
DECISION MEMO

**MIDDLE BLACK MOUNTAIN TRAIL RE-ROUTE, TRAILHEAD
IMPROVEMENTS AND JOEL BRANCH CONNECTOR TRAIL PROJECT**

U.S. FOREST SERVICE

PISGAH RANGER DISTRICT

PISGAH NATIONAL FOREST

TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

BACKGROUND

The Black Mountain Trail was heavily used by backpackers and hikers for decades but in the more recent past, it has become a mountain bike destination. You'll find riders on the trail from the local community, across the country and beyond. The middle section of Black Mountain Trail (known as "Middle Black") is particularly eroded and entrenched as a ridgetop, fall-line trail. This combination of the current alignment and condition of the trail has come to represent what some simply, and affectionately, describe as "Pisgah" and is a rough and technical ride. Resource conditions are degrading as the trail continues to erode and this section of trail is no longer maintained to Forest Service standards. In order to maintain this section of trail to standard, there would either need to be a major investment in its current alignment, or it needs to be re-routed on a sustainable alignment.

In addition, the Black Mountain Trailhead is located about ten feet from Starens Branch, a tributary to the Davidson River. This paved parking and associated road crossing is an impairment to the riparian and in-stream habitat.

Horse Cove Road extends from the NC Wildlife Resources Commission Education Center to the trails of Brevard's Bracken Mountain Preserve. This is a great connection, but it's often pointed out that a loop could be created with relatively little investment between Horse Cove Road and Joel Branch Road, both of which are closed Forest Service roads. This connection would effectively link four main areas – the entrance to the Pisgah Ranger District (Davidson River Campground, Pisgah Ranger Station, Estatoe Trail, etc), the NC Wildlife Resources Commission Education Center, Brevard's Bracken Mountain Preserve, and the City of Brevard's greenway system.

This project has been designed as part of an overall effort to systematically increase the sustainability of the trail system on the Pisgah Ranger District.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The specific activities are below and as seen on the attached maps.

Activities Associated with Black Mountain Trail (TR 127)

- 1) Re-route “Middle” Black Mountain trail.
 - a. Construct a sustainable re-routed trail consistent with the Pisgah character to be the new “Middle Black” (TR 127) that is approximately 3.6 miles.
 - b. Effectively decommission, block use and stabilize the current 2.0 mile section of “Middle Black” (TR 127).
- 2) Relocate the Black Mountain Trailhead to the west away from Starens Branch.
 - a. Construct the Black Mountain TH adjacent to the Ranger Station overflow parking lot (including parking facilities, trail information, restroom facilities).
 - b. Construct a 0.2 mile section of Thrift Cove Connector Trail to the relocated Black Mountain Trailhead.
- 3) Restore Starens Branch riparian habitat and in-stream barrier.
 - a. Remove the 48” culvert and restore the streambank.
 - b. Remove asphalt parking areas on the west side of Starens Branch that are within 30’ of the stream.
 - c. Effectively block vehicular access on both sides of the stream within at least 30’ of Starens Branch and restore with appropriate species.
 - d. Replace 6x6 posts on the west side of Starens Branch with a gate that will control access to Thrift Cove Road (NFSR 5061).

Activities Associated with Joel Branch Connector Trail

- 1) Construct the Joel Branch Connector Trail between the end of Joel Branch Road (NFSR 5002) and Horse Cove Road (NFSR 475C) which is approximately 1.3 miles. Both roads are closed to public vehicular traffic.
 - a. Install clear signage noting the Art Loeb Trail is only authorized for hiking only.
 - b. Install structures and signage as necessary to instruct Forest users not to enter the Schenck Job Corps Center while using Joel Branch Road.
- 2) Construct a Trailhead in the existing field to the east of the Davidson River Campground road (NFSR 803) on the south side of the Davidson River.
 - a. This trailhead will be minimally developed and employ a pervious surface. Also, it will be at least 100’ from the Davidson River and be designated for day-use only.
 - b. Improve the existing non-system trail from this trailhead to Joel Branch Road. This trail will be designated as the Exercise Trail Extension and is approximately 0.3 miles.
- 3) Widen the first 200’ of Joel Branch Road (NFSR 5002) to provide an area exclusively for equestrians to park horse trailers (day-use only).

The activities listed above will serve to:

- Create a “Middle Black” trail that is maintainable with current resources but still retains the character of the Pisgah.
- Stabilize the current “Middle Black” trail to prevent further erosion and entrenchment.
- Improve riparian and aquatic habitat of Starens Branch.
- Expand trailhead parking.
- Improve trail connections within the Davidson River corridor and multiple City of Brevard public trail systems.

DECISION

I have decided to implement the specific actions described above in the Project Description.

The following design criteria will be observed during implementation.

- The re-routed portion of Black Mountain Trail will be designed and built as a Bicycle Trail Class 2¹ with “double lanes” where appropriate. Black Mountain Trail will continue to be a non-motorized trail with authorized use by hikers (pedestrians) and bikes only.
- The Joel Branch Connector Trail will be designed and built as a Pack and Saddle Trail Class 3¹. Joel Branch Connector Trail will be a non-motorized trail with authorized use by hikers (pedestrians), bikes and equestrians.
- The Exercise Trail Extension will be designed and built as a Bicycle Trail Class 4¹ with double lanes where necessary. Exercise Trail Extension will be a non-motorized trail with authorized use by hikers (pedestrians) and bikes only.
- The final trail layout will be located in such a way that avoids the felling of suitable bat roosting trees as much as practicable.
- Trees that are deemed suitable for roosting bats should not be felled from April 15th to October 15th.
- On the Joel Branch Connector, avoid disturbing important habitat features for eastern spotted skunk including coarse woody debris, rocky outcrops and uprooted/fallen trees.
- Avoid construction of the Joel Branch Connector Trail from May 15th through August 1st to minimize the risk of disturbing eastern spotted skunks during parturition/denning with young.
- Monitoring will take place to ensure the three nearby archaeological sites identified as potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places are not impacted.
- Ensure Middle Black Trail activities do not impact the Red Turtlehead population.
- Relocate individuals of Ginseng if located in areas that will be disturbed.

¹ (U.S. Forest Service, 2016)

The following administrative actions will occur after implementation.

- Administrative changes such as trail distances, names and locations will be completed and communicated to Forest Visitors and known map makers.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA). The applicable categories are identified in agency procedures as 36 CFR 220.6(e)(1) – *Construction and reconstruction of trails*; 36 CFR 220.6(e)(18) – *Restoring wetlands, streams, riparian areas or other water bodies by removing, replacing, or modifying water control structures such as, but not limited to, dams, levees, dikes, ditches, culverts, pipes, drainage tiles, valves, gates, and fencing, to allow waters to flow into natural channels and floodplains and restore natural flow regimes to the extent practicable where valid existing rights or special use authorizations are not unilaterally altered or cancelled, and 36 CFR 220.6(d)(5) – Repair and maintenance of recreation sites and facilities.*

I find that there are no extraordinary circumstances that would warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS. I took into account resource conditions identified in agency procedures that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist:

- 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 project may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect the Northern Long-eared Bats (NLEB). NLEB occur across the Pisgah Ranger District however, the project area is not near any known maternity roost trees or hibernacula. The project will not affect any other federally proposed, threatened or endangered, Region 8 Sensitive or Forest Concern terrestrial wildlife, aquatic, or botanical species as designed.
- Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds – This project is designed to improve the riparian habitat around Starens Branch and the Joel Branch Connector trailhead will be located at least 100' from the Davidson River and utilize a pervious surface.
- Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas – None are present.
- Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRA) or potential wilderness areas – None are present.
- Research Natural Areas – None are present.
- American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites – Cultural Resource surveys within the project area documented multiple archaeological sites. Two of the sites are pre-historic and one is historic. Further evaluation would be required on these sites to determine if they're eligible to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Therefore, these three sites will not be disturbed during the construction activities. Consulting Tribes were notified of these survey results.
- Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas – (see above also) Project specific Cultural Resource Survey findings and recommendations were submitted to the State Historic Preservation Office for review and comment. As planned, the project will have No Effect on NRHP Eligible (or potentially eligible) Historic Properties as documented by the NC SHPO letter from 10/19/2020 and follow-up discussions.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

These projects were initially discussed during the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forest Trail Strategy in 2013. They were then listed as a proposal on the Pisgah National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions on April 1, 2018 and updated periodically during the analysis. A scoping letter was emailed on March 28, 2018 to those who have expressed interest in projects on the Pisgah Ranger District. A news release was published on March 30, 2018 which informed the public about the project and how to comment. In addition, an open house was held at the Pisgah Ranger Station the evening of April 10, 2018 to invite comments and discussion regarding several projects (of which these were included). 126 members of the public attended the open house. There were well over 100 comments received from the scoping letter but only 49 comments were specific to this project. The comments are summarized below into broad categories.

Summary *

Comment	# of Comments	Forest Service Response
<i>Black Mountain Trail – Leave “as-is” or Maintain in Place</i>	37	<i>The decision has already been made to not leave “Middle Black” as-is because we’re responsible to manage and maintain National Forest System trails. We’re not able to maintain the trail in the current alignment. We’ve recently confirmed that to maintain the trail properly in its current alignment is cost prohibitive both initially and into the future.</i>
<i>Black Mountain Trail – Keep “Pisgah” Character</i>	42	<i>This is obviously a subjective term, but the intent is that the re-routed trail will maintain as much of the “Pisgah” character as possible while being constructed in a sustainable fashion.</i>
<i>Black Mountain Trail – Add Climbable/Parallel Trail</i>	24	<i>We currently don’t have any directional trails, so any trail is “climbable” from an authorized perspective. From a trail characteristic perspective, the re-routed trail will be more climbable given its grade and little to no drops that span the width of the trail. A parallel trail is beyond the scope of this project since it was described as a “trail re-route” from the beginning.</i>
<i>Black Mountain Trail – Support as Proposed</i>	8	<i>Comments noted.</i>
<i>Joel Branch Connector Trail – Support as Proposed</i>	13	<i>Comments noted.</i>
<i>Joel Branch Connector Trail – Need more parking and specifically Horse Parking near Schenck.</i>	4	<i>Sufficient parking is lacking across the Pisgah RD but in particular within the 276 corridor. Based on external and internal comments, it was recognized that adding a new trail in this area requires additional parking. Trailhead parking was added to the project near the entrance to</i>

		<i>the Schenck Job Corps Center. In addition, horse trailer parking will be provided at the beginning of Joel Branch Road.</i>
<i>Joel Branch Connector Trail – Concerned About Horse Trailer Parking at the NC Wildlife Ed Center</i>	2	<i>The NC Wildlife Education Center is frequently at or beyond parking capacity. Horse trailer parking on Joel Branch could help alleviate this concern.</i>
<i>Black Mountain Trailhead – Support as Proposed</i>	5	<i>Comments noted.</i>
Total Comments	49	

**Group responses are counted as one.*

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

This decision is consistent with the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forest Land Management Plan.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW (APPEAL) OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is not subject to administrative review and appeal.

CONTACT

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Jeff Owenby, Recreation Program Manager @ Jeffrey.Owenby@usda.gov.

January 15, 2021

David M. Casey

Date

District Ranger

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REFERENCES

U.S. Forest Service. (2016). *Trail Fundamentals and Trail Management Objectives - National Design Parameters*. Retrieved from https://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/trail-management/documents/trailfundamentals/03-TrailDesignParaHandout_Sec508_01-24-17_150dpi.pdf