Chicken Creek Trails Project

Environmental Assessment

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San Juan National Forest
Dolores Ranger District
Montezuma County, Colorado
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Background

Stakeholders interested in both motorized and non-motorized opportunities have expressed interest in expanding recreational trail opportunities in the Mancos area, including those that are analyzed here.

Motorized and non-motorized recreation in the Mancos-Cortez travel management landscape[1] offers opportunities to San Juan National Forest (SJNF) visitors of many experience levels. The Chicken Creek area provides good beginner to intermediate level non-motorized experiences for hikers, equestrian users, and mountain bike riders that is close to the towns of Mancos, Dolores and Cortez, and is accessible via improved roads.

The Chicken Creek and the upper elevation motorized areas discussed in this proposal are managed for a variety of uses including grazing and vegetation management, including temporary routes and activity associated with timber sales. It is anticipated that there will be prescribed fire projects in the future to maintain forest health, associated with timber harvests, and to protect private property and a popular State of Colorado Wildlife Area day use facility at the south end of the project area.

However, the landscape is widely known for its recreational appeal. The current motorized and non-motorized trail system, as well as the surrounding area, provide for warm weather recreation activities such as camping, OHV/ATV use, pleasure driving, sightseeing, hunting, biking, trail running, hiking and horseback riding. Winter activities include cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, snowshoeing, and snow biking. Existing trails and roads (both motorized and non-motorized) in the Chicken Creek area are mostly nested within a motorized area that includes National Forest System Roads (NFSRs) 559 (A, C, D, K), 385, and 386, which are used for general forest access.

The existing upper elevation motorized system (including the Box Canyon, Golconda, West Mancos and Aspen Loop Trail systems) provides approximately 25 miles of popular, high-country motorized opportunities (single-track and 50”-wide ATV) in the proposal area. The existing system also provides connectivity to a wider array of motorized trails and forest roads.

Forest Plan

The San Juan National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP 2013) provides desired conditions, objectives, standards and guidelines related to recreation management. This proposal is within Management Area 5 – Active Management (commodity production in order to meet multiple use goals), (LRMP p. 187 & 188) and would move conditions towards those described in the LRMP.

Desired Conditions in the LRMP include:

> Activities are regulated primarily in order to protect the quality of the recreation settings and benefits, as well as to protect natural and cultural resources. Managers monitor conditions and implement management strategies in order to maintain desired setting characteristics. Recreation users have opportunities to benefit from the diversity of varied terrain, scenery, and nature in the canyons, mountains, and mesas, as well as on the rivers of the San Juan National Forest and Tres Rios Field Office. (2.14.1, LRMP p.115)
>
> Established road and trail travel corridors offer high-quality scenery. Developed recreation facilities (including trailheads) provide relatively easy access for visitors, enabling them to enjoy a wide range of recreation experiences. (2.14.2, LRMP p.116)

[1] *Mancos-Cortez Travel Management Plan EA* (2008)

Purpose and Need

Purpose - Provide an expansion of the existing motorized and non-motorized trail system in proximity to Mancos, Colorado, connecting to other recreation opportunities in the Mancos-Cortez landscape. Enhance resource protection by actively addressing current concerns including unauthorized trail development, improved trail maintenance, intentional trail design, and appropriate recreation-related signage. Through an expanded trail system, seek to increase funding and partnership opportunities, as well as to provide economic benefit to Montezuma County and its municipalities through increased recreational opportunities that would serve local interests as well as tourism.

Need – respond to requests from Mancos Trails Group and San Juan Trail Riders for additional trails in the area and coordinate with these groups in developing a sustainable recreational transportation system that provides a variety of settings and experiences.

Project Area

The project area is approximately eight miles northwest of Mancos, Colorado. This project includes two geographic areas: The Chicken Creek Trails area north of Mancos, Colorado, and sections of trail near Owens Basin and Deer Lick Creek. The non-motorized area is located primarily in ponderosa pine and accessed from NFSRs 559 (A ,C, D, K), 385, and 386 (see attached Proposed Action – Non-Motorized map). The motorized area is located in aspen and spruce and is accessed from NFSR 566 (see attached Proposed Action – Motorized map).

A variety of NFSRs provide access to and within the proposed project area. The following table summarizes Operational Levels for NFSRs in the project area:

Operational Maintenance Level	Description
ML 1 – Basic Custodial Care (Storage of closed roads)	Intermittent use road while placed in storage; closed to all mechanized travel but not decommissioned
ML 2 – High Clearance Vehicle*	Limited to use by high clearance vehicles
ML 3 – Suitable for Passenger Cars*	Maintained for travel by prudent driver in standard passenger car

Alternatives

The USFS Project Lead coordinated review of the proposed trail segments with both the USFS Inter Disciplinary Team (IDT) and the project proponents. Changes to alignments were developed that addressed areas of resource concern and provided opportunities to improve user experience. These changes are represented in the Proposed Action. In addition, the IDT and Project Lead developed Design Elements for the construction and operation of the trails that will reduce or eliminate impacts to specific resources. The USFS staff will work with project proponents on the implementation and monitoring of the proposed trails, and associated design features, to ensure measures are effective at the resource protection. On the ground conditions may necessitate changing the resource protection approach to better achieve desired results.

No Action – No Expansion of The Current Trail System

Under the "no action" alternative, the existing trails (and associated use designations) and trails management would not change, and there would be no addition of new trail miles to the system.

Proposed Action – Expansion/Modification of the Current Trail System

The proposed action consists of three elements:

1. Analysis of the existing system trails near the Chicken Creek Parking Lot that were authorized under the Mancos-Cortez Travel Management Plan (2008). These routes include a dense alignment of non-motorized single-track routes used for both summer and winter use. Winter use includes the Chicken Creek ski area operation that grooms for Nordic skiing and snow shoeing. Although the system is concentrated, it provides short loops that are popular for many visitors because of the proximity to Mancos, Colorado. As part of this project, corrections would be made to maps and databases. The end result of this analysis process would be an accurate trail database that would support forest management and planning in the future.
2. Analysis of approximately 12 miles of new single-track, non-motorized trails. These trails are user-made trails that have been used by visitors for several years. The Mancos Trails Group, a local trail advocacy group, approached the Forest Service approximately four years ago in an effort to formally authorize these routes. In order to avoid the additional proliferation of more unauthorized routes while recognizing the need for trails near Mancos, the Forest Service chose to analyze and consider designating the user made routes. Trail use would include summer non-motorized activities (pedestrian, equestrian and mechanized use).
3. A motorized proposal in the upper elevations of the Mancos-Cortez travel management planning area northeast of Mancos, Colorado. This element would add motorcycle designation to 1.1 miles of existing non-motorized trail in order to provide connections between other existing motorized trails. The San Juan Trail Riders, a motorized advocacy group that has partnered with the Dolores Ranger District on trail issues, approached the Forest Service regarding these connections. This proposal does not include any removal of motorcycle designations from trails where that designation currently exists.

The deciding official has the option to make a final decision that incorporates elements analyzed within this EA, but that does not include all elements covered in the proposed action. For example, selection of the addition of motorcycle use to the Deer Lick and Owens Basin trails is not directly tied to use of the non-motorized trails in the Chicken Creek area.

The proposal involves the construction and maintenance of approximately 13 miles of new motorized and non-motorized trails within the Mancos-Cortez landscape, as follows:

Non-motorized

- The Stump Lake Trail involves the construction of approximately 2.8 miles of single-track trail in the center of the project area. The trail includes NFSR 385A, a ML 1 road also referred to as the Rush Spur.
- The Outer Loop trail would include approximately 7 miles of single-track trail above Lost Canyon and acts as the boundary of the project area. These 7 miles would incorporate existing unauthorized trail segments as well as new construction. The trail follows the rim of the canyon and crosses ML 2 Roads as well as areas of the forest that are currently under a timber contract, due to being in an actively managed area of the forest. (The timber operations will end in 2019 but subsequent prescribed fires and thinning to promote forest health will likely occur in the

future.) The trail then trends to the east and south where it ties into the existing Hamlin and Dolph Kuss routes.

- The Lower and Upper Bauer Routes (approximately 2.3 miles) has been used by the Chicken Creek Ski operation. Adding these trail segments to the trail system would authorize it for year-round use and provide additional trail mileage/opportunity in an area that is already heavily utilized.

Motorized

- The Deer Lick Trail would be approximately 0.9 miles of trail that would connect NFSR 566 to the Box Canyon Spur Trail, following an abandoned route, and would include trail design to mitigate damage to wet areas.
- The Owens Basin Connector is an existing 0.23 miles non-motorized route between two motorized routes and would connect the Golconda ATV trail to the West Mancos Trail. The connector is currently non-motorized but was intended to be designated as a motorized route under Mancos-Cortez Travel Management Plan (2008) decision; however this did not occur. The Owens Basin Connector would provide a better crossing of the West Mancos River than the existing crossing at the bottom of the Golconda Trail.

NFSRs 559 and 385 intersect the proposed trails and would be used for transportation of crews and equipment during project implementation. Possible activities related to trail building may include fence installation and repair, bike cattle-guard installation, equipment hauling and personnel transportation.

Design Elements

The following design elements are a mandatory aspect of the proposed action and are intended to lessen or prevent adverse effects.

Cultural

1. If a previously undocumented historic property is discovered, or if inadvertent effects occur to a historic property, all work in the vicinity of the property shall cease and a SJNF archaeologist shall be notified immediately. The property shall be protected and project activities in the immediate vicinity of the property shall not resume until any actions necessary to resolve adverse effects to the property have been completed.
2. Upon the discovery of human remains, funerary items, sacred objects, or objects of cultural patrimony, a SJNF archaeologist shall be immediately notified by telephone, with written confirmation. All project activities shall cease in the vicinity of the discovery, and the discovery shall be protected for 30 days, or until the contractor is given notice to proceed by a SJNF archaeologist

Hydrology and Soils

1. Select stream/ditch crossings that are hardened by gravel, cobble or bedrock. If none exist or in the case of swales or ephemeral drainage crossings, use local material to manually harden trail crossings.
2. Establish crossings at right angles to streams/ditches, where the stream/ditch is relatively straight and shallow, and where stream/ditch banks do not exceed a 30% slope.
3. Use hand tools to construct trail inside riparian areas.
4. Refer to and follow all applicable best management practices (BMPs) for motorized and non-motorized trails (pages 91-93) outlined in FS-990a, *National Best Management Practices for Water*

Quality Management on National Forest System Lands. These BMPs are critical to address erosion potential that would otherwise be high, as well as other concerns.

5. The Deer Lick Creek crossing at the upper portion of the trail is currently wide, shallow, muddy and shows heavy cattle utilization; this crossing shall be engineered with a turnpike or boardwalk and culvert(s) to minimize sedimentation from motorized traffic. There are numerous smaller intermittent and ephemeral creek crossings in the middle and lower portions of the trail; local rock should be used to armor these crossings to prevent muddy areas from forming due to increased use.
6. Route or reroute trail alignments to avoid wetland features. The recommended minimum buffer distance is equal to 2 times the maximum diameter of the wetland up to a maximum of 100 feet.
7. Avoid the one small wetland that is directly adjacent to the existing Deer Lick roadbed and another in relatively close proximity.
8. Design trail to protect against slope failure. Additional bike/foot traffic could cause slope failure where the existing Stump Lake to Ditch Trail alignment is in close proximity to Rush Creek Ditch, because portions of the ditch are currently undercut and actively eroding.
9. Adaptive management techniques may need to be employed during wetter years when more hydrological features are present throughout the project area. During implementation, consult the wetland area maps located in the project record. Although field surveys found that the proposed trail alignments avoid wetland features adequately, fieldwork was completed during an extremely dry year (2018). BMPs shall be followed to avoid impacts to sensitive water resources. Consult with SJNF hydrologist as appropriate.
10. Minimize potential for head-cutting and channel incision by ensuring application of BMPs in locations where trail alignments cross intermittent drainages.
11. The wide portion of the existing Owens Basin trail shall be obliterated and signed accordingly to prevent non-authorized use by UTV/ATVs.

<u>Rangelands and Rare Plants</u>

1. Ground disturbance activities associated with trail constructions should be limited to the footprint necessary for trail establishment. This generally occurs in a linear feature. Weed prevention and suppression efforts will continue to occur throughout the project area.
2. Continue to install trail cattleguards or turnstiles at all fence crossings to minimize the need for trail users to open and close gates. In instances where a cattleguard is not feasible, a swing gate may be installed.
3. Equipment shall be washed before entering a new area of project implementation.

<u>Recreation</u>

1. The project would be implemented according to trail management direction described in Forest Service Handbook 2309.15. Trails would be managed as a standard terra trail of Trail Class 2 or 3, with allowed uses of Pedestrian, Pack and Saddle, and Bicycle for the non-motorized trail proposals. Trails would be managed as a standard terra trail of Trail Class 2 or 3, with allowed uses of Pedestrian, Pack and Saddle, and Bicycle and Motorcycles, for the motorized trail proposals. Design specifications associated with several types of trail use may be incorporated in order to effectively manage and maintain a trail segment. For example, trail management may include vegetation clearing limits associated with Pack and Saddle in order to allow safe passage for stock. These same trails might also incorporate some tread width, grade, and surface design

elements from design parameters associated with bicycles. Additional information about trail management concepts is provided in Forest Service Handbook 2309.18.

2. Dispersed camping impacts would be monitored by recreation staff. Parking of motor vehicles for dispersed camping would follow the Mancos-Cortez Travel Management Plan (depicted on the Motor Vehicle Use Map).
3. Trails would be built with an eye towards sustainability, site specific resource protection and low cost maintenance vs. steep, unsustainable trails that require frequent maintenance. In addition, sustainable trails can also be maintained by volunteers who are able to complete light maintenance activities with limited FS oversight.
4. This FS would continue partnership programs with local motorized, horse, hiking and bike organizations to include trail maintenance, weed control and visitor education.
5. Interpretive trail etiquette signs will be added that address all users including hikers, motorized users, horseback riders and mountain bike riders.
6. The Chicken Creek parking areas at the existing trailheads would be expanded to accommodate additional vehicles including horse trailers, if funding is available (Forest Service or partners) and use increases.

Threatened, Endangered, Sensitive, and Species of Local Concern

1. Contact the district biologist if specific impacts to threatened, endangered, proposed, Region 2 sensitive species, or SJNF species of local concern and/or their habitats are identified prior to or during project implementation. Management of the project (e.g., timing restrictions or project boundary) may be adjusted as necessary to reduce impacts. The Region 2 sensitive species most likely to be present are Northern goshawk and Largeflower triteleia.

Vegetation and Fuels

1. If future vegetation management projects (timber or prescribed fire) occur within the proposed project area, coordination between the SJNF Recreation, Fire, and Timber programs will occur prior to implementation. Temporary roads will be allowed to cross trails.

Wildlife

1. Survey for active raptor nests should be undertaken before constructing new sections of trails. If a raptor moves into an area near an existing designated trail, consult the SJNF Wildlife Biologist. Address new nests in accordance with LRMP Guideline 2.3.49 and Forest Plan Table 2.3.2.

Alternatives Considered But Not Carried Forward For Detailed Study

The proposed designation of the non-motorized portion of the West Mancos Trail to motorized was considered but not included in this proposal because the North Fork Connector was constructed (2010) to connect the motorized West Mancos Trail to the Aspen Spur Trail.

Minor adjustments to the trail alignment proposal submitted by the project proponent are included in the Proposed Action and were not considered as a separate alternative.

Environmental Consequences

Affected Locale

The non-motorized part of the proposal would occur in the ponderosa pine/gambel oak vegetation type and the motorized part would occur in aspen and spruce/fir forests. Past vegetation management projects

such as thinning, pine restoration treatments and oak mastication have contributed to the current forest structure and appearance. In addition to recreational use (including hunting), vegetation and rangeland management activities currently occur in the proposal area.

The Chicken Creek Trails Project area is heavily roaded with ML 1, 2 and 3 roads dominating the landscape. Access to the trails areas are provided on Montezuma County Roads 40, 41 and 44 (Echo Basin Road).

Potential effects to three resources (hydrology and soils, recreation, and wildlife) were considered in detail. Summaries of the associated analyses follow.

Hydrology and Soils

The following is a summary of the Riparian, Soils, Water Quality, and Watershed report that is in the project record.

Affected Environment

Chicken Creek Trails

All of the soil types in the project area are deep, well-drained soils but have slow permeability and medium to high runoff characteristics. The soils have a relatively high erosion potential within this landscape.

None of the proposed trails cross perennial streams, but there are a number of intermittent and ephemeral drainages in the vicinity. These channels are relatively stable and functioning properly, but have minimal or no riparian corridors and are lacking vegetative diversity. This is likely a function of climatic conditions, precipitation regime, naturally poor soil productivity, and historic grazing.

There are a number of wetlands in the vicinity of the proposed non-motorized trails (see attached Proposed Action – Non-Motorized with Wetlands map). Many of these wetland features are lakes or freshwater ponds, but there are a number of freshwater emergent wetlands and freshwater forested wetlands in this landscape.

Deer Lick Motorized Trail

The dominant type of soil in the vicinity of the proposed trail is a very deep, well-drained soil with slow permeability and medium to high runoff characteristics.

The proposed trail alignment is on a pre-existing abandoned roadbed that follows Deer Lick Creek in the West Mancos River watershed. There is currently an established cattle/user trail along approximately 90% of the proposed route.

The National Hydrography Dataset (NHD) identifies Deer Lick Creek as an intermittent drainage, but it is a well-defined drainage with an established (although narrow) riparian corridor and was running at the time of field survey (July 2018). The attached Proposed Action – Motorized with Wetlands map shows proximate wetlands. There is beaver activity occurring in portions of Deer Lick Creek as indicated by two large dam complexes below the roadbed along the southern portion of the proposed trail. There is one crossing of Deer Lick Creek at the upper portion of the trail and numerous smaller intermittent and ephemeral creek crossings in the middle and lower portions of the trail. The Deer Lick Creek crossing is wide, shallow, muddy and shows heavy cattle utilization.

Owen's Basin Connector

The West Mancos River watershed is a municipal supply watershed for Mesa Verde National Park and the Town of Mancos.

This pre-existing trail is in the West Mancos River watershed and crosses the South Fork of the West Mancos River. There are no wetlands along this route and the riparian corridor affiliated with the South Fork of the West Mancos River is healthy and intact.

The current crossing is located in a relatively wide, shallow, and naturally-braided location. The stream bottom is armored with large cobble substrate and the banks are stable and not currently eroding. There is a single-track trail and a wider UTV/ATV trail that both utilize this river crossing. The UTV/ATV trail crosses a pre-existing but eroding road closure barrier and then follows a steep off-camber slope down to the Mancos River crossing.

No action

Direct and Indirect Effects

Under this action, no new non-motorized trails would be developed, and thus no additional ground disturbance would occur. Portions of user-created trails that are currently eroding or holding water would continue to do so. Poorly-located existing stream and ditch crossings would continue to erode, increasing channel width and sedimentation at those locations. Expansion of user-created routes and continued use of existing trail networks is expected to occur, leaving areas of active erosion and sedimentation unchecked in both the short and long term.

Under this action, motorized traffic would not legally occur on Deer Lick or Owens Basin Trails. Soil compaction, displacement and erosion caused by an additional user-group and type would not occur. Existing illegal user-created bypasses and route utilization would continue, allowing erosion and sedimentation to continue at/near the main crossing on the South Fork of the West Mancos River.

Proposed Action

Direct and Indirect Effects

Non-motorized

Chicken Creek Trails

The proposed action includes project design elements that when implemented would address erosion and sediment transport concerns. Adverse impacts to water conveyance structures (two ditches) in the Stump Lake to Ditch Trail area would be minor.

In locations where proposed trail alignments would cross intermittent drainages, best management practices (BMPs) would be applied to minimize potential for head-cutting and channel incision.

However, adverse impacts of trail layout and construction in this vicinity should have little to no impact on water quality or wetlands because of project design and BMPs. Field surveys found that the proposed trail alignments avoid these wetland features adequately, but it should be noted that fieldwork was completed during an extremely dry year. Adaptive management techniques may need to be employed during wetter years when more features are present throughout the landscape and BMPs would be followed to avoid meaningful adverse impacts to these sensitive water resources.

There are no municipal supply watersheds surrounding the proposed trail system, but there are a number of groundwater wells on private land developments in the vicinity. Given the location of the proposed trails and the type of disturbances associated with the construction of the trails, these wells would not be impacted by the proposed activities.

Motorized –

Deer Lick Trail

Areas of high soil erosion potential would be controlled through strict adherence to BMPs and design elements. With implementation of design elements and BMPs soil erosion and sediment transport will be minimized and no impacts to downstream water quality would occur. The proposed trail is more than 3 miles away from the closest intake and will not affect water quality or compromise municipal water supply infrastructure.

Owen's Basin Connector

There is potential for this portion of the trail to erode when wet and be a source of sedimentation. As this trail is proposed for motorized single-track use only, a portion of the existing trail would be obliterated and signed accordingly to prevent non-authorized use by UTV/ATVs and minimize concern for sedimentation. With implementation of design elements and BMPs, including successful closure and reclamation of the UTV/ATV trail erosion and sediment transport to waterways would be minimized. The proposed trail is more than 4 miles away from the closest intake and will not affect water quality or compromise municipal water supply infrastructure.

Cumulative Effects

Current watershed and soil conditions are the result of many natural and anthropogenic activities occurring within the analysis area. The largest historical impacts to watershed health, water quality and soil productivity in this analysis area include livestock grazing, timber harvest, private land development, water diversions, historic mining, recreation, and road/trail building and use. Soil and watershed resource conditions in the analysis area are driven by naturally-limiting soil conditions, grazing, water diversions, and increasing recreational impacts such as illegal road/trail building and utilization. Width and diversity of riparian corridors have been diminished from historic and current grazing practices in Deer Lick Creek and its tributaries, but beaver activity is currently helping to reestablish wetland and riparian acreage within the landscape. Most main tributaries of the Mancos River are impacted by historic water diversions, affecting both the quantity of flows as well as the natural hydrologic regime. Expansion of user-created roads and trails in this landscape are causing erosion and sedimentation at crossings and in areas where they are hydrologically connected to stream courses.

Grazing and heavy recreational use are expected to continue in this landscape, along with future vegetation management actions authorized under various fuels and timber decisions. The proposed actions described in this EA would ultimately help curtail illegal trail building/utilization in this landscape and decrease point-source sedimentation by relocating some poorly-located existing stream crossings and trail segments. These actions would result in reducing both short and long-term impacts to many discrete water and soil resources in this landscape.

Recreation

The Affected Environment for recreation resources is summarized in the Background section. The following sections describe the direct, indirect and cumulative effects to recreation resources, for both the No Action and Proposed Action Alternatives.

No Action

Direct and Indirect Effects

There would be ongoing use and potential expansion of unauthorized routes. This situation poses recreation management challenges. Unauthorized trails do not serve a broad user base that typically visits the forest to use National Forest system trails, typically signed and shown on maps.

Proposed Action

Direct and Indirect Effects

The proposed expansion would provide expanded beginner, intermediate and expert experiences for visitors, with easy access to the trail systems using existing roads, trails and parking areas. The proposed Outer Loop Trail would provide opportunity for longer rides and a variety of terrain as compared to the current trail system. The additional trails would also provide opportunity to separate users which would reduce user conflicts.

Increased use caused by new motorized and non-motorized opportunities could adversely impact visitors using the existing trails due to more people on the trail systems. In addition, new dispersed camping pressure could be caused by growth in popularity of the trail system. The proposed action would help reduce off-trail travel by providing a larger authorized, managed trail system. Adding motorized use opportunities would create adverse, long-term, intermittent sound impacts along the sections of trail that were previously non-motorized. Some non-motorized users (such as hikers, horse riders or mountain bikers) may be displaced to other areas because they prefer to recreate in non-motorized area.

Cumulative Effects

The Proposed Action would add approximately 12.1 miles of new designated non-motorized single-track trails and 1.1 miles of motorized trails to the existing recreation network in the Chicken Creek area. The cumulative effect to recreational trail users is an overall increase in the length and diversity of trail opportunities available within easy commuting distance of Dolores, Cortez, and Mancos. Other recreation contribution to cumulative effects are due to factors related to recreational activity in the area, primarily being growth of the local community and an increase in visitation to the Dolores Ranger District.

There are no other meaningful cumulative effects for the recreation resource. However, there are foreseeable future vegetation management actions that will occur within the project area, based on existing decisions including the Dolores Prescribed Fire Pine Ecosystem Restoration Project (USFS 2017) and Chicken Creek Healthy Forest Restoration Act Project (USFS 2004). The primary effect of these actions on the recreation user would be sights and sounds from the vegetation management project implementations.

Wildlife and Fisheries

The following federally listed species do not occur within the project area, or habitat for these species does not occur within the project area, and they are therefore not analyzed in this EA: *Canada lynx, New Mexico Meadow Jumping Mouse, Mexican Spotted Owl, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, Bonytail Chub, Colorado Pikeminnow, Greenback Cutthroat Trout, Humpback Chub, and Razorback Sucker*.

Forest Service Region 2 sensitive species were assessed for effect. A pre-project field review was conducted using available information to assemble occurrence records, describe habitat needs and ecological requirements, and determine whether field reconnaissance would be needed to complete the analysis. No further analysis is needed in this EA for Forest Service sensitive species that are not known or suspected to occur in the project area, for which no suitable habitat is present, or for which there is no potential for a meaningful effect. A list of species not analyzed in detail is in the project record.

Effects to species of interest relative to the proposal or for which there might be a meaningful effect, are summarized here. The following effects discussion is a summary from the Wildlife and Fisheries Biological Assessment/Biological Evaluation and the Monitoring Indicator Species (MIS) Report which are in the project record.

No action

Direct and Indirect Effects

Region 2 Sensitive Species – Northern Goshawk (NOGO)

Under this action, there would be ongoing use and potential expansion of unauthorized routes. This situation poses the potential to displace breeding and nesting goshawk without providing any control of timing or nest buffers. Without having some control over where new routes are located there is the potential to have an increase in the number of miles of unauthorized trails that would negatively affect goshawk territories within the project area.

Monitoring Indicator Species (MIS) – Elk

Under this action, elk transitional range could be negatively affected by expanding dispersal of animals and increasing stress because of the potential for on-going use and increased mileage of unauthorized trails.

Proposed Action

Direct and Indirect Effects

Region 2 Sensitive Species – Northern Goshawk (NOGO)

Most nesting and foraging goshawk habitat within the analysis area for this species would be unaffected. Territories would remain undisturbed and forest characteristics necessary for prey species would not be impacted. The proposed action may have a negative impact on nesting habitat for a few select areas, but there will be a net gain in nesting habitat across the analysis area. Areas should be surveyed for active goshawk nests prior to new trail construction (described in Design Features above).

A historic breeding territory for Northern goshawks is located in the Chicken Creek area. Three sites in this area were recorded as being active in one in 2009 and the other two 2013. In that last five years, there has been no confirmed active nests in this area. This may have to do with the rise in popularity of recreation in this area. The proposed Chicken Creek expansion trails goes through this historic goshawk territory. Two acoustical surveys were conducted in the spring of 2018 for this area. No evidence of recent use was observed, nor any Northern goshawks seen. Evidence of recent use includes any nests that appear to have had work done on them this year or recent years (nest building), white-wash (bird droppings) on or around nests, or carcasses or other evidence of feeding.

As stated in the Design Features, any future active raptor nests would be evaluated and if needed timing restrictions would be applied.

Monitoring Indicator Species (MIS) – Elk

The trails are located in transition range for big game and the new trails will increase human disturbance. Elk use transition range primarily in the spring and fall and it is important for elk to stay in transition areas prior to moving into winter range. If elk move too early because of disturbance it increases pressure on winter range. Due to close proximity of the trails to existing roads and trails, little acreage is affected that is greater than a ½ mile from an existing road. The proposed trail system does not fall into any security areas. Security areas are defined as any areas that are greater than ½ mile from a road and are larger than 250 acres (Lyon & Christensen, 1992). The project area is not located in a CPW identified migration corridors. Therefore, no large elk herds should be moving through this area during the transitional period. Since the new trails are nested within an area that receives heavy use, the addition of new non-motorized trails is not expected to have an impact on elk migration. Because the new motorized trail segments are so small there is also little potential for impact to elk migration.

Cumulative Effects

Grazing and heavy recreational use are expected to continue in this landscape, along with future vegetation management actions authorized under various fuels and timber decisions. The proposed action described in this EA would ultimately help reduce illegal trail building and utilization in this landscape, which have the potential to negatively affect breeding and nesting of Northern goshawk and could increase stress to big game, which could affect recruitment in this transitional migration range.

Resources Considered But Not Analyzed In Detail

Rangelands

Chicken Creek Trails (non-motorized)

Cattle typically use the pastures within the Spring Creek and Turkey Creek Allotments in the early summer months of June and July. Afterwards, cattle move to pastures outside the project area. The proposed trails are within the ponderosa pine vegetation type, which does not represent a substantial portion of available forage. The adverse impact on available forage to livestock grazing would be minimal. Establishment of new trails has the potential to create new routes for cattle movement. This creates the possibility of cattle using areas that were not previously used, but potential for this has been minimized through project design. Impacts to livestock operations would be minor.

Deer Lick and Owen Basin trails (motorized)

The Deer Lick and Owen Basin trails fall within the West Mancos Allotment and are already well established. Cattle typically use these areas sometime between July and October.

Regarding cumulative effects, existing roads and trails already impact cattle distribution across the project area. Gates are sometimes left open by recreationalists, though cattle use within the area is short so this concern does not persist throughout the grazing season. While the proposed action, along with past and future actions, might increase the likelihood of this occurring, it would not meaningfully affect rangeland resources.

Invasive Species

There are known populations of weeds within the project area. The primary species present are musk thistle, Canada thistle, and mullein. These populations are primarily within high-use/disturbed areas and drainages. Populations have been treated in the past and continue to be monitored and treated when necessary. Currently, these populations do not pose a risk of substantial spread.

The ground disturbance associated with trail construction and use by recreationists would provide increased opportunity for noxious weed establishment and spread. However, project design limits this potential. Established weeds within the project area are already treated based on feasibility. This will continue to occur. No meaningful changes to the successful management of invasive species are anticipated.

Regarding cumulative effects, some recent timber sales have resulted in noxious weed establishment and these areas continue to be treated. Public recreation, especially motorized use, cumulatively adds to the spread of noxious weeds across the landscape. While the proposed action, along with past and future actions, might increase the likelihood of this occurring, it would not substantially increase invasive species across the landscape.

Rare Plants

There are no federally listed threatened or endangered plant species known or suspected to occur in the project area, and there is no habitat for these species in the project area. There is one Forest Service

Region 2 species, largeflower triteleia, that has suitable habitat within the project area. The nearest known population of largeflower triteleia is approximately 10 miles from the project area, there are no known populations within the project area, and populations within the project area would be protected through project design. A Rare Plants Biological Assessment/Biological Evaluation is in the project record.

Who is involved in this EA process?

An interdisciplinary team prepared this draft environmental assessment:

Keith Fox – Environmental Review, Writer/Editor
Corey Ertl – Rangelands, Botany
David Casey – Timber, Silviculture, and Transportation
Eric Herchmer – Hydrology and Soils
Ivan Messinger – Wildlife and Fisheries
Liz Cutright-Smith – Archaeology
Pat Seekins - Fuels
Tom Kochanski - GIS
Tom Rice – Recreation, Scenery, Project Lead

On February 27, 2019, the district initiated consultation with the 25 federally recognized tribes with which the forest consults. Class III (intensive) inventory of the area of potential effects is currently underway. If needed, trail segments would be re-routed to avoid adverse effects to historic properties.

On March 4, 2019 the proposal was listed on the Forest Service's PALS website (#55542) for future inclusion in the Schedule of Proposed Actions.

Consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was not necessary, due to lack of threatened or endangered species.

Project Maps

Attached are the following maps of the proposed action, and maps with hydrology resources:

Proposed Action – Non-Motorized

Proposed Action – Motorized

Proposed Action – Non-Motorized with Wetlands

Proposed Action – Motorized with Wetland

Finding of No Significant Impact

As the responsible official, I am responsible for evaluating the effects of the project relative to the definition of significance established by the CEQ Regulations (40 CFR 1508.13). I have reviewed and considered the EA and documentation included in the project record, and I have determined that the Chicken Creek Trails Project proposed action would not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. As a result, no environmental impact statement will be prepared. My rationale for this finding is as follows, organized by sub-section of the CEQ definition of significance cited above.

Context

For the proposed action and the no action alternative, the context of the environmental effects is based on the analysis in this EA. Disclosure of effects in the EA may differ by the resource being analyzed and the scale of the analysis. The project is a site-specific action that does not have an international, national, region-wide or state-wide importance. The discussion of significance criteria that follows is within the context of local importance in the Chicken Creek Trails project area.

This discussion of the project's context provides meaning to the intensity of effects described below to support the rationale for a finding of no significant impact related to each factor.

Intensity

Intensity is a measure of the severity, extent, or quantity of effects, and is based on information from the effects analysis of this EA and the references in the project record. The effects of this project have been appropriately and thoroughly considered with an analysis that is responsive to concerns and issues raised by the public. The Forest Service has taken a hard look at the environmental effects using relevant scientific information and knowledge of site-specific conditions gained from field visits. My finding of no significant impact is based on the context of the project and intensity of effects using the ten factors identified in 40 CFR 1508.27(b).

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.

Both beneficial and adverse effects of the proposed action have been disclosed and considered. The effects analysis in the EA (pages 6-12) state that some indirect, direct and cumulative effects are expected in the context of the analysis area. Design features have been agreed upon by the ID Team to ensure that effects to resources would not be significant

2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.

Any potential for increases in recreation conflicts would be mitigated through implementation of Design Elements described above, such as trail design, education and interpretation (EA pages 5-6). Implementation of these measures would reduce or eliminate potential effects on public health and safety.

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as the proximity to historical or cultural resources, parklands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

No actions would occur within or affect prime farmlands, wilderness areas, roadless areas, wild and scenic rivers or other designated special areas. Design elements have been included for hydrology and soil resources (EA pages 4-5). See below for a discussion of historical and cultural resources.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

Note: The term "controversial" in this context refers to cases where substantial scientific dispute exists as to the size, nature, or effects of a major Federal action on some human environmental factor, rather than to public opposition of a proposed action or alternative.

These types of trails have been constructed throughout the National Forest system for decades and their associated effects have been documented in the existing body of scientific literature. There is no evidence of any substantial scientific dispute regarding the size or nature of the effects.

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

The project is not unique on the San Juan National Forest. When professional experience is paired with the substantial body of literature on the subject, there is little uncertainty regarding effects.

6. The degree to which the action may establish precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

This is a stand-alone project and its associated actions would not set a precedent or make a decision in principle about future actions or considerations. Any new proposals for trails, similar to or entirely different from the proposed action, will be subject to further site specific evaluation and analysis as require under the National Environmental Policy Act.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.

The effects of one project must overlap in time and space with the effects of other projects in order to produce a cumulative effect. The spatial and temporal scales considered for cumulative effects varied depending on the resource analyzed. No significant cumulative effects associated with the proposed action were identified for any resources, and when viewed together, no major effects are considered likely (EA pages 6-12).

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

A cultural resources inventory of the proposed project's Area of Potential Effects will be performed prior to project approval. The Forest anticipates that a finding of no adverse effect to historic properties will be recommended for the project pursuant to 36 CFR 800.5(b). Colorado State Historic Preservation Office concurrence with the recommended finding will be obtained prior to project approval. Consequently, the proposed action is not expected to adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic places or cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

There are no federally listed wildlife species that have habitat or known occurrences within the analysis area. Since there are no federally listed threatened or endangered plant species known or suspected to occur in the project area, and there is no habitat for these species in the project area, a determination of "**no effect**" was reached. Based on the no effect determination, consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was not required for this project.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

This action complies with Federal laws imposed for the protection of the environment. Local County and Town of Mancos officials were consulted and no conflict with local land use plans was identified.

Pre-decisional Administrative Review Process

This project is subject to pre-decisional administrative review pursuant to 36 CFR 218, Subparts A and B. This rule provides for a pre-decisional objection process, whereby the public is provided an opportunity to comment and express concerns on projects before decisions are made, rather than after. A legal notice of a 30-day opportunity to comment on this project was published in Cortez Journal on January 6, 2020. Notice of the document availability will be sent to those who submitted comments on previous versions of this environmental assessment. Objections will only be acceptable from those who have previously submitted specific written comments regarding the proposed project during scoping or other designated opportunities for public comment in accordance with 36 CFR 218.S(a).

Implementation

Implementation may begin immediately but it is anticipated to begin in early summer 2020.

Contact Persons/Further Information

For additional information concerning this decision or the environmental analysis, contact Tom Rice (Thomas.B.Rice@usda.gov) or Derek Padilla at the Dolores Public Lands Office – (970) 882-7296.

Responsible Official

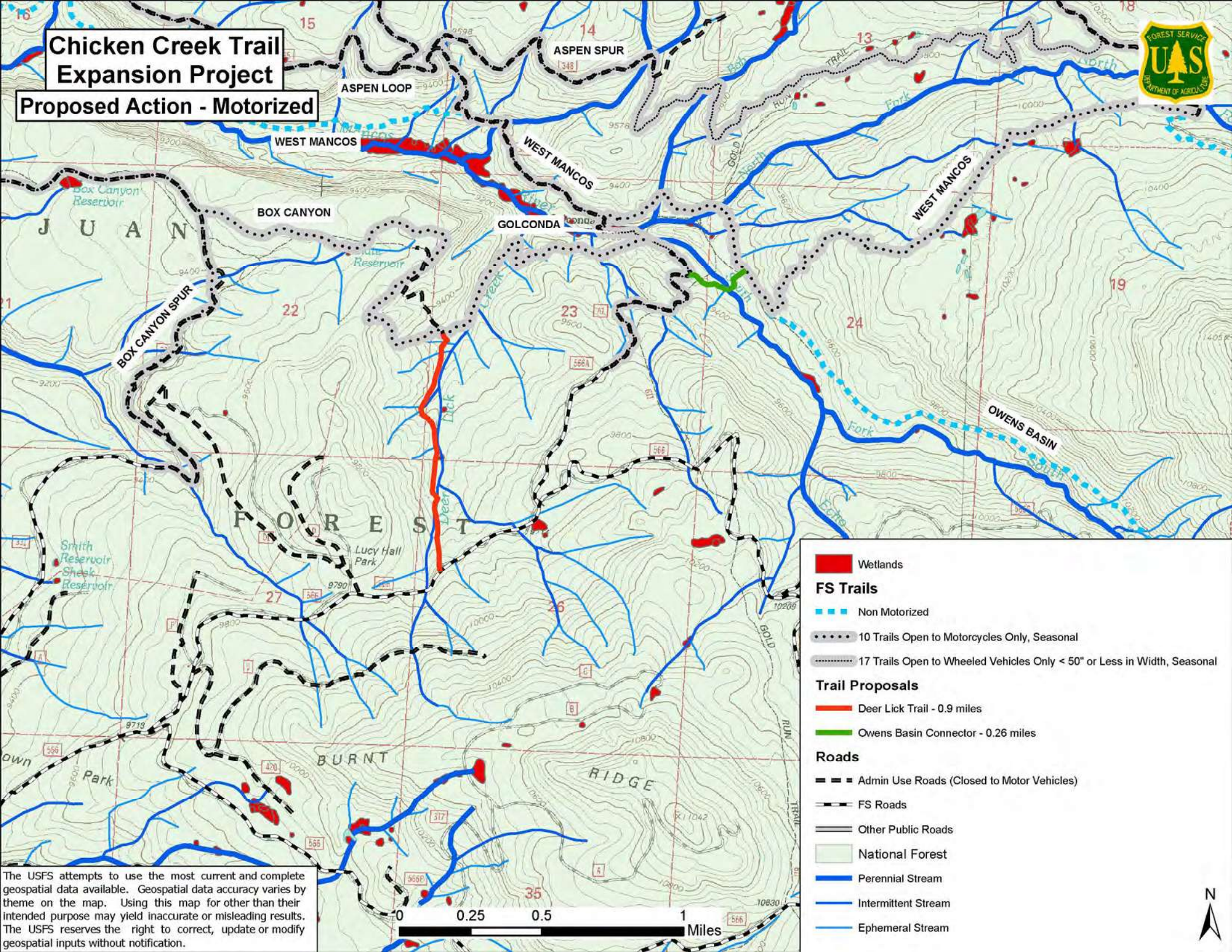
The District Ranger of the Dolores Ranger District of the San Juan National Forest is the official responsible for the final decision for the Chicken Creek Trails Project.

Derek Padilla
District Ranger
Dolores Ranger District
San Juan National Forest

1/10/2020
Date

Chicken Creek Trail Expansion Project

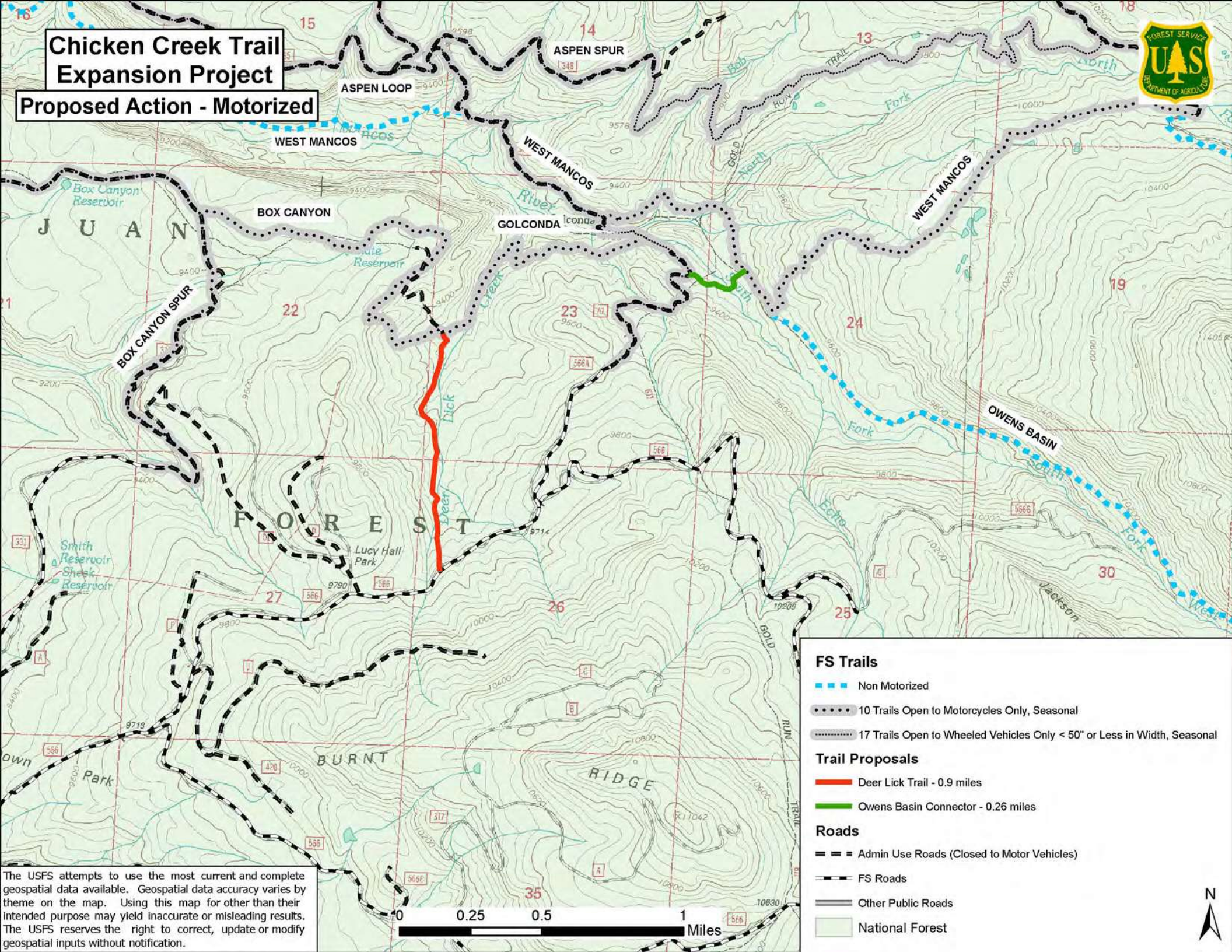
Proposed Action - Motorized



The USFS attempts to use the most current and complete geospatial data available. Geospatial data accuracy varies by theme on the map. Using this map for other than their intended purpose may yield inaccurate or misleading results. The USFS reserves the right to correct, update or modify geospatial inputs without notification.

Chicken Creek Trail Expansion Project

Proposed Action - Motorized



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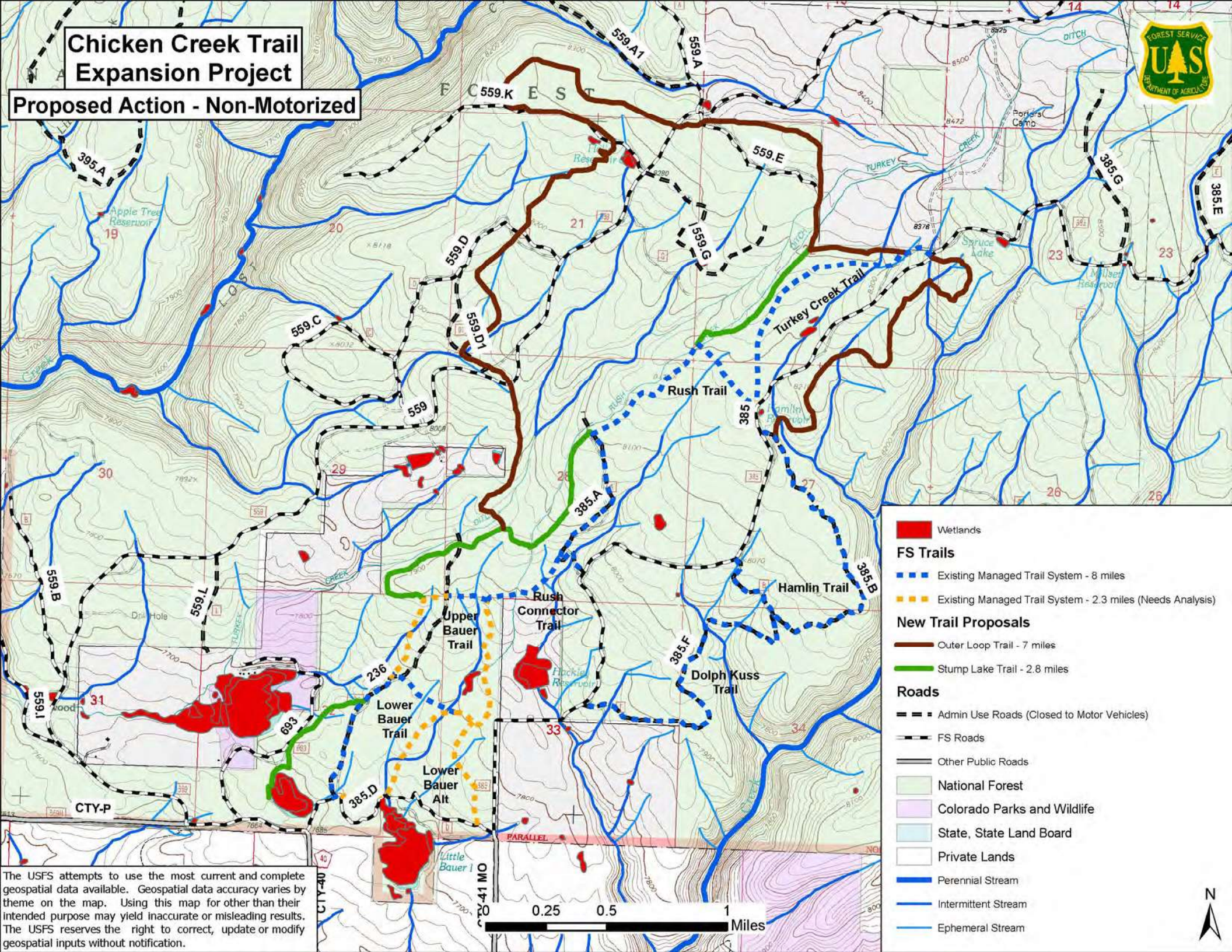
Chicken Creek Trail Expansion Project

Proposed Action - Non-Motorized



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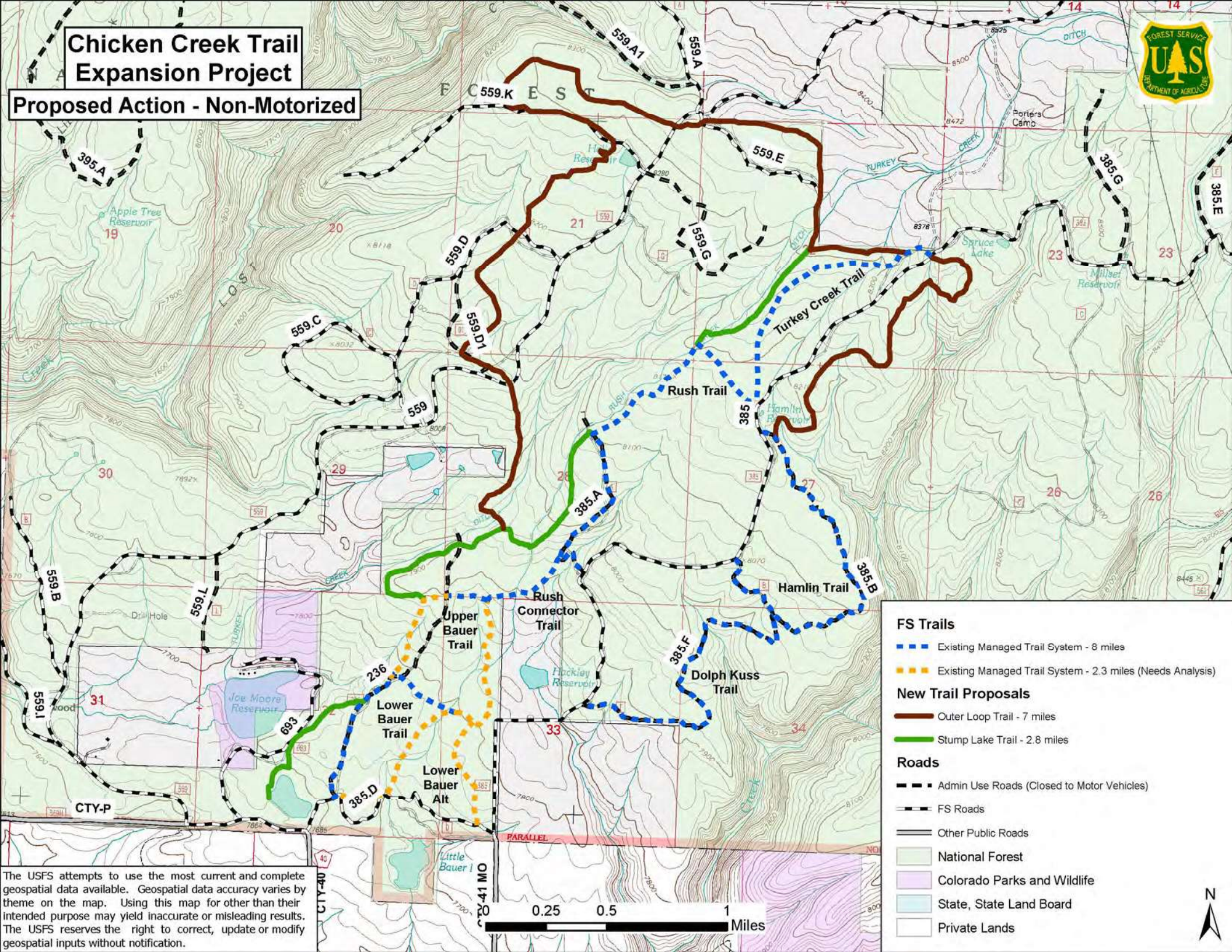

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