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Mt. Moosalamoo, Oak Ridge and Caryl Brook Trails Mountain Bike Access

Decision Memo

**USDA Forest Service, Eastern Region
Green Mountain National Forest
Middlebury and Rochester Ranger Districts
Towns of Chittenden, Pittsfield, Ripton, and Salisbury
Addison and Rutland Counties, Vermont**

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Mountain Bike Access Project
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I. SUMMARY

As District Ranger for the Middlebury and Rochester Ranger Districts of the Green Mountain National Forest (GMNF), I am authorizing the implementation of the Mt. Moosalamoo, Oak Ridge and Caryl Brook Trails Mountain Bike Access Project. Currently, the Oak Ridge and Mt. Moosalamoo trails allow hiking use only and will need improvements to allow mountain bike use. Improvements authorized in this decision will include construction of new switchbacks, modifying existing drainage structures to bicycle standards and potential reroutes around wet and sensitive areas. The Caryl Brook Trail is currently designated for snowmobile use and exceeds trail design standards for mountain bike use. The Caryl Brook Trail will continue to be maintained as a snowmobile trail but will be opened to mountain biking. The project is located on National Forest System (NFS) land in the Towns of Chittenden, Pittsfield, Ripton and Salisbury in Addison and Rutland Counties, Vermont (see attached maps).

II. DECISION TO BE IMPLEMENTED

A. Background and Project Area

Opportunities for mountain biking in the Moosalamoo National Recreation Area and GMNF are limited. By expanding the allowable use on two hiking trails and one snowmobile trail (Forest Trails 120, 181, and 797) to allow mountain biking, there are additional opportunities for this recreational activity, including loop trails. In 2008, the Vermont Mountain Bike Association (VMBA) received a grant to implement necessary trail improvements to create multiple use trails on the GMNF. Authorization was provided in October 2008 to designate mountain bike access on a portion of the Oak Ridge Trail (FT 181 from State Rte 125 to FSR 92 (3.3 miles)). Designating additional trails for mountain bike access will provide important links between roads and trails to establish a series of riding opportunities of varying length.

A developing partnership between the Forest Service and VMBA is providing enhanced opportunities for public mountain bike-based recreation access as well as public education and support for GMNF resource management programs. In addition, VMBA has worked with the staff of the GMNF to reduce deferred maintenance on existing trails, off-setting routine trail maintenance costs.

The Caryl Brook Trail is in the Diverse Forest Use Management Area (MA). The Oak Ridge and Mt. Moosalamoo Trails are in the Moosalamoo Recreation and Education Area MA and the Moosalamoo National Recreation Area.

B. Purpose and Need

The purpose and need for this action is to implement the 2006 GMNF Land and Resource Management Plan's (Forest Plan) goal of "Providing a diverse range of high-quality sustainable recreation opportunities that complement those provided off National Forest System lands." During the development of the Forest Plan, many members of the public felt that the GMNF did not provide enough trail opportunities for mountain biking. The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (2006) Recreation Effects Analysis stated that there is more public demand for mountain bike use than what the GMNF currently provides. It also went on to state that there is capacity for the GMNF to provide additional recreation trail opportunities for these uses.

The Forest Plan provides several key points that provide purpose and need for this action:

- "The Forest Service will manage the Green Mountain national Forest for **multiple uses**. The Green Mountain National Forest is open for any legal public activity or management action, unless specifically restricted in law, policy, or the 2006 Forest plan. While allowed, such activities and actions **may require administrative review and authorization** before they are implemented." (page 4)
- "Our recreation niche will focus on the fact that the GMNF's large, contiguous blocks of land are well suited to **trail-based activities** in backcountry settings.... Working in partnership with many organizations will continue to be a hallmark of how the Forest Service provides recreation opportunities to the public." (page 9)
- "Increase the effective use of **partnerships** in the improvement, maintenance, and operation of the Forest trails system." (page 9)
- "Trail maintenance and improvement activities should focus on the **reduction of deferred maintenance** needs on existing trails before the development of new trails." (page 35)
- "**Multiple use trails** should be emphasized over single use trails where the uses are compatible." (page 35)
- "Multiple use recreation trails should be designed and maintained to adequately and **safely accommodate the most demanding or impacting type** of use allowed." (page 35)
- S-1: "Bicycle trails shall be allowed only on National Forest System **trails that are designated for that use**. Forest System Roads (Class I-V) shall be open to saddle, pack, and draft animals unless posted closed." (page 36)
- G-1: "Bicycle trails should be identified and maintained in **cooperation with partners**." (page 36)

C. Description of Decision

The following existing trails will be designated and managed for multiple uses including mountain bike use:

1. Mount Moosalamoo Trail (FT 120): 2.5 miles
2. Oak Ridge Trail (FT 181) from FSR 92 to the junction with the Mt. Moosalamoo Trail (FT 120): 3.3 miles
3. Caryl Brook Trail (FT 797): 5.2 miles

The decision to allow mountain bike access will include a closure order that will be implemented to annually close trails forest-wide to mountain bike use temporarily to reduce anticipated impacts to soil resources during the wettest times of the year. In addition, mountain bike use on trails may be temporarily prohibited in times of extreme wet weather or other adverse resource conditions. My decision also includes sign changes at trailheads and trail intersections to indicate mountain bike use is allowed. Additional blazing and directional signs will be installed as needed to provide directional information for users.

Trail improvements may include reroutes and construction of new switchbacks to attain sufficient grades for mountain bike trail standards, modifying existing drainage structures to bicycle standards (such as replacing waterbars with rolling dips), and reroutes around wet and sensitive areas. Activities may include standard actions such as installing new water bars, ditches or other structures for improved drainage and to prevent or reduce soil erosion.

The trails being designated for mountain bike use in this project will fulfill the purpose and need for this action. These trails were identified in cooperation with local mountain bike user groups and future partners. A careful administrative review on this proposal has revealed that:

- Allowing mountain bike users on trails will develop additional partnerships that will contribute to the maintenance of existing trails.
- Allowing mountain bike users on trails is in line with our Forest's recreation niche of trail based activities in backcountry settings.
- This decision will foster the development of multiple use trails that will increase recreational opportunities to the public without increasing deferred maintenance or increasing the Forest's infrastructure.

This decision includes implementation of mitigation measures and monitoring requirements identified in Appendix A of this Decision Memo. This decision is based upon an environmental analysis conducted by Forest Service personnel. This information is located in the project planning record located at the Rochester Ranger District office.

III. REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment when they are within one of the categories found at 36 CFR 220.6(d) and (e), and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative environmental effect.

A. Category of Exclusion

Based upon the environmental analysis contained in the project planning record and on experience with similar activities on the GMNF, I have concluded that this decision can be appropriately categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment. I have determined that the selected action is a routine activity within the following category of exclusion found at 36 CFR 220.6(e)(1): "Construction and reconstruction of trails."

B. Relationship to Extraordinary Circumstances

The list of seven extraordinary circumstances that were examined for this analysis may be found at 36 CFR 220.6(b). The mere presence of one or more of these resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion. It is the degree of the potential effects of a proposed action on these resource conditions that determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist. I have concluded that there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment. My conclusion is based on information presented in this document and the entirety of the project planning record. A summary of the project's potential effects on each resource condition is as follows:

1. Federally Listed Threatened or Endangered Species or Designated Critical Habitat, Species Proposed for Federal Listing or Proposed Critical Habitat, or Forest Service Sensitive Species –

A Biological Evaluation (BE) was prepared in July 2009 to assess the likelihood of occurrence, habitat needs, and determination of findings regarding Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive (TES) wildlife species in the project area (Widowski July 1, 2009). Based on the analysis in the BE, the likelihood for occurrence of any threatened and endangered (T&E) species in the project area is low. The GMNF has historic occurrence records of three T&E species (eastern cougar, gray wolf, and Canada lynx), and current occurrence records for one species (Indiana bat). There are no known T&E wildlife species occurrences currently in any of the areas (Widowski field review April 20, 2009 and July 1, 2009). There is no potential or critical habitat within the project area, and because the project areas exceeds elevation of 800 feet, the potential for Indiana bat maternal roosting habitat is low (Forest Plan, p. 27). As a result, there will be "no adverse effect on species or critical habitat."

This project site has been surveyed for Regional Forester Sensitive Species (RFSS) (Widowski April 20, 2009 and July 1, 2009). No RFSS animals are known to occur within the project area and a survey of the sites did not identify any individuals or ideal habitat for RFSS animals. This project will have "no impact" on any of the RFSS or their preferred habitats.

A BE was prepared in June 2009 to assess the likelihood of occurrence, habitat needs, and determination of findings regarding TES plant species in the project area (Deller June 27, 2009). Based on the analysis in the BE, the authorization of the Mt. Moosalamoo, Oak Ridge and Caryl Brook Trails Mountain Bike Access Project will have "no adverse effect on species or critical habitat" for Threatened and Endangered Species; there are no federally listed plant species on the GMNF. In addition, no Regional Forester Sensitive Species (RFSS) are known from the project area; authorization of this project will have "no impact" on any of the plant RFSS or their preferred habitats. Implementation of this project is not likely to lead to loss of viability or trend toward federal listing for any rare plants on the RFSS list (Deller June 27, 2009).

2. Floodplains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds –

The project is not located in or near floodplains or municipal watersheds. This has been validated by map and site-review. No significant impacts to floodplains or municipal watersheds are expected to result from this project (communication with staff hydrologist, June 29, 2009).

This decision includes activities within 100 feet of wetlands; this has been validated by map and site-review. Trail maintenance, use, and activities will have little to no effect on and will not impair the function of the wetlands. Mitigation measures are identified in Appendix A for soil and water resources. Similar past projects in this area were determined to have no significant wetland-related impacts. Monitoring of similar projects validates acceptable resource effects from similar activities. No significant impacts to wetlands are expected to result from this project (communication with staff hydrologist, June 29, 2009).

3. Congressionally Designated Areas, such as Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, or National Recreation Areas –

Wilderness:

Wilderness is identified on the Forest as Management Area 5.1 (Forest Plan, p. 49). The project is not in or near Wilderness. This decision, with impacts limited to the immediate area of activity, will not affect the Wilderness Area (communication with Recreation Planner, October 22, 2008 and April 9, 2009).

Wilderness Study Areas:

There are no Wilderness Study Areas within the project area. This decision will not affect Wilderness Study Areas (communication with Recreation Planner, October 22, 2008 and April 9, 2009).

National Recreation Areas (NRAs):

The GMNF contains two NRAs: the *Moosalamoo NRA* and the *Robert T. Stafford White Rocks NRA*. The Oak Ridge and Mt. Moosalamoo Trails are located within the Moosalamoo NRA. One general objective of the Moosalamoo NRA includes providing for public enjoyment of the area for outdoor recreation and other benefits. Opportunities for mountain biking in the Moosalamoo NRA and GMNF are limited. By expanding the allowable use on two hiking trails and one snowmobile trail to allow mountain biking, there are additional opportunities for this recreational activity, including loop trails. Implementation of this decision document is consistent with management direction and the desire for the Moosalamoo NRA to exemplify outstanding recreation opportunities (communication with Recreation Planner, October 22, 2008 and April 9, 2009).

Wild and Scenic Rivers:

Although the GMNF does not contain any Congressionally designated Wild and Scenic Rivers, there are many river segments that are eligible to be further considered for addition to the National Wild and Scenic River System. These river segments and their associated corridors are within the Eligible Wild, Scenic, and Recreational Rivers Management Area (MA 9.4). The project area is not located in these eligible river segments. This has been validated by map and site-review. This decision will not affect the outstandingly remarkable values identified for any eligible Wild, Scenic, and Recreational Rivers (communication with Recreation Planner, October 22, 2008 and April 9, 2009).

4. Inventoried Roadless Areas or Potential Wilderness Areas –

There are no inventoried roadless areas (Roadless Area Conservation Rule or Forest Plan Inventoried Roadless Areas) in the project area. This decision will not affect inventoried roadless areas (communication with Recreation Planner, October 22, 2008 and April 9, 2009).

5. Existing and Candidate Research Natural Areas –

There are no Existing or Candidate Research Natural Areas (MA 8.6) in the project area. This decision, with impacts limited to the immediate area of activity, will not affect Existing or Candidate Research Natural Areas (communication with staff ecologist, October 22, 2008 and April 9, 2009).

6. American Indian and Alaska Native Religious or Cultural Sites –

See Item 7 below.

7. Archaeological Sites, or Historic Properties or Areas –

This decision complies with the National Historic Preservation Act, the Archaeological Resources Protection Act, and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. A 'no properties affected' determination was made for properties within the project area (concurrence from Forest Archaeologist October 24, 2008 and April 19, 2009).

8. Other Resources –

In addition to resource conditions that could lead to extraordinary circumstances, I also have considered the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to other resources such as soil/water, fisheries, visuals, recreation, and non-native invasive species even in light of other road and trail maintenance activities that are expected to occur throughout the Forest during the same time period as this project (2009 to 2010). The project will not result in significant impacts to these resources, particularly because all applicable Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines will be implemented (communication with Resource Specialists at Small Projects Day, October 22, 2008, April 9, 2009, and May 15, 2009).

IV. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

This project was listed in the quarterly *Green Mountain National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions* (SOPA) beginning in January 1, 2009, and will remain in the SOPA until the project is authorized for implementation. The Caryl Brook Trail was also discussed with the Tweed Valley Travelers Snowmobile Club in June 2009. This project was also internally scoped with Forest Service staff during Small Projects Day on October 22, 2008, April 9, 2009, and May 15, 2009. Comments were used to refine the project and analysis. Comments were also used to consider the possibility of extraordinary circumstances and potential effects to those resources.

V. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OR RELATED TO OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

My decision will comply with all applicable laws and regulations. I have summarized some pertinent ones below.

National Environmental Policy Act - This Act requires public involvement and consideration of potential environmental effects. The entirety of documentation for this decision supports compliance with this Act.

Forest Plan Consistency (National Forest Management Act) –The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requires the development of long-range land and resource management plans, and that all site-specific project activities be consistent with direction in the plans. The GMNF Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) was completed and approved in 2006 as required by NFMA. The Forest Plan provides direction for all management activities on the GMNF. The Mt. Moosalamoo, Oak Ridge and Caryl Brook Trails Mountain Bike Access Project implements the Forest Plan.

The Caryl Brook Trail is in the Diverse Forest Use MA as described in the 2006 Forest Plan. The Oak Ridge and Mt. Moosalamoo Trails are in the Moosalamoo Recreation and Education MA and the Moosalamoo NRA as described in the 2006 Forest Plan and subsequent legislation (Public Law 109-382, December 1, 2006). As required by NFMA Section 1604(i), I find this project to be consistent with the Forest Plan including goals, objectives, desired future conditions, and Forest-wide and Management Area Standards and Guidelines.

The Diverse Forest Use MA has an emphasis on providing a variety of forest uses, including a full range of recreation opportunities such as motorized and non-motorized trails. There are no specific management area standards or guidelines for recreation or trails. This use is consistent with management area direction (GMNF Forest Plan, pp. 47-48).

The Moosalamoo Recreation and Education MA emphasizes providing an outstanding combination of outdoor recreation opportunities and aesthetic attractions. Management emphasizes public use, interpretation, and education, and the protection of the special values and attributes of the area that contribute to public enjoyment. One general objective of the Moosalamoo NRA includes providing for public enjoyment of the area for outdoor recreation and other benefits. Implementation of this decision document is consistent with management area direction and the desire for the Moosalamoo Recreation and Education Area to exemplify outstanding recreation opportunities (GMNF Forest Plan, pp. 100-102).

Endangered Species Act - The Endangered Species Act requires that federal activities do not jeopardize the continued existence of any species federally listed or proposed as threatened or endangered, or result in adverse modification to such species' designated critical habitat. In accordance with Section 7(c) of this Act, a report of the listed and proposed, threatened, or

endangered species that may be present in the project area was reviewed. See Section III, Item B.1 of this document.

Clean Water Act – The intent of the Act is to restore and maintain the integrity of waters. The Forest Service complies with this Act through Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines, specific project design criteria, and mitigation measures to ensure protection of soil and water resources.

Wetlands (Executive Order 11990) - Executive Order 11990 directs the agency to avoid to the extent possible the adverse impacts associated with the destruction or modification of wetlands, and to avoid support of new construction in wetlands wherever there is a practical alternative. See Section III, Item B2 of this document.

Floodplains (Executive Order 11988) - Executive Order 11988 directs the agency to avoid to the extent possible the adverse impacts associated with the occupancy and modification of floodplains, and to avoid support of floodplain development wherever there is a practical alternative. See Section III, Item B2 of this document.

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act - See Section III, Item B.3 of this document.

National Historic Preservation Act - Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires federal agencies to take into account the effect of a project on any district, site, building, structure, or object that is included in, or eligible for inclusion in the National Register. It also requires federal agencies to afford the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation a reasonable opportunity to comment. See Section III, Item B.7 of this document.

Archaeological Resources Protection Act - The Archaeological Resources Protection Act covers the discovery and protection of historic properties (prehistoric and historic) that are excavated or discovered in federal lands. It affords lawful protection of archaeological resources and sites that are on public and Indian lands. See Section III, Item B.7 of this document.

Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act - The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act covers the discovery and protection of Native American human remains and objects that are excavated or discovered in federal lands. It encourages avoidance of archaeological sites that contain burials or portions of sites that contain graves through “in situ” preservation, but may encompass other actions to preserve these remains and items. See Section III, Item B.6 of this document.

Federal Noxious Weed Act of 1974 and Executive Order 11312 (Non-Native Invasive Species) – The Federal Noxious Weed Act requires cooperation with State, local, and other federal agencies in the management and control of non-native invasive species (NNIS); Executive Order (EO) 11312 requires all pertinent federal agencies (subject to budgetary appropriations) to prevent the introduction of NNIS. This project’s decision meets the intent of this law and EO by incorporating all pertinent Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines, and mitigation measures to ensure the management and control of NNIS.

Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898) - Executive Order 12898 requires consideration of whether projects would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations. This decision complies with this order. Public involvement occurred for this project, the results of which I have considered in this decision-making. Public involvement did not identify any adversely impacted local minority or low-income populations. This decision is not expected to adversely impact minority or low-income populations.

VI. ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is not subject to an administrative review or appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215 and the Earth Island Institute v. Ruthenbeck Ruling of October 19, 2005.

VII. IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision may be implemented immediately.

VIII. CONTACT PERSON

Further information about this decision can be obtained from Holly Knox during normal office hours (weekdays, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) at the Rochester Ranger District office at 99 Ranger Rd. Rochester, VT 05767; Phone: 802.767.4261.530; or E-mail: hknox@fs.fed.us.

Additional information about this decision can be found on the Internet at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/gmfl/>

IX. SIGNATURE AND DATE

/s/ Gregory D. Smith _____

Date: 7/14/2009

Gregory D. Smith
Rochester and Middlebury District Ranger
Responsible Official

Attachments: Maps of the Project Area. NOTE:

- Mount Moosalamoo Trail (FT 120) is identified on the Oak Ridge Trail map as "Proposed Mountain Bike Trail Small Projects Day – 2008"
- Oak Ridge Trail (FT 181) is identified on the Oak Ridge Trail map as "Proposed Mountain Bike Trail Small Projects Day – 2009"

Mt. Moosalamoo, Oak Ridge and Caryl Brook Trails Mountain Bike Access Project DM

APPENDIX A – Mitigation Measures

All pertinent Forest-wide, and Diverse Forest Use and Moosalamoo Recreation and Education MA Standards and Guidelines will be adhered to during project implementation. The following additional mitigation measures will also be adhered to during project implementation:

1. Project implementation should occur between April 1 and October 31. Trail construction activities should not be implemented between November 1 and March 31 in order to minimize disturbance to resting black bears.
2. Trail crew members should be informed of black bear habitat and recent sightings in the project area so as to remain vigilant during trail construction activities and to avoid potential black bear encounters.
3. Recreation staff and/or volunteers (e.g., from mountain bike clubs) should conduct annual surveys for NNIS plants and discuss NNIS control options with the Forest botanist as needed.
4. If wheeled/tracked equipment or pack animals are utilized during project implementation, equipment and animal hooves should be free of mud and debris prior to accessing the work sites.
5. In areas of new trail construction, the top of the soil has a 3-4 inch layer of duff and soil, high in organic matter. This layer should be removed (pushed to the side) for a suitable natural-soil tread surface. Steeper grades and wet spots will need hardening with local sandy loam material, or something like SurePack.
6. The trail re-routes should be full-benched on trail sections with cross sideslopes of 40-45%; if that is not possible, the trail should have rock cribbing on the downhill side to maximize the trail stability.
7. Cutbanks should be sloped back as much as possible and outsloping and/or ditchlines should be implemented. Following construction, and based on the amount of exposed soil and cutbank steepness, Forest Service staff should evaluate the need for seeding and/or anchored mulch along cutbanks.
8. The steepest trail sections (just below Mt. Moosalamoo peak) may be designed as "hike-a-bike" (push your bike up). These sections should be hardened for this use.
9. To minimize the possibility of trail erosion and gullying and to minimize impacts to soil and water resources, the trails should be constructed, maintained and monitored by experienced people, to FS and IMBA bike trail standards.
10. A GPS map of trail reroutes along the Moosalamoo Trail should be created.