**PROJECT INFORMATION**

Fat Bike Trail Designations Project

The USDA Forest Service (USFS) is initiating an environmental analysis process for the proposed Fat Bike Trail Designations Project pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act. The project area is located on the Rochester and Middlebury Ranger Districts of the Green Mountain National Forest (GMNF) in the Towns of: Chittenden, Killington and Pittsfield (Rutland County); Rochester (Windsor County); Goshen and Ripton (Addison County); and Warren (Washington County), Vermont (see attached maps). The proposed action would designate approximately 37 miles of existing trails for fat bike use and would allow trail maintenance activities to maintain the trails to snow trail standards. A detailed description of the proposal is included below.

**BACKGROUND**

Fat biking is a growing recreational trend on the GMNF, with increasing demands for access on multiple trail networks. These pedal bikes have large frames and large tires designed for flotation and stability on snow and fat bike riders need snow compaction on the trail to ride the fat bikes. Requests to designate and publicize specific fat biking opportunities have been deferred until the Forest Service could designate trails for fat bike use. The Fat Bike Trail Designations Project includes trails within the Appalachian National Scenic Trail Management Area (MA 8.1) where co-located with Mountain Meadows Nordic Area Special Use Permit trails. The remaining trails are located within the Diverse Forest Use MA (3.1); Diverse Backcountry MA (6.2); Recreation Special Areas MA (8.8); Moosalamoo Recreation and Education Area MA (8.9); and Eligible Wild, Scenic, and Recreational Rivers MA (9.4) as identified in the 2006 GMNF Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan).

**PURPOSE AND NEED**

The purpose and need for this action is to implement the 2006 GMNF Land and Resource Management Plan’s (Forest Plan) goal of “Providing a diverse range of high-quality sustainable recreation opportunities that complement those provided off National Forest System lands.” In addition, the decision would implement several key points from the Forest Plan that are the basis for the purpose and need for this action:

* The Role of Today’s GMNF: “Our recreation niche will focus on the fact that the GMNF’s large, contiguous blocks of land are well suited to trail-based activities in backcountry settings” (p. 9).
* Forest-wide Goal 12: “Provide for a diverse range of high-quality, sustainable recreation opportunities that complement those provided off National Forest System Lands” (p. 15).
	+ Forest-wide Goal 12, Objective: “Increase the effective use of partnerships in the improvement, maintenance, and operation of the Forest trails system” (p. 15).
	+ Forest-wide Goal 12, Objective: “Continue to provide diverse, high-quality opportunities for recreation in partnership with private sector by authorizing appropriate activities through special use authorization and by improving administration of special use authorizations” (p. 15).
* Forest-wide Goal 20 Objective: “Improve communication and collaboration with federal and State agencies, regional commissions, town governments, and other local organizations” (p. 18).
* Forest-wide Basic Principles of Management (Principle 4): “The Forest Service will manage the Green Mountain National Forest for multiple uses. The Green Mountain National Forest is open for any legal public activity or management action, unless specifically restricted in law, policy, or the 2006 Forest plan. While allowed, such activities and actions may require administrative review and authorization before they are implemented” (p. 4).

**PROPOSED ACTION**

The Fat Bike Trail Designations Project will add approximately 37 miles of fat bike winter trails to the GMNF National Forest Trail System on the Rochester and Middlebury Ranger Districts (see attached maps). The trails would be managed as fat biking trails annually from December 15-April 15 on non-permitted trails and November 15-April 15 on Nordic center trails holding special use permits (these dates align with snowmobile trail opening dates on non-permitted trails and permittee operating periods on permitted trails). Activities necessary to maintain the trails for fat biking would include: administrative grooming with a snowmobile (off a designated snowmobile trail), grooming through snowshoe compaction, or grooming with standard grooming equipment. Activities would also include sign changes at trailheads and trail intersections to indicate the managed uses for the trail network. No earth disturbance or tree felling is necessary. A variety of trails were selected for fat biking designation to enable the USFS to understand the demand for this recreation opportunity and user impacts:

* Nordic Trails under Special Use Permit
* Existing mountain bike trails (“groomed” only by foot compaction)
* Non-snowmobile trails and roads that the Forest Service would allow a snowmobile to administratively groom (see photo to right)
* Snowmobile trails

Specifically, the trails include the following:

* **National Forest System Trails (10.4 miles concurrent with National Forest System Roads; 22.6 miles concurrent with National Forest System Trails):**
	+ Forest Trail (FT) 44 Bloodroot (portion): 2.4 miles (concurrent with FR35)
	+ FT 797 Caryl Brook: 5.6 miles
	+ FT 134 Round Robin 4.2 miles (0.6 miles concurrent with Town Road/ FR99)
	+ FT 745 Chittenden Brook X/C Ski (only portion concurrent with FR45 (from Route 73 to the campground)-1.0 miles
	+ FT 143.03 Hogback Loop 2.7 miles
	+ FT 272.02 Blackberry Run 0.4 miles
	+ FT 272.06 A.O.A. trail 0.4 miles
	+ FT 272.05 Moose Loop 2.0 miles
	+ FT 273 Steam Mill (portion concurrent with Forest Roads 59 and 59A from 54/59 trailhead parking to Rikert Nordic Area) 4.0 miles
	+ FT 257 Goshen Dam (portion): 2.4 miles with Brooks Road/FR67 and 1.3 miles of trail
	+ FT 143.12 Moosalamoo Area Ski (portion): 0.9 miles
	+ FT 165.01 Sucker Brook Historic 1.4 miles
	+ FT 143.08 Horseshoe 1.0 miles
	+ FT 141 Nettles 0.3 miles
	+ FT 142 Widow’s Clearing 3.0 miles
* **National Forest portions of the Mountain Meadows Nordic Center trails (1.2 miles):**
	+ FT 814: Red/Mt Meadows Telemark (MA 8.1 AT) 0.3 mile
	+ FT 815: Green/Mt Meadows Orchard (MA 8.1 AT) 0.2 mile
	+ FT 817: Purple/Mt Meadows (MA 8.1 AT) 0.4 mile
	+ FT 813 Black/Mt Meadows N Ridge 0.3 mile
* **National Forest portions of the Rikert Nordic Center trails (2.68 miles):**
	+ Brown Gate 1.7 miles
	+ Kiwi .02 miles
	+ Blue Bed .06 miles
	+ Wagonwheel .52 miles
	+ Outer Frost .24 miles
	+ Holland .14 miles

**FOREST PLAN CONSISTENCY**

The Fat Bike Trail Designations Project was designed to be consistent with the goals, objectives, and Forest-wide and Management Area (MA) Standards and Guidelines as specified in the 2006 Forest Plan. Specific MA direction applicable to the project includes:

* **Diverse Forest Use MA (3.1)**: The Diverse Forest Use MA has an emphasis on providing a variety of forest uses, including a full range of recreation opportunities such as motorized and non-motorized trails. There are no specific management area standards or guidelines for trails within this MA (Forest Plan, pp. 47-48).
* **Diverse Backcountry MA (6.2):** Direction specific to MA 6.2 includes an emphasis on providing a mix of backcountry recreational experiences from low use foot trails to motorized use trails. There are no specific management area standards or guidelines for trails within this MA (Forest Plan, pp. 58-59).
* **Appalachian National Scenic Trail MA (8.1)**: Trails located within the Mountain Meadows Nordic Special Use Permit area are within MA 8.1. The Forest Service is collaborating with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and the Green Mountain Club to determine if select trails proposed for fat bike use are within 500 feet of the Appalachian Trail or otherwise out of compliance with MA 8.1 and should be removed from final designation (Forest Plan, pp. 66-72)
* **Recreation Special Areas MA (8.8):** The Desired Future Condition for MA 8.8 states that *“Management activities will focus on maintaining the character of these areas and providing high-quality recreation opportunities for the public. Management activities may include, but are not limited to: trail and recreation facility construction and maintenance.”* Providing non-motorized trail use is consistent with the Blueberry Lake Recreation Special Area values and the MA 8.8 Trail Standard to prohibit motorized trail use (Forest Plan, pp. 98-99).
* **Moosalamoo Recreation and Education Area MA (8.9):** The Moosalamoo Recreation and Education Area MA emphasizes providing an outstanding combination of outdoor recreation opportunities and aesthetic attractions. Management emphasizes public use, interpretation, and education, and the protection of the special values and attributes of the area that contribute to public enjoyment. Implementation of this decision document is consistent with management area direction and the desire for the Moosalamoo Recreation and Education Area MA to exemplify outstanding recreation opportunities (GMNF Forest Plan, pp. 100-102).
* **Eligible Wild, Scenic, and Recreational Rivers MA (9.4):** MA 9.4 has an emphasis on protecting and enhancing the “outstandingly remarkable values” (ORVs) that led the rivers and streams within the management area to be determined as eligible Wild, Scenic, and Recreational Rivers for the National Wild and Scenic River System. Management under this MA retains a river’s eligibility for the stated potential classification (GMNF Forest Plan, pp. 105-109). River corridors contained within this MA are one-quarter mile on each side of the stream. A portion of the project area includes NFS lands located in the Eligible Wild, Scenic, and Recreational Rivers MA, due to the proximity of the Ottauquechee River, an Eligible Recreational River. The Ottauquechee River has special values associated with recreation ORVs. There are no specific management area standards or guidelines for non-motorized trails (GMNF Forest Plan, Table 3.1-7 on p. 107 and pp. 105-109).

 All of the expected environmental effects from this project are anticipated to be within the range of the effects disclosed in the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the 2006 Forest Plan.

**ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS**

The USFS will consider public comments during the environmental analysis process. The proposed action appears to be in a category that can be excluded from documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or Environmental Assessment (EA) as identified at 36 CFR 220.6(d)(4): *“Repair and maintenance of roads, trails, and landline boundaries.”*

The environmental analysis will identify any extraordinary circumstances that exist and could result in significant effects to the environment. In accordance with 36 CFR 220.6(b), the following specific resource conditions will be considered:

1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Regional Forester’s sensitive species
2. Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds
3. Congressionally designated areas (Wilderness or National Recreation Areas)
4. Inventoried Roadless Areas
5. Research Natural Areas
6. American Indians and Alaska Native Religious or Cultural Sites
7. Archaeological Sites, or Historic Properties or Areas

Additional resources will also be considered as part of this analysis that include (but are not limited to): Ecology, Timber/Silviculture, Soils.

**DECISIONS TO BE MADE**

After conducting and reviewing the environmental analysis, including public involvement and interdisciplinary resource specialists’ input, the Responsible Official will make the following decisions based on the environmental analysis:

1. Whether the proposed project will proceed as proposed, as modified to address issues, or not at all
2. What specific resource protection or mitigation measures should be implemented as part of the project
3. Whether the project would have environmental impacts at levels that may require an EA or EIS
4. What monitoring requirements should be applied to the project

**OPPORTUNITY TO COMMENT**

Please send any comments c/o Holly Knox by June 19, 2015 via the following methods:

* Mail (verbal comments can also be given in person):

USDA Forest Service – Rochester Ranger District

99 Ranger Road Rochester, VT 05767

* Email: comments-eastern-green-mt-finger-lakes-rochester@fs.fed.us
* Phone: (802) 767-4261 x 530
* Facsimile: (802) 767-4777

Comments received in response to this invitation, including name and address of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project and will be available for public review. Additional information regarding the proposal can be obtained from: Holly Knox, Rochester and Middlebury Ranger Districts, 99 Ranger Road, Rochester, VT 05767, (802) 767-4261 ext. 530 or email at hknox@fs.fed.us.

**RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL**

Christopher Mattrick, the District Ranger for the Middlebury and Rochester Ranger Districts, is the Responsible Official for the decision on this proposal.

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