

## Scoping Notice

**Unauthorized Motorized Routes Restoration Project  
Spring Mountains National Recreation Area  
Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest  
Las Vegas, Nevada  
March 2014**

### **COMMENTS WELCOME**

The Spring Mountains National Recreation Area (SMNRA) of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest is proposing to block access to and restore approximately 73 miles of unauthorized motorized routes to natural conditions. The types of physical closures and restoration will be specific to each route and based on site characteristics such as severity of resource damage, susceptibility to erosion, and potential for vehicle incursions.

**These routes were not designated for motorized use under the 2004 SMNRA Motorized Trails Designation project and subsequent SMNRA Motorized Vehicle Use Map. In most cases they are user-created or legacy routes. No new route closures are proposed under this action. The routes that are designated for motorized use and which remain open are displayed on the current Motor Vehicle Use Map.**

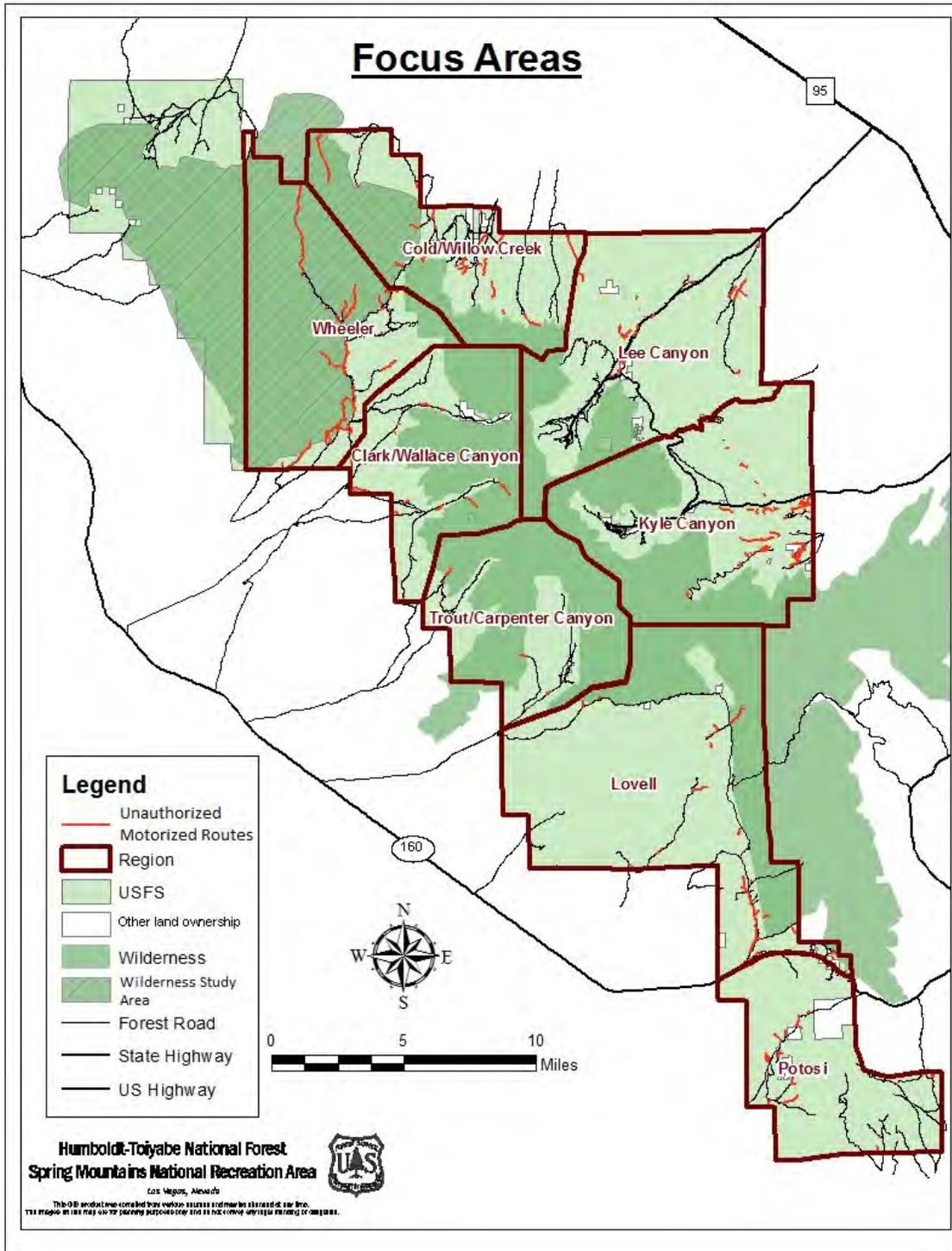
The Forest Service, Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Spring Mountains National Recreation Area, has made a preliminary assessment that this proposed project falls within categories of actions listed in the Forest Service National Environmental Policy Act Handbook (FSH 1909.15, Chapter 32.2 (20)) that are excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and that no extraordinary circumstances exist that would preclude use of the category. For detailed information on how to provide comments, please refer to the "Comment Process" section on page 11 of this document.

### **Location**

The Spring Mountains National Recreation Area (SMNRA) is located in southern Nevada between Las Vegas and Pahrump. It covers 315,648 acres of National Forest System land in Clark and Nye Counties and is almost completely surrounded by public land managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management as well as some private lands. This project is located only in Clark County portions of the SMNRA.

The unauthorized motorized routes that have been documented for this project are spread across the SMNRA. The map below shows the geographic scope of the project (see Appendix B for detailed maps of each focus area). All of the

routes proposed for restoration are highlighted in red and are already closed under the 2004 Motorized Trails Designation Project.



**Existing Condition:**

In 2004, the SMNRA issued a Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact on the Motorized Trails Designation Project. This decision, which provided several opportunities for public involvement, stated that “no motorized vehicle use will occur on the Spring Mountains National Recreation Area outside of Forest System Roads” and provided a map of designated Forest System Roads where motor vehicle use is authorized. This included any motorized vehicle “designed for or capable of cross-country travel on or immediately over land, water, sand, snow, ice, marsh, swampland, or other natural terrain” (Executive Order 11644 - Use of off-road vehicles on the public lands).

Since that decision, a Motor Vehicle Use map (MVUM) of the SMNRA has been produced for public distribution and is available on the SMNRA website and at SMNRA administrative sites. Even though a system of designated roads has been established, there are still unauthorized routes on which motor vehicles are being driven.

The SMNRA currently has funding through the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act (SNPLMA) Round 6 Habitat Restoration Project to continue to implement high priority habitat restoration by restoring unauthorized routes in the Spring Mountains.

The disturbances caused by this unauthorized use have a wide range, both geographically throughout the SMNRA and physically, and are categorized by width, depth, and plant community damage of the incursion.



**Existing condition of an unauthorized motorized route (DIS12-035) off of FS 45601, Wheeler Pass Road.**

Each unauthorized route was assessed using the interagency document, *Protocol for Documenting Disturbances, Prioritizing Restoration, and Evaluating Restoration Effectiveness for Vehicle Disturbances in Mojave Desert Uplands (March 2013)*. The current condition of the unauthorized motorized routes ranges from minimal vegetation damage to completely denude of vegetation. The routes range in width from single track to eight (8) feet in width, and vary in depth and slope. The majority of the unauthorized motorized routes are 4-6 feet in width and have 2-4 inches in depth of erosion and are not vegetated.

All of these unauthorized motorized routes are causing plant and animal habitat fragmentation and degradation and are described in the *Protocol* document:

“Frequent vehicle traffic injures vegetation and compacts soil, and water erosion occurs as a result of decreased soil porosity and infiltration capacity, ineffectiveness of surface stabilizers, and decreased hydraulic resistance to overland flow (Braunack 1986). Mechanical compaction of soil can also reduce seedling establishment and impede root penetration and growth (Bainbridge and Virginia 1990). Invasive annual species are known to colonize areas previously inhabited by native species following soil surface disturbance (Hunter *et al.* 1987). As a result of the multifaceted impacts of disturbances on soils and vegetation, and with few opportunities for natural regeneration due to low rainfall, desert lands may take decades or centuries to recover without any active intervention (Lovich and Bainbridge 1999, Webb 2002).”

Unauthorized motorized routes are also causing damage and destruction of cultural resources, such as archaeological sites, in the SMNRA.

### **Desired Condition:**

The Unauthorized Motorized Route Restoration Project is continuing the implementation of the 2004 SMNRA Motorized Trail Designation Project, and has the same desired conditions as that project (presented below):

The following desired conditions for the SMNRA are identified in the 1996 *General Management Plan for the Spring Mountains National Recreation Area, an Amendment to the Land and Resource Management Plan, Toiyabe National Forest (Forest Plan)*. Many of these desired conditions are also described in *The Conservation Agreement for the Spring Mountains NRA, Clark and Nye Counties, Nevada (Conservation Agreement)*, and in *The Clark County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (Habitat Conservation Plan)*.

### **Resources**

- Sensitive plant and wildlife species are protected (Forest Plan, Conservation Agreement and Habitat Conservation Plan).

- Riparian areas (springs and streams) are protected (Forest Plan, Conservation Agreement, and Habitat Conservation Plan).
- Water quality is improved (Forest Plan).
- Areas with high biodiversity and/or a number of species of concern are protected. (Forest Plan, Conservation Agreement, and Habitat Conservation Plan).
- There are no impacts to significant archaeological sites from recreation, roads or other uses. (Forest Plan).
- Minimal soil erosion and compaction results from recreation, roads and other uses of the Spring Mountains NRA (Forest Plan).

### **Recreation Needs**

- Motorized vehicle use only occurs on designated roads and trails (Forest Plan).
- The Spring Mountains National Recreation Area is managed for a variety of road types, including routes that offer recreation opportunities for off-highway vehicles (Forest Plan).
- Whenever possible, current recreation uses are protected, and limits are instead placed on new uses or expansion of existing uses (Forest Plan).

### **Social Setting**

- Information is provided to the public on how to recreate without impacting sensitive plant and animal species (Forest Plan, Conservation Agreement, and Habitat Conservation Plan).



**An unauthorized motorized route (DIS06-001) before and after restoration from a previous project in Lee Canyon off of State Route 156.**

## **Purpose and Need**

Unauthorized routes on the SMNRA are adversely impacting high priority habitat, wilderness characteristics, significant archeological resources, and the hydrologic characteristics of the riparian areas in close proximity to the routes. There is a need to protect these resource values from further motorized vehicle impacts, and a need to restore sections of unauthorized routes to address erosion issues along the routes, impacts to rare plant habitat, and impacts to wilderness characteristics. The purpose of this action is to block access to the unauthorized routes, deter further motorized use, and accelerate restoration of the previously mentioned resource values.

## **Proposed Action**

The staff of the SMNRA propose to block access to and restore approximately 73 miles of unauthorized motorized routes to natural conditions. The types of physical closures and restoration will be specific to each route and based on site characteristics such as severity of resource damage, susceptibility to erosion, and potential for vehicle incursions. The types of proposed restoration activities are listed below:

Blocking routes:

- **Installing boulders**: A series of boulders would be placed at the entry of the unauthorized route. Spacing and size of boulders would deter entry by motorized vehicles, but allow non-motorized recreation to pass.
- **Installing gates**: A locked gate would be placed at the entry to close the route to unauthorized motorized use, but allow access for administrative reasons such as utility right-of-ways or fire suppression.

Habitat restoration:

- **Mulching**: Natural material would be placed on a disturbed soil surface to stabilize the topsoil, capture seeds, and reduce the visibility of the disturbance. Material may include on-site rocks, downed woody debris, downed logs, dead brush, and straw waddles.
  - **Vertical Mulch**: Mulch that is placed upright and partially buried to mimic the surrounding upright vegetation and provide habitat for seeds and small animals.
  - **Horizontal Mulch**: Mulch that is placed horizontally over disturbed soil.
- **Decompacting surface soil with hand tools**:
  - **Raking**: The use of hand rakes to return the route surface to a more natural contour and disperse native mulch.
  - **Pitting**: The use of hand tools to decompact the soil.
- **Seeding**: Hand dispersal of native seed on decompact soil to revegetate the disturbance area.

- Ripping (also known as sub-soiling or harrowing): A tillage method using heavy equipment to drag metal tines through the soil. Soil can be decompacted to a depth of 6 to 8 inches, promoting natural revegetation and allowing water to infiltrate the soil.  
Ripping is proposed only if:
  - Soil compaction is severe and hand tools would not be sufficient
  - The length needing active restoration is long enough that the use of hand tools would not be efficient
  - The area would be accessible with heavy machinery
- Adding soil amendments: Addition of organic material to the soil to promote revegetation and recovery of the soil incorporated into the soil after a ripping/decompaction treatment has been applied.

These active restoration activities would occur mostly on the portion of the route within view of where motor vehicles are entering the route. The portions of the routes that are outside of the entry line-of-sight are proposed to undergo “passive restoration” in which the area will be restored through natural processes. Appendix A summarizes the amount of estimated active and passive restoration in each geographic focus area.

Each route was inspected in the field and the proposed restoration was determined on a case-by-case basis. Appendix B specifies the restoration activities planned for each route.

### **Staging Areas for Restoration Implementation**

During project implementation, boulders would be delivered to staging areas where they would be temporarily piled until they can be transported to the installation sites. Equipment may also temporarily be staged at these areas. All staging areas would be located in previously disturbed sites and are selected based on proximity to restoration sites and the accessibility of the area.

Four existing disturbed locations on the SMNRA may be used as staging areas (see map in Appendix C):

#### Cold Creek Pond Parking Area

*Location:* Near the intersection of County Road 202 and Forest Service Road 45601.

*Description:* Fenced parking area.

#### Kyle Canyon Staging Area

*Location:* Near the junction of Harris Springs Road and Forest Service Road 45532 in Kyle Canyon.

*Description:* Approved staging area already in use.

#### Lee Canyon Gravel Pit

*Location:* Along Lee Canyon Road, Hwy 156 approximately 10.5 miles from Interstate 95.

*Description:* Approved gravel pit already in use.

#### Lovell Gravel Pit

*Location:* Near the intersection of Lovell Canyon Road FR 45537. Staging would occur approximately 5.5 miles down the road at the intersection of Forest Service Roads 25920 and 25921.

*Description:* Approved gravel pit already in use.

Some of the unauthorized motorized routes may be used as a temporary staging area prior to their restoration. For example, multiple boulders could be piled at the entry to a route that will eventually have just four boulders installed.

Additional off-site staging areas at existing commercial or State-owned gravel pits may be used.

#### **Design Criteria**

SMNRA resource specialists have proposed the following design criteria to reduce or avoid potential adverse impacts of the proposal:

##### Botany

- Prior to implementation, restoration crews would meet with a qualified botanist or ecologist on the SMNRA staff to coordinate on sensitive species identification, techniques to minimize impacts to sensitive species and habitats, and notification procedures if threatened and endangered species (TES) are encountered.
- Seeding with native plant material will occur within some treatment areas. Any such seeding would be limited to areas where the application of seed would not alter or degrade habitats of sensitive species.
- As much as is reasonably practical, temporary equipment staging areas will be located within the area of analysis and in previously disturbed areas (e.g., roads, parking areas). Ground-disturbing activities, including ripping and pitting, will be located within the area of analysis.
- If a large population of the following USFS Region 4 Sensitive plant species is found in the disturbance by implementation crews, the population will be flagged and the occupied area will be decompacted using hand tools: Clokey's milkvetch, Spring Mountains milkvetch, and Charleston ground daisy. Heavy equipment may be walked over the population to reach unoccupied areas designated for ripping.
- Native Plant Materials: Implementation crews will follow Forest Service Policy (FSM 2070) and use genetically appropriate native plant materials for rehabilitation and restoration when possible.

### Cultural Resources

- Cultural sites found in areas proposed for mechanical treatments would be avoided. The District Archaeologist would provide archaeological site protection input and on-site monitoring as needed.

### Noxious/Invasive Species

- **Weed Prevention:** USFS and Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Best Management Practices (Humboldt-Toiyabe Supplemental FSM 2080) will be employed during project implementation to prevent and control the introduction and spread of invasive species. Inspection of erosion control and road materials, equipment and vehicles will occur prior to work to ensure that they are free of mud and visible plant debris. The materials, equipment, and vehicles will also be cleaned prior to moving from an infested treatment unit to a unit that is free of weeds.

### Soils and Hydrology

- Establish designated areas for equipment staging and parking to minimize the area of ground disturbance. Maintain equipment in good operating condition, refueling areas would be properly developed, monitored, and equipped with a spill prevention and clean-up plan.
- Develop an erosion control plan that covers all disturbed areas including roads to be ripped and treated, water source sites, or other disturbed areas.
- On steeper pitches construct waterbars to minimize continued sheet and rill erosion on roads.
- Install energy dissipaters (e.g., rip rap aprons) at outlet points of water bars to reduce runoff velocity and erosion potential if an erosion hazard exists, as determined necessary by a watershed specialist.
- *Equipment Operations:* Operate equipment when soil compaction, displacement, erosion, and sediment runoff would be minimized:
  - Avoid ground equipment operations on unstable, wet, or easily compacted soils and on steep slopes.
  - Evaluate site conditions frequently to assess changing soil moisture conditions
  - Adjust equipment operations as necessary to protect the soil while maintaining efficient project operations.
  - Inspect equipment and vehicles daily for potential fuel leakage or failures and repair to prevent release of oil or other fluids into soil or water.
- *Springs and Riparian Areas:* Delineate springs and riparian locations and boundaries in the project area using suitable markings. Maintain or reestablish these boundaries as necessary during project implementation or operation.
- *Adjacent Habitat:* Preserve existing undeveloped/vegetative areas where feasible

- *Monitoring:* Implement appropriate monitoring and maintenance (e.g. prior to and after storm events) to ensure proper Best Management Practice function and efficiency.

#### Wildlife

- No vegetation disturbance would occur between May 1 to July 20 in order to protect nesting migratory birds. Any active raptor nests would have a no disturbance buffer of 200 meters surrounding the nest from March 1 to August 31.
- Bat maternity colonies and hibernacula would be protected from disturbance, with the buffer size depending on the species and site-specific characteristics.
- Palmer's chipmunk dens/nest cavities would be protected with the buffer size depending on the site.
- Desert tortoise habitat would be protected and staging areas would not be placed in suitable habitat.
- Butterfly host plants would not be removed.

#### **National Environmental Policy Act Requirements**

This Proposed Action fits under the categorical exclusion 36 CFR 220.6 (e) (20), which requires a project file and Decision Memo. This categorical exclusion covers the following type of activities:

(20) Activities that restore, rehabilitate, or stabilize lands occupied by roads and trails, excluding National Forest System roads and National Forest System trails to a more natural condition that may include removing, replacing, or modifying drainage structures and ditches, reestablishing vegetation, reshaping natural contours and slopes, reestablishing drainage-ways, or other activities that would restore site productivity and reduce environmental impacts. Examples include but are not limited to:

(i) Decommissioning a road that is no longer a National Forest System road to a more natural state by restoring natural contours and removing construction fills, loosening compacted soils, revegetating the roadbed and removing ditches and culverts to reestablish natural drainage patterns

(ii) Restoring an unauthorized trail to a natural state by reestablishing natural drainage patterns, stabilizing slopes, reestablishing vegetation, and installing water bars; and

(iii) Installing boulders, logs, and berms on an unauthorized road segment to promote naturally regenerated grass, shrub, and tree growth.

## **COMMENT PROCESS**

The Forest Service encourages your comments on this Proposed Action. Your comments will help us prepare an environmental analysis on the proposed action, and will be used to determine the level of analysis needed.

Written, facsimile, hand delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted until April 28, 2014. Comments can be submitted to: Spring Mountains National Recreation Area, 4701 N. Torrey Pines, Las Vegas, NV 89130, Attn: Carol Hotchkiss, or faxed to 702-515-5499. The office business hours for those submitting comments in person are 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments may be submitted to [RouteRestoration@fs.fed.us](mailto:RouteRestoration@fs.fed.us).

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project and will be available for public inspection and released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

For further information contact Carol Hotchkiss, Interdisciplinary Team Leader at (702) 515-5440 or via e-mail at [RouteRestoration@fs.fed.us](mailto:RouteRestoration@fs.fed.us).

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