

DECISION MEMO FOR SKYLINE TRAIL
USDA Forest Service, San Bernardino National Forest
Mountaintop Ranger District
San Bernardino County

United States Department of
Agriculture

Forest Service
Pacific Southwest Region R5



April 2012

Decision

It is my decision to approve the designation and construction of a single-track non-motorized trail called the Skyline Trail.

The original proposal was for a trail between the eastern end of Forest Road 2N10 (near Bear Mountain Ski Resort) and the Big Bear dam area (see attached map). I have a number of concerns about the western portion of the trail where it goes through endangered plant habitat and a relatively undisturbed area of the forest. As such, I have decided not to approve the western end of the trail at this time. Instead, the west end of the Skyline Trail will end at the junction of Forest roads 2N10 and 2N11. It will start again at the intersection of 2N10 and North Creek and continue parallel to 2N10 to the intersection with 2N17. This will allow riders to use Forest Road 2N10 to access other portions of the trail system or to ride on 2N11 to access the Champion Lodgepole pine area. It will also separate non-motorized and motorized traffic along this busy section of 2N10 between Bluff Lake and Camp Osito Rancho.

After further study in the future, I may consider a subsequent phase that would extend the Skyline Trail in the original proposed location or in another alignment.

Purpose and Need

The purpose and need for the Skyline Trail is to separate motorized from non-motorized traffic on Forest Service Road (FSR) 2N10 to increase safety for all users. FSR 2N10 is a popular, meandering, unpaved road that is frequently traveled by people driving vehicles, motorcycles, and bicycles. The combination of mixed use and relatively high number of users has resulted in several near collisions, as well as documented accidents between vehicles and non-motorized users.

Project Description

The project involves the construction and designation of the Skyline Recreation Trail, a non-motorized, multi-use trail within the bounds of the Skyline Fuelbreak, located along the ridge south of the Big Bear Valley.

The Skyline Recreation Trail will be designed and constructed to encourage bicyclists to travel at safe speeds, thereby promoting safe shared-use for all non-motorized recreationists. The trail will roughly parallel Forest Service Road 2N10 and follow an east-west alignment. The recreation trail in the fuelbreak is also intended to decrease the use of non-system trails in the vicinity of the Skyline Fuelbreak. As a result, the Mountaintop Ranger District also proposes to close and restore intersecting non-system trails to their natural condition that pose risks to Forest resources or hazards to Forest

visitors. Signs will be installed to mark the trail and to direct and educate trail users away from non-system routes as necessary. Trail construction will utilize best management practices to mitigate resource concerns and will follow Trails Management Handbook guidelines (FSH 2309.18).

The Forest Service has developed a partnership with the Big Bear Trails Foundation which has proposed the development of this trail. As part of the partnership, the Trails Foundation would adopt the trail. Under the guidance of the Forest Service, they would construct and maintain the trail. They would also monitor the trail for problems such as new user-created trails and work with the Forest Service to remedy the problems.

Trail construction would be accomplished by hand crews and hand tools for the most part. In some places, a small trail excavator may be used to establish the track.

It is likely that the trail would be constructed in segments over the period of 3-5 years. Trail construction is expected to start in the summer of 2012.

Avoidance/Minimization and Mitigation Measures

As part of my decision, the construction and maintenance of the Skyline Trail would adhere to a number of Design Features that to help reduce the level and extent of potential impacts from the project. The Design Features are described in Appendix A.

Management Direction

The Project Area is in the Big Bear Place (LMP Part 2, p. 49). Program emphases for this place include community protection, healthy ecosystems, conservation education, quality recreation opportunities, protection and recovery of TES species, and maintenance and improvement of scenic quality.

No Special Area Designations from the LMP (*e.g.*, Research Natural Areas, Special Interest Areas, eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers, or Inventoried Roadless Areas) occur in the Project Area. Bear Creek, adjacent to the Project Area, is eligible for Wild and Scenic River designation but has not been designated (LMP Part 2, p. 51) and is one of two designated State of California “Wild Trout Streams” on the SBNF (<http://www.dfg.ca.gov/fishing>).

The project area includes areas with Scenic Integrity Objective (SIO) of High. The Skyline Trail goes through several Recreation Opportunity Spectra (ROS): Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized; Semi-Primitive Motorized; and Roaded Natural. The Forest Plan contains explanations about management direction for these types of areas. The Forest Plan also contains specific guidance for management of recreation in a natural setting on the San Bernardino National Forest (Goal 3.1, Part 1, pg. 34).

Reasons For Categorically Excluding The Proposed Action

This project is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement under Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, 36 CFR 220.6(e)(1): *Construction and reconstruction of trails*.

This is a low impact project that will not have a significant effect on the environment. There are no extraordinary circumstances or conditions associated with the project. It was also determined through environmental analysis that specifically, this determination is based on the absence, among others, of adverse effects on the following resource conditions:

- a. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species: No federally-listed species or Primary Constituent Elements for designated Critical Habitat would be affected by the development, use, and maintenance of the Skyline Trail. Design Features are included to ensure that there would not be negative effects to the occurrences of federally-listed species and their habitat. (*Biological Assessment by District Biologist Robin Eliason and District Botanist Scott Eliason*).
- b. Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds: This project does not place new facilities in floodplains or municipal watersheds. Wetlands in the project area would be avoided during trail construction.
- c. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas: None are present.
- d. Inventoried roadless areas: None are present.
- e. Research Natural Areas: None are present.
- f. American Indian religious or cultural sites; and archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas: Surveys of the project area were conducted for the construction of the Skyline Fuelbreak, the South Big Bear Fuel Reduction EA, and the Bluff Lake Fuel Reduction EA. There are no known heritage sites within the construction area. Section 106 certification for the construction, use, and maintenance of the Skyline Trail will be completed prior to implementation.

Public Involvement/Issues

A scoping letter was published in the Big Bear Grizzly on August 17, 2011. In addition, the project was presented to the public at an open house field meeting on 08/20/2011. Over twenty responses were received. Almost all were very supportive of the Skyline Trail proposal due to the safety concerns of bicycles and motorized vehicles sharing Forest Road 2N10.

Two commenters raised the concern about the number of user-created trails that have proliferated on the south side of Big Bear Lake and the associated erosion and damage to the natural habitats. Another commenter raised a number of concerns about hiking and bicycling uses not being compatible on the same trail, the inability of the Forest Service to adequately police and monitor the existing trails, and the disturbance of wildlife.

It is my expectation that by having the new trail adopted by a volunteer group, they will help the Forest Service monitor and maintain the trail. With signing and proper maintenance, erosion should be reduced and new trails should be closed and restored as they appear. Volunteers will have ownership and an incentive to work with the mountain biking community to ensure that users respect and use the trail system properly.

At the same time that I am signing this decision, I am also signing a decision that will designate some of the user-created trails and close and restore all of the rest. It is my expectation that by having an official trail system that is adopted in whole by the mountain biking user groups, the trails will be maintained properly to reduce erosion and other impacts, and that users will be more responsible about staying on the official trails.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This finding is consistent with the San Bernardino National Forest Land Management Plan (2006), the Endangered Species Act of 1973, State Historic Preservation Act, and the National Forest Management Act of 1976, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Clean Water Act and Floodplain Management (E.O. 11988), and Protection of Wetlands (E.O. 11990).

Implementation Date

If no appeals are filed within the 45 day appeal period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, five business days from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed under 36 CFR 215, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215. To initiate an appeal, written notice of appeal must be postmarked within 45 days of the publication date of the legal notice of this decision in the Big Bear Grizzly. Attachments received after the 45 day appeal period will not be considered. The publication date in the Big Bear Grizzly is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. It is the appellant's responsibility to meet the requirements of 36 CFR 215.14.

Copies of the notice to appeal must be filed with Forest Supervisor; Skyline Trail Appeal; San Bernardino National Forest; 602 S. Tippecanoe Ave.; San Bernardino, CA 92408. Appeals may be submitted in person at the address above during normal business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic appeals must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf) or word (.doc) to: comments-pacificsouthwest-san-bernardino-big-bear@fs.fed.us.

Contact Person

For additional information regarding this project, contact Scott Tangenberg at the Big Bear Ranger Station (P.O. Box 290, Fawnskin, CA 92333; stangenberg@fs.fed.us).

Approved By:

_____/s/Scott Tangenberg
Scott Tangenberg, District Ranger
San Bernardino National Forest

4/27/12
Date

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Appendix A: Project Design Features

Visual Quality Design Features

Follow the trail Trails Management Handbook guidelines (FSH 2309.18).

Recreation Design Features

The entire Skyline Trail falls within the Rural and Roaded Natural classes of the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS). Forest Road 2N10 falls within both classifications of Roaded Natural and Rural of the ROS. Forest Road 2N21 falls within Rural classification. Both Rural and Roaded Natural ROS classes call for an experience with low opportunity for challenge with physical settings that are in harmony with the environment, which appear to be within a characteristic setting of the landscape. The following design features will assist in achieving both Roaded Natural and Rural objectives found within the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum of the project area:

1. General Design and Layout:
 - a. A Recreation Forester will be consulted prior to the layout and marking of the trail by the project layout specialist when implementing the project around the Bear Mountain and Snow Summit ski area boundaries.
 - b. Excess slash from trailwork will be scattered and blended into surround vegetation.
 - c. If any recreation permits are issued for the project area during the implementation process of this project, users should be informed of possible hazards that one may encounter in the project area.
 - d. The trail will connect to Bear Mountain and Snow Summit ski area trails to minimize locations where non-motorized trail users are on the same roads as motorized users. The blending of slash in the vicinity of Bear Mountain and Snow Summit ski areas shall mimic the overall characteristic of the ski area's characteristic vegetation pattern.

WILDLIFE DESIGN FEATURES

1. California Spotted Owl

- a. Where construction is conducted within ¼-mile of nest trees, conduct activities outside the nesting season (February 1st to August 15th). Protocol-level surveys may be used to determine territory occupancy: where territories are not occupied by nesting pairs, the seasonal restriction is not needed. Protocol-level surveys need to be started in the middle of March. Six visits are required at least 5 days apart: occupancy cannot be verified until late April/early May.

2. Southwestern willow flycatcher

- a. Follow LRMP management direction and BMPs for protection of riparian habitats.
- b. No activities will be conducted within 900 feet of suitable habitat during the nesting season (May 1st through August 31st), unless protocol surveys indicate absence of the species. Treatments within 900 feet of suitable

habitat may occur outside the nesting season if there are no impacts to riparian vegetation or aquatic systems.

3. **Mountain yellow-legged frog**

- a. Follow LRMP management direction and BMPs for protection of riparian habitats.
- b. Modeled habitat will be avoided or surveyed for suitability prior to project activities. Impacts to suitable habitat will be avoided and a 200 foot buffer will be implemented to protect suitable habitat.

4. **General**

- a. All categories of spotted owl habitat or habitat for other species requiring special treatment as described below will be delineated on maps and kept within the project file. These maps will be used to guide project layout and implementation with assistance from the project biologists.
- b. Nighttime work (and use of artificial lighting) will not be permitted.

5. **Snags and logs:**

- a. Where logs must be moved, a biologist train construction crews to monitor for sensitive reptiles.
- b. Where possible, existing logs will be left undisturbed (no cutting through down logs if trail can be easily routed around, no equipment used over existing logs; trees felled away from existing logs, etc.).

6. **Southern rubber boas and other sensitive/watch reptiles**

- a. Crews will be provided training/identification information on several sensitive animals (southern rubber boas, aquatic two-striped garter snake, San Bernardino ringneck snake, San Bernardino kingsnake, mountain yellow-legged frogs, etc.) and provided direction for what to do if those species are encountered (immediately contact the District Biologist and do not handle the animal). At that time, the District Biologist will determine appropriate measures to minimize impacts.
- b. Equipment and crews will avoid disturbing rock outcrops, boulders, and logs to the extent possible. No equipment will be operated on these features and no trees skidded over them. If buffers cannot be flagged on the ground, a biological monitor will be on site when activities occur in the area.
- c. Where practical, implement a Limited Operating Period (LOP) (no operations between October 1st and November 15th and between March 1st and May 31st) in the highest quality rubber boa habitat.
- d. If using a LOP is not feasible: During seasons of rubber boa activities (between October 1st and November 15th and between March 1st and May 31st), biological monitors will be used in high quality habitat in the early morning before equipment operations begin to clear construction trails of rubber boas.

Heritage Prescription

1. Areas of high-to-medium probability for heritage resources and areas of low topographical relief that are identified where ground disturbance may occur and/or will have the potential to affect heritage resources have been inventoried in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, National Environmental Policy Act, and with the *First Amended Regional Programmatic Agreement among the USDA Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region, California State Historic Preservation Officer, and Advisory Council on Historic Preservation* (PA). Historic properties and unevaluated heritage resource sites (sites) located within the Area of Potential Effect (APE) have been recorded, and the perimeter of the boundaries marked with flagging with a suitable buffer applied. Ground-disturbing activities will only occur within the boundaries of these sites and buffers as specified below on a case-by-case basis approved by a Heritage Resource Manager (HRM).
2. When project activities do occur within boundaries of sites, the following conditions will be applied as Standard Resource Protection Measures, as outlined in the PA.
 - a. Felling and removal of hazard, wind throw, and salvage trees may occur within sites. Felled trees may be removed using techniques that provide minimal ground disturbance, such as (but not restricted to) hand bucking and carrying, rubber-tired loader, crane/self loader, and/or helicopter systems.
 - b. Equipment operators and other operators shall be briefed on the need to reduce ground-disturbances (e.g., avoiding cultural features, artifact concentrations, etc., and minimizing turns).
 - c. Trail construction will not be allowed within historic property boundaries unless a pre-existing road through the site exists and this pre-existing road contains no potential for subsurface cultural properties that may be damaged by the above activity.
 - d. Forest Heritage Resource specialists, as determined by the HRM, will monitor all such activities within sites as mentioned above at the time of project implementation. No treatment will occur within any site, structure or object until an implementation plan has been developed by the District or Forest Heritage Resource Manager. Forest Heritage Resource specialists shall monitor a certain percentage of sites that the HRM deems necessary after completion of the project.
3. In order to monitor for previously unrecorded heritage resources, the HRM may designate specific locations to re-inventory/monitor upon the completion of the project and produce a follow-up report identifying the results. This report will be submitted to the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) during year-end reporting.
4. Equipment operators and other operators shall be briefed on the Archeological Resources Protection Act and heritage resource preservation. This information shall be included in the wording of all contracts and permits.
5. If additional heritage resources are discovered during project implementation, work will immediately stop in that area until the HRM evaluates the resource, in consultation with SHPO.
6. When historic properties are identified following an intensive inventory, or an approved sample inventory, and effective protection measures will be employed, no

review or consultation with the SHPO or ACHP is required prior to implementing an undertaking (PA III (D) (3) (a).

7. If unevaluated historic properties are found within the APE, implementation could proceed provided the potentially affected area is avoided, until appropriate consultation has been completed.

If, prior to project implementation, consultation with the SHPO determines that any heritage resource is not an historic property, the District/Forest will immediately notify the implementation team. This is an important consideration, as mosaics generated by the protection of heritage resources may potentially affect the overall effectiveness of the various projects.

Watershed Prescription

1. Heavy equipment would be excluded from perennial and intermittent stream courses 100 feet, slope distance, to either side of center line, and from meadows. Ephemeral first-order draws would have a 50-foot, slope distance, equipment exclusion zone to either side of the bed centerline. Hand construction will be required in these areas.
2. If temporary roads or skid trails are created, they will be rehabilitated using standard features such as water bars, mulch or material less than 4 inches in diameter, and barricaded to prevent unauthorized vehicle usage. Rehabilitated trails or roads will be inspected following one season of rain events to determine the effectiveness of rehabilitation. Corrective action will be implemented as needed.
3. Trail construction will use rolling features and outslope design to shed water off of the trail and avoid concentrating flows. Lead out ditches may be constructed along trail sections with sustained gradients in order to shed water off trails and avoid downcutting.
4. Stream crossings will be designed through consultation with a hydrologic specialist. At a minimum, crossings will be hardened with rock to minimize sediment input.
5. Meadows, springs, and wetlands will be avoided during construction.

BOTANY DESIGN FEATURES (INCLUDING THREATENED, ENDANGERED, AND SENSITIVE)

1. The project area was surveyed for threatened, endangered, and sensitive plants. All known occurrences of listed Threatened or Endangered plants and designated critical habitat will be avoided.
2. Known occurrences of sensitive/watchlist plant species will be avoided as much as possible. These areas may be buffered to prevent indirect impacts such as soil movement into the occurrences. Where avoidance is not feasible, the following guidelines will be implemented:
 - a. A botanist will work with the construction crew to minimize impacts (*e.g.*, placement of skid trails, landings, burn piles, equipment storage, etc.) by avoiding as many plants as possible.
 - b. Felling and removal of hazard, wind throw, and salvage trees may occur within plant occurrences. Felled trees may be removed using only the following techniques: hand bucking and carrying, rubber-tired loader, crane/self loader, and/or helicopter systems.

- c. Equipment operators and construction crews shall be briefed on the need to reduce ground-disturbances (*e.g.*, minimizing turns).
 - d. No section of trail will be constructed within sensitive/watch plant avoidance areas unless a pre-existing road through the site exists and this pre-existing road contains no potential for species occurrences that may be damaged by the above activity.
 - e. Qualified specialists, as trained by the District Botanist, will monitor all such activities mentioned above at the time of construction. Qualified specialists shall monitor a certain percentage of sites that the specialist deems necessary after completion of the project.
3. Rare plant sites that contain heavy concentrations of brush, chaparral or dense stands of small-diameter trees will be hand cleared and downed materials carried off-site.

NOXIOUS WEEDS DESIGN FEATURES

- 1. A field reconnaissance of the project area was completed and a noxious weed assessment will be developed for the project prior to implementation. The noxious weed assessment will specify areas where disturbance from equipment and project-related weed vectors will not be permitted.
- 2. All mulches and seed mixes used for erosion control will be from on site sources or where possible be certified weed free by the State of California Department of Agriculture.
- 3. To prevent introduction or spread of non-native invasive plants, all equipment will be cleaned prior to entering the project area and be clean and free from noxious weeds or propagules.
- 4. All plant material (*e.g.*, straw, mulch, etc.) used for erosion control and/or road maintenance must be certified weed-free. Seed mixes must be approved by a Forest Service botanist prior to application.

Post-Treatment Restoration

- 1. After completion of the project, stockpiled duff, pine needles, and slash will be scattered over bare ground to help reduce invasions/establishment of non-native invasive plants and to help minimize erosion. In some areas, continuous cover will not be attained. Priority for coverage of bare ground will be where ground disturbance has occurred and where erosion control measures are needed.
- 2. If temporary roads, landings, or skid trails are created as part of trail building, they will be rehabilitated and blocked after project completion. Rehabilitation will include: returning the ground to natural contours, implementing decompaction and erosion control measures as needed, and covering bare soil with slash, chips, pine needles, or cut brush as necessary.
- 3. A combination of natural barriers (rocks, logs, etc.), screening, fencing, etc. may be used to prevent/discourage illegal vehicle activity during and after the project treatment. Fire Prevention Technicians and other staff will monitor the area and if/when problem areas arise, remedial and preventative actions would be taken as appropriate. Coordination with adjacent landowners, public education, and signing will be used as appropriate.

4. If trees are removed as part of the project, the project area will be evaluated for soil compaction (especially in the skid trails and access routes). Where unacceptable levels of compaction have occurred (as determined by a Forest Service soils scientist/hydrologist), decompaction will be done (by subsoiling, ripping, or discing).
5. Where pockets of conifer mortality have occurred, planting may be done to enhance natural recruitment rates of conifer seedlings, especially within the spotted owl habitat areas. Planting will only be done where it will not compromise the objective of the fuelbreak.
6. If temporary roads, landings, and skid trails are created during the project, they will be mulched using slash, wood chips, or certified weed-free straw or mulch. Wood chips would be spread to no more than 2" in depth. Use of wood chip as mulch on disturbed areas may help reduce the establishment/spread of cheatgrass.
7. All existing fences will be repaired after completion of the project in order to prevent unauthorized off-road driving.