

Executive Summary

Introduction

The trails on Forest Service land in the Ashland watershed are immensely popular. On virtually any given day you will see bikers, runners, hikers, dog walkers, and the occasional equestrian. Locals love their trails and, increasingly, others do too. Mountain bike magazines tout the Ashland trails to ride and one even devotes an article to “the perfect Ashland downhill bike.” Rated the top city for trail running in the nation by Outside Magazine (2010), Ashland was also ranked one of the top *recreational* cities in the country, partially based on its network of trails.

Reading some of the positive press, one might be tempted to think that trails in the Ashland Forest Service land are relatively problem-free. However, many hikers and runners have expressed their frustration at near misses with mountain bikers. Many mountain bikers, in turn, have expressed their displeasure at poorly designed trails with poor sight lines that don’t ride safely and lead to rutting, erosion and trail blowouts. Forest Service personnel are exasperated with rogue trail building and one user group—the equestrians—feels almost driven out of the watershed. Public comments regarding the future of trails suggest strongly that addressing potential user conflict is of paramount importance.

In recent years, unauthorized trails—often ill-conceived—have proliferated with increasing frequency, challenging the Forest Services’ ability to contain them. In some cases, new trails and accompanying “features”(such as “double-dip” jumps) have been created with large earth-moving machinery, causing great concern regarding the adverse impact on wildlife, soils, water and other natural resources.

The number of miles of illegal trails now far exceeds the number of legal trails, though the distinction between the two is often blurred. Some of the illegal trails are older historical trails in use for many decades.

In short, a dramatic increase in trail popularity and the rapid creation of new, illegal trails has raised concerns about:

- trail user conflict and safety
- erosion
- fire danger
- habitat encroachment
- deleterious effects on Ashland’s water supply
- the lack of a sustainable plan for the future

This has been the motivation for developing a comprehensive trail plan for the area--an Ashland Watershed Trails Master Plan.

The [Ashland Woodlands & Trails Association](#) (AWTA) is the umbrella group spearheading this effort. A coalition of non-motorized user groups based in Southern Oregon, AWTA has worked under the guidance of the US Forest Service, Ashland Parks and Recreation and the Pacific Crest Trail Association to create and maintain a variety of trails used by hikers, runners, bikers, dog walkers, equestrians and other users.

Under the direction of the US Forest Service and with considerable public input, AWTA has undertaken a multi-phase approach to the creation of the Ashland Woodlands Trails Master Plan. Phase I represents an effort to:

- Formally authorize several historical trails
- Formally authorize several existing, well-conceived trails
- Avert user conflict by creating alternatives to main trail choke points
- Avert user conflict by creating some “encouraged use” trails: some mainly for foot/h hoof traffic and some mainly for mountain bike use
- Divert/augment some existing, authorized trails to remedy problems
- Decommission some poorly designed trails to prevent further damage.

The Ashland watershed is one of the most scrutinized of any area in the Forest Service lands, most recently for the Ashland Forest Resiliency project, so there is a wealth of information about the geology, botany, endangered species, cultural and historical concerns. The availability of this information should assist in the environmental review that is part of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process.

The public, Ashland businesses, members of local city government, and several environmental groups have expressed support for the trails master plan effort.

A US Forest Service affiliated agency, Trails Unlimited, recently issued an evaluation of the Ashland watershed trail system concluding that “the trail users and community are ready to put forth the hard work needed for a sustainable multiple-use trail system...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.”

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2011 Trails Unlimited Report on the Ashland Trails

Mission Statement

The mission of Ashland Woodlands Trails Master Plan is to create a blueprint for a safe and sustainable, enjoyable network of non-motorized recreation trails for a variety of user groups in Forest Service Land primarily within the Ashland watershed.

Goals

1. Increase safety of trail system by:

- a. Distributing traffic within the watershed to limit congestion.
- b. Developing “encouraged use” trails. Some trails may become more pedestrian-oriented and some trails may become more bike-oriented. Bike-oriented trails will have a natural bike flow to them which will lend themselves to primarily biking, while other trails will be engineered--through mostly natural features--to be discouraging to bike users and more desirable to pedestrians and equestrians.
- c. Developing better sight-lines
- d. Informative signage

2. Protect sensitive resources

Reroute some trails, and create new ones to avoid water sources (creeks, Reeder Reservoir, etc), Threatened and Endangered Species (TES), the Research Natural Area (RNA)

3. Increase sustainability of trails

Modern bike equipment has evolved so that many existing trails don't "ride" well, which often results in ruts, blowouts, washboards, etc. Reroute some trails and create new ones such that there is a “flow” to these trails. Eliminate narrow switchback turns and other undesirable traits.

4. Further engage user communities in the creation and maintenance of trails

Expand on existing trail user groups with better volunteer coordination, training, and management. Increase the sense of “buy-in” of existing trail users so they will embrace the trails plan, rather than creating their own trails.

5. Decommission poorly designed trails

Discourage use and establish to rogue trail builders that their work may be lost.

6. Establish clearly which trails are legal and which are not

Eliminate some of the confusion regarding sanctioned and unsanctioned trails by going through the necessary process to approve certain trails.

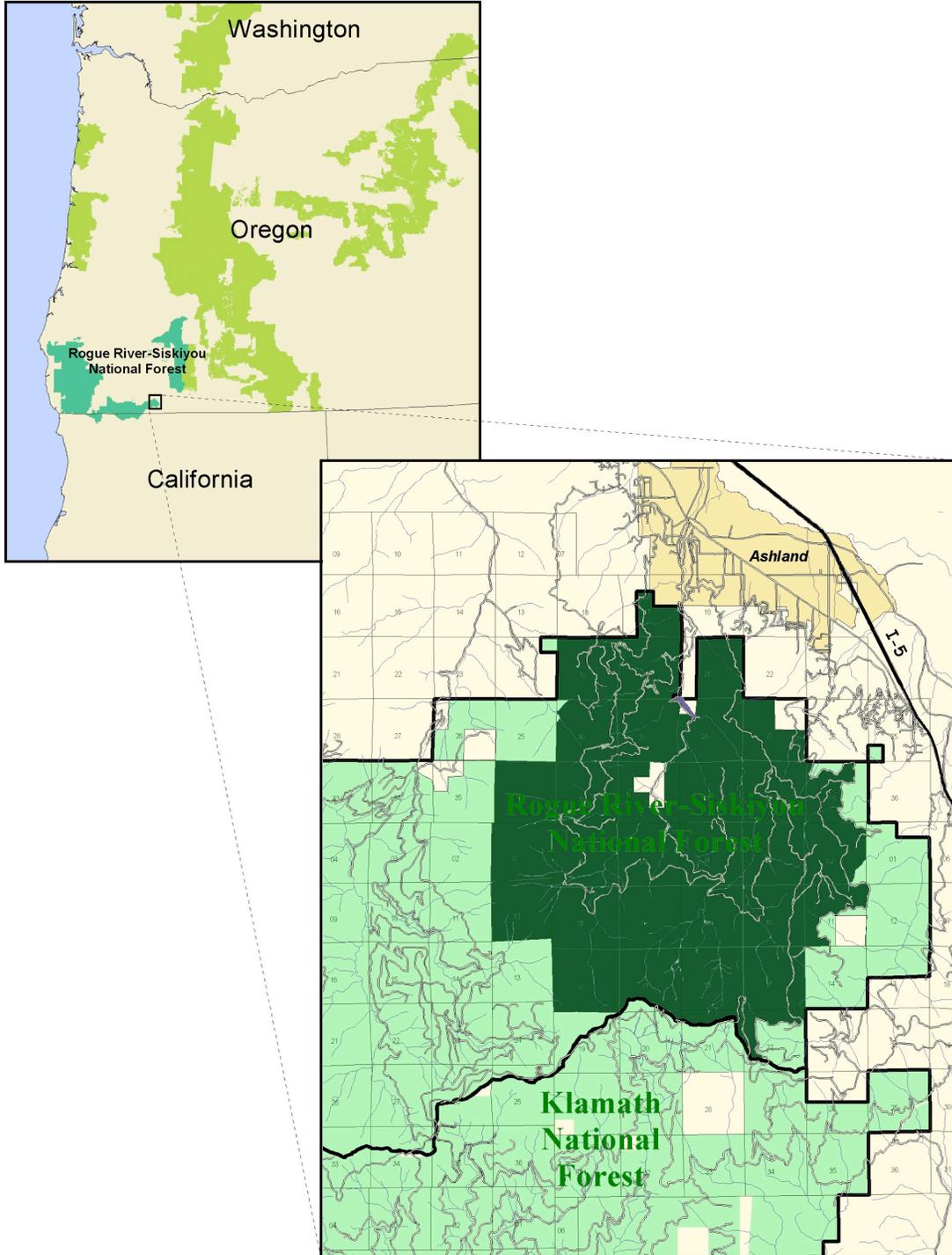
Master Plan Development

The Master planning process has been structured into 4 steps:

1. **ANALYZE:** inventory existing trails, gather trail use data, review existing trail use conditions and issues, gather history, review existing plans and procedures.
2. **UNDERSTAND:** gather initial public comment, identify additional issues, facts, needs, ideas, opportunities and constraints leading to a clearer understanding of how the Ashland Trails System currently functions and how the Trail System might better function in the future.
3. **IDEATE AND ITERATE:** propose new trails, suggest trails to be eliminated, offer alternative design of some current trails, gather more public input, review and amend, compose a draft plan.
4. **IMPLEMENT:** production of the final recommended trails plan with implementation strategies.

Area Description

The area under consideration is a roughly 12,700 acre area in the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest, Ashland Ranger District, broadly known as the Ashland Watershed, represented by the dark green area below.



Derived from Ashland Forest Resiliency: Final Environmental Impact Statement