



United States
Department of
Agriculture



Forest Service
August 8th, 2019



Hale Lake Area Management Project Scoping Document

Smokey Bear Ranger District

Lincoln National Forest

Lincoln County, New Mexico

Responsible Official: Jodie Canfield, District Ranger

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Comments are due by: Tuesday, September 10th 2019

Summary

The Smokey Bear Ranger District is proposing changes to the management of US Forest System lands in the vicinity of Hale Lake. These changes would improve the access to a variety of recreation uses within the Hale Lake area, while addressing known issues with travel management and recreation.

Proposed changes include:

- The authorization of new single-track trails.
- The authorization of five 4x4 trails on existing user created routes.
- Reclamation and physical closure of all other user created routes and of decommissioned roads.
- The use of gates, fencing, boulders, and/or bollards to prevent unauthorized access to “administrative use only” roads.
- The creation of three public parking areas.
- The construction of two low standard helispots for EMS access.
- The potential addition of vault toilets at the proposed parking areas, as well as other amenities.

The proposed changes are based on both resource damage caused by existing uses, and on the expected increased demand for all types of recreation in the coming decade.

Implementation of these changes would occur as funding becomes available; however, it is the goal of the district to authorize the 4x4 trails and begin the closure of unauthorized routes to motor vehicles as soon as is feasible following a decision on the project.

Background

The greater Ruidoso area is seeing a steady increase in the quantity and diversity of users that come to the area to recreate on public lands and enjoy the history and amenities offered by the surrounding communities.

With growing public demand for OHV recreation opportunities on the Smokey Bear Ranger District (Off Highway Vehicles, including: ATV's, motorcycles, full size 4x4 vehicles, and large UTV's), we identified the Hale Lake area as a portion of the district most suitable for revising the travel system and for expanding/improving the recreational opportunities available. The Hale Lake area is located east of Ruidoso Downs, New Mexico, south of Highway 70 (See map #1).

The travel system for the Lincoln National Forest was initiated with the creation of the Forest Plan in the late 1980's. The system has had some minor revisions and updates since then, but has largely remained unchanged. The roads and trails currently open to motorized use are depicted on the Motor Vehicle Use Map (free and available at District

offices). Roads that are open to public traffic are maintained for highway legal vehicles. Some are intended for high clearance vehicles only.

The Forest Service designates motorized trails in the following ways:

1. Open to 4x4 vehicles *greater* than 50" in width (this class effectively allows all size motorized vehicles, including motorcycles)
2. Open to vehicles 50" width *or less* (this class effectively limits the trails to small ATVs and motorcycles)
3. Open to motorcycles (No ATV use allowed).

Currently, there are no trails on the district designated for 4x4 vehicles, and only a very small selection of trails designated for just for motorcycles, or for vehicles less than 50" in width.

In 2018, the district conducted an inventory of roads in the project area. The inventory that showed that there are over 50 miles of user created/unauthorized roads being used. Some of these routes are contributing to watershed and habitat degradation through increased sedimentation, vegetation loss and landscape fragmentation. The inventory also showed that about 75 miles of system roads that were either intended to be decommissioned or are for administrative use only are also being actively used by motor vehicles. (See map #2)

The district requested public input on management options within the Hale Lake area in 2019. Seeing the opportunity to address other issues in the area, we asked the public to provide input on travel management, OHV use, and other recreation opportunities.

Responses from the public were detailed and varied. After balancing the wide variety of suggestions that we received with our capacity and obligations as a land management agency, environmental and ecological concerns, and the desire to provide a quality recreational experience to area users, we developed the following proposed action.

Proposed Action

Proposed project activities include 6 main components which will be discussed in detail below:

1. The authorization for five designated 4x4 trails.
2. The closure and reclamation of all other user created and decommissioned roads.
3. The closure of administrative use only roads.
4. The authorization of 2 areas designated for future new single-track trails: One for non-motorized and potentially for class-1 pedal assist E-bike use, and another for non-motorized, all E-bike, and motorcycle use (no OHV).
5. The authorization for the creation of 3 parking areas.

6. The authorization for a short, non-motorized single-track interpretive trail from forest road 443 to the historic Tunstall murder site.

The roads that are currently designated open to highway legal vehicles (including those designated for high clearance) will remain unchanged.

The Authorization of 5 Designated OHV Trails

Five different 4x4 trails will be added to the system (see map #1). These trails will allow for a system of 4x4/OHV loops that are based on and connect the existing prism of current system roads and user created routes. Minimal trail construction or modification will be required. Some trail maintenance will be required over the life of these trails.

These trails would be designated as trails for 4x4 vehicles. This designation would allow for the use of the trails by full size 4WD vehicles, UTVs, ATV's, and motorcycles. These routes would be maintained as trails, and not as part of the road network, and would provide a greater off-road challenge for motorized users than system roads.

These trails were selected based on their ability to provide a variety of riding experiences to OHV users, while reducing the footprint and impacts currently caused by this type of recreation within the project area. In total, approximately 17 miles of trail that is not currently open to 4x4/OHV use will be added to the travel system for the district. These trails will be clearly signed as open for this use, and informational kiosks will be provided within the project area that include maps, rules and regulations.

The proposed trails are color coded: The orange trail is north of 443 and west of forest road 993D, and would add ~7.28 miles of trail. The green trail is between 993D and forest road 588, and would add ~4.41 miles of trail. The purple trail connects the east and west sides of 588 via forest road 588B, and would add ~1.5 miles of trail. The blue trail connects forest road 443E and forest road 443D, and extends OHV access within Tunstall Canyon on forest road 9019D, and would add ~2.95 miles of trail. The yellow trail is at the east end of the project area off of 443 and connects forest roads 443A and 443B, and would add ~0.83 miles of trail.

We believe that by legitimizing this recreation activity and limiting it to designated areas, improving signage, increasing enforcement, and partnering with local user groups, we can provide a recreation experience in the area that fosters a sense of ownership by area users and thus reduces the potential for resource damage.

The Closure and Reclamation of All Other User Created Routes and Previously Decommissioned Roads

The remainder of routes that exist in the area that are either user created routes, or roads that had been decommissioned in the past, will be closed to public motorized access. These areas will still be accessible to non-motorized uses, such as foot and horse traffic. Common closure methods include, but are not limited to; the installation of

signs, gates, boulders, berms, woody or rocky material, fencing, and/or other barriers that block motorized access.

These roads may then be reclaimed via ripping or digging out the tread with heavy machinery, seeding with native seed, scattering rocks and boulders or woody material across the trails/roads, and/or any other methods that remove the road from the landscape.

These same methods will be authorized on any new illegitimate travel routes within the project area that may develop or be discovered in the future.

The Closure of Administrative Use Only Roads

Administrative use only roads are those that are part of the designated travel system, but that are held in reserve for use by authorized personnel to assist with land management activities such as range administration, wildland firefighting, or invasive plant treatments. These roads are not maintained regularly, nor are they intended for regular motorized use, and are already closed to public motorized access in the current travel plan.

Most of the administrative use only roads within the project area need physical barriers and additional signage to prevent unauthorized use. As part of this proposal, any administrative use only road will be closed via gating and/or other physical barriers such as fencing or bollards. These areas will still be accessible to non-motorized users.

The authorization of 2 areas designated for future single-track trails.

Two distinct areas have been identified that would be suitable for the future installation of single-track trails (see map #1). These areas are being proposed at this time to allow for the construction of trails in the future as funding becomes available. Specific trail routes have not been identified at this point, but would be determined based on the terrain and sustainability by experienced personnel.

Single-track area 1 is southwest of 443, and would be designated as non-motorized, and evaluated for the potential authorization of class-one E-bike use in the future, should this category of E-bike receive its own trail designation status. Non-motorized uses include hiking, mountain bike riding, and horseback riding. Class-one E-bikes are a category of bicycles that use an electric motor to provide additional power during the pedal stroke of the rider. These bikes cannot provide supplemental power at speeds of over 20 miles per hour, do not have a throttle, and cannot provide power when the brakes are applied. Maximum motor power on class-one E-bikes is 750 watts, which is approximately equal to one horsepower. The user experience, noise levels, and effects to the trail and other users from class-one E-bikes is comparable to that of a regular mountain bike. Current forest service policy categorizes all E-bikes as motorcycles, which would restrict them from use in this area. However, this precedent is being changed on non-federal public lands around the country and forest policy may change in the future. By analyzing for the potential future authorization of this category of E-bike on the otherwise non-motorized trails proposed for single-track area 1 in this document, we will be prepared to adopt any potential new policy right away.

Single-track area 2 is northeast of 443 and north of Hale Lake, and would be designated for motorcycle, E-bike, and non-motorized use, but not for OHV use. Currently the district has less than 5 miles of non-continuous designated motorcycle trail. These trails would provide an opportunity for motorcycles to access motorized single-track, which offers a desirable experience for some users, and is an opportunity that is currently lacking on the district.

This trail system would intersect the OHV/motorized trail network in places. Therefore signage and/or width limiters would be installed to indicate which trails are appropriate for the different user groups to travel on.

As public use of our trail systems increase, there may be needs to manage for shared use of the trail systems. For example, this could include alternating days and directions of travel for motorized and non-motorized users to reduce conflicts. This strategy has proven successful in highly visited public lands in California and Colorado.

The authorization for the creation of 3 parking areas.

Three areas have been identified to provide parking for day use (see map #1). The first area is a public access point off Stetson Road in the southwest portion of the project area, along forest road 590. This spot is a popular access point for dispersed camping, hiking, and horseback riding. The second parking area would be developed on the east side of the project area at the intersection of 443 and the 443A road. The third area would be adjacent to Hale Lake at a spot that is currently used for parking and dispersed camping.

All of these locations would be approved for the construction of some amenities if a need is identified in the future and as funding becomes available:

- Parking to accommodate trailers and vehicles.
- Information kiosks.
- Vault toilets.
- Other potential amenities as demand and funding merit, such as picnic tables, non-potable water, and fire rings.

Future development of amenities may necessitate creating a fee use area in order to be sustainable.

Lastly, in order to prevent resource damage, the livestock trap surrounding Hale Lake will be closed to motorized access using width limiters, gating, and/or fencing that still allows wildlife, livestock, and foot access to the water feature.

The authorization of an interpretive trail from forest road 443 to the historic Tunstall murder site.

This project would authorize the construction of a small parking area at the intersection of 443 and forest road 9019D and a short non-motorized trail to provide walk in access to the historic Tunstall murder site (approximately 0.7 miles). The Tunstall murder site is famous for being the location of the event that started the Lincoln County war, and led to the rise of Billy the Kid. This walk in access would make the site more accessible to visitors without a high clearance vehicle. Interpretive signs detailing the history of these events may be installed at the trailhead, along the trail, and/or at the site marker if funding becomes available.

Additional Proposed Activities

In order to properly implement the proposal, a number of other, smaller project activities would be authorized:

- Installation of signs throughout the project area as needed to mark travel routes, trails, closed areas, and to post rules and regulations.
- Installation of a kiosk on the western end of 443 that includes area maps, regulations, a 4x4 and single-track trail register, and other area information.
- Changes to the direction of travel for different user groups on trails if needed to deconflict use during popular times – for example, horses and hikers may be required to travel in one direction on certain days of the week and mountain bikes the other direction those same days.
- Installation of cattle guards at any intersection of a road or trail as needs are identified. This would reduce conflicts between private grazing operations and recreational users.
- Remediation of damage to soils from motorized use as needed, including through the use of exclosures, temporary closure orders, ripping, and/or seeding.
- Construction of two low standard helispots on the east and west ends of 443. Specific locations will be determined prior to construction based on suitability of access and terrain. These helispots would provide locations for emergency medical services and fire operations helicopters to land in the area if needed.
- Construction of a single-track connector trail from Single-track trail area #2 to the proposed parking area on the east end of 443 through the central portion of the project area, north of forest road 588, if a suitable route is identified and as funding becomes available in the future.
- The ability to accommodate unforeseen technologies in the future through the addition of new designations to existing routes, or to the routes proposed in in this document, where effects would be similar.

Project Design Features and Mitigations

Key design features and mitigations that will be inherent to the project area are summarized here:

- No project activities will take place within the Mexican Spotted owl (MSO) Protected Activity Center (PAC) found within the project boundaries.
- Areas that have suitable habitat for Kuenzler's hedgehog cactus will require surveys to be completed prior to implementation. Much of the project area has already been surveyed for this species and it has not been located within the project area. If a Kuenzler's hedgehog cactus population is discovered within the project area, it will be protected from motorized traffic with a buffer of 200 feet, except where natural barriers provide adequate protection (i.e. rocky outcroppings or cliff faces). Kuenzler's hedgehog cactus populations, if present, may also have fencing exclosures added or removed around them as needed to facilitate the management of population health.

- All project activities will be designed so as not to cause any sensitive species to trend towards federal listing.
- Because federally listed species can change, all current and future project activities will be designed so that activities are *not likely to adverse effect* any federally listed species at the time of implementation.
- Project activities will be reviewed and/or surveyed as needed for cultural sites. Implementation will take place in a manner that causes *No Adverse Effect* to identified sites. Most of these sites will be protected by complete avoidance.

How to get involved

Comment on the Hale Lake Area Management Project by Tuesday, September 10th 2019.

A 30 day public comment period will start on Friday, August 9th, 2019. This will be the first of two opportunities to give written input on the project. The public will also have the opportunity to comment on the Draft Environmental Assessment. Those who provide timely and specific comments during either comment period may also be eligible to file an objection to the Final Environmental Assessment and Draft Decision Notice.

Comments can be submitted online, by mail, in-person, or by email. For objection eligibility, each individual or representative from each entity submitting timely and specific written comments must either sign the comments or verify identity upon request. We will place all written and electronic comments received, including the names and addresses of those who comment, in the project file and that information will become a matter of public record. We will accept and consider anonymous comments. You may submit comments through the following options:

- **Send an email (preferred)** to comments-southwestern-lincoln-smokey-bear@usda.gov with "Hale Lake Area Management Project" in the subject line. If attaching a document, please use .doc, .txt, .pdf, or .rtf formats only.
- **Via telephone:** Smokey Bear District Ranger Station (575) 257-4095. Speak with either Andrew Ellis, NEPA Planner, or Jodie Canfield, District Ranger.
- **Postal mail:**
Attn: Hale Lake Area Management Project
Jodie Canfield, District Ranger, 901 Mechem Drive, Ruidoso, NM 88345
- **Hand-delivered comments** may be submitted to the Smokey Bear Ranger District Office (901 Mechem Drive, Ruidoso, NM 88345) between 8:00 am and 4:30 pm, weekdays.
- **Send a fax** with your written comment to:
575-257-6174 Attn: Hale Lake Area Management Project

For More Information

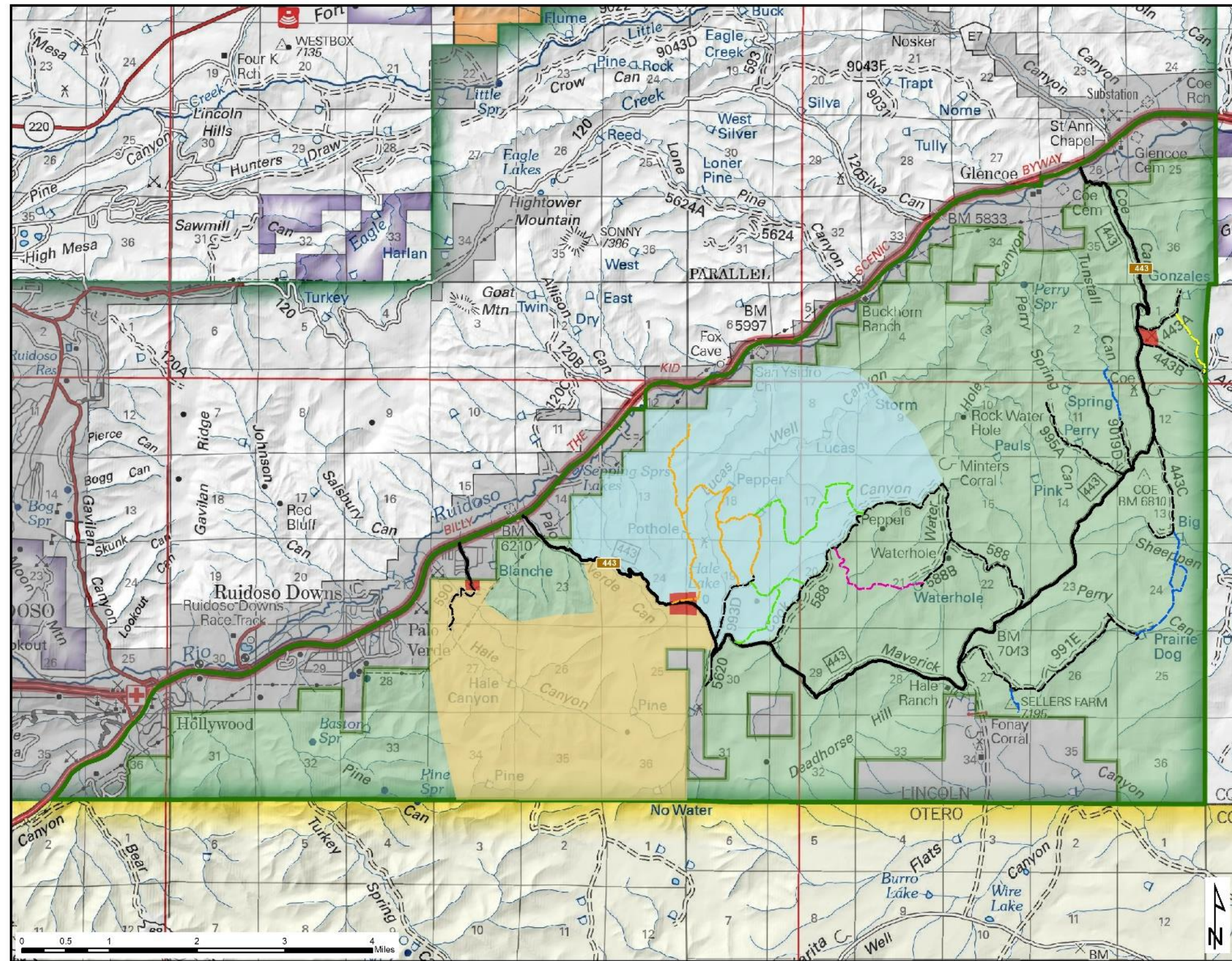
For more information concerning the proposal, please contact:

Andrew Ellis, NEPA Planner

Andrew.Ellis@usda.gov

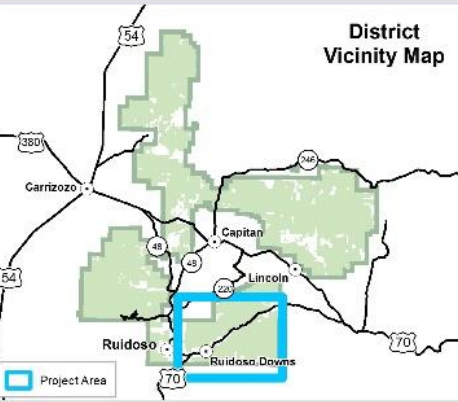
(575) 630-3008

Map #1 – Proposed Additions



Lincoln National Forest Smokey Bear Ranger District

Hale Lake Area Mangement Proposed Action - Additions



Legend

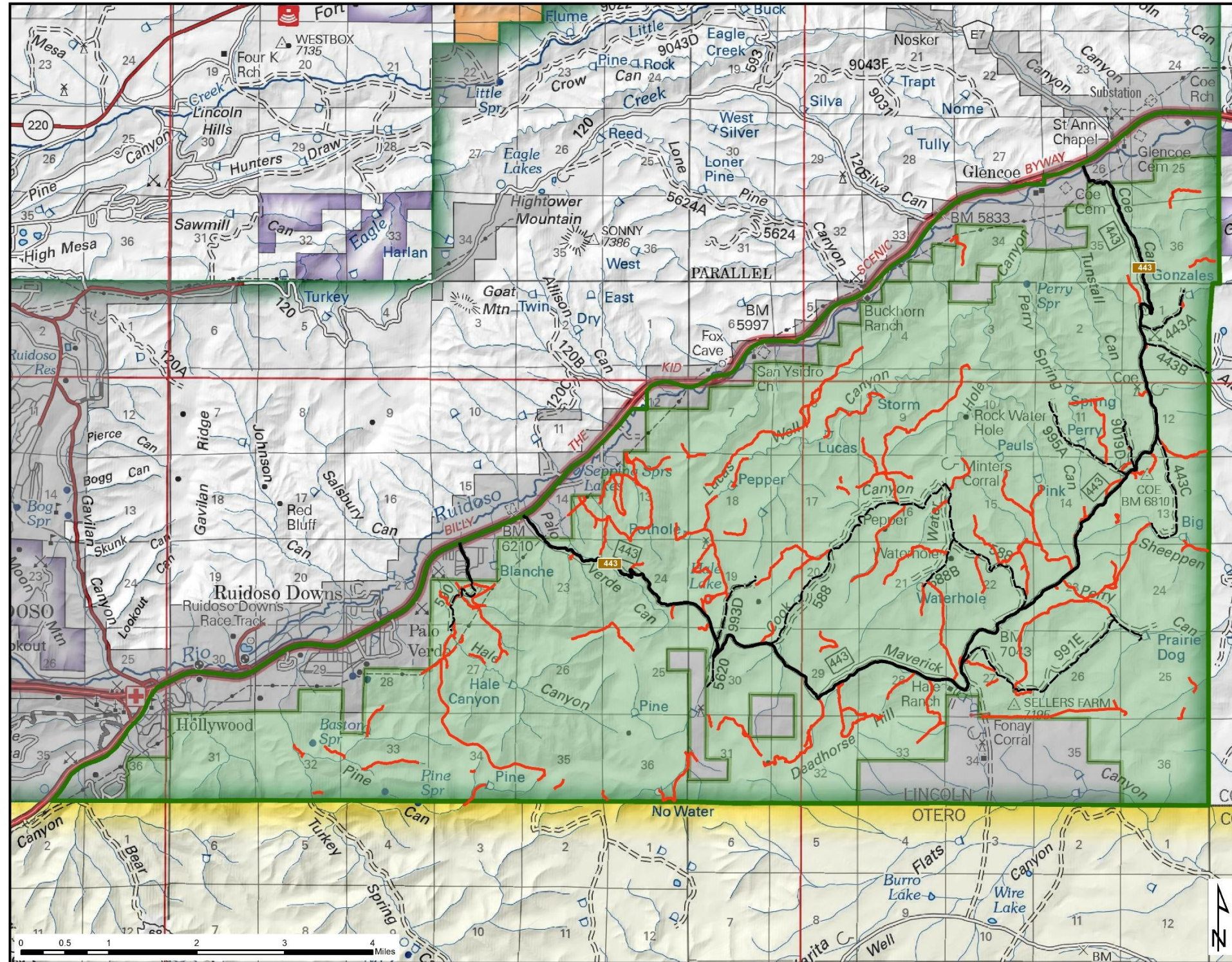
Proposed Trails	Proposed Use Areas
Blue Trail	Single-Track Trail Area #1 - No Motorcycles
Green Trail	Single-Track Trail Area #2 - Motorcycles Allowed
Orange Trail	Parking Area
Purple Trail	Project Area
Yellow Trail	Private Land
Roads currently open to Motorized Travel	
High Clearance Vehicles	
Suitable for Passenger Cars	



Date: 8/5/2019

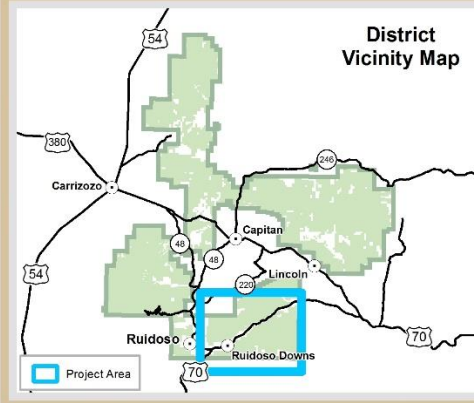


Map #2 – Unauthorized Routes Eligible for Removal



**Lincoln National Forest
Smokey Bear
Ranger District**

Hale Lake Area Mangement
Proposed Action - Travel Routes Eligible
for Removal



Legend

- Roads Currently Open to Motorized Travel**
 - High Clearance Vehicles (dashed line)
 - Suitable for Passenger Cars (solid line)
- Roads and Trails Proposed for Potential Removal** (red line)
- Project Area** (green shaded area)
- Private Land** (grey shaded area)