

Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

**Forest-wide Unauthorized Route Decommissioning
Environmental Assessment (EA)**

**USDA Forest Service
Cleveland National Forest
Orange, Riverside, and San Diego Counties, California**

1. Background

Motorized use of the Cleveland National Forest is regulated by its 2005 Land Management Plan (LMP) and its 2008 Motorized Travel Management decision, both of which involved substantial public input. To summarize their direction, roughly 200 miles of Forest roads are open only to highway-legal vehicles, while an additional 80 miles of roads and trails are open to off-highway vehicles (OHVs). Public motorized use of the National Forest is restricted to these routes in order to prevent resource damage. Nevertheless, an estimated 100 miles of user-created, unauthorized routes exist on the Cleveland National Forest, and their use and lack of maintenance leads to a variety of impacts to sensitive resources.

Nearly three-quarters of known unauthorized routes pass through the habitats of federally-listed threatened and endangered species, not to mention other sensitive species. Over half of the routes cross or follow riparian areas, thereby contributing to soil erosion, habitat degradation, and water quality impacts. One-quarter of the routes lie within areas managed as Wilderness, where vehicles are prohibited altogether, or Inventoried Roadless Areas, where road-building is particularly restricted. Fifteen percent of the routes pass through known archaeological sites, presenting risks to priceless resources. Finally, unauthorized routes contribute to other illegal activities on the Forest, such as dumping, target shooting, and dispersed campfires, that can lead to costly and damaging wildfires.

The primary purpose of this project is to decommission the highest priority unauthorized routes on the Cleveland National Forest, returning the landscape to its desired condition and educating and directing motor vehicle users to legal opportunities. A secondary purpose is to make minor adjustments to the National Forest Road and Trail Systems that are needed to provide for public or administrative access or to prevent resource impacts and safety issues.

2. Decision and Rationale

Based on evaluation of alternatives in the Forest-wide Unauthorized Route Decommissioning EA, supporting documentation found in the project record, and review of public comments, I have selected Alternative 2, the proposed action, for implementation. The unauthorized routes and National Forest System Roads proposed for decommissioning are summarized in Table 1

below. For route-specific detail, refer to the EA and consult Table 2 and the maps in Appendix B. For most routes, restoration would be accomplished through earthwork by heavy equipment or by hand and the installation of pipe-rail barriers or boulders to prevent re-entry. Particular routes would require additional strategies to prevent resource impacts, including seeding of native plant species where disturbance would exceed 10 feet in width. Signage would be installed at each site to direct riders to authorized areas for vehicle use. Finally, each site would be monitored annually for a period of five years, to ensure that the barriers remain effective at preventing re-entry and that soil erosion has been reduced.

Unauthorized routes that would be added to the National Forest Systems as administrative or public Roads and non-motorized or motorized Trails are also shown on the maps and in the tables. The only routes proposed for addition to these Systems were those with an identified, legitimate need and without resource concerns. These routes would be improved through earthwork, signed as appropriate, and maintained over time to prevent resource impacts. “Add for Administrative Use” refers to incorporating a route into the National Forest Road System only for administrative use, not for public use. “Add for Public Use” refers to incorporating a route into the National Forest Road System for public use, with the exception of a single route off Bear Valley Road that would become a motorized, 50-inch-wide National Forest System Trail. “Add for Non-Motorized Use” refers to incorporating a route into the National Forest Trail System as a non-motorized trail.

Table 1. Lengths and numbers of routes proposed by action type and Ranger District (DRD: Descanso, PRD: Palomar, and TRD: Trabuco).

Action Type	Length in Miles				Number of Routes			
	Total	DRD	PRD	TRD	Total	DRD	PRD	TRD
Add for Administrative Use	1.7	1.4	0.2	0.1	10	6	3	1
Add for Non-Motorized Use	4.4	2.5	0.6	1.3	11	6	1	4
Add for Public Use	1.0	0.8	0.2	0	6	3	3	0
Decommission	70.6	51.2	13.0	6.3	216	146	38	32
Grand Total	77.7	55.9	14.0	7.7	243	161	45	37

Two National Forest System Roads would be decommissioned under Alternative 2 and are included in Tables 1 and 2:

- 1) An impassable, administrative, 2-mile-long segment of 17S08, South Boundary Road, is severely eroding. A passable road through private lands connects to both of its ends, and so it is not needed.
- 2) A steep, 1.6-mile-long segment of 16S03, Carveacre Road, is currently passable only by high-clearance, 4-wheel-drive vehicles. It is severely eroding and impacting sensitive biological resource areas, and its use presents unacceptable fire hazards and safety risks. Its decommissioning would also render an additional 2.6 miles of 16S03 inaccessible to motorized use by the public. Administrative use of this additional length would continue, given its gated connections to other roads at both ends.

The following design features have been incorporated into the project to mitigate or reduce adverse impacts and achieve desired outcomes:

- Should any previously unrecorded cultural resources be encountered during implementation of this project, all work would immediately cease in that area and the Forest Heritage Program Manager (HPM) would be notified immediately. Work could resume after approval by the HPM, provided any recommended Standard Protection Measures were implemented. Should any cultural resources become damaged in unanticipated ways by activities proposed in this project, the steps described in the Regional Programmatic Agreement for inadvertent effects would be followed.
- Should the project boundaries or activities be expanded beyond the current area of potential effect, such as for routes requiring “extensive restoration and earthwork,” National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 compliance for this project would be incomplete until additional cultural resource review was completed. The HPM would be kept informed of the status of various stages of the project, so that subsequent field work could proceed in a timely fashion.
- Prior to decommissioning unauthorized routes, high priority invasive weeds would be identified and removed in order to prevent their spread. Ground disturbing equipment would be thoroughly cleaned of debris before performing earthwork, and weed-seed-free materials (such as straw wattles/bales, matting, mulch, slash, chips, and imported/transported fill) would be used to prevent the introduction of new invasive weeds into the project area. Vegetative restoration would be monitored annually for at least three years along routes where invasive species were identified before decommissioning.
- Barrier installation would involve minimal clearing around each footing.
- Decommissioning activities at three sites in Hauser Canyon would not occur during the breeding season (March 1 to August 1); or Least Bell’s Vireo surveys would be conducted to determine if this species is present within or immediately adjacent to the project area between March 1 and July 1.
- Thirty-two routes in Arroyo Toad habitat would be surveyed prior to and monitored during decommissioning activities.
- Routes where Jacumba Milkvetch, Ramona Horkelia, Heart-leafed Pitcher Sage, Felt-leaved Monardella, San Felipe Monardella, Moreno Currant, and Gander’s Butterwort may occur would be surveyed prior to decommissioning activities.
- Routes where Spiny Redberry may be present (Route 16S03 Carveacre) would be surveyed prior to decommissioning activities. All Spiny Redberry plants would be flagged and avoided during decommissioning activities.
- Limit maximum speed on unpaved roads to 25 miles per hour to minimize fugitive dust.
- Organic matter at project restoration and decommissioning sites would be retained at the site and be redistributed across the disturbed area (FSH 2509.18).
- Soil cover (on disturbed areas) following decommissioning and restoration activities would be maintained at levels of at least 50 percent of the soil surface in upland area and at least 71 percent in the Riparian Conservation Areas (RCA) (98 feet for intermittent

streams and 50 feet for ephemeral streams). Soil cover would consist of rocks, litter, organic matter, low-growing plants, and woody debris. (FSH 2905.18)

- Mechanical equipment use would require ground conditions dry enough to prevent soil compaction, rutting, runoff of sediments to streams, or disturbance (in excess of disturbance needed to restore site). (FSH 2509.18, BMP 2.3, AqEco-2).
- Mechanical equipment refueling would occur outside of the RCA and would have spill containment measures in place during operations. For small quantities (5 gallons or less), fueling of gas-powered machinery would not occur within 25 feet of any body of water or stream channel to maintain water quality. (Road-10, BMP-2.11).
- Staging of equipment would occur outside the RCA (AqEco-2).
- Riparian vegetation would be protected during operations where possible (AqEco-2).
- Decommissioned and restoration sites would be stabilized, restored, and revegetated to a more natural state as necessary to protect and enhance National Forest System (NFS) lands, resources, and water quality (BMP 2.7).
- Sites added to the system would be stormproofed and added to the regular schedule of maintenance. (BMP 2.3, BMP 2.4).
- Sites would have erosion control plans for short and long-term recovery (BMP-2.13).
- Stream crossings would be adequately sized and stabilized (BMP 2.8).
- All other relevant Forest Service best management practices would also be used.

By combining a number of approaches to address the purpose and need of this project, I find that Alternative 2, the proposed action, is the most effective alternative for achieving the desired conditions specified in the LMP. In particular, the selected alternative would restore landscapes damaged by unauthorized vehicle use and two roads that adversely impact sensitive resources, while making minor improvements for recreational and administrative access.

I understand that there are many concerns about the effects of this project on access to the Cleveland National Forest. The majority of these concerns are founded on a persistent misunderstanding: except for Carveacre Road, all routes proposed for decommissioning are already prohibited for public motorized use. This decision primarily regards the restoration methods to be used. Individuals or groups that desire exclusive motorized access across the National Forest would need to apply for special use authorizations or submit Plans of Operations for mining. I also understand the recreational values of Carveacre Road, but I find that these values conflict directly with unacceptable resource (i.e. biological, soil, and water) and public safety concerns. Finally, I understand that non-motorized recreationists use these routes to access the National Forest, and so select routes will be maintained as trails, parking areas for others will be retained where feasible, and no area will be closed to non-motorized public access by this decision.

Five resource areas were analyzed in the EA: impacts to soil and water, air quality, biology, recreation and public safety, and cultural resources. Overall, the selected alternative best addresses historic impacts to these resource areas. Managing OHV use in the project area will allow for improvements to natural resources and public safety. Adverse impacts to recreation will be offset by beneficial impacts to recreation. Finally, by bringing the Cleveland National

Forest into better alignment with its Land Management Plan, the selected alternative will help to ensure continued OHV recreational access in the future.

Altogether, this project will achieve ecological restoration on a landscape scale, while making needed adjustments to National Forest Road and Trail Systems. It will have a long-term positive effect on natural resources and public safety while providing for sustainable recreational access.

3. Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, a No Action alternative was considered and analyzed in detail as part of this project. Under the No Action alternative, historic management would continue to guide management of the project area. Unauthorized routes, as defined by the Cleveland National Forest's Motorized Travel Management decision of November 12, 2008, would not be closed to access or restored.

4. Public Involvement

The Cleveland National Forest identified potentially interested stakeholders and invited them to comment on the proposed action. These stakeholders included Tribal governments, local and State government and regulatory organizations, recreation user groups, local environmental organizations, and other members of the public that have expressed interest in projects on the Cleveland National Forest.

Scoping and public involvement for the project consisted of the following:

1. The proposal was first listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions in February 2014.
2. A letter announcing a 30-day scoping period was sent to 978 individuals and organizations anticipated to have interest in the Proposed Action on February 17, 2015. Altogether, 206 scoping comments were received during the 30-day scoping period.
3. The Draft EA was made available on December 4, 2015, for public review prior to the publication of a legal notice in the San Diego Union-Tribune on December 18, 2016, to initiate a 30-day comment period. Everyone who expressed interest in the project during scoping was notified about this opportunity directly, as were newly identified parties that might be interested. Due to an unexpected website malfunction during the final three days of the comment period, the period was extended for an additional three days. Altogether, 91 comments were received during the comment period.

Commenters expressed a wide variety of recommendations for, concerns about, and support for the project. All comments and responses can be found in Appendix A of the EA.

5. Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental impacts described in the EA and after examining supporting documentation found in the project record, I find that implementing the selected alternative will not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment, considering context and intensity of impacts (see 40 CFR 1508.27). Therefore an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

1. The finding of no significant impact is not biased by the beneficial impacts of the selected alternative. The beneficial effects consist of the reduction of impacts to natural resources and recreation and public safety in the project area.
2. No significant impacts on public safety will occur due to the implementation of the project (see section 3.3.1 of the EA). The project will instead improve public safety as compared to historic conditions.
3. No significant impacts on the unique characteristics of the area will occur because this project improves natural resource conditions, including soil and water quality, and biology. The project also improves social resources such as scenery and recreation experiences.
4. The impacts on the quality of the natural environment are not likely to be highly controversial because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project. Sections 3.1 and 3.2 of the EA describe the consequences of the alternatives to the physical and biological environments.
5. The Forest Service has considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. Analysis shows the impacts are not uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks.
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant impacts because the purpose and need for the project will be addressed by the selected alternative.
7. The cumulative impacts associated with the selected alternative are not significant (see relevant cumulative effects sections in Chapter 3 of the EA). This EA analyzed the cumulative effects of this project with activities on adjacent National Forest System lands.
8. There will be no Adverse Effect to Historic Properties by implementation of this project where Standard Resource Protection Measures will be used to protect, manage or maintain historic properties in a manner that avoids adverse effects. A heritage resource and tribal relations specialist has analyzed the area of potential effect and did not identify historic properties that would be damaged, or Tribes that would be adversely affected, by the proposed action (see section 3.3.2 of the EA).

9. The action will not adversely impact any endangered or threatened species, or habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended. Project area surveys were conducted by a Forest Service wildlife biologist and are documented in a project-specific biological evaluation and biological assessment (see section 3.2.1 of the EA). The action will indirectly result in benefits to five federally listed threatened, endangered, or candidate animal species – Least Bell’s Vireo, California Gnatcatcher, Arroyo Toad, Laguna Mountains Skipper, and Hermes Copper. The action will have no effect on two threatened or endangered plant species – San Bernardino Bluegrass and Thread-leafed Brodiaea.
10. The action will not violate federal, state, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the LMP (see section 1.3 of the EA).

6. Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

My decision to implement the selected alternative is consistent with the long-term goals and objectives listed in the LMP. The project was designed in conformance with LMP standards and guidelines.

6.1 National Forest Management Act of 1976, as amended

All project activities fully comply with the LMP. This project incorporates all applicable LMP forest-wide standards, guidelines, and management area prescriptions, as they apply to the project area, and complies with LMP goals and objectives. All required interagency reviews and coordination have been accomplished and new or revised measures resulting from these reviews have been incorporated. Application of LMP direction for the project ensures compliance at the project level. With the inclusion of LMP direction, this proposed project will move the existing condition of the project area toward its desired condition.

6.2 Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended

The action will not adversely impact any endangered or threatened species, or habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended. Project area surveys were conducted by a Forest Service wildlife biologist and are documented in a project-specific biological evaluation and biological assessment (see section 3.2.1 of the EA). The action will indirectly result in benefits to five federally listed threatened, endangered, or candidate animal species – Least Bell’s Vireo, California Gnatcatcher, Arroyo Toad, Laguna Mountains Skipper, and Hermes Copper. The action will have no effect on two threatened or endangered plant species – San Bernardino Bluegrass and Thread-leafed Brodiaea.

6.3 National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended

This project complies with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended in accordance with provisions of the Programmatic Agreement among the U.S.D.A. Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region (Region 5), the California State Historic Preservation Officer, the Nevada State Historic Preservation Officer, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation Regarding Processes for Compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic

Preservation Act for Management of Historic Properties by the National Forest of the Pacific Southwest Region (Regional PA 2013). Native American communities were contacted and public comment was encouraged. Consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer was not necessary for this project. See section 3.3.2 of the EA.

6.4 Clean Air Act of 1963, as amended

Project activities are expected to meet all applicable air quality standards. See section 3.1.2 of the EA.

6.5 Federal Water Pollution Control Act (Clean Water Act) of 1972, as amended

The design of project activities is in accordance with LMP standards and guidelines, best management practices, and applicable Forest Service Manual and Handbook direction. Monitoring and evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of LMP standards and guidelines and Best Management Practices will occur. Project activities are expected to meet applicable state water quality standards. See section 3.1.1 of the EA.

6.6 Wilderness Act of 1964

Project activities are expected to improve the wilderness character of the Hauser and San Mateo Wildernesses, and a minimum requirements analysis will inform the specific methods to be used for implementation. See section 3.3.1 of the EA.

6.7 Executive Order 13112, Invasive Species

Implementation of the selected alternative is not anticipated to cause or promote the introduction or spread of invasive species. The selected alternative is designed to reduce the extent and spread of invasive species. See section 3.2.4 of the EA.

6.8 Executive Order 13186, Migratory Birds

Management objectives of this executive order will be met. No impacts on migratory bird species are expected.

7. Objection Process

This decision was subject to objection pursuant to 36 CFR 218. A legal notice of the opportunity to object to the Draft Decision Notice was published in *The San Diego Union-Tribune* on February 12, 2016. Twenty-one eligible objections were received during the 45-day filing period. A resolution meeting was held on April 22, 2016, among objectors, the Cleveland National Forest, and the Pacific Southwest Regional Office. Reviewing Officer Jennifer Eberlien, Deputy Regional Forester, sent a response letter to all objectors on May 19, 2016.

While my decision was not changed through the objection process, there are opportunities for the resolution of some matters through future collaboration. Specifically, I would consider enabling the motorized use of administrative roads for maintaining wildlife drinkers or guzzlers through special use authorization. In addition, I would consider the establishment of non-motorized trails where there is suitable public access and a lack of sensitive resources.

8. Implementation Date

As per 36 CFR 218.12, because the Reviewing Officer has responded to all objectors in writing and has not identified any instructions, I can sign this decision and begin its implementation immediately.

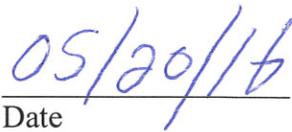
9. Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, contact:

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WILLIAM METZ
Forest Supervisor



Date

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