

Background Information on the Ashland Trails Project

This document was developed to provide recent and relevant background information on the Ashland Trails Project to help foster a better understanding of what work has occurred in regards to the project. It is essentially a timeline and covers the last 12 years of work pertaining to trails on Forest Service managed land adjacent to Ashland, Oregon.

In 2000 the Ashland Ranger District prepared the Ashland Watershed Trails Management Project Environmental Assessment (EA) which would “manage access to existing recreation facilities, provide additional recreation opportunities, and would manage the recreation use type for existing and proposed facilities”.

Under this EA and Decision Notice:

- 3.9 miles of new trails were constructed, which included the Caterpillar trail, extensions of the existing Toothpick trail, Bull Gap trail and Horn Gap trail.
- 7.3 of existing trails were reconstructed. This included sections of the Toothpick trail, Caterpillar trail, Bull Gap trail and the Horn Gap trail and the Eastview trail.
- Year-round gate closures were implemented on 6.9 miles of existing roads. This included Road 2060 from White Rabbit trailhead to Four Corners, and the 2080200 from Four Corners to Bull Gap.
- Winter only closures were implemented on 7.3 miles of existing roads. This included Road 2080600 from the junction of Road 2080 to Four Corners and Road 2080 from Bull Gap to Road 2080600.
- 0.7 mile of unauthorized trail that access Reeder Reservoir was deactivated.
- And 2.6 miles of existing road were authorized for decommissioning. This included Road 2080270, 2080400, 2080410, 2080415, and 2080420.

Estimated annual use in the project area in 2000 was 16,000 visitors and consisted of hikers, equestrians and cross country mountain bike riders.

This project, along with the presence of a law enforcement officer (LEO), addressed the unauthorized trail building and users conflicts until about 2007 when the Forest Service started observing unauthorized trail building and began receiving increasing reports of user conflicts.

Several things contributed to the unauthorized trail building and increasing user conflicts: no LEO presence, a substantial increase in use levels and the growth of downhill mountain biking.

For several years the Forest Service continually attempted to close unauthorized trails, but was unsuccessful given the limited resources and minimal personnel presence.

In 2009, recognizing that the unauthorized trail construction and user conflicts were becoming significant issues, District personnel developed a project funding proposal for a trails assessment and submitted it as part of the Forest’s annual budgeting process.

At the close of the Fiscal Year in 2009 the Forest allocated \$40,000 to Trails Unlimited, a Forest Service Enterprise Unit, to conduct a trails assessment in the Ashland Watershed. The overall purpose of the trails assessment was to:

1. Ride or hike all trails and roads, or representative segments, in the Ashland Watershed.
2. Document trail conditions of legal and illegal mountain bike trails and make recommendations for changes in trail design, location, maintenance techniques, or other needs.
3. Assess the sustainability of the existing legal and illegal mountain bike trails.
4. Provide an overview of what a sustainable, maintainable and manageable mountain bike trail system would look like for the Ashland Watershed.

In early March of 2010, a series (12) of jumps and gaps were constructed illegally utilizing a mini excavator on Marty's trail. This escalated the issue significantly, and in an effort to begin working with the community on this issue a meeting was organized between the Forest Service and local representatives of trail user groups and City of Ashland officials.

Trails Unlimited visited the District in May and October of 2010 to consult with District personnel, community members and City of Ashland staff and conducted a field review of the trails. In December of 2010 Trails Unlimited provided the District with several documents that included:

- Strategic Plan for Ashland Watershed Trails
- Ashland Trail Strategy Outline
- Ashland Watershed Trail Assessment and map

The Strategic Plan for Ashland Watershed Trails and the Ashland Trail Strategy Outline provided important points to consider in moving forward with addressing the trails situation. The primary suggestion in both documents was the development and utilization of a Trail Coalition. The Trail Coalition would consist of representatives of the trail user groups (equestrian, biking, and hiking) and would be "ambassadors for the planned trail system."

The Ashland Watershed Trail Assessment and map was a report of what Trails Unlimited found in their field review of the trails and provided suggestions as to what user group a particular trail should be managed for and what percentage of the trail is sustainable from a trail design standpoint. They concluded that "the Forest Service has all the elements in place to provide a world class trail system that protects and manages the watershed while meeting the recreational needs of locals and visitors".

In January of 2011, the Ashland Woodlands and Trails Association (AWTA), a private, non-profit group that works to help preserve, maintain and provide public access to Ashland's woodlands and trails, contacted the Forest Service enquiring about opportunities to support efforts to address the ongoing issues surrounding trails on Forest Service managed land adjacent to Ashland. The AWTA, who has had informal discussions with the Forest Service regarding new trails on Forest Service managed land since 2006, also began mapping and inventorying all the trails in the watershed in 2008 and developed the initial map of the trails in 2009. This initial map has now been modified and incorporated into the Proposed Action for the Ashland Trails Project.

Recognizing that this was an opportunity to move forward with developing a Trail Coalition that Trails Unlimited suggested in their work, the Forest Service provided insight to the AWTA in regards to what support they could provide, including developing a trails master plan, public contact and the possibility on partnering on funding for future environmental analysis on trails.

The AWTA was very responsive to the suggestions of the Forest Service and developed an initial trails proposal for a trails system and presented it to the public for comments at two public meetings, one on February 2nd and one on February 22nd 2011. Over 100 members of the public attended each meeting and the comments from these meetings were eventually incorporated into the Trails Master Plan developed by the AWTA. The AWTA went a step further to provide information to the public about the project and developed a link (<http://sites.google.com/site/ashlandwoodstmp/home>) off their main website which provided background information, a frequently asked questions section, a summary of the comments from the public meetings, a map and documents related to the trails project and allowed any viewer to make comments on the trails proposal.

Shortly after the second public meeting the District Recreation Staff, Forest Recreation Staff and District Ranger went to the Forest Service Regional Office in Portland to present the Ashland trails project to the Regional Director of Recreation, Assistant Director of Recreation and the Regional Director of Trails. The presentation focused on the issues surrounding the trails on Forest Service managed land adjacent to Ashland, the collaboration and recently formed partnership with the AWTA and the need to match funding with the AWTA for the environmental analysis.

At the close of the Fiscal Year (October 1st) in 2011 the Forest Service allocated \$13,000 to Recreation Solutions, a Forest Service Enterprise Unit, which was to be used in trail layout and design. A portion of this funding has been used to layout the Jabberwocky trail, which was deemed unsustainable by the Trails Unlimited team. The remaining funding will be used for trail layout and design as the planning process moves forward.

At the end of October 2011 the AWTA submitted their Trails Master Plan for the trails on Forest Service managed land adjacent to Ashland. This document was the culmination of the input from the two public meetings held in February, Forest Service direction, input from the public gained through the AWTA website and the knowledge of the trail user group representatives that comprise the board of the AWTA. The Trails Master Plan identifies eight problems that have contributed to the current issues with the trails on Forest Service managed land adjacent to Ashland:

1. Explosive User Growth
2. Lack of a Comprehensive Design
3. Trail Congestion at Three Areas (Alice in Wonderland/ White Rabbit, Caterpillar, and Four Corners and Immediately North)
4. Lack of Modern Trail Design
5. Illegal Trail Construction
6. Fewer Trails on West Side
7. Legal Status of Trails Unclear

8. Lack of Maps and Signage

Each of the problems are examined in depth in the Trails Master Plan and solutions are provided which were utilized by the Forest Service to develop the Proposed Action for the Ashland Trails Project.

In November of 2011 a Collection Agreement between the Forest Service and the AWTA was completed with the purpose of documenting “the voluntary contribution of funds from AWTA to the U.S. Forest Service to develop a Trails Management Plan and conduct National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis for the Mt. Ashland Watershed trails system located on NFS lands”. Specifically the “AWTA is expected to fund 50% of the NEPA cost performed by the U.S. Forest Service and continue to assist in trail development planning and implementation of the NEPA decision. Tasks include, but are not limited to: trail inventory through use of GPS, identify possibilities for new trail construction and decommissioning, coordinate with various user groups and other interested parties including the City of Ashland and assist in trail layout and design”. Currently \$13,000 has been collected by the Forest Service from the AWTA under the Collection Agreement and will be utilized for Forest Service Resource Specialists in their NEPA analysis.

With the Trails Master Plan submitted and reviewed and a collection agreement with the AWTA established to support the NEPA analysis, the Forest Service developed a Proposed Action for the Ashland Trails Project and a Project Initiation Letter (PIL). In the middle of February 2012 the Forest Service held a preliminary Interdisciplinary Team (ID Team) meeting to discuss the project with Forest Service Resource Specialists and to identify potential resource concerns. Each trail in the Proposed Action was examined during the meeting and any potential resource concerns or mitigation measures to minimize resource concerns were noted and will be utilized in the environmental analysis.

At this time the public scoping as part of the NEPA analysis, is in process and at the conclusion of scoping the Forest Service will review the comments and determine if other alternatives to the Proposed Action are needed. After any Alternatives are developed, Forest Service Resource Specialists will then examine the trails in the Proposed Action and Alternatives for resource concerns. If it is determined that the trails impact resources and no mitigation measures can address the resource impacts, trails may be relocated or dropped from further analysis or inclusion into the trails system.

For further information on the Ashland Trails Project, contact:

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