

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

for

Cathedral Hills Trail Reconstruction/Construction

EA# OR-110-03-15

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
MEDFORD DISTRICT
GRANTS PASS RESOURCE AREA

May 2003

Dear Reader:

We appreciate your interest in the BLM's public land management activities. We also appreciate your taking the time to review this environmental assessment (EA). If you would like to provide us with written comments regarding this project or EA, please send them to Abbie Jossie, Field Manager, Grants Pass Resource Area, at 3040 Biddle Road, Medford, OR 97504.

If you would like to comment confidentially, please be aware that comments, including names and addresses of respondents, will be available for public review or may be held in a file available for public inspection and review unless you request confidentiality. If you wish to withhold your name or street address from public review or from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, you must state this clearly at the beginning of your written comment. Such requests will be honored to the extent allowed by law. All submissions from organizations or officials of organizations or businesses will be made available for public inspection in their entirety.

I look forward to your continued cooperation in the management of our public lands.

Abbie Jossie
Grants Pass Field Manager

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
MEDFORD DISTRICT

EA COVER SHEET

RESOURCE AREA: Grants Pass

FY & EA # OR-110-03-15

ACTION/TITLE: Cathedral Hills Trail Reconstruction/Construction

LOCATION: T.36S., R.5W., Section 31; T.37S., R.5W., Section 5. Wm. Meridian, Josephine Co., OR.

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GRANTS PASS RESOURCE AREA
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Cathedral Hills Trail Reconstruction/Construction

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Chapter 1. Purpose of and Need for Action

A. Introduction

The purpose of this environmental assessment (EA) is to assist in the decision making process by assessing the environmental and human effects resulting from implementing the proposed action or alternatives. This EA will also assist in determining whether an environmental impact statement (EIS) or a finding of no significant impact (FONSI) is appropriate.

This EA tiers to the following documents:

- (1) *Final EIS and Record of Decision dated June 1995 for the Medford District Resource Management Plan*;
- (2) *Final Supplemental EIS on Management of Habitat for Late-Successional and Old-Growth Forest Related Species within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl* (February 1994);
- (3) *Record of Decision for Amendments to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl* and its attachment A entitled *Standards and Guidelines for Management of Habitat for Late-Successional and Old-Growth Forest Related Species Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl* (April 13, 1994).
- (4) *Record of Decision and Standards and Guidelines for Amendments to the Survey and Manage, Protection Buffer, and other Mitigation Measures Standards and Guidelines* (January 2001).

B. Purpose of and Need for the Proposal

The need for the proposed action is three-fold: a portion of a trail used by the public is currently on private land; environmental degradation is occurring due to current trail locations, including unofficial, user created trails; and greater recreational opportunities exist for the area. The purpose of the proposed action is to reroute a trail that was constructed on private land onto BLM administered land and to improve and lengthen a portion of a trail which will link with other trails.

C. Project Location

The general location of the proposed project is shown in Appendix A, Map 1. The project area is on Josephine County and BLM lands. Josephine County has an easement across the section of private land that will be incorporated as part of the trail in Section 6. A portion of the project is within a Recreation and Public Purposes (R&PP) lease area managed by the Josephine County Parks system; the remainder is in the matrix land allocation.

D. Issues and Concerns Relevant to the Project

A variety of issues and concerns identified during initial project scoping were raised during interdisciplinary project planning and public scoping or were drawn from some of the documents noted above. These issues were used in the design of the proposed project and alternatives. Some issues were eliminated from further consideration by the ID team because they were determined to be outside the scope of the project or proposed action(s). Issues pertinent to this project are:

- Stream crossings and erosive granitic soils.
- Potential noxious weed introduction due to trail construction and increased visitor use.
- Increased fire risk due to increased recreational use.
- Potential conflicts between hikers, horseback riders and mountain bike riders.
- Wildlife disturbance.
- Safety, fire, and environmental degradation risks due to unauthorized off-highway vehicle use.
- Private landowner liability where the trail passes through private land.

E. Land Use Allocation and Objectives

On federal land, the proposed trail location is in the matrix land allocation. The broad management objectives for this allocation are outlined in the NFP and the Medford District RMP. A portion of the project area is within an R& PP lease the objectives of which are to maintain recreational opportunities. More specifically, the lease, which was established in 1963 and renewed for 25 years in 1984, designates the area for hiking and horseback riding. In 1966, the area was closed to motorized use in response to complaints about noise and trail damage (Categorical Exclusion OR-110-84-24).

Chapter 2. Proposed Action and Alternatives

A. Alternative 1: No Action Alternative

In this EA, the "no-action" alternative is defined as not implementing any aspect of the proposed action alternative(s). Therefore, the no action alternative also serves as a baseline or reference point for evaluating the environmental effects of the action alternatives. Inclusion of this alternative is done without regard to whether or not it is consistent with the Medford District RMP.

The no action alternative is not a static alternative; implicit is a continuation of current environmental conditions and trends within the project area including vegetative succession, wildlife habitat changes, erosion and fire hazard.

B. Alternative 2: Proposed Actions

1. Objective and location

North Trail. The objective is to remove a ¼ mile segment of trail that is currently on private land. This would be accomplished by obliterating the ¼ mile section and constructing a new ½ mile section of trail on BLM land. The new trail would follow slope contours and have a low grade (<10%) which would help reduce current and future erosion.

South Trail. The objectives are to prevent current trail related environmental degradation and to provide greater recreational opportunities. These objectives would be accomplished by reconstructing a ½ mile portion of existing trail (including drainage and grade improvements), building two bridges, and by constructing an additional ½ mile loop, for a total length of approximately one mile (Appendix A, Map 2).

For both trails, recreation use would remain limited to non-motorized day use.

2. Trail construction/reconstruction

The trail width would be three feet, on a full bench prism with no fill slopes. Mechanized equipment (chainsaws or trail building machines) or hand tools may be used. Some vegetation would be removed, primarily shrubs or small trees, and would be scattered below the trail to blend with the natural landscape.

Two wooden bridges would be built on the South Trail: one spanning an intermittent channel and the other, an ephemeral channel. These bridges would protect hydrophilic vegetation and maintain visual integrity in high water table areas. The bridges would be at least five feet wide and would accommodate equestrian use. Only minimal excavation (no more than two cubic yards at each site) would be needed to prepare bridge footings.

3. Permitted uses

The following uses, approved through the Recreation and Public Purposes Act (R&PP) lease with Josephine County, would continue to be permissible on all portions of the trail: hiking, horse back riding and mountain biking. The area would be day use only. The trail would be closed to motorized use, campfires and camping.

C. Project Design Features

Project design features (PDFs) are included in the proposed action to reduce anticipated adverse environmental impacts which might stem from project implementation. The PDFs noted below would be part of all action alternatives, unless otherwise noted.

1. Soil and Water

To minimize compaction, trail building machines would be limited to a wheel or track width of 36 inches (limiting compaction to the trail tread) and their use would be between March and December, as long as soil moisture is 20% or less.

Outsloping, rolling grades and water dips along long stretches would facilitate drainage.

2. Botany

If localized erosion control is needed, plant native species or sterile wheat grass. Native vegetation reestablishment would occur naturally in other disturbed areas. If any federal candidate, Bureau sensitive or survey and manage plant species are found in the project area, the trail would be designed to avoid or minimize impacts to these populations.

The trail would be monitored for noxious weed infestations. Weed control measures would be applied under the guidance of the Medford District Integrated Weed Management Plan (PA-OR110-98-14).

Mechanized equipment would be washed prior to being brought on-site and following its use to prevent the spread of noxious weeds.

3. Wildlife

Felled hazard trees would be left on site and the trail would avoid rock outcrops.

Trail sections that are no longer needed would be signed and barricaded as necessary to prevent future use and reduce wildlife disturbance.

4. Cultural Resources

Cultural sites found in the project area would be protected (trail rerouting, etc.).

Chapter 3. Environmental Consequences

A. Introduction

Only substantive, site specific environmental changes that would result from implementing the proposed action or alternatives are discussed in this chapter. If an ecological component is not discussed, it should be assumed that resource specialists considered effects to that component and determined that the proposed action or alternatives would have minimal or no effects. Similarly, unless addressed specifically, the following were found to be unaffected by the proposed action or alternatives: air quality; cultural or historical resources; Native American religious concerns; prime or unique farmlands; flood plains; endangered, threatened or sensitive plant, animal or fish species; water quality (drinking/ground); wetlands/riparian zones; wild and scenic rivers. In addition, hazardous waste or materials are not directly involved in the proposed action or alternatives.

Typical effects from similar projects are also described in the EISs and plans to which this EA is tiered.

B. Site-Specific Beneficial or Adverse Effects of the Alternatives

1. Soil and Water

a. Affected Environment

The project is located in the Rogue River – Grants Pass watershed and in the Lower Rogue River – Grants Pass subwatershed. Soils in the project area are mapped in the Soil Survey of Josephine County as Siskiyou gravelly sandy loam which is moderately deep and somewhat excessively drained. The area receives 36-38” of annual precipitation, predominately falling as rain. The North Trail crosses ephemeral draws and the South Trail crosses one intermittent and several ephemeral draws. The trail leading to the South Trail also crosses an intermittent draw.

b. Environmental Effects

1) Alternative 1: No Action

The current trail system is steep (>30% slope in places) with poor drainage and active erosion along some stretches. Ridge top trail sections have incised trail treads. Foot traffic at intermittent stream crossings has resulted in bank trampling, channel erosion and sedimentation. Erosion and sedimentation would likely increase over time due to degrading trail conditions and anticipated increased use. Most sediment resulting from erosion is dissipated into the forest, but some intermittent streams may transport sediment.

2) Alternative 2: Proposed Action

The South Trail would be designed with slopes <10% and would be located away from ridge tops. Rolling grades, out sloping, and water dips would minimize runoff and erosion. The two South Trail bridges would help reduce sedimentation in the long term (5-20 years). Water dips on the abandoned trail sections would minimize further erosion. The intermittent stream crossing on the trail leading to the North Trail would not be improved, therefore continuing as a minimal (inconsequential) source of sediment.

Project implementation would occur during dry weather; therefore, negligible short-term increases in runoff and sedimentation as well as minimal long term reductions in sedimentation within the subwatershed are anticipated.

Since the trail building machines are limited to a 36" wheel or track base, compaction would be limited to the trail tread, thereby maintaining soil productivity near the trail.

2. Vegetation and Botany (including special status species and noxious weeds)

a. Affected Environment

The project area is in mid-seral, mixed evergreen and hardwood communities comprised of Douglas-fir, incense cedar, ponderosa pine, sugar pine, madrone and black oak. Young trees, hazelnut and scattered dense patches of manzanita and poison oak comprise most of the understory. Canopy cover ranges from open to nearly closed with abundant grasses and forbs in some open areas. The plant association is Douglas-fir/dry shrub.

b. Environmental Effects

1) Alternative 1: No Action

Implementing the no-action alternative would maintain currently steep and unnaturally eroding trail segments resulting in a slight negative impact to native vegetation due to an altered hydrologic regime. The current risk of noxious weed infestation would be maintained or slightly increased if the network of off-trail use and unauthorized trail building continues.

2) Alternative 2: Proposed Action

No federally listed, survey and manage, or special status vascular plants, lichens and bryophytes were found in the project area. However, the project area does provide suitable habitat for the federally endangered *Fritillaria gentneri*.

Portions of the existing trail which are on relatively steep slopes and erosive soils would be rerouted to create a gentler grade, thus reducing erosion and improving drainage.

Drainage would also be improved through out sloping and water barring. Improved drainage and hydrologic function would benefit native vegetation.

Roads and trails can serve as corridors for noxious weed dispersal. However, given that motorized use is prohibited, the risk of noxious weed introduction is reduced. Trail construction activities in Section 5 could increase the potential for weed introduction.

Other management activities occurring in or near the South Trail project area that could cumulatively impact the risk of weed infestation include 120 acres of proposed fuel treatment (Wild Rose Fuel Hazard Reduction). Fuels treatment reduces ground cover and the shrub layer, thus increasing the area's susceptibility to weed infestation. However, the overall impact of this project on the risk of noxious weed infestation would be beneficial by reducing the total number of trails (user created trails) and concentrating use on well drained, fewer trails.

3. Wildlife (special status, S&M and habitats)

a. Affected Environment

The land within the project area provides potential habitat for a number of special status species including the northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*), goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) and other raptors as well as three bat species. As of this date, surveys have not been completed for those special status species that might be affected by the proposed action.

The following discussion of potential impacts on these species is based on alteration of potential habitat which will be assumed to be occupied. It is unlikely that all areas considered as potential habitat will prove to be occupied. Therefore, actual effects will be equal to or less than those identified.

The entire project area is within close proximity of existing roads, developments and residences. There is a baseline level of disturbance associated with the ongoing recreation and urban interface aspect of the Cathedral Hills project area.

For both the North and South Trails, habitat is diverse and includes a mosaic of conifer and hardwood stands. The primary tree species in the project area are ponderosa pine, sugar pine, Douglas-fir, madrone, white oak and manzanita. In general, the conifers are in the mature age class and there is a conspicuous absence of relict trees. Snags and coarse wood are distributed throughout the area. The most common hardwoods in the project area include madrone and white oak. These stands are characterized by relatively open canopies and are distributed throughout the project area. In some of these stands, there is excellent ground cover comprised of bear grass. Some areas contain dense thickets of decadent manzanita (>6' high).

Neither the North nor South Trails provide suitable nesting habitat for spotted owls. The absence of large relict trees and lack of a complex multi-storied canopy reduce habitat

suitability for nesting. However, the entire area is considered suitable dispersal and foraging habitat for spotted owls.

In the spring of 2002, there was an unconfirmed goshawk sighting on the south portion of the trail but no nest was located. However, a review of the project area suggests that it could provide suitable nesting or foraging habitat for goshawk.

Bats could roost in green trees and snags. Typically, foraging bats are strongly associated with bodies of water. Although the project area does not contain year round pools of water, it is still considered suitable foraging habitat.

The project area is not considered suitable great grey owl (*Strix nebulosa*) or red tree vole (*Arborimus longicaudus*) habitat.

b. Environmental Effects

1) Alternative 1: No Action

In the no action alternative, recreational use of the area would continue and likely increase over time due to expanding local populations. Therefore, recreation impacts to wildlife would continue and may include nest abandonment, displacement, altered food habits and behavior, habituation and attraction.

2) Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Overall ecological conditions are not likely to change. However, increased year round recreational use may cause slight (inconsequential) nest abandonment, displacement, altered food habits and behavior, habituation and attraction. The degree of disturbance would depend on frequency and magnitude of visitation. The type of recreational use will remain limited to non-motorized day use.

Project implementation is anticipated to take less than two weeks, limiting the duration of construction disturbance, which could result in temporary displacement and modified wildlife behavior.

The North Trail would be unlikely to result in increased use; any increases in recreation use are expected to correspond with overall trends in recreation.

Currently, in the south portion of the project area, there is a single trail that is neither signed nor well developed. Therefore, the new South Trail would likely result in increased recreation use, impacting wildlife more than would be expected based solely on recreation increases due to population trends.

Because area wildlife are already adapted to certain amounts of disturbance associated with recreation and the urban interface, gradual increases in use will likely impact

wildlife only minimally to moderately. Individuals most sensitive to disturbance may be displaced, while others will adapt and continue to occupy the project area.

There are no anticipated impacts to spotted owl reproduction. If goshawks or other raptor species are determined to be nesting within the project area, seasonal restrictions for the construction periods will minimize impacts to reproductive success.

Project implementation could result in hazard tree felling. Felling snags that provide suitable bat roosting habitat would result in bat displacement but would have little impact on foraging habitat.

4. Recreation/Cultural Resources

a. Affected Environment

These trails are part of a larger trail system in Cathedral Hills Park. The park consists of more than five miles of non-motorized trails for hiking, horse back riding and mountain bicycling. Because the park is just outside Grants Pass, the trails are heavily used. The North Trail is in a 400 acre parcel of BLM land managed by Josephine County Parks under a Recreation and Public Purposes Act (R&PP) Lease. The South Trail would cross county and BLM land. The project area is in VRM Class 3, which requires partial retention of the visual landscape. Portions of the existing trail are on private land. Furthermore, some trail segments are on overly steep slopes, are eroding, have poor drainage and present safety hazards to users.

There are no known cultural sites along the proposed route.

b. Environmental Effects

1) Alternative 1: No Action

Recreational activity would continue on private lands, causing conflicts between users and landowners. The trail on private land is also steep and eroding.

Current unregulated, dispersed use in the south area would continue. Multiple non-designated trails, which are steep and heavily eroded, would continue to be developed. Safety would continue to be a concern due to use of steep, unmarked, unofficial routes.

2) Alternative 2: Proposed Action

According to Hammitt and Cole¹, trail construction is a good example of use concentration that reduces the number of user-created trails dissecting the landscape. Use concentration would also limit safety hazards by providing a designated trail rather than allowing multiple trails to be developed in steep, brushy terrain, where hikers could become lost or injured.

¹ Hammitt, William and David Cole 1987. Wildland Recreation: Ecology and Management.

The rerouted North Trail would provide public access to BLM lands and avoid private land, thus eliminating or reducing conflicts between users and landowners. The trail would also be constructed at a more favorable grade for all users and would reduce erosion potential.

South Trail construction would provide a diverse experience for users because it would pass through landscapes than are currently unavailable within the Cathedral Hills trail system. Impacts would be concentrated along the appropriately graded trail rather than dispersed throughout the area on multiple, steep, unofficial trails.

VRM Class 3 objectives would be maintained in that project implementation would not appreciably impact canopy cover or the visual landscape.

Chapter 4. Agencies and Persons Consulted

A. Agencies and Persons Consulted

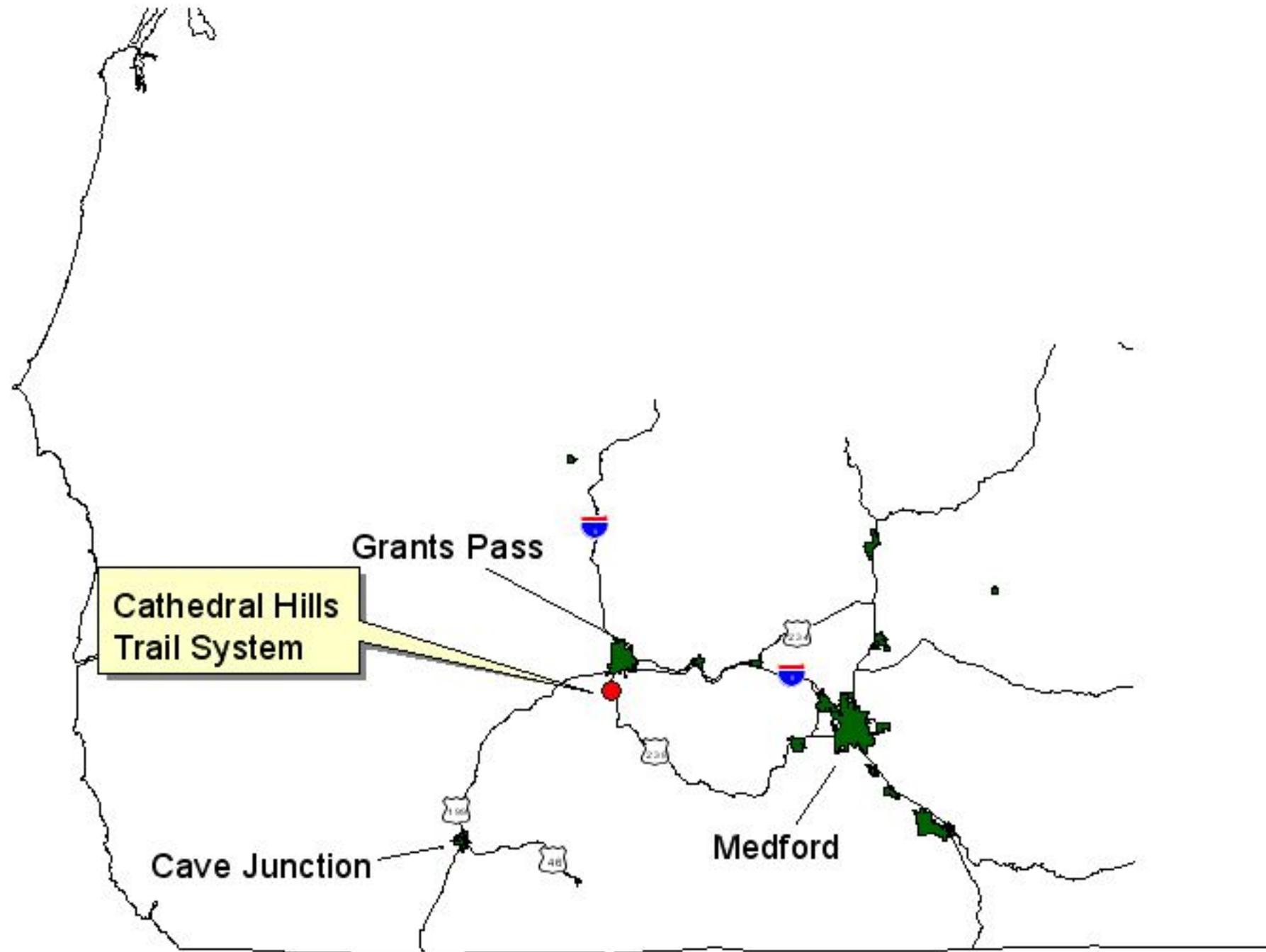
All input was considered by the interdisciplinary planning team in developing the project proposal and preparing this EA. Furthermore, Josephine County Parks officials were consulted prior to preparation of this proposal.

B. Availability of Document and Comment Procedures

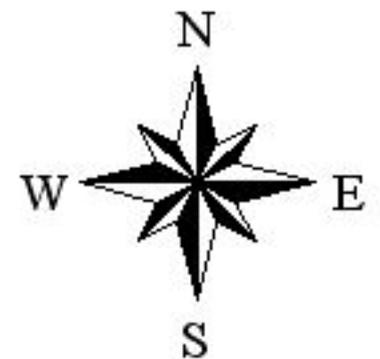
Copies of the EA will be available for public review in the BLM Medford District Office. A formal 15 day public comment period will be held following an announcement in the Grants Pass Daily Courier.

Written comments should be addressed to Abbie Jossie, Field Manager, Grants Pass Resource Area, at 3040 Biddle Road, Medford, OR 97504. E-mailed comments may be sent to *or110mb@or.blm.gov*.

Cathedral Hills Vicinity Map

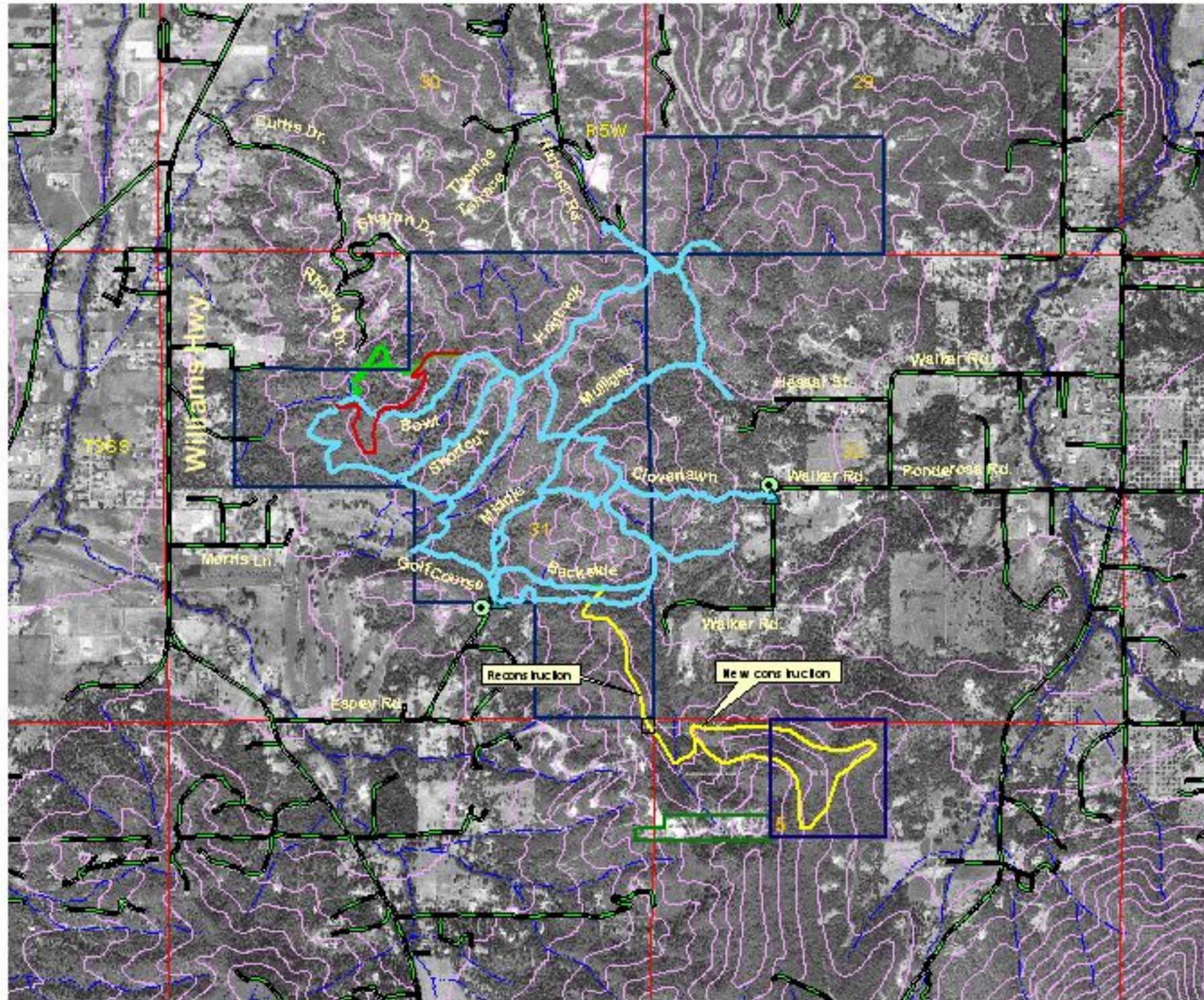


-  Cities
-  Major Roads
-  State boundary



Cathedral Hills

Trail Reroute and Construction



-  Proposed reroute
-  Cathedral hills trails
-  Proposed new trail construction
-  Trailheads
-  Parking
-  Roads_all
-  BLM Ownership
-  Streams
-  Old trail-private land
-  Section lines
-  Contour lines

