

Decision Memo

Cooks Meadow Trail Relocation

September 14, 2015

**USDA Forest Service
Mt. Hood National Forest
Hood River Ranger District**

Hood River County, Oregon

Background

The Cooks Meadow trail is a popular trail for non-motorized recreationists, especially mountain bikers. The trail is scenic and is often used as a connector for several popular trails in the vicinity including Surveyors Ridge, High Prairie and Dog River. Currently, about 2.5 miles of the trail follows Forest Road 4410. In addition to the less desirable recreation experience that the road provides, this is a safety concern for some recreationists. The objective of this project is to provide a safer experience for non-motorized users including mountain bikers, equestrians and hikers. The proposal is to relocate a portion of the Cooks Meadow Trail off of Forest Road 4410 and through forested stands and panoramic views of Mount Hood.

Purpose and Need for Action

There is a need to reroute existing trail users off the 4410 road, where motorized and non-motorized users have a high likelihood of conflict. The purpose of the project is to relocate non-motorized use off of the 4410 to provide a safer, more enjoyable non-motorized experience on Cooks Meadows Trail. By connecting the existing non-motorized trail and relocating the remainder of the route off forest road 4410, this project will create a safer trail experience for recreation users.

Proposed Action

The proposed project would provide a recreation opportunity that serves public need and meets land management objectives while emphasizing the natural setting of the National Forest. This proposal would relocate 2.5 miles of the Cooks Meadows Trail off of Forest Road 4410. The relocation would be approximately 4 miles in length. Trail relocation would consist of minimal clearing due to the openness of the area: a tread width of 24 inches and a clearing limit of 36 inches wide as well as a clearing limit 6 feet of centerline and 10 feet high would be established where needed for equestrians.

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This project would improve the trail by removing the current route off forest road 4410 and into the forest environment. This will provide for a safer trail experience. Preliminary scoping with local equestrians, hiker and mountain bike organizations provided supportive comments of the project.

Project Design Criteria/Mitigation Measures

Project design criteria (PDC) were developed to reduce or eliminate potential impacts from implementation of the Proposed Action. PDC's define a set of conditions or requirements that an activity must meet to avoid or minimize potential effects on sensitive resources. PDC's are not optional and are incorporated in the effects analysis.

Fisheries:

- Follow Forest Service BMP's for trails to be used by people on mountain bikes, horses, and day hikes

Heritage:

- Nearby heritage sites should be periodically monitored and the trail moved away from their vicinity if site disturbance is discovered.

Noxious Weeds:

- Wash (or use an air compressor) all equipment and tools before entering the Hood River Ranger District to make sure seeds and/or plant roots are not attached.
- Post environmental education information on the trailhead sign or on the signs at the High Prairie parking lot.

Silviculture:

- Fell and remove seedling and saplings within the new trail corridor. Tree removal would not cut any trees over 8 inches DBH. All created slash from tree felling will need to be piled.

Fuels:

- Any sapling trees that are felled for the Cooks Meadow trail construction need to be hand piled. Piles will be burned after they have sat for one year to allow for drying and curing. Pile size construction specification is six feet high by six feet long and six feet wide.

Scoping and Public Involvement

The Forest Service conducted public scoping to identify any concerns with the proposed activities. A scoping letter was distributed in June 2015 to approximately 60 individuals and organizations, including all local landowners, state, tribal and federal governmental agencies; environmental groups; and local non-profits organizations. Over 60 comments on the project were received through these efforts. Approximately 5 phone calls and two letters were received from these efforts. There were many comments in full support of the project as proposed. There

were also comments indicating concern with the relocation crossing the upper meadow where it was proposed to leave the High Prairie Trailhead. Individuals expressed concern with fragmenting meadow habitat as well as concern that a trail in a wet meadow may not be sustainable in the long run.

Decision

It is my decision to implement the Cooks Meadow reroute as proposed, except for the portion proposed through the High Prairie meadow. This was based on internal and external comments received during the scoping period. This portion of the trail will now fall along Forest Road 4410 from the High Prairie Trailhead for approximately 2/10 of a mile until it reaches the location where the proposed trail takes off of the East side of Forest Road 4410.

Reasons for Categorical Exclusion

I find the proposed action for Cooks Meadow Trail Reroute Project can be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact State because the action fits into Category 31.12-5 [36 CFR 220.6(d)(5)], described in Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, May 28, 2014. This category states: "Repair and maintenance of recreation sites and facilities."

I find the proposed actions can be categorically excluded because there are no extraordinary circumstances identified by the interdisciplinary team of resource specialists that analyzed this proposal. Resource conditions that were considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstance related to the proposed action warrant further analysis and documentation are listed below (1-7) conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion. It is the degree of the potential effect of a proposed action on these resource conditions that determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist" (FSH 1909.15).

- 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.** 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. Biological Evaluations were prepared for sensitive, threatened or endangered wildlife, fish and botanical species. These are available in the project record, located at the Hood River Ranger District in Mt. Hood-Parkdale, Oregon.
- 2. Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds.** Analysis for the effects of the project on floodplains, wetlands and municipal watersheds is included in the Fisheries Biological Evaluations contained in the project record. The Proposed Action would not affect or impair floodplain function. There are no municipal watersheds or designated wetlands in the project area.
- 3. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas.** The project is not located in congressionally designated areas.

4. **Inventoried roadless areas.** The project is not located in inventoried roadless areas.
5. **Research natural areas.** The project is not located in research natural areas.
6. **American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites / Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.** A complete heritage resource inventory survey was performed for the proposed projects. The heritage resource survey followed protocol established in the 2004 Programmatic Memorandum of Agreement between the Region 6 USDA Forest Service, the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. No heritage resources will be negatively affected by the project.

Findings Required by Other Laws

National Forest Management Act: The interdisciplinary team reviewed the applicable Standards and Guidelines of this proposal. The analysis demonstrated that this decision is consistent with the Mt. Hood Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), as amended, as required by the National Forest Management Act.

Management Indicator Species (MIS): The impacts to MIS are included in the fisheries and wildlife biological evaluations available in the project record. There were no aquatic MIS within the project area. I find that the selected alternative is consistent with the Forest Plan standards and guidelines pertaining to MIS, and that based on the fact that there are no MIS in the project area, this project does not contribute towards a negative trend in viability on the Forest.

Regional Forester's Sensitive Species: I have considered the impacts to sensitive aquatic, wildlife and botanical species as disclosed in the aquatic, wildlife and botanical biological evaluations (available in the project record). There are no sensitive species within the action area. As such, this project has no effect to any sensitive species.

Northwest Forest Plan: I have determined that the Proposed Action is consistent with the Standards and Guidelines for the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) Record of Decision (USDA and USDI, 1994), including the subsequent decisions regarding the Aquatic Conservation Strategy and Survey and Manage.

Aquatic Conservation Strategy: I find that this project is consistent with the Aquatic Conservation Strategy (ACS) objectives. The ACS analysis is contained in the project record. At the site scale, conditions described in the nine ACS objectives will be maintained because there will be no impacts to aquatic resources. The indicators address water quality, habitat access, habitat elements, channel conditions and dynamics, flow/hydrology, and watershed conditions.

Survey and Manage: No habitat for aquatic, wildlife or botanical survey and manage species was present within the project area, so surveys were not required. As such, this project is consistent with all survey requirements from the *Record of Decision and Standards and Guidelines for Amendments to the Survey and Manage, Protection Buffer, and other*

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Mitigation Measures Standards and Guidelines (USFS et al. 2001).

Clean Water Act and State Water Quality Laws: The aquatics biological evaluation has determined that this project complies with the Clean Water Act and state water quality laws, which will protect beneficial uses.

Invasive Plants: By considering the prevention of invasive plant introduction, establishment and spread of invasive plants, the planning process is consistent with the Pacific Northwest Invasive Plant Program Preventing and Managing Invasive Plants Record of Decision issued in 2005 and the Site-Specific Invasive Plant Treatments for Mt. Hood National Forest and Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area in Oregon. A noxious weed risk assessment was prepared for this project and is available in the project record.

Other Laws or Requirements: Finding associated with the Endangered Species Act, Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act and National Historic Preservation Act are discussed under the Reasons for Categorical Exclusion section of this document. The Proposed Action is consistent with all other Federal, State, or local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment and cultural resources.

Implementation Date

Implementation may begin immediately.

Contact Person

Detailed records of this environmental analysis are available for public review at the Hood River Ranger District. For further information about this decision, please contact Casey Gatz at 541-352-1255 or cgatz@fs.fed.us

Signature of Deciding Official

 for _____

9/14/2015 _____

for
JANEEN TERVO
District Ranger, Hood River Ranger District

Date

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