

# The Florida National Scenic Trail



## Optimal Location Review Process Guidelines

USDA Forest Service



## **Executive Summary**

This document outlines the format, process, and location criteria for an Optimal Location Review (OLR) on the Florida National Scenic Trail (FNST).

This analytical process is critical for ensuring that the trail is located in the setting that best meets the congressional intent for a National Scenic Trail, provides outstanding recreation opportunities, and promotes and protects access to the natural, scenic, historic and cultural resources of the trail corridor. The format is intended to engage land managers, community and stewardship partners at every level of project development and implementation.

Pioneered by the US Forest Service on the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, this analysis process reviews land ownership, scenic resource values, natural and cultural resource concerns, and trail location and determines the optimal location for the FNST. Actual relocation of the FNST will require an environmental analysis, and significant relocation proposals will require USFS Chief or Congressional approval.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

This white paper is written with the intent of standardizing the process for relocating significant portions of the Florida National Scenic Trail and to better ensure protection of the Trail and Trail Corridor for an outstanding recreation and scenic trail experience. The trail relocation review developed for the FNST, referred to as the Optimal Location Review (OLR), establishes a systematic and objective framework for determining the best location for the FNST and for acquiring lands to meet the criteria outlined in the FNST Comprehensive Plan. The optimal location of the Trail should be located within a corridor which can sustain the most desirable recreation setting, including natural appearing scenery, safe public access, suitable water sources, and reasonable separation from urban developments that could impair the desired scenic recreation experience of the Trail. This document describes the need for relocating segments of the trail and the desired outcome of an OLR (Sections I, II, and III). It explains the entire OLR process (Section IV) and the final steps involved in completing the analysis (Sections V, VI, and VII). Lastly, it explains the role of OLR in the NEPA process (Section VIII).

## **II. BACKGROUND**

The National Trails System Act of 1968 (the Act) assigned the US Forest Service (USFS) as the lead managing agency for the Florida National Scenic Trail's administration. To coordinate the management and operation of the FNST, individual Memorandum's of Understanding (MOU) or Certification Agreements are signed with land managers of the FNST including Federal, State, Local and Private interests. The Act also recognized the valuable contributions of volunteers to the development and maintenance of the National Trail System, a Memorandum of Understanding and a Challenge Cost Share Agreement (CCSA) between the USFS and the Florida Trail Association ensures volunteer citizen involvement in the planning, maintenance and management of the FNST.

For segments that lie outside of the jurisdiction of the USFS, the National Trail Manager is the agency, land owner, or interest with the authority and the responsibility for decision making for lands under its jurisdiction. The USFS may recommend relocation of FNST right-of-way segments upon concurrence with the head of the Agency having jurisdiction over the lands involved.

The FNST's selected route and Comprehensive Management Plan were published in the Federal Register of May 28, 1987 (Vol. 52, #102). The Trail, when complete, will extend a total distance of 1,300 miles across the State of Florida. According to the National Trail System Act, "the routes of national scenic trails... should avoid, insofar as practicable, established highways, motor roads, mining areas, power transmission lines, existing commercial and industrial developments, range fences and improvements, private operations, and any other activities that would be incompatible with the protection of the trail in its natural condition and its use for outdoor recreation".

Of the total trail miles, approximately 600 miles cross non-federally owned lands (i.e. State, County or Privately owned). Several issues including limited public lands, and a lack of adequate

funding and/or unwilling sellers during initial construction, resulted in locating several segments of the Trail on “interim” routes along public roads, and on narrow, non-restrictive private easements (with the majority providing only 10 to 20 feet of right-of-way) that provide little if any protection to the Trail or its users. These interim routes have created conflicts with motorists and landowners, leading to concerns that portions of the current route fail to meet the intent of the Act and the safety of its users. To further exacerbate the problem, many trail segments are located in less-than-optimal locations, and constantly evolving land uses have resulted in urban encroachment within and upon the FNST trail corridor.

In response to these problems, the FNST partners will work to identify segments located on or adjacent to public roads, utility corridors, and areas of development as trail segments with an immediate need for relocation to improve user safety and the quality of the recreation experience, and to protect the FNST by improving the Trail Corridor where the trail crosses private lands.

### **III. THE GOAL OF AN OLR**

The decision for the optimal trail location is based upon the desired FNST experience and achieving consistency within the criteria outlined in the FNST Comprehensive Plan. The federal administrator and managing agency must determine if: (1) relocation is necessary to preserve the scenic and recreation purposes for which the trail was established, or (2) the relocation is necessary to promote a sound land management program in accordance with established multiple-use principles. To accomplish a full OLR, the entire length of the FNST should be reviewed to determine if there are any unknown problems areas or possible opportunities. An OLR can recommend a combination of land acquisitions, conservation easements and/or trail relocations to preserve the purposes for which the FNST was established and to protect the FNST from urban encroachment by establishing a Trail Corridor. The OLR identifies the best possible location for the FNST regardless of land ownership or construction needs. Acquisition of the easement or land surrounding the Trail and completion of relocations may at times require a long or uncertain wait. This should not deter land managers from pursuing the location deemed most desirable. Land ownership conditions change over time and provide opportunities to acquire the optimal location. Land management agencies should pursue alternate locations to those identified as “optimal” if unique circumstances warrant using an alternate route.

#### *Optimal Location Review Objectives*

The purpose of conducting an OLR is to:

1. Determine an optimal trail location prior to land or easement acquisition and trail construction, that:
  - a. Meets the intent of Congress to locate the FNST so that it “emphasize(s) nationally significant scenic, historic, natural and cultural features.
  - b. Achieves consistency with design criteria for location outlined in the FNST

Comprehensive Plan.

- c. Ensures a trail location that meets stability and maintenance requirements which blends with the environment in a cost-effective manner.
- d. Selects the best solution that will resolve concerns and provide for an optimal trail location and continuous public access.

2. Evaluate the physical, biological and social environments to locate the trail within a corridor which can sustain the most desirable recreation setting, including natural appearing scenery, safe public access, suitable water sources, and reasonable separation from residential, commercial and industrial developments that could impair the desired FNST experience.
3. Provide an accurate and complete inventory of Florida National Scenic Trail locations and alternatives using GPS technology that meets national mapping accuracy standards (+/- 40 feet). USFS will use GIS technology to maintain GPS inventoried data. Maps created using GIS technology will identify areas of greatest concern and potential trail management opportunities.
4. Provide site photography to communicate desired recreation settings and scenery, and to identify adverse conditions to be avoided or minimized by the OLR.
5. Provide a method to facilitate an OLR process and a format to document agreements between partner agencies and organizations.
6. Establish the purpose and need to begin NEPA environmental planning and obtain funding.

#### **IV. OLR PROCESS**

The steps for the OLR process are outlined below

##### **1. Determine the Scope of the OLR:**

The Forest Service FNST Manager may initiate an OLR process to resolve impaired FNST experiences and conditions resulting from:

- land uses and developments that excessively alter the desired recreation setting and scenery
- severe ecosystem disturbance events such as floods or fires
- safety concerns
- conflicts with motorized vehicles and mechanized recreation activities
- unique circumstances such as newly identified habitat for an endangered species

Frequently, an OLR will evaluate lands across administrative boundaries providing sufficient size to consider alternatives regardless of land ownership. For proposed relocations greater than 15 miles, partners may divide the project into sections based on fixed anchors, such as road crossings, to facilitate detailed field review.

## **2. Form the OLR Team:**

The Forest Service FNST Manager will designate an OLR Project Team Leader to coordinate and provide oversight for the OLR process. The Team Leader will provide opportunities for partners to become familiar with sections in need of protection. These partners may include the US Forest Service, FTA staff, volunteers, and local chapters, Federal, State, County, and Private land owners and other Stewardship groups. The

FTA and the land management agency partners for the segment under review will appoint OLR Team members (staff, volunteers, and interested parties/groups). Early in the process, the Team Leader will develop a schedule for meetings and fieldwork to assure adequate participation and representation of the partners on the team.

## **3. Preliminary Office Review:**

- For the segment under review, Team Leader will determine if the current route is located within the original route selection as published in the Federal Register of May 28, 1987 (Vol. 52, #102), or a published amendment to the original route. Information regarding unpublished current route locations should be forwarded to the US Forest Service Florida National Scenic Trail Manager for appropriate action.
- Team Leader will provide team members with those sections of the FNST Comprehensive Plan, the National Trails System Act, subsequent legislation and other guiding documents pertaining to the FNST.
- Team Leader will provide team members with land ownership patterns for review.
- Team Leader will provide team members with any associated Forest Plan desired conditions for Recreation and Scenery (i.e. Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) class and Scenic Integrity Objectives/Visual Quality Objectives (SIO/VQO) pertinent to the project area, as well as its mapped “Scenic Attractiveness”/“Variety Class”).

## **4. Preliminary Field Meeting:**

The Team Leader will set up preliminary field meetings to identify obvious issue areas, e.g. proximity to private land, roads, leasing applications, power lines, wind energy operations, residential developments, etc. The Team Leader will consult with all team members to:

- Discuss the unique recreational niche of the area/place, and its desired recreation

setting conditions (access, sights, sounds, bodily contacts and challenges, site facilities and management, social encounters, visitor impacts)

- Discuss the desired scenic character conditions that are sustainable and can best provide an enduring, attractive FNST setting
- Discuss other resource objectives and their potential as additional attractions or vulnerabilities along the FNST
- Review known issues, concerns, and opportunity / problem areas
- Identify potential alternate trail locations to maximize the enjoyment and safety of FNST users.

*“Opportunity Area” Examples*

- Vistas
- Meadows
- Unusual topographic and hydrological features
- Streams, rivers, lakes, and other nearby scenic or cultural attractions

*“Problem Area” Examples*

- User safety, e.g. road walks, particularly if extensive in length;
- A pronounced lack of desired recreation setting or scenery conditions;
- Incompatible use such as OHV or other mechanized or motorized equipment;
- Excessive disturbance within the FNST corridor or view shed due to existing or potential residential, commercial or industrial forest development;
- Resource damage, e.g. erosion and creation of multi-tracks;
- Chronic, recurring maintenance demands or problems;
- Hazards to the public;
- Arbitrary or circuitous routing;

**5. Contact Land Owners:**

Agency Representatives and FTA staff and/or volunteers should have permission to access private lands if these areas are under consideration. If staff is unable to secure permission for access and field review, use the best information available to complete the analysis.

**6. Full Field Review:**

All segments under review require an on-site intensive visit to determine if the current location meets all objectives of an “optimal location”. The field review should involve key members of the OLR team. The OLR team will develop alternate routes and analyze in comparison with the current route for identification of an optimal location.

- Use GPS technology to collect the spatial location of trail features.
- Note opportunities, problems and alternatives for the current route.
- Examine whether the trail segment was designed for sustainability.

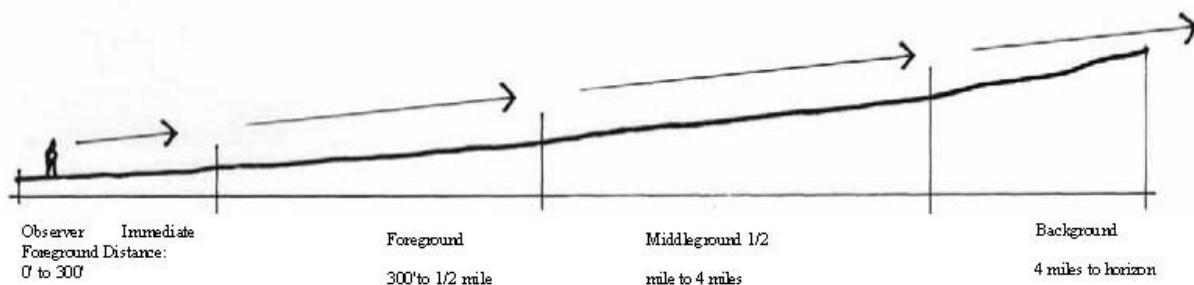
## 7. Post-Field Review:

The final steps for completing an Optimal Location Review include:

- Conduct a “Landscape Visibility Analysis” for the optimal trail location. This will be described in further detail in Section V.
- Design a “Trail Corridor”.
- Collect GIS parcel data for the private lands which fall within the “Trail Corridor” (see Section VI).
- Document findings by generating a report and GIS map (see Section VII).

## V. LANDSCAPE VISIBILITY ANALYSIS

The intent of landscape visibility is to identify the relative importance of what is seen and perceived in the landscape. A high priority must be given to maximizing the scenic nature of the FNST, given its status as a National Scenic Trail. The OLR will conduct a landscape visibility analysis to assist in determining the best boundaries for (or extents of) a “Trail Corridor”. The Distance Zones described in the USDA Agriculture Handbook Number 701: “Landscape Aesthetics, A Handbook for Scenery Management” will be used to guide the process in delineating a “Trail Corridor” (Refer to Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Distance Zones described in the USDA Agriculture Handbook Number 701: “Landscape Aesthetics, A Handbook for Scenery Management” (page 83 of chapter 4; Landscape Visibility and Scenic Classes”)

Landscape visibility analyses utilize GIS technology to run a view shed analysis to determine the area that can be “seen” from the optimal trail location. The “seen area” is overlaid with Immediate Foreground and Foreground distance zones to determine which portions of the landscape should be defined and then managed as the formal FNST Trail Corridor.

#### Distance Zones:

- Where the viewshed is greater than  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile and the trail is located adjacent to or within a developed community or near highways; the FNST Trail Corridor will be developed within the “Immediate Foreground” for a maximum distance of 300 feet on either side of the trail centerline.
- In all other locations where the viewshed is greater than  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile, the “trail corridor” can be developed within the “Immediate Foreground” and “Foreground” for at least  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile on either side of the trail centerline.

#### Scenic Integrity/Disturbance:

- Note: Consider the FNST’s scenic integrity/disturbance visible within all distance zones during evaluation of proposed projects. Scenic Integrity levels of “Very High”, “High”, or “Moderate” are typically compatible with FNST user preferences for a dominantly natural appearance (refer to Scenery Handbook 701 Chapter 2 for Scenic Integrity criteria).

Thresholds for visible disturbance (called Scenic Integrity Objectives/SIOs) should be established whenever possible, for both the FNST Corridor and its entire view shed (all applicable distance zones).

## VI. LANDS ACQUISITION INVENTORY

After identifying the Trail Corridor boundaries, the OLR shall identify all of the private lands located within this boundary. The OLR team will categorize the land parcels as either acquisition “Priority 1” or “Priority 2”. “Priority 1” parcels are those non-federal parcels located directly on the optimally determined location for the trail itself. “Priority 2” parcels do not cross the trail but are located within the Trail Corridor determined by the visibility analysis. The OLR team leader will list parcels in a table that includes: a parcel ID that will cross-reference with the assessor’s parcel number (APN) on a map provided of the OLR area; a legal description; whether there is an easement; assessor parcel number; acres; landowner; and acquisition priority. An example table is shown below:

Priority Level	Parcel ID	Legal Description	Assessor's Parcel # (APN)	Parcel Acres	Land Owner	Easement Present
1	A	S 20, T19N, R15E	XXX-XXX-002	54	Mr. Smith	Yes
2	D	S20, T19N, R13E	XXX-XXX-003	125	Mrs. Smith	No
3	E	S21, T18S, R12W	XXX-XXX-017	219	Mr. Allen	No

The FNST Manager will maintain a “Lands Acquisition Inventory” database of the Florida National Scenic Trail protection priorities. Priorities identify areas most in need of protection and assists with securing funding and resources to pursue land acquisitions.

## VII. DOCUMENTATION

The OLR report shall be formatted and numbered as follows. It is not necessary to include a background of the FNST’s history or the purpose of the OLR process:

- 1. Description of the Current Route:** Describe the location of the current route (from south to north) and whether the trail is located along the route identified and published in the Federal Register, or if it is an “interim” route.
- 2. Background and Statement of the Problem:** Describe why there is a need to do an Optimal Location Review by identifying the known problems, issues and concerns with the existing trail location. Issues and concerns include such things as: unsafe road crossings, road walks, reservoir crossings, protection of unique areas, and encroachment by development. Describe the outcome of any public meeting(s) that may have been held.
- 3. Trail Objectives:** Describe the objectives for the Trail in the area under review. This section should list the improvements or added benefits of moving the trail. For example, this could include improving safety by moving the trail from a highway shoulder, or providing a unique recreation experience by allowing the hikers to see an interesting geological formation. These objectives should follow the guidelines outlined in the FNST Comprehensive Plan and the National Trails System Act.
- 4. Alternative Routes Considered:** Compare different route possibilities that will meet trail objectives, including the current route. List “pros” and “cons” of each. Each route considered will be referenced by an “Alternative Number” that is cross-referenced to the report’s map. The discussion will include an evaluation of physical, site-specific trail considerations that locates the trail within a corridor which provides safety, a natural setting, suitable water sources, and avoids urban development.

**5. Optimal Trail Location:** Provide a description of which alternative provides for an optimal trail location, and describe how it resolves concerns and meets trail objectives. It may be determined that the existing route is already the optimal trail location.

**6. Trail Acquisition Corridor:** For the selected optimal trail location, identify its Trail Corridor and any parcels proposed for acquisition within this Trail Corridor. Identify any “Priority 1” and/or “Priority 2” acquisition parcels. Format this section as a table, discussed previously in Section VI.

**7. Maps:** Include a topographic map(s) produced using GPS and GIS technologies which meets national mapping accuracy standards (+/- 40 feet). GIS maps will provide a visual depiction of the Florida National Scenic Trail corridor, locations, alternatives, and areas of greatest concern and potential opportunities as described within the OLR Report. The appropriate map(s) will accompany each OLR report/document. Identify parcels proposed for acquisition with a parcel ID cross-referenced to the report’s acquisition table.

**8. Photographs:** Include digital photography of the existing recreation setting and its scenic character, as well as problem areas demonstrating opportunities to improve FNST conditions and settings through the OLR process.

**9. Review:** Once the OLR partners reach consensus and the OLR document is complete, the Forest Service FNST Manager will obtain final review, and acceptance from the representatives of the underlying land management agency line officer, the local land management agency unit, the assigned maintaining organization (if one exists), and the Florida Trail Association President. A signature page should be developed where possible.

## **VIII. CONCLUSION**

It is a Federal Action to relocate a portion of a National Scenic Trail. All Federal Actions, whether located on federal or non-federal land, are subject to compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The OLR process functions as the analysis which establishes the purpose and need to begin a NEPA analysis for relocating a segment of the FNST. The OLR report does not substitute for NEPA compliance or legal requirements for publishing major shifts in the location of the FNST in the Federal Register. After an agency completes NEPA compliance, the final OLR and NEPA documents set the stage for publishing a notice for trail relocation in the Federal Register, and the ultimate implementation of activities to improve FNST settings and conditions.

**Appendices:**

Purpose of the Florida National Scenic Trail, *1986 Florida National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan*

Location Criteria, *1986 Florida National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan*