Reconstructed sections of trail between the Minnie Baker Trail south to the Brandon Town Road will be designed and managed to Class 4 snowmobile trail standards.

- The existing managed snowmobile and equestrian uses will be eliminated from the Leicester Hollow Trail from Silver Lake south to the junction of the Minnie Baker Trail. This section of trail will be managed for foot travel (hike, ski, snowshoe) and bicycle use only. The section of trail from the junction with the Minnie Baker Trail south to the Brandon Town Road will continue to be managed for foot travel (hike, ski, snowshoe), equestrian and snowmobile uses.
- This proposal also includes the decommissioning of five trail bridges that cross Leicester Hollow Brook and the reconstruction of two trail bridges.

Ridge Trail (FT177.01)

Re-designate the Ridge Trail (FT177.01) as a Class 4 snowmobile trail. Currently, the Ridge Trail is managed for foot travel only (hiking, skiing, snowshoeing) and receives very little public use. The trail is primarily located on an old skid trail used for past and present timber management purposes. Re-designating the Ridge Trail would require the following improvements:

- Removal of trees (approximately 5, including 3 snags) and rocks that protrude more than six inches above the trail tread.
- Minor reroute (approximately 0.2 miles in length) to provide for a more sustainable location to cross a perennial stream.
- Construction of a 16' bridge to cross a small perennial stream
- Installation of a 24" x 16' culvert on an intermittent stream
- Reconstructing the trail tread for a length of approximately 50' in order to obtain the standard trail width of 11-13 feet
- At the completion of soil disturbing activities, seeding (with an appropriate seed mix) and mulching would occur at critical areas to reduce erosion (Forest Plan, G-7, p. 21).

There will be a net increase of approximately 0.1 miles of designated snowmobile trails on the GMNF with this proposal. The northern terminus of the Ridge Trail will be at the Goshen Trailhead/Silver Lake parking eastern lot off of Forest Road 27. The southern terminus of the Ridge Trail ends at the Brandon Town Trail on Fay Road. From there, the snowmobile trail will follow the Town Trail west to the Brandon Town Road in Leicester Hollow. At that point, snowmobile users can either travel south to SR 73 or north and west via the Leicester Hollow and Minnie Baker Trails to SR 53. The VAST has obtained permission from the Town of Brandon to utilize these Town trails and roads, including Churchill Road Bridge, as part of the statewide snowmobile trail system. VAST has also obtained permission from the State of Vermont to ride along Vermont State Route 73 and private landowners further south to complete the connection of Corridor 7A to Corridor 7.

Leicester Hollow Brook Restoration

Decommission and remove five trail bridges that cross Leicester Hollow Brook. Where bridges are removed, restore the natural channel dimensions and stabilize banks with boulders from on-site, as necessary. Re-shape stream channels to their approximate original bank slope and shape, as indicated by nearby natural stream banks. A small- tracked excavator will be used for channel restoration work.

FOREST PLAN CONSISTENCY

The Leicester Hollow and Ridge Trails Project was designed to be consistent with the goals, objectives, and Forest-wide and MAs 8.5, 8.9, and 9.4 Standards and Guidelines as specified in the Forest Plan. The proposed action would move the project area toward the desired future condition for MA 8.9, Moosalamoo Recreation and Education Area. All of the expected environmental effects from this project are anticipated to be within the range of the effects disclosed in the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the 2006 Forest Plan.

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

The USFS will consider public comments during the environmental analysis process. The proposed action appears to be in a category that can be excluded from documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or Environmental Assessment (EA) as identified at 36 CFR 220.6(e)(1): "Construction and reconstruction of trails." The analysis and supporting documentation will be the basis for determining whether this action can be categorically excluded in a Decision Memo or whether additional analysis is needed.

The environmental analysis will identify any extraordinary circumstances that exist and could result in significant effects to the environment. In accordance with 36 CFR 220.6(b), the following specific resource conditions will be considered:

1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Regional Forester's sensitive species
2. Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds
3. Congressionally designated areas
4. Inventoried Roadless Areas
5. Research Natural Areas
6. American Indians and Alaska Native Religious or Cultural Sites
7. Archaeological Sites, or Historic Properties or Areas

DECISIONS TO BE MADE

After conducting and reviewing the environmental analysis, including public involvement and interdisciplinary resource specialists' input, the Responsible Official will make the following decisions based on the environmental analysis:

1. Whether the proposed project will proceed as proposed, as modified to address issues, or not at all;
2. What specific resource protection or mitigation measures should be implemented as part of the project;
3. Whether the project would have a significant impact requiring an EA or EIS; and
4. What monitoring requirements should be applied to the project.

RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL

Gregory D. Smith, the District Ranger for the Middlebury and Rochester Ranger Districts, is the Responsible Official for the decision on this proposal.

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