ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

for

Grayback Mountain Trail Construction
Phase 2b and 3

EA# OR110-03-18

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 or email them to *or110mb@or.blm.gov*.

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
Field Manager
Grants Pass Resource Area

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

EA COVER SHEET

RESOURCE AREA: *Grants Pass* FY and EA# OR-110-03-18

ACTION/TITLE: *Grayback Mountain Trail Construction - Phase 2b and 3*
LOCATION: T39S, R5W, Section 21 Willamette Meridian, Josephine Co., Oregon.

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GRANTS PASS RESOURCE AREA
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Grayback Mountain Trail Construction - Phase 2b and 3

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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* (October 1994) (RMP)
(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, *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) (NFP)
(4) *Record of Decision and Standards and Guidelines for Amendments to the Survey and Manager, Protection Buffer, and other Mitigation Measures Standards and Guidelines* (January 2001)
(5) *Grayback Mountain Trail Construction - Phase 1 Environmental Assessment* (EA # OR-110-00-26) (August 2000)
(6) *Grayback Mountain Trail Construction- Phase 2a Environmental Assessment* (EA # OR-110-01-50) (September 2001)

This EA also draws from the following documents:

(1) *Williams Watershed Analysis*, BLM - Grants Pass Resource Area, 1996
(2) *Grayback/Sucker Watershed Analysis*, Siskiyou National Forest, USFS, 1995
(3) *Source Book for Natural Area Coordinators* (March 1990)
(4) USFWS Biological Opinion #1-7-96-F-392

The proposed project is to finish construction of the trail, phase 2b and 3 (see project location), which includes BLM and Forest Service lands. The overall proposal was described in the Grayback Trail Construction - Phase 1 EA (August 2000) and Phase 2a EA (September 2001). Those EAs analyzed the portion of the trail that was subsequently constructed in the fall of 2000, 2001 and 2002. Division of the overall project (analysis and implementation) into phases was necessitated by the timing of the completion of S&M species surveys along different segments of the trail.

B. Purpose of and Need for the Proposal

The broad purpose of the proposed action is to implement the Medford District's Resource Management Plan (RMP). The Grayback Mountain Trail is one of 16 potential trails identified in the RMP to be developed as funding, opportunity and workload allow, the purpose of which is to provide and develop recreation opportunities.

The Grayback Trail would also have regional and national significance. It would provide access to over 2,500 miles of trail in the western US, including the Pacific Crest Trail and the Boundary Trail (two trails in the national trails system) as well as other trail systems on National Forest lands (including the Red Buttes Wilderness Area) and the Oregon Caves National Monument. The Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail traverses more than 2,500 miles from Mexico to Canada. The Boundary Trail follows, for eight miles, the ridge that separates the Illinois River and Applegate Valleys.

Specifically, the purpose of the trail is to provide foot and equestrian access to a high elevation (6,000 feet) recreational area and to join with the Forest Service National Boundary Trail managed by the Siskiyou and Rogue River National Forests.

C. Project Location

The general location of the proposed project is shown on Map 1 (Appendix A). The project is located on BLM and Forest Service lands in the Williams fifth field watershed.

D. Issues and Concerns Relevant to the Project

A variety of issues and concerns were identified during the initial 2000 scoping of the Grayback Trail construction project. Issues were raised by the project planning team, the resource area's interdisciplinary team and have been drawn from some of the documents noted above.

No new or additional issues were raised in comments received regarding earlier phases of this project. Therefore, the issues used in the design of the proposed Phase 2b and 3 are as follows:

- Non-native vegetation may be introduced due to increased use.
- Fire risk may increase due to greater recreational use.
- A portion of the trail would pass through the Grayback Glades RNA.
- Soils are potentially erosive and there are talus slopes in the area.
- Habitat for the northern spotted owl, a federally listed species, is found in the project area.
- There is existing and potential OHV use on adjacent trails on Forest Service lands.

E. Land Use Allocation and Objectives

The proposed trail traverses three NFP/RMP land allocations: Adaptive Management Area (AMA), Late-Successional Reserve (LSR), and Riparian Reserve. The management objectives for these allocations are identified in the NFP and the Medford District RMP (pp. 26, 32, 36, 67).

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 or other alternatives. Therefore, the no action alternative 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 static; implicit is a continuation of current environmental conditions and trends within the project area including vegetative succession, wildlife habitat changes, erosion, fire hazard, OHV use, etc.

B. Alternative 2: Proposed Action

1. Objectives

Grayback Mountain Trail objectives include:

- providing access to the Boundary Trail from the Williams area
- completion of the final phase of the Grayback Mountain Trail development linking Rock Creek Road and the Forest Service Boundary Trail.

The proposed action is to:

- build 4.5 miles of trail, including brushing (total trail length is six miles)
- provide additional parking using turnouts (widened as needed but staying within the road prism) on the Rock Creek Road
- acquire an easement through section 20
- obliterate and rehabilitate the Old Rock Creek Trail (2.25 miles) through the RNA, including removal of old campsites
- post RNA boundaries
- establish trail head interpretive signs that would discuss the unique RNA features and the importance of staying on the trail.

2. Permissible Uses

Allowable uses would remain hiking and horseback riding. Mountain biking and motorized use are not permitted (off highway vehicle use in LSRs is limited to designated roads as stated on page 67 of the Medford District RMP). Campfires and camping would not be permitted within the RNA.

C. Project Design Features

Project design features (PDFs) are included in the proposed action for the purpose of reducing adverse environmental impacts that might result from project implementation. PDFs would be the same for all alternatives unless otherwise noted.

1. Trail Construction Standards

Trail tread would be three feet wide, allowing for weathering over time to a final maintenance width of two feet.

Excavated fines would be used to fill spaces on talus slopes or would be incorporated into the trail tread construction; sidecast would be minimal

Organic debris would be scattered below the trail to blend with the natural landscape.

The trail would be out-sloped, rolled and dipped for proper drainage.

The trail tread would be constructed on a full bench prism with no fill slopes.

Vegetation clearing would be four feet horizontally on each side of the centerline and ten feet vertically from the centerline.

The trail would be built using mechanized equipment (e.g. chainsaws, trail building machines) or by hand. The maximum wheel or track width would not exceed 36 inches.

Explosives may be used to remove stumps or large rocks.

Mechanized equipment would be washed prior to entering the project site to reduce the chance of spreading *Phytophthora lateralis* or noxious weeds.

2. Botany

Native plant species or sterile wheat grass would be used for trail rehabilitation (through the RNA) or erosion control. Native vegetation would reestablish naturally in other disturbed areas. The trail would be routed to avoid any species of concern plant populations (federally listed, proposed, Bureau sensitive, or survey and manage plant species).

3. Cultural Resources

If cultural sites are found along the proposed trail route during implementation, mitigation measures such as trail rerouting would be implemented to protect the sites.

4. Wildlife

Construction would not be permitted within ¼ mile of spotted owl nests or unsurveyed spotted owl habitat between March 1 and June 30.

If goshawk or other raptor nests are found, project implementation would be seasonally restricted to minimize potential impacts to reproductive success.

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. For ecological components that are not discussed, it can be assumed that resource specialists considered effects to that component and found that the action alternatives would have inconsequential or no effects. Therefore, unless addressed specifically, the following were found not to be affected 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 trail is on and adjacent to ridges that separate the 6th field watersheds of East and West Forks of Williams Creek. Trail construction would occur at elevations between 4,000 and 6,400 feet. Project area soils are mapped in the Soil Survey of Josephine County as Tethrick gravelly fine sandy loam (surface and subsoil). Tethrick soils are well drained, deeper than 40 inches and are developed in colluvium derived primarily from granitic rock. Tethrick soils are highly erosive due to low cohesion. Other project area soils (also primarily granitic) are the Crannler, Goodwin, and Rogue series. These soils, which have a high erosion hazard, are a stony sandy loam with a depth of 20-40 inches or more.

b. Environmental Effects

1) Alternative 1: No Action

Conditions that affect soils and hydrologic status should remain essentially the same in both the short term (up to 5 years) and long term (5-20 years).

2) Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Trail design features would maintain natural drainage patterns. Therefore, the trail itself should cause minimal, if any, changes to localized runoff, erosion or sedimentation to stream networks in either of the 6th field watersheds.

Vegetation cleared during trail construction and increased use would inconsequentially diminish the vegetated area and plant productivity.

Motorized and mountain bike use would not be permitted on the trail and trails would be signed to that effect. However, equestrian use would be allowed. Horse hooves put greater bearing pressure on the trail surface than do hikers. This could lower the trail surface and create a low track on the trail that could transport runoff, alter natural drainage patterns and potentially lead to erosion if uncorrected over time. However, it is anticipated that little to no sediment would reach the stream network, given the project design, periodic maintenance, and the fact that the ridge top trail does not cross any streams and is far from most water.

2. Botanical Resources (Special Status Species)

a. Affected Environment

Surveys for survey and manage/special status vascular plants, lichens and bryophytes were conducted in July and August of 2002; no special status plants were found. The lower elevation, northern portions of the proposed trail in sections 29 and 32 are characterized by a mixture of Douglas-fir, white fir, incense cedar, chinquapin, and madrone. The higher elevation, southern portions of the trail in sections 32, 4 and 5 are characterized by white fir, mountain hemlock and shasta red fir. Approximately 1.5 miles of the proposed trail would pass through the Grayback Glades Research Natural Area (RNA).

b. Environmental Effects

1) Alternative 1: No Action

No adverse effects would occur for botanical resources in the project area.

2) Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Vegetation loss within the trail prism due to construction would be negligible on a stand and landscape scale. No large or old growth trees would be cut. Some trampling or browsing from horses would likely occur near the trail in flatter areas.

A noxious weed interpretive kiosk at the trailhead would educate visitors in how to help prevent infestations along the trail. The kiosk and potential interpretive hikes would provide educational opportunities which, in addition to recreation, are appropriate uses of an RNA (RMP p. 56).

Proposed Monitoring: Monitor annually or periodically to provide maintenance recommendations to mitigate disturbance effects and control noxious weeds.

The 1.5 mile portion of the trail that passes through Grayback Glades RNA would not impact key values or natural processes in the RNA since it neither passes through nor approaches sensitive areas such as headwater springs, riparian zones with Port-Orford cedar (POC) or the glades proper. Slopes near the trail in the RNA are very steep; therefore, substantial off-trail use and impacts are unlikely. Obliteration of the old trail through the RNA would decrease the possibility of POC root disease or noxious weed infestation. Although trail construction could provide a vector for noxious weed infestation, the closed canopy and rocky habitat in the RNA is not well-suited for noxious weed proliferation. Any seed deposited by boots or horses would have a low probability of becoming established or spreading in or near the RNA.

There are few trails in this portion of the Siskiyou Mountains. Therefore, cumulative effects that might result from trail related vegetation disturbance should be negligible.

4. Wildlife (Special Status, S&M Species and their Habitats)

a. Affected Environment

The land allocation on the BLM portion of the trail is LSR. The portion of the trail built in 1989, prior to the listing of the northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*) as a threatened species, passes near a spotted owl nesting location.

The project area includes high elevation true fir, meadows and alder glades providing potential habitat for a number of special status species that could be affected by this project including the northern spotted owl, red tree vole (*Phenacomys longicaudus*), goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*), other raptors, and three Survey and Manage bat species. As of this date, surveys have not been completed for the northern goshawk. Surveys will be conducted beginning in June 2003.

The impacts discussed below are based on the alteration of potential habitat for different wildlife species and will assume that the habitat is occupied. This assumption ensures that actual effects would be equal to or less than what is being analyzed.

b. Environmental Effects

1) Alternative 1: No Action

The existing portion of trail would remain unlinked from any trail head and would not access any other trails. Existing trends in vegetation would continue. Species that occur within the area would remain undisturbed. Current trends in populations would remain the same. The area would continue to have little visitation from humans and would remain relatively remote.

2) Alternative 2: Proposed Action

The trail is not anticipated to change the overall ecological conditions of surrounding habitats. The primary impact would be increased human activity in areas that currently receive little visitation. The degree of disturbance would depend on the frequency and magnitude of use. It is

anticipated that the trail would receive light weekend use. Overnight use would be allowed but due to the limited amount of flat terrain and primary use of the trail to access higher elevation areas, extended periods of camping would not be expected. Therefore, most disturbance would be near the trail and would not likely affect local animal populations. The RTV is a small arboreal species not likely to be affected by trail recreation; therefore, there are no anticipated impacts to RTV populations and habitat.

The Rock Creek and Little Sugarloaf northern spotted owl nesting sites are adjacent to the existing and proposed trail. Increased visitation could cause nest abandonment, displacement, changes in food habits, and altered behavior.

Proposed Monitoring: Monitor annually or periodically to better assess the impact of increased trail traffic on spotted owl nesting.

The trail would also pass through unsurveyed suitable habitat for the northern spotted owl. Increased activity associated with trail construction including noise from chainsaws or trail building machines could negatively affect owls in the area. Seasonal operating restrictions for trail construction would reduce impacts to owls to an inconsequential level during the nesting season (see Project Design Features).

Goshawks and other raptors may also be impacted by an increase in human use of the trail. If goshawks or other raptor species are found to be nesting within the project area, seasonal restrictions for implementation would minimize potential impacts to reproductive success.

5. Recreation and Cultural Resources

a. Affected Environment

The proposed trail is in a Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class III area. The project would meet VRM III objectives to: "partially retain the existing character of the landscape. Management activities may attract attention but should not dominate the view of the casual observer." (BLM Manual H8410-1, 1986.)

There are no known cultural sites along the proposed route.

b. Environmental Effects

1) Alternative 1: No Action

Recreational use would continue to be light and user impacts would be dispersed throughout the area. The existing section of the Grayback Mountain Trail would be shorter and more difficult to access due to its location behind a locked gate.

2) Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Phase 2b and 3 would complement and complete the sections of this trail built between 1990 and 2002. The trail would provide additional hiking and equestrian opportunities and would facilitate

access to the Pacific Crest Trail. The project would also provide access to and interpretation of unique high elevation habitat.

Impacts would be limited to a single designated trail rather than multiple unauthorized trails, which are likely to result without implementation of this project. According to Hammitt and Cole[1], 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 that 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.

Chapter 4. Agencies and Persons Consulted

A. Agencies and Persons Consulted

The staffs of several agencies and groups were consulted prior to preparation of this proposal:

Siskiyou National Forest, Illinois Valley Ranger District
Illinois Valley Community Response Team
Rogue River National Forest, Applegate Ranger District
Williams Watershed Council
Applegate River Watershed Council
Brushriders Equestrian Club

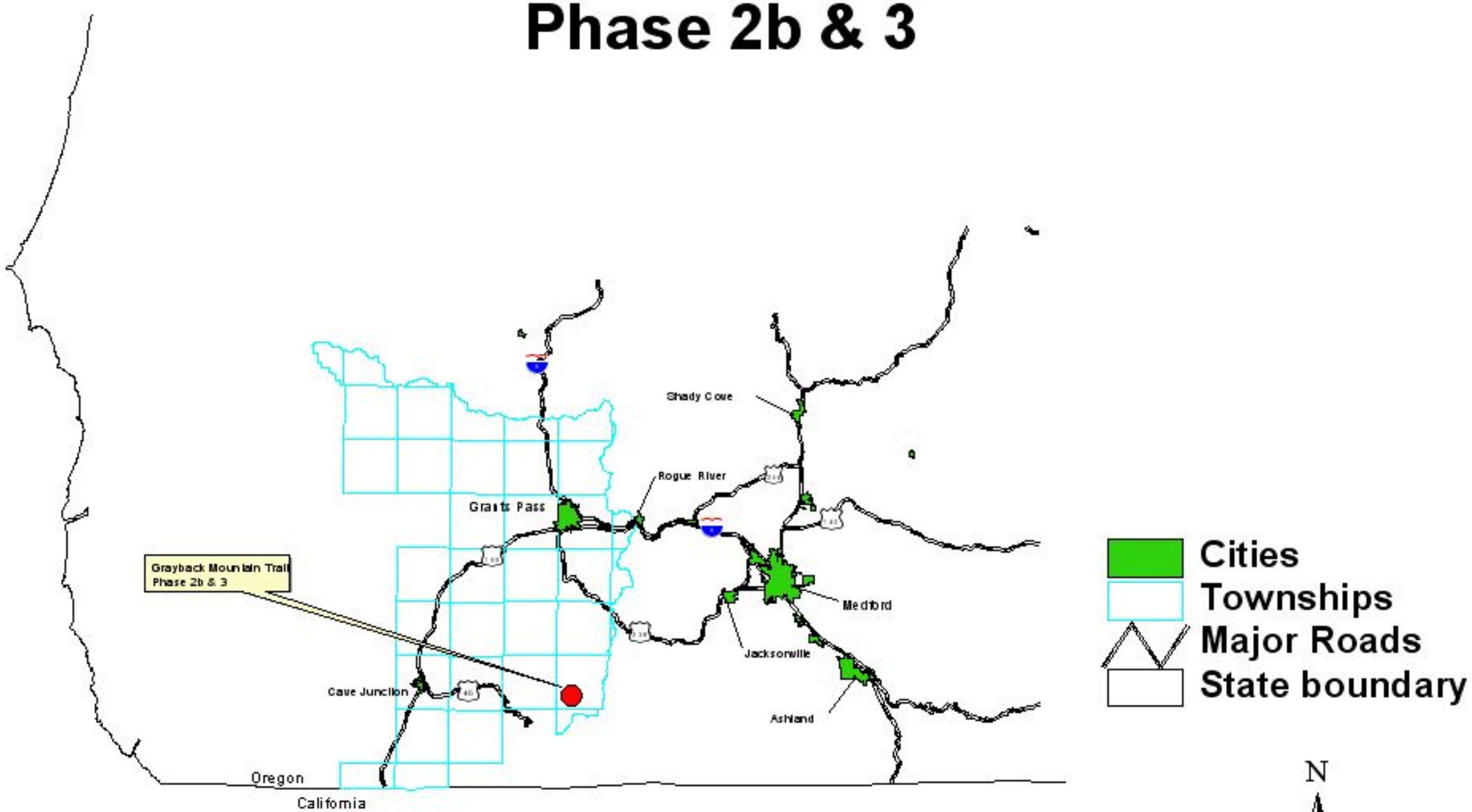
A public comment period was also held in August 2000 for the review of the Grayback Trail Phase 1 Construction Project EA which outlined the full Grayback Trail project. One letter was received during this comment period and it registered support for the project. Previous trail sections were constructed by local volunteers; these volunteer projects provided opportunities for additional comments and views to be presented.

B. Availability of Document and Comment Procedures

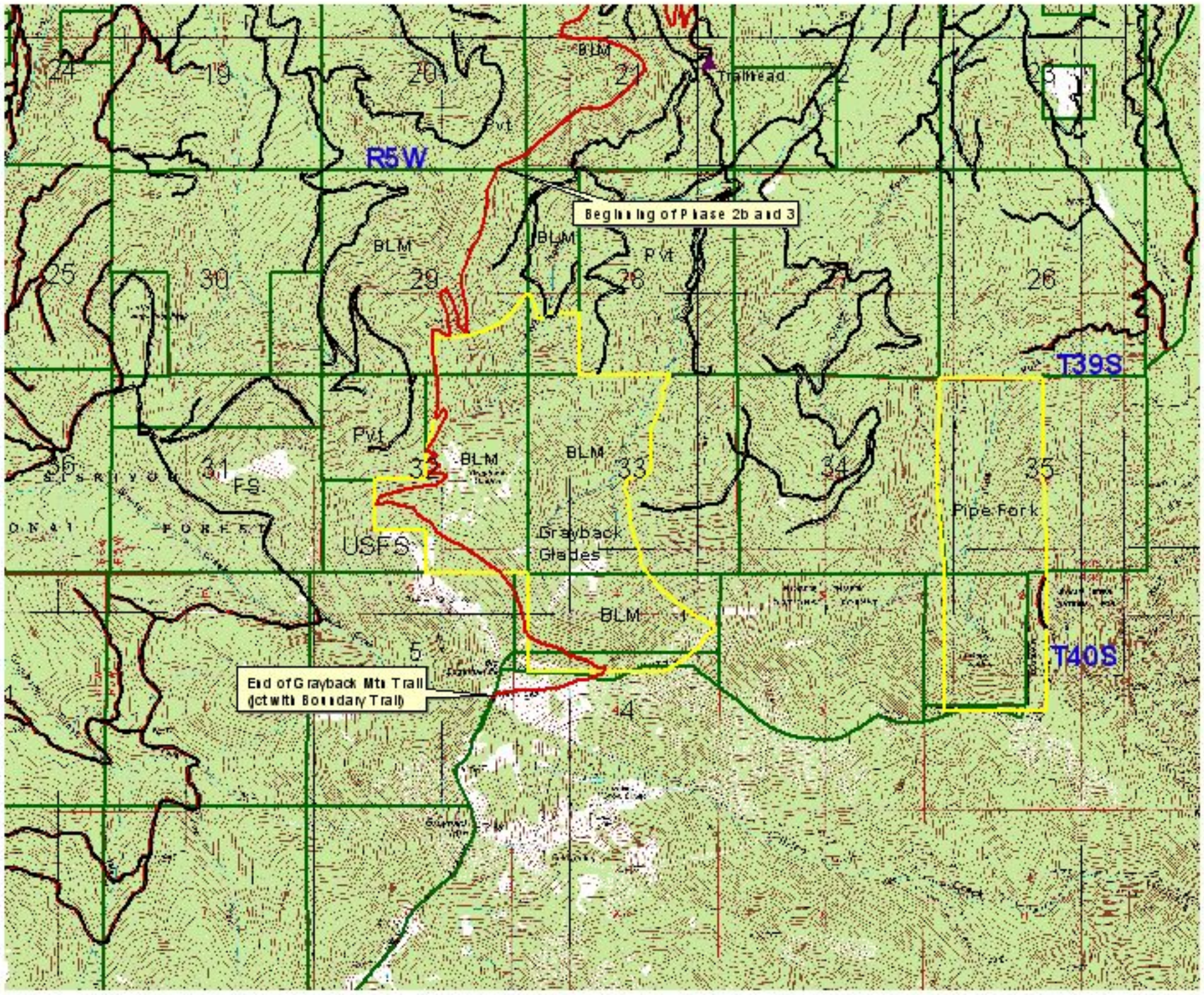
Copies of the EA document will be available for formal public review in the BLM Medford District Office. A formal 15 day public comment period will be held following an announcement in the Grants Pass Daily Courier.

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*.

Location Map
Grayback Mountain Trail
Phase 2b & 3



Grayback MountainTrail-Phase 2b & 3



Roads
Grayback trail
RNA Boundary
Section lines

N
W
E
S

2 0 2 4 Miles