



United States Department of Agriculture

Geyser Pass Improvements Project (GPIP)



Environmental Assessment



Forest Service

Manti-La Sal National Forest

February 2021



Geyser Pass Improvements Project

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ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

PROJECT INFORMATION

Project Name: Geysers Pass Improvements Project

Project Initiation Date: 8/13/2020

Proponent Name: US Forest Service

Line Officer: Michael Engelhart

District: Moab Ranger District

County(ies): San Juan

Anticipated Implementation: Fall 2021

Signing Authority: Forest Supervisor

PALS Tracking #: 58337

Project File (Internal Forest Service Link):
<https://usfs.box.com/s/a1x33rll3nbqj64ix9o4ddhrtpOyd0sb>

GIS File (Internal Forest Service Link):
<https://usfs.box.com/s/jsjn5vh4uz1ew3evs9o0u116wajnzkrk>

Project Webpage (Accessible to the Public):
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=58337>

General Location: This project is located on or around Geysers Pass Road (50071)

Applicable Management Areas: RNG and TBR

Legal Description: Sections 1, 2, 3, and 5 of Township 27 South, Range 24 East, Salt Lake Meridian

Elevation Range: ~8920 ft – ~10540 ft

Watersheds: Mill Creek



CURRENT CONDITIONS

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Visitation to and use of public lands in Southeast Utah has grown substantially in recent years. In 2019 alone, the Moab, Utah area saw over three million visitors. The La Sal Mountains, often the backdrop to much of the visitation on National Park Service (NPS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands, are now seeing large increases in use and visitation. The increase of use in the La Sal Mountains is consistent to the increase of visitation in Moab, Utah; with the La Sal Mountains becoming an overflow area for many visitors. The La Sal Mountains draw crowds as an escape from the summer heat in the surrounding desert and are a winter getaway for those who want close access to winter snow sports. A world-renowned attraction and bucket list activity, the Whole Enchilada mountain bike trail featuring a series of non-motorized and motorized trails linking passage back to Moab, has also added to this increase in use and visitation. Anyone familiar with the area would say that use has exceeded the capacity for much of the existing infrastructure.

To capture visitation data, the Manti-La Sal National Forest installed several road traffic counters in various locations throughout the La Sal Mountains. In June of 2019 a road traffic counter was installed at the junction of the Geysers Pass (50071) and La Sal Loop Roads (CR46) - the main entrance onto the Geysers Pass Road. With a little more than a year of recordings (6/20/2019 – 11/16/2020) 36,545 vehicles were recorded passing the traffic counter location (0004_GeyserPass_TrafficCounts_02222021). This data indicates that the Geysers Pass Road is one of the most trafficked Level III/Level II National Forest System (NFS) roads on the Forest, even exceeding most of those areas that lie closer to the largest population centers of Utah.

GEYSER PASS ROAD

Under an agreement with the US Forest Service, both Grand and San Juan County Road Departments maintain Geysers Pass Road (NFS road 50071). San Juan County Road Department is responsible for regularly scheduled road maintenance - outside of winter months - and maintains the entirety of the road to the private property boundary at the end of the Geysers Pass Road. On average, San Juan Road Department blades the Geysers Pass Road twice a year. Grand County Road Department is responsible for plowing Geysers Pass Road to the Geysers Pass Winter Trailhead during winter months. In years when snowpack is deep, the Forest Service uses a dozer to assist with snow plowing efforts to widen the plowed corridor when Grand County's grader is insufficient.

The lower 6 miles of Geysers Pass Road, between the Loop Road and Gold Basin intersection (NFS road 50241), is aggregate surfaced, 24-30 feet wide, and maintained as a level 3 (passenger car) road. The aggregate surface on this section of road is old and starting to wear out. The fine clay binding portion of the aggregate is mostly gone. This, along with the grade of the road and lack of moisture, often results in the creation of wash boards between maintenance.

The upper two-mile section, between the intersection of Gold Basin Road and the Upper Gold Basin Trailhead, is native surface, 16-20 feet wide, and maintained as a level 2 (high clearance vehicle) road. This section of road has many steep road-cut slopes that are eroding, are unvegetated and/or are embodied with large evergreen trees. These steep cut slopes in conjunction with the narrower road width create many blind corners.

Both sections of road have a mix of non-motorized, motorized, and commercial vehicle use, including daily use by, bicycles passenger cars, ATVs, UTVs and commercial shuttles. With the amount of use the upper section of the Geysers Pass Road is receiving, the current conditions do not allow for safe travel. Two-way traffic is often unfeasible, requiring one vehicle to reverse to a wider portion of road that allows for passing vehicles.

TRANS LA SAL TRAILHEAD

Situated on the lower half of the Geyser Pass Road in the La Sal Mountains, the Trans La Sal Trailhead provides access to two National Forest System (NFS) trails: Squaw Springs (5038) and Boren Mesa (5037, [see map 2]). The trailhead is used by hikers, climbers, mountain bikers and authorized outfitter guides accessing adjacent trails. The Trans La Sal Trailhead currently has the capacity to safely park up to 5 vehicles with overflow parking along the side of Geyser Pass Road. Steep topography and a narrow switchback (see picture 2) limit roadside parking which often results in visitors blocking-in already parked cars at the trailhead. The only alternative for these forest users is to park downhill of the trailhead, sometimes hundreds of yards away and off the side of the road creating additional unnecessary impacts and safety concerns. On busy Summer and Fall days it is common to see upwards of 20 vehicles in the area surrounding the Trans La Sal Trailhead.

The Trans La Sal Trailhead is also a popular trailhead during the winter when it is used by backcountry skiers, snowshoers and climbers. In winter the small parking area often fills with vehicles and there are not additional areas along the road for overflow parking. Visitors using the area in winter must reverse into a blind corner that is often icy and frozen over in the shade of a northern aspect. Keeping this switchback plowed is difficult because an inside hill does not allow snow to be fully pushed off the road. This often results in a narrow single lane along the corner turn making two-way traffic hazardous. This area has been the location of several vehicle accidents in the past (0003_GPIP_2018AccidentInformation_07162020).

GEYSER PASS WINTER TRAILHEAD



Picture 1 (above) – View from the Geyser Pass Nordic Trail looking at the Geyser Pass Winter Trailhead and into the Moab Valley. It is a common site to see this when winter conditions are present.

Located at an elevation of approximately 9600 feet, the Geyser Pass Winter Trailhead is the highest plowed trailhead in the La Sal Mountains and has become the La Sal Mountain’s most heavily used winter recreation area. A majority of all winter recreation use in the La Sal Mountains is accessed around the Geyser Pass Road and Geyser Pass Winter Trailhead. It is common for the winter trailhead to fill with 50 to 60 vehicles on weekends and some weekdays (see picture 1). Congestion of this trailhead in past years has led to user conflicts and the need for increased law enforcement presence. Vehicles hauling trailers have been most problematic for parking during the winter season as these vehicle types take up significant space and often add to the complexity in parking at the trailhead in winter.

CLARK LAKE TRAILHEAD

Clark Lake Trailhead is situated halfway up the Upper Geyser Pass Road (see map 3 and picture 4) in an area that is not conducive to parking more than two vehicles. Despite spurring directly off the Upper Geyser Pass Road, this trailhead has a steep and difficult approach. At the trailhead, there is only space for two parked vehicles with limited overflow parking opportunities in the immediate area. Due to Upper Geyser Pas Road’s narrow width and steep roadcuts, roadside parking near this trailhead is nearly impossible and often inhibits vehicular traffic. A blind road corner uphill from the trailhead also decreases site distance and adds complexity to parking at this trailhead.



GEYSER PASS TRAILHEAD

The Geyser Pass Trailhead is the primary access point for National Forest System (NFS) trails: Moonlight Meadows (5179) and Burro Pass (5315) - the beginning of the Whole Enchilada Trail (see map 3). Currently, the Geyser Pass Trailhead has the capacity to safely park five vehicles with additional overflow parking along the roadsides of the Geyser Pass and Dark Canyon Roads. During the heavy-use biking season (mid-September until snow prohibits safe riding [early November]) it is common to see upwards of 30 vehicles in the immediate area of the trailhead, with many vehicles found parking in the area's ecologically sensitive meadows. In recognition of this issue, the Forest Service has managed the area by installing barricades around these meadows to protect them from damage. The Geyser Pass Trailhead is a destination for many mountain bike enthusiasts but also to several permitted shuttle companies. All commercial shuttles are managed under permit and have a limited number of days they can operate. Shuttles are a benefit to managing use in the area as they decrease the number of vehicles that must access and park at the trailhead. But because most bikers need to start the Whole Enchilada in the morning to avoid the blistering heat of the desert later in the day, hundreds of people and upwards of 20 shuttles can be found at the trailhead on a single morning. Despite the use of these shuttles, the Geyser Pass Trailhead parking lot continues to regularly surpass capacity and create safety issues for all who use the Trailhead.

PURPOSE & NEED AND PROPOSED ACTION

PURPOSE & NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

On Geyser Pass Road, there is a need for:

- Improved road conditions for mixed traffic, public safety, and enhanced snow removal
- Increased and improved parking space for efficient trailhead access
- A restroom facility for rising sanitation concerns

The purpose of this project is to protect user's health and safety by enhancing access along a heavily used section of a National Forest System (NFS) road. According to data that was collected in 2019 and throughout 2020, the Geyser Pass Road (50071) has become one of the most trafficked Level III/Level II NFS roads on the Manti-La Sal National Forest. Due to this increase in use, access along narrow sections of the Geyser Pass Road have become a major concern. Narrow sections of the road create single lane "pinch points" providing little to no room for vehicles to pass. These single lane sections create hazardous conditions for both vehicular and non-vehicular uses in the area. Proposed roadwork work will widen those narrow areas to approximately 20 feet and eliminate "blind corners" lessening the risk of automotive accidents. A narrow switchback corner bottlenecks during the winter months and prohibits effective snow removal removing an adjacent hill and expanding the Trans La Sal trailhead will resolve this safety concern and provide additional trailhead parking for adjacent trails and winter use. Trailhead parking lots along the Geyser Pass road are too small for current use and quickly become full. Improving and expanding existing parking lots and a turnaround for shuttle vehicles will alleviate much of the existing parking issues. The increase in use has also created the need for a restroom to alleviate sanitation issues that are developing.

PROPOSED ACTION

The Geyser Pass Improvements Project is comprised of four locations (Upper Geyser Pass Road and Trans La Sal, Clark Lake, and Geyser Pass Trailheads [see map 1]) and is divided into two project areas; Trans La Sal Trailhead (see map 2) and Upper Geyser Pass Road (Gold Basin Road junction to the Geyser Pass Trailhead [see map 3]). These two project locations were selected because they were identified as needing improvements under the current visitor use trends and pose most risk to public safety.

GEYSER PASS ROAD

Proposed actions for this project include widening the upper section of road to approximately 20 feet and lay all road cut back slopes back to a 1:1 ratio. Widening those areas that are less than the 20 feet in width would allow for two-way traffic to pass more safely. To improve sight distance on the Geysir Pass Road and around blind corners, slopes above the road would be laid to a 1:1 ratio. Cutting road slopes back to a 1:1 ratio would not only provide better sight distance around road corners, but would also create back slopes that are less likely to erode and will create an area that encourages vegetation response. While trees and other vegetation within the 1:1 cut would need to be removed, it would create a better environment and slope for vegetation growth over time. The road widening and sloping would increase visibility and sight distance on the road and increase response time for motor vehicle operators when approaching oncoming traffic. This expansion will convert the Upper Geysir Road from a maintenance level 2 road (maintained for high clearance vehicles) to a level 3 road (maintained for passenger cars). Spot graveling would occur along the lower section of road to help deliver aggregate to the upper section.

TRANS LA SAL TRAILHEAD

The proposed action for the Trans La Sal Trailhead is to flatten a hill that is in the middle of the adjacent road switchback and create an expanded parking area in its place (see picture 2). Expanding the parking area by removing the inside hill will alleviate trailhead congestion. With appropriate parking being made more available in the middle of the switchback, a restroom would be installed in the footprint of the existing parking area to alleviate sanitation concerns. In winter seasons, when there is sufficient snow coverage on the road, vehicles with trailers would be required to park in this proposed parking lot. This will alleviate vehicle congestion issues at the existing winter trailhead which is located 1.6 miles up the road. A sign with information on where to park trailers in the winter would be installed at the parking lot.



Picture 2 (above) - Screenshot image of the Trans La Sal Trailhead. Shown in light blue is the existing parking lot and the proposed parking lot in orange. The narrowness of the road (right of the proposed parking lot) creates challenges for Forest users and the County Road Departments.

CLARK LAKE TRAILHEAD

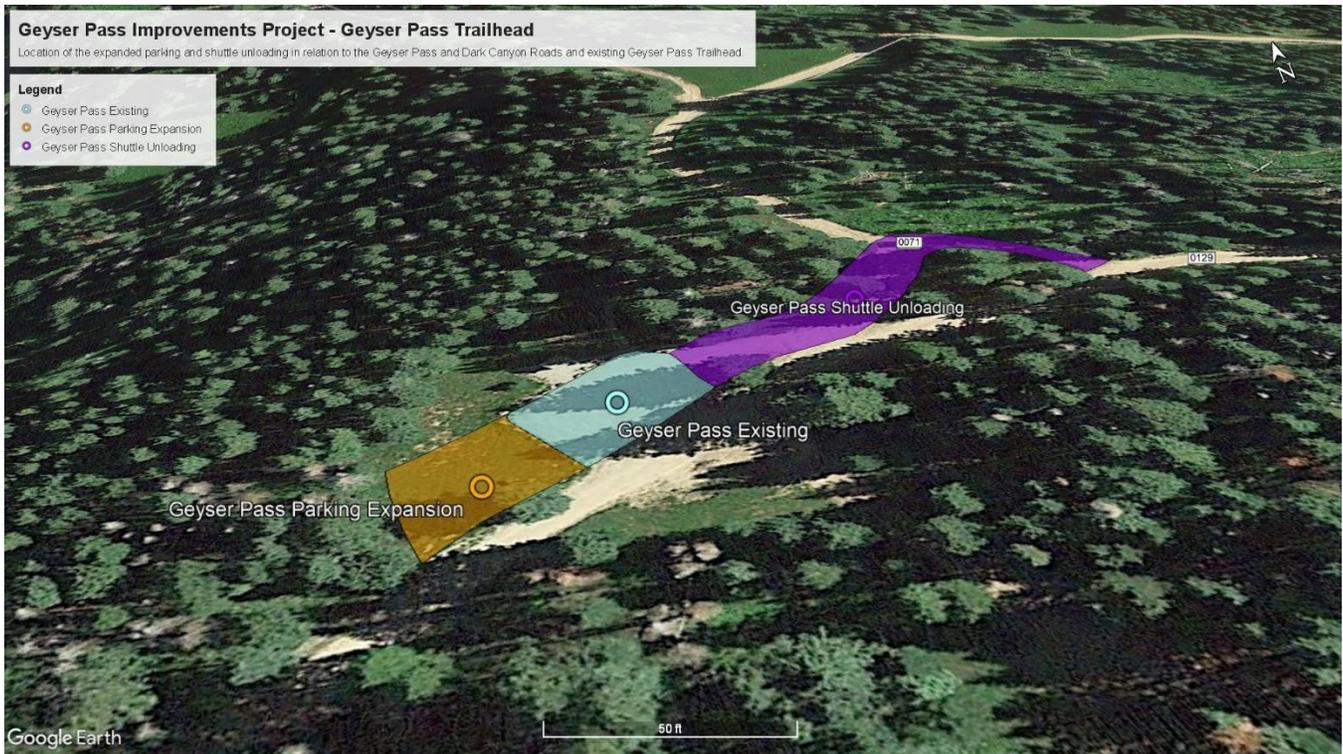
Proposed actions for the Clark Lake Trailhead are to improve and minimally expand the Clark Lake Trailhead parking area. Improving the trailhead would involve raising the trailhead parking lot to the level of the Upper Geyser Pass Road enhancing the approach from the road to the trailhead. In raising the parking lot, the trailhead’s footprint would expand so the parking lot could safely accommodate up to 5 vehicles (see picture 3).



Picture 3 (above) – Google Earth image of the Clark Lake Trailhead. Shown in light blue is the existing parking lot and the proposed parking lot in orange. This trailhead is situated along the Geyser Pass Road.

GEYSER PASS TRAILHEAD

Proposed actions for the Geysers Pass Trailhead include expanding the parking area to roughly double its size, with an ability to accommodate up to 10 vehicles, and identifying an area for off-loading of passengers and equipment for shuttles. An area adjacent to the existing parking area would be used for additional overflow parking. The unloading area would be located along a small section of the Geysers Pass and Dark Canyon Roads adjacent to the existing parking lot (see picture 4). These roads would need to be expanded to a minimum of 20 feet so two vehicles could pass alongside one another safely. The offloading areas would utilize the Geysers Pass Road to provide an area for shuttles to offload recreationalists, gear, and equipment, keeping the parking area available for other recreational users. Identifying and requiring that permitted shuttle vehicles use the identified area would alleviate congestion in the parking area of the Geysers Pass Trailhead.



Picture 4 (above) – Google Earth image of the Geysers Pass Trailhead. Shown in light blue is the existing parking lot, proposed parking lot in orange, and proposed shuttle unloading area in purple.

Table 1: This table lists Survey, Existing and New Impact areas in acres for the proposed Geysers Pass Improvements Project.

Project Area	Survey Area (acres)	Existing Footprint of Infrastructure (acres)	Proposed impact from project (approximate acres)	Proposed addition to footprint of infrastructure
Trans La Sal Trailhead	5	.1	.76	.76
Upper Geysers Pass Roadway	36	5.42	.6	.6
Upper Geysers Pass Road Sloping		N/A	8.65	N/A
Geysers Pass Trailhead	2	.11	.15	.15
Clark Lake Trailhead	1	.03	.1	.1
TOTAL	44	5.66	10.26	1.61

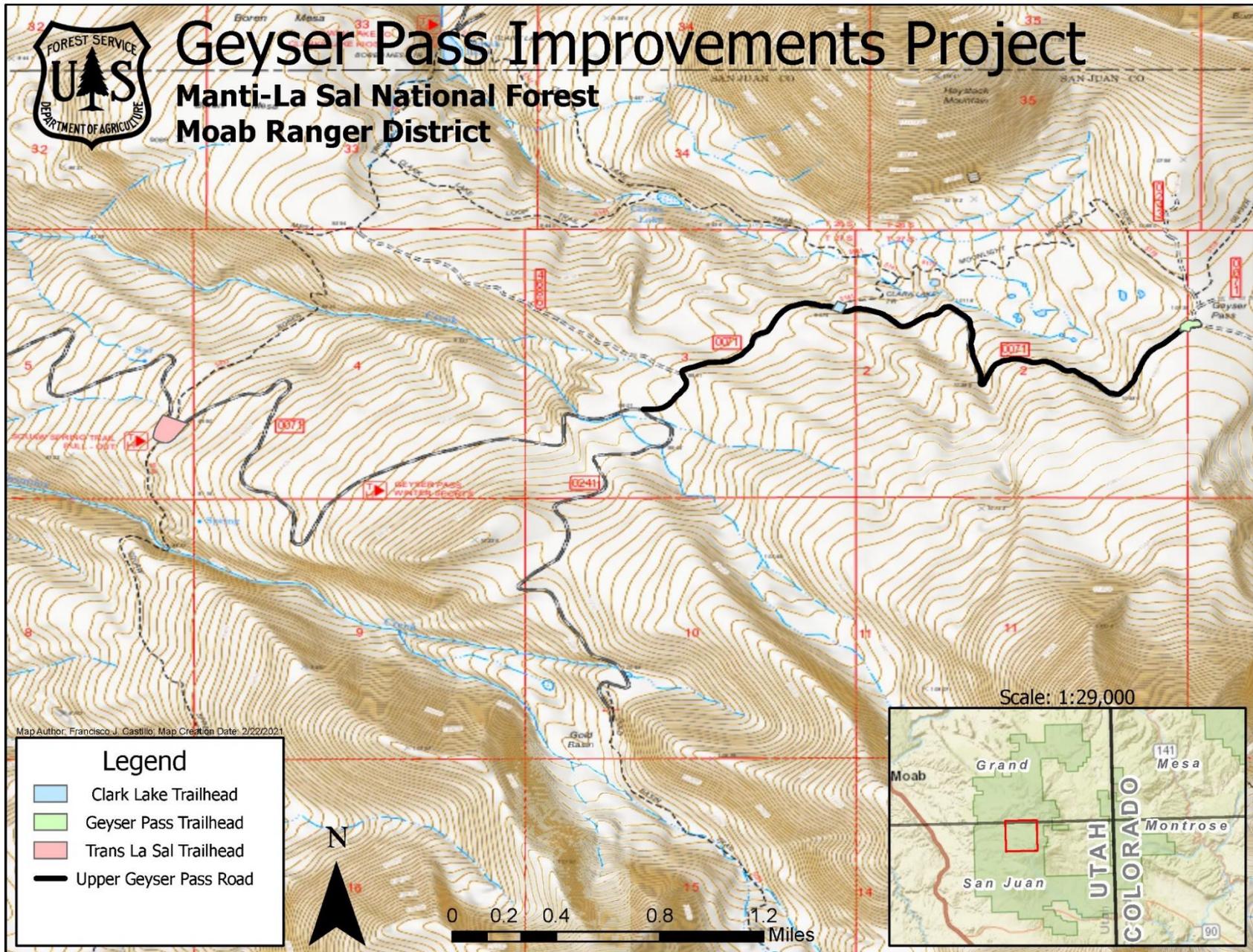


DESIGN FEATURES INCLUDED IN THE PROPOSED ACTION

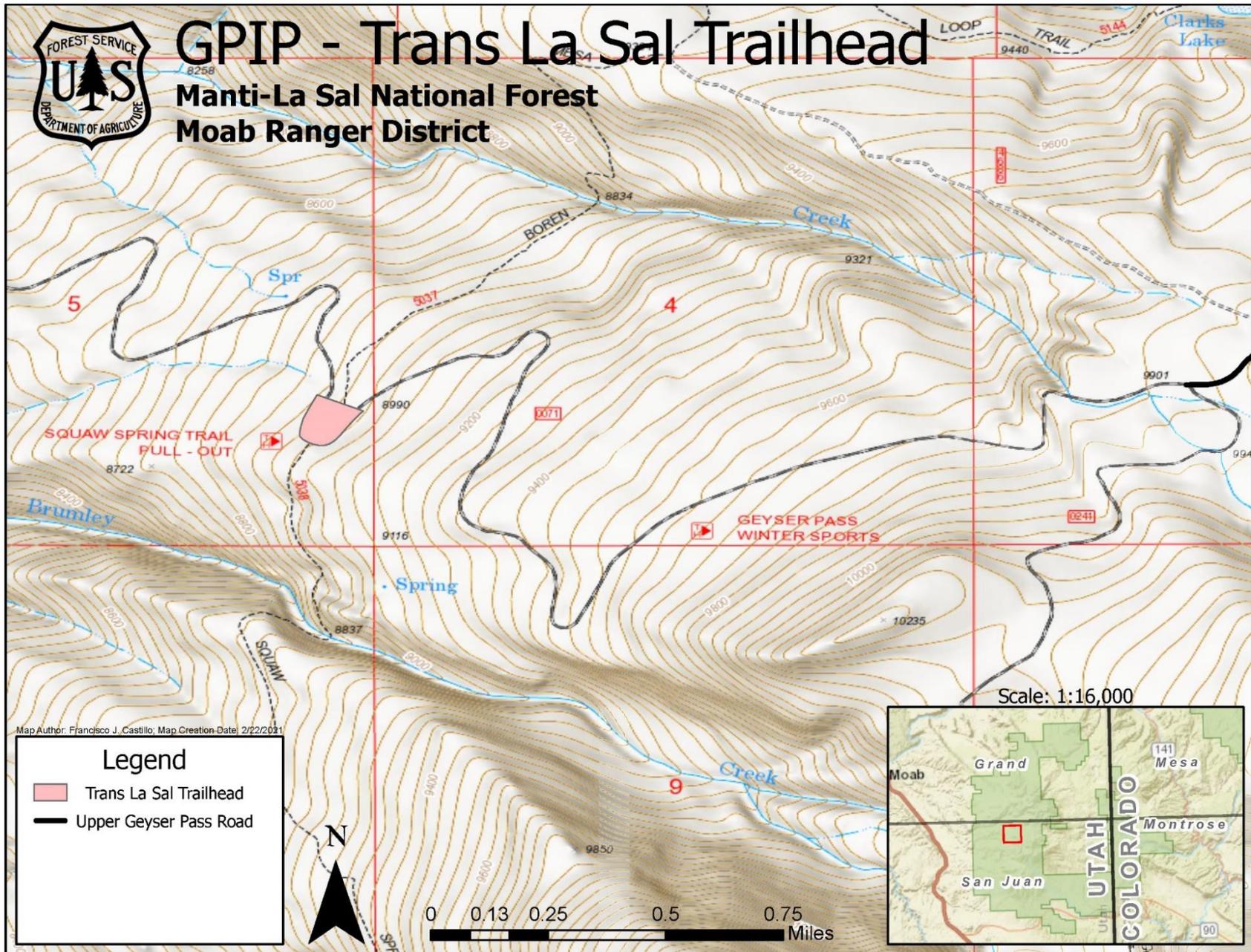
Project design criteria are listed in Table 2 below. These criteria were developed to avoid or eliminate adverse impacts from project activities and are incorporated as an integrated part of the proposed action. Project design criteria are based upon standard practices and operating procedures that have been employed and proven effective in similar circumstances and conditions: Forest Service Manual and Handbook direction, Regional Watershed Conservation Practices (FSH 2509.22 for Region 1 and 4), LRMP standards and guidelines, and other management requirements that apply to the proposed activities.

Table 2: Project Design Features

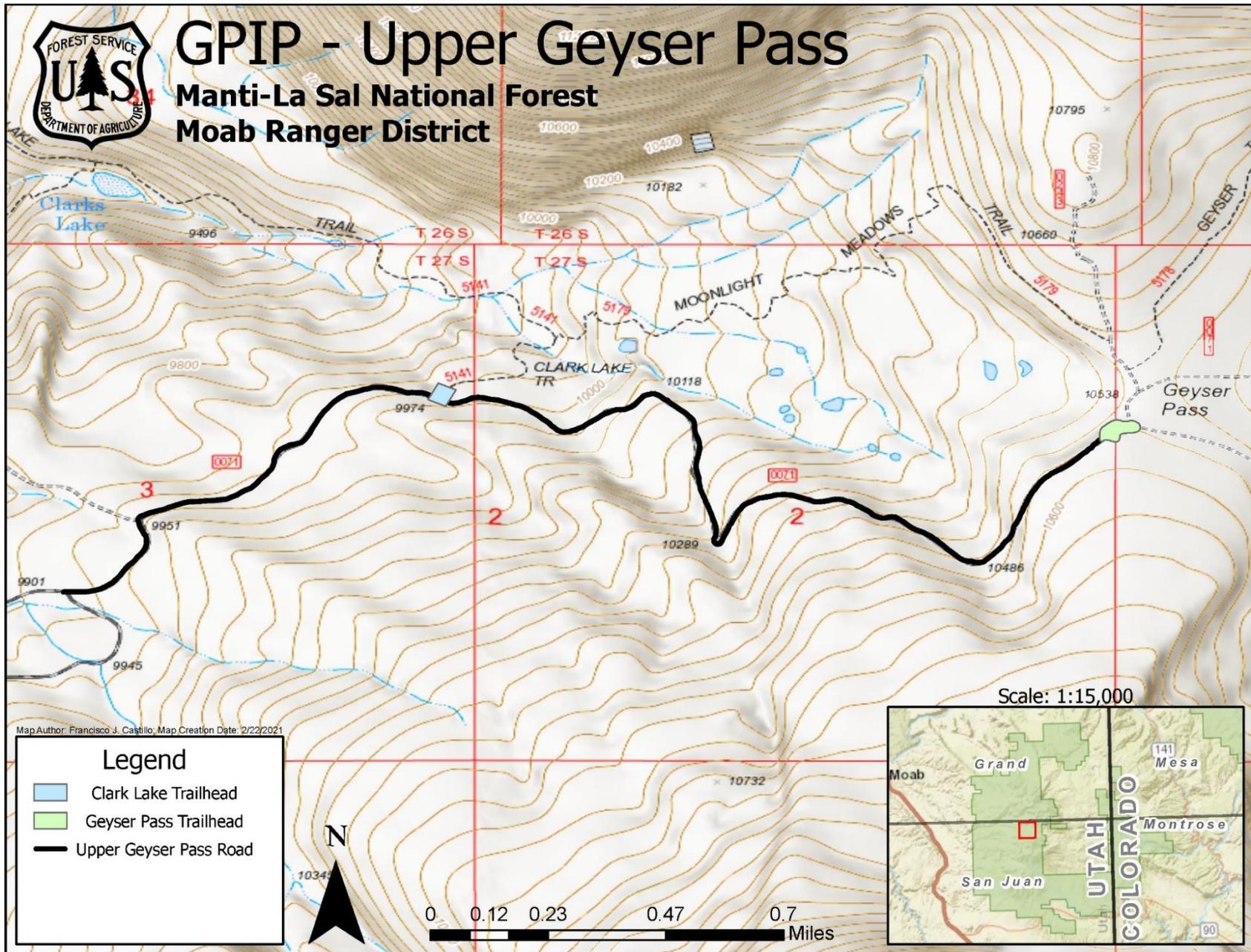
Resource Area	Project Design Features
Watersheds	See 0006_GPIP_WatershedReport_07282020 Table 7.
Engineering	Use of higher clay content aggregate surfacing to reduce wash boarding. Spot graveling the lower section to allow for safe hauling of aggregate for improvement of upper section.
Visuals	Stumps left after tree removal will be 6 inches tall or shorter
Visuals	When removing trees adjacent to the road only the minimal amount required to implement the project should be removed.
Wildlife	Designate equipment staging areas and log decks outside of northern goshawk and three-toed woodpecker territories.
Wildlife	Restrict hauling (logs and gravel) and other construction activity at night.
Wildlife	Conduct northern goshawk territory monitoring/survey early in the season to identify active nests in or adjacent to the project area. Conduct a breeding bird survey in the project area to locate nests of species of concern.
Wildlife	If there is an active goshawk nest, complete work on the Clark Lake trailhead as late in the season as possible or after September 31.
Vegetation	Post construction, seed road cuts and other disturbed area with an approved seed mix.



Map 1 (above) – The entire project area (Trans La Sal Trailhead and the Upper Geysers Pass Road). As reflected in the above map the Geysers Pass Improvement Project consists of four areas Trans La Sal, Clark Lake, and Geysers Pass Trailheads and the upper section of the Geysers Pass Road (Upper Geysers Pass).



Map 2 (above) – Location of the Trans La Sal Trailhead in relation to the Geysers Pass Winter Trailhead and the Upper Geysers Pass Road (right-side of map).



Map 3 (above) – Upper Geyser Pass Road and locations of the Clark Lake and Geyser Pass trailheads in relation to the Geyser Pass Road.



PROJECT SCREENING

REGULATORY CONSIDERATIONS

Given the nature of the project, the Responsible Official has requested documentation to demonstrate compliance with the following regulatory considerations in addition to NEPA:

- | | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NFMA/Land Management Plan <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Endangered Species Act (ESA) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Sensitive Species (FSM 2670) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tribal Consultation <input type="checkbox"/> Clean Air Act (CAA) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Clean Water Act (CWA) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Pertinent Executive Orders | <p>SPECIAL MANAGEMENT AREAS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Wilderness <input type="checkbox"/> Roadless <input type="checkbox"/> Wild & Scenic River Corridor <input type="checkbox"/> Recommended Wilderness <input type="checkbox"/> Research Natural Areas <input type="checkbox"/> National Scenic & Historic Trails <input type="checkbox"/> National Recreation Areas |
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RESOURCE PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS REVIEW

The Responsible Official has requested the following resource areas to review the proposed action to determine compliance with the regulatory considerations and inform the degree of effects.

Table 3: Documentation of Review Completion

Resource	Review Complete	Specialist's Initial Input on Project
Botany	2/12/2021 Barb Smith	Field Visit: Choose an item. Estimated Total # of Days to Complete Work: Choose an item. Is consultation with a regulatory agency anticipated? YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/>
Cultural/Heritage	2/11/2021 Donald Irwin	Field Visit: Field visit needed prior to decision being signed but can complete most of the environmental review prior to that. Estimated Total # of Days to Complete Work: >5 Consultation anticipated for: SHPO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tribal <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/>
Engineering	2/22/2021 Daniel Luke	Field Visit: Field visit needed prior to conducting further environmental review. Estimated Total # of Days to Complete Work: 6
Fisheries	2/12/2021 Barb Smith	Field Visit: No field visit needed. Estimated Total # of Days to Complete Work: <2 Is consultation with a regulatory agency anticipated? YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/>
Hydro	2/12/2021 Daniel Lay	Field Visit: No field visit needed. Estimated Total # of Days to Complete Work: >5
Lands/Special Uses	2/19/2021 Francisco Castillo	Field Visit: No field visit needed. Estimated Total # of Days to Complete Work: 0
Minerals	2/19/2021 Francisco Castillo	Field Visit: No field visit needed. Estimated Total # of Days to Complete Work: 0
Range	2/8/2021 Cory Farnsworth	Field Visit: No field visit needed. Estimated Total # of Days to Complete Work: 0



Geyser Pass Improvements Project

Resource	Review Complete	Specialist's Initial Input on Project
Recreation	2/12/2021 Brian Murdock	Field Visit: No field visit needed. Estimated Total # of Days to Complete Work: <2 Are the following needed: MRDG <input type="checkbox"/> Roadless Briefing <input type="checkbox"/> None <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Scenic Resources	2/12/2021 Brian Murdock	Field Visit: No field visit needed. Estimated Total # of Days to Complete Work: <2
Soils	2/12/2021 Daniel lay	Field Visit: No field visit needed. Estimated Total # of Days to Complete Work: >5
Special Management Areas	2/12/2021 Brian Murdock	Field Visit: No field visit needed. Estimated Total # of Days to Complete Work: 0
Wildlife	2/12/2021 Barb Smith	Field Visit: Field visit needed post-decision but pre-implementation and environmental review can be completed. Estimated Total # of Days to Complete Work: >5 Is consultation with a regulatory agency anticipated? YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/>

AGENCIES & PERSONS CONSULTED

Given the nature of the project, the Responsible Official consulted the following agencies, organizations, tribes and persons during development and analysis.

In November of 2019 a meeting was held with stakeholders at the location of the proposed project areas to solicit opinions and ideas for developing the proposed action. The general public and interested parties were made aware of this project in August 2020 when the project was listed on the Manti-La Sal National Forest's quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions.

Comments regarding the proposed action were solicited from the public and interested parties. Two legal notices were published in the Times-Independent on August 20th, 2020 and San Juan Recorder on August 19th, 2020. Scoping letters were mailed to 79 interested parties, including state and federal agencies. As a result of this effort, 16 letters were received during the scoping period and 3 letters after the end of the scoping period. All letters and comments received on the proposal are part of the project record and are available for public review.

Agencies

- Bureau of Land Management
 - Gary Torres
- Natural Resource Conservation Service
 - Andrews Don

Organizations/Businesses

- Porcupine Shuttle
 - Byran Nickell
- Poison Spider
 - Scott
- Coyote Shuttle
 - Kristin Jensen
- Whole Enchilada Shuttle
- Chile Pepper Bike Shop
- Western Spirit
 - Marc Sevenoff
- Rim Tours
 - Kirstin Peterson
- Magpie Tours

- Maggie Wilson
- Moab Cyclery
 - Jacques Hadler
- Moab Gear Trader
 - Marshall Dvorscak
- Bike Fiend
- Double Down Bike Shop
- Grand Canyon Trust
 - Mary O' Brian
 - Mike Popejoy
- SPEAR
 - Brent Johansen

Native American Tribes

- Navajo Utah Commission
 - Clarence Rockwell
- Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah
 - Dorena Martineau
- White Mesa Ute Council



Geyser Pass Improvements Project

- Elaine Cantsee
- Pueblo of Zuni Historic Preservation Office
 - Kurt Dongoske
- Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department
 - Richard Begaye
- Hopi Cultural Preservation Office
 - Stewart Koyiyumptewa
- Ute Mountain Ute Tribe
 - Terry Knight

State/Local Governments

- San Juan County Road Department
 - Todd Adair
- Grand County Road Department
 - Bill Jackson
- Grand County Recreation Department
 - Trail Mix
- Utah Division of Wildlife Resources
- Utah Division of Forestry, Fire, & State Lands
- Utah Division of State History

Elected Officials

- Grand County City Council
- San Juan County Commission

Individuals

- Anne Clare

- Bego Gerhart
- Chuck Tolton
- Craig Bigler
- Daniel McNeil
- Edmund Grote
- Eric Ming
- Gerrish Willis
- Jason Taylor
- Josh Doucette
- Kalen Jones
- Kirstin Peterson
- Larry Witt
- Lionel Weeks
- Marshall Dvorscak
- Matt Van Scoyoc
- Matt Bigler
- Nathan Ament
- Reed Kennard
- Robin Reibold
- Sarah Topp
- Mary Moran
- David Svendson
- Len Sorensen (landowners)
- Ken Williams (landowners)
- James Nyland (landowners)
- Joe Holyoak (landowners)
- Ryan Holyoak (landowners)

SUPPORTING PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

Table 4: Applicable Project File Documentation to Agencies & Persons Consulted

Documentation Type	File Name(s)
Scoping Letter	0007_GeyserPassImprovementsProject_ScopingLetter_08132020
Scoping Mailing List	0008_GeyserPassImprovementsProject_Scoping-MailingList_08132020
Moab Times-Independent Website Proof	0010_GPIP_OnlineLegalProof_MTI_08202020
San Juan Recorder Website Proof	0011_GPIP_OnlineLegalProof_SJR_08192020



ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS REVIEW

The following effects (or impacts) discussions focus on changes to the human environment from the proposed action that are reasonably foreseeable and have a reasonably close causal relationship to the proposed action, including those effects that occur at the same time and place as the proposed action and may include effects that are later in time or farther removed in distance from the proposed action or alternatives.

ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

GENERAL

Recreation

Short term direct negative impacts to recreational opportunities may occur during project implementation as the road and trailheads will be required to be closed. Long term impacts to recreation would generally be positive as the improvements should create safer conditions for recreationists. Some recreationists, primarily those using the Geyser Pass Road as a bike or ski trail may view the change in the character of the Geyser Pass Road as a negative impact. No cumulative impacts to recreation opportunities are anticipated from the project.

The entire project is within a Recreation Opportunity System (ROS) class of Roaded Natural and is consistent with the management of that ROS class.

Visual Resources

Overall the Proposed Action is not anticipated to add any lines, color or texture into the project area other than those already commonly found in the existing landscape along the road corridor and these alterations to the existing landscape would meet the objectives of all of the affected VQOs.

Wildlife/Botany

All project locations are occupied by a variety of wildlife, including mule deer, wild turkey, black bear and northern goshawk. In addition to northern goshawk, other species considered in detail in the wildlife specialist reports include another sensitive wildlife species, three-toed woodpecker, and the Management Indicator Species deer, elk and golden eagle. There are no federally listed threatened/endangered species in the analysis area.

A full description of impacts can be found in the Specialist Reports for the Project.

TRANS LA SAL TRAILHEAD

Recreation

Removing the hill on the blind corner will make the area safer in winter and summer and will reduce the risk of accidents on this dangerous corner. Removing the hill will also allow for better snow plowing and removal from that portion of the road. With the removal of the hill, an additional parking area will be created inside the bend in the road. This will make for a safer recreation experience in the summer as hikers and bikers will not have to park along the dirt road.

The creation of the new parking area will also benefit winter recreation as it will create an additional parking area for winter users pulling trailers. When the road is snow covered vehicles pulling trailers will be asked to park in this area. This should relieve the pressure on the often-congested Geyser Pass Winter Parking area 1.4 miles up the road.

The addition of a bathroom will benefit both winter and summer recreation.



Visual Resources

The largest amount of change to the landscape will occur at the Trans La Sal Trailhead where a forested hill adjacent to the road will be removed and a parking area constructed. This change will be visible from the road adjacent to the parking area road but will not add any lines, color or texture into the project area other than those already commonly found in the immediate area. The parking area would be constructed in a switchback with the Geysers Pass Road on both sides of the parking area. This specific portion of the project is within the Modified Visual Quality Objective (VQO) and the proposed action would be consistent with the visual objectives for the area.

Wildlife/Botany

There would be no additional effects to wildlife at already heavily used Trans La Sal Trailhead. There are no sensitive plants present in the area that would be disturbed.

GEYSER PASS WINTER TRAILHEAD

Recreation

When there is sufficient snow on the Geysers Pass Road vehicles pulling trailers will be required to park at the Trans La Sal parking lot. This will alleviate many parking issues and reduce user conflicts and congestion in the Geysers Pass Winter Trailhead.

GEYSER PASS ROAD

Recreation

The Proposed Action will change the character of the upper Geysers Pass Road and the experience of driving, biking or skiing along the road. The narrow road through the dense spruce/fir forest will be widened and the forest alongside the road will be more open. While the proposed action will change the experience of driving the upper Geysers Pass Road it is deemed necessary to manage the increase in use that has occurred on the road and to make the road safer. It is not anticipated that the Proposed Action will increase use along the road. Use has increased and is expected to continue to increase along the road regardless of whether the Proposed Action is implemented. Motor vehicle accidents have increased over the years in the project area and the Proposed Action is designed to manage the increased use and reduce the risk of accidents, not to invite more use.

Widening the road will also allow for the road to be more easily groomed for Nordic skiing in the winter as several of the tight corners and narrow portions of the road can be difficult to groom on years with deep snowpack's and drifting.

This expansion will convert the Upper Geysers Road from a maintenance level II (high clearance vehicles) to III (suitable for passenger cars) road. Despite the name for the road category, Geysers Pass Road has and will continue to be accessed by passenger vehicles with or without this project being approved. This road does not provide enough challenges to persuade passenger vehicles from using this road. The change in maintenance level is more consistent with the 1991 Travel Management Plan with the majority of Geysers Pass Road being converted to level III (suitable for passenger cars) road.

Visual Resources

The Proposed Action for the upper portion of the road would change the amount and pattern of the visual elements (vegetation) by removing additional trees directly adjacent to the road. These changes would primarily be visible to users who are on the road. Other Forest visitors would likely not notice the improvements from other viewpoints. Widening the road would change the character of the road by removing trees adjacent to the road, widening the road from 18' to 20' and by removing some of the blind corners and laying back the road cuts. However, these changes would repeat form, line, color and texture commonly found in characteristic landscape and would be consistent with the Partial Retention VQO. One potential positive affect of laying road cuts back to a 1:1 slope, is that the cuts will have a better chance of revegetating than a steeper slope.



Wildlife

Two sensitive wildlife species occur along the upper Geysers Pass road corridor and may be affected by the proposed road widening activities. The existing road goes through a goshawk territory and is adjacent to several three-toed woodpecker breeding territories. Direct effects from the proposed project to northern goshawks and their habitat are increased forest habitat fragmentation in a nesting territory from widening of the road corridor, increased noise and other disturbance during construction activity, causing changes to behavior, avoidance of the area and possible abandonment of a nesting territory for 1 or more seasons. Indirect effects come from human activity associated with use of the road, trailhead facilities and associated trails, leading to avoidance of the areas and disturbance to goshawk behavior. Three-toed woodpeckers may be affected by increased forest habitat fragmentation from widening of the road corridor, increased noise and other disturbance during construction activity, causing changes to behavior and temporary avoidance of the area. Project activity may remove trees, especially large Engelmann spruce and snags, used for feeding or nesting. Evidenced by the long-term occupation of woodpecker territories close to the existing road, indirect effects from road traffic and use of the road, trailhead facilities and associated trails are negligible. There are no cumulative effects to either species.

The sensitive plant Abajo Peak draba is common along the upper Geysers Pass road. Construction activity from widening the upper Geysers Pass road and expansion of the Geysers Pass trailhead parking area will disturb up to 16 acres of occupied habitat. The project will directly impact less than 1% of the available habitat (2660 acres) in spruce-fir forest on the La Sal Mountains/Moab portion of the district. Indirect impacts to the plants in the project area would be on-going from dust, runoff and road maintenance, including the use of dust suppressants. Effects to the species could also come from trampling associated with use of the road, trails and from dispersed camping. The plant grows at a density of 1-5 plants/m² along the existing Geysers Pass road, likely taking advantage of the opening in the spruce-fir canopy that it prefers, and does not appear to be adversely affected by road-related activities. There is no vegetation management or other activity proposed in Abajo Peak draba habitat that would contribute measurable cumulative effects.

CLARK LAKE TRAILHEAD

Recreation

The Geysers Pass Improvements Project would expand this parking lot and make it easier to access. Parking would be limited to 5 vehicles and other vehicles would continue to find parking elsewhere in the immediate area.

Wildlife

The Clark Lake Trailhead is within the northern goshawk nesting territory. Project activity and associated noise could affect a nearby nest if it is active during the construction season.

GEYSERS PASS TRAILHEAD

Recreation

The creation of additional parking spots and a shuttle turnaround at the Upper Geysers Pass Trailhead will benefit recreation by reducing the pressure to park along the road or in sensitive meadows areas when the parking area is full. The turnaround will benefit trailhead users as it should allow for shuttle companies to drop riders off in a different area than the parking areas which should relieve some the congestion of busy days.

Wildlife

The Geysers Pass Trailhead is outside the known goshawk territory but is within suitable foraging habitat. The trailhead is currently heavily used in the summer/fall, and project activity is unlikely to cause changes to goshawk behavior as they may already avoid the area. Abajo Peak draba occurs in large numbers around the existing Geysers Pass Trailhead and roads. The plant grows around the edge of the parking area and along the associated trail. Based on a 2020 survey, the proposed expansion activity may directly impact 230 individuals. Post-construction, it is expected that the draba will recolonize the site.



Increasing the size of the parking area and incorporating an area for offloading of passengers and equipment will help in preventing vehicles from parking off designated routes and parking areas.

NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT ACT (NFMA) – LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN CONSISTENCY

The pertinent specialists have reviewed the project and made the following determinations regarding consistency with applicable Land Management Plan direction, standards and guidelines.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Botany: Consistent | Range: Consistent |
| Cultural/Heritage: Consistent | Recreation: Consistent |
| Engineering: Consistent | Scenic Resources: Consistent |
| Fisheries: Consistent | Soils: Consistent |
| Fuels: Consistent | Silviculture: Consistent |
| Hydro: Consistent | Special Management Areas: Consistent |
| Lands/Special Uses: Consistent | Wildlife: Proposal Modification Needed |
| Minerals: Consistent | |

REQUIRED MODIFICATIONS

Forest Plan Standard: When non-vegetative management activities (for example: mineral & energy development, land exchanges, recreation facility development, ski resort construction, utility corridors, etc.) are proposed that would result in loss of suitable goshawk habitat, sufficient mitigation measures will be employed to insure an offset of the loss. The biological evaluation (BE) process will be used to document findings, recommend mitigation measures, and evaluate consistency with the intent of the Conservation Strategy and Agreement for Management of the Northern Goshawk in Utah.

The upper Geyser Pass road and Clark Lake trailhead are within a known northern goshawk breeding territory. To offset the potential loss of habitat from the proposed actions, close two unauthorized motorized routes that go for 450 ft and up to 1450 ft off the designated roads into goshawk habitat. Closing these areas to dispersed camping and unauthorized off-road use will improve alternate and replacement nest areas in the goshawk territory. This mitigation measure will meet the intent of the Forest Plan and the Conservation Strategy and Agreement for Management of the Northern Goshawk in Utah.

SUPPORTING PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

Table 5: Applicable Project File Documentation to Support NFMA Compliance

Documentation Type	File Name (if applicable/needed)
Forest Plan consistency checklist_TES/MIS	0017_ForestPlan_ConsistencyChecklist-WFRP_GeyserPassRoad_09182020

ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

THREATENED, ENDANGERED, PROPOSED AND CANDIDATE SPECIES &/OR CRITICAL HABITAT

The pertinent specialists reviewed the project and made the following determinations for threatened, endangered and/or proposed species:



Table 6: TEPC Effect Determinations for ESA

Species/Habitat	Status	Proposed or Designated Critical Habitat Present?	Determination*	Brief Rationale (or refer to other project documentation)
Southwestern Willow Flycatcher	Endangered	No	NE	There is no suitable willow/shrub-dominated riparian habitat within the project area and the species is not known to occur on the Moab District or in high elevation forested habitats. There are no downstream effects to suitable habitat.
Colorado River fishes (Bonytail, Colorado pikeminnow, Humpback chub, Razorback sucker)	Endangered	No	NE	None of the endangered Colorado River fish species occur on the Manti-La Sal National Forest (MLNF), but are present in drainages that receive water originating on the MLNF. The project area is in the Colorado River watershed. No water depletions are associated with the proposed project. The proposed action would not have a measurable effect on the quantity or quality of water in the Colorado River system.
Greenback cutthroat trout	Threatened	No	NE	This native cutthroat trout occurs in one drainage on the other side of the mountain from the project area, and the proposed action would have no effect on the fish or its habitat.

*NE – No Effect; NLAA – May Affect, Not Likely to Adversely Affect; LAA – May Affect, Likely to Adversely Affect; No Jeopardy - Not Likely to Jeopardize the Continued Existence or Adversely Modify Critical Habitat

SUPPORTING PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

Table 7: Applicable Project File Documentation to Support ESA Compliance

Documentation Type	File Name (if applicable/needed)
USFWS T&E species list	0018_USFWS-2021_Updated-T&ESpeciesList_02022021
TES species white paper	0019_2020-LifeHistoryAnd StatusSummary-v7_032020



SENSITIVE SPECIES (FSM 2670)

The pertinent specialists reviewed the project and made the following determinations for sensitive species:

A Biological Evaluation was prepared. Determinations as documented in that report are:

No Impact: spotted bat, western big-eared bat, bighorn sheep, bald eagle, peregrine falcon, flammulated owl, Colorado River cutthroat trout, sweetflower rock-jasmine, Isely’s milkvetch, La Sal daisy, Canyonlands lomatium

May Impact Individuals or Habitat but Will Not Likely Contribute to a Trend Towards Federal Listing or Loss of Viability to the Population or Species: northern goshawk, three-toed woodpecker, Abajo Peak draba

SUPPORTING PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

Table 8: Applicable Project File Documentation to Support Agency Sensitive Species Compliance

Documentation Type	File Name (if applicable/needed)
Biological Evaluation/Wildlife Report	0016_GPIP_BE&WildlifeReport_02182021
TES species white paper	0019_2020-LifeHistoryAnd StatusSummary-v7_032020

NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION ACT (NHPA) – SECTION 106 REVIEW

The pertinent specialist has reviewed the project and made the following determination regarding Section 106 compliance:

No historic properties affected - 36 CFR 800.4(d)(1). Section 106 Review has been completed for the project area and no National Register eligible cultural sites were found.

COMMENTS

Three sites documented and consulted. Historic properties not eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places

SUPPORTING PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

Table 9: Applicable Project File Documentation to Support NHPA Compliance

Documentation Type	File Name (if applicable/needed)
SHPO Concurrence Case #20-2447	
CR Report	0020_U-20-FS-0524

TRIBAL CONSULTATION

Based on the nature of the project, the line officer/responsible official made the following determination regarding Tribal Consultation:

Consultation with American Indian Tribes has been completed.

COMMENTS

Hopi, Navajo Nation, Ute Tribe, Ute Mountain Ute, White Mesa Ute, and Paiute tribes consulted. Consultation letter and report sent August 20, 2020. Only response was email from Timothy Begay, THPO 9-24-2020



SUPPORTING PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

Table 10: Applicable Project File Documentation to Support Tribal Consultation Compliance

Documentation Type	File Name(s)
Email from Timothy Begay	Email forwarded to F. Castillo

SPECIAL MANAGEMENT AREAS (E.G. WILDERNESS, ROADLESS ETC.)

The pertinent specialist has reviewed the project and made the following determinations based on special management area presence/proximity or lack of:

Table 11: Special Management Area Compliance Determinations

Management Area Type	Applicable Law/Regulation to Demonstrate Compliance With	Rationale for Compliance or Needs for Project Modification
Wilderness,RNA,IRA	Wilderness Act, 2012 Roadless Rule	Proposal is not within wilderness, RNA or IRA

SUPPORTING PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

Table 12: Applicable Project File Documentation to Support Special Management Area Compliance

Documentation Type	File Name(s)
Specialist Report	0015_GPIP_Rec_Visual_SpecialAreaAnalysis02182021

CLEAN WATER ACT (CWA)

The pertinent specialist has reviewed the project and made the following determination:

Complies with section 404 of the Clean Water Act. Exemption 404(f)(1); no permit needed for construction or maintenance of forest roads with best management practices in place.

SUPPORTING PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

Table 1: Applicable Project File Documentation to Support CWA Compliance

Documentation Type	File Name(s)
Soils/Hydro Specialist Report	0006_GPIP_WatershedReport_07282020

PERTINENT EXECUTIVE ORDERS

The line officer and/or applicable specialist(s) have determined the project is in compliance with the following Executive Orders (EO), which were deemed pertinent based on the nature of the project.

- EO 11988, Floodplain Management
- EO 11990, Protection of Wetlands
- EO 12898, Environmental Justice
- EO 13007, Indian Sacred Sites
- EO 13112, Invasive Species
- EO 13175, Consultation & Coordination w/ Indian Tribal Governments
- EO 13186, Migratory Birds
- EO 13443, Facilitation of Hunting Heritage & Wildlife Conservation



COMMENTS

The proposed action complies with the Executive Orders listed above (see hydrology/soils, cultural, aquatics, range, and wildlife resource condition checklists in the project record).