



**File Code:** 2300  
**Date:** October 18, 2019

Dear Interested Party,

The Santa Lucia Ranger District of the Los Padres National Forest is conducting an environmental analysis of the recreation use and restoration needs on West Cuesta Ridge. The purpose of the project is to improve resource conditions and protect desired landscape attributes, including the botanical interest area, by providing sustainable managed recreation opportunities. A detailed description of the project is enclosed, including the location, purpose and need, proposed action, and the decision to be made. Project related information is also available online at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=56821>.

The proposed project is in the first stage of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance process, and it is our intention to document the analysis with an Environmental Assessment (EA). This letter is being sent to potentially interested and affected members of the public to solicit comments regarding this proposal. Comments received will be used to further refine the project and to identify potential issues to be addressed through the environmental analysis process.

#### **How to Comment**

We encourage you to review the enclosed project information, and to provide us your project related comments, concerns, and questions by November 24, 2019.

Written comments may be submitted electronically to: [comments-pacificsouthwest-los-padres-santa-lucia@usda.gov](mailto:comments-pacificsouthwest-los-padres-santa-lucia@usda.gov). Please record "West Cuesta Ridge" in the subject line of your email. Comments may also be submitted to: Alicia Sanchez Scott, Santa Lucia Ranger District, 1616 North Carlotti Drive, Santa Maria, CA 93454; fax (805-961-5781); or phone (805-925-9538 ext. 235). The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Please record "West Cuesta Ridge" on the envelope and your letter when providing comments by mail.

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. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.

For questions concerning this proposal, please contact Alicia Sanchez Scott, Assistant Recreation Officer, at [alicia.sanchezscott@usda.gov](mailto:alicia.sanchezscott@usda.gov) or at (805) 925-9538 ext. 235.



Thank you for your interest and participation in the management of the Los Padres National Forest.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'KEVIN B. ELLIOTT', with a large, loopy flourish extending to the right.

KEVIN B. ELLIOTT  
Forest Supervisor

Enclosures: Project Summary and Maps

## West Cuesta Ridges Sustainable Recreation and Botanical Area Restoration Project Summary

### **Background**

Throughout the past decade, recreation use along West Cuesta ridge (TV Tower Road) on the Santa Lucia district has grown. More recently, in 2016 the road accessing the ridge was paved, improving access and increasing vehicle traffic in the area. It is a desirable place to visit with the shade provided by the Sargent Cypress grove and sweeping views to Morro Bay. However, the ridge has been negatively impacted by unplanned and unmanaged recreation activities since the road has been maintained such as: unauthorized motorized and non-motorized trails development, resource damage to the Cuesta Ridge Botanical Area, accumulation of human waste from dispersed camping, illegal trash dumping, abandoned campfires, and target shooting. The Forest Service has taken efforts to address some of these activities and the resultant resource damage, particularly in the Cuesta Ridge Botanical Special Interest Area, with limited success. The popularity of the area and resource issues has also captured the attention of the public, user groups, and local and federal government agencies that have an interest in the management of recreation activities on West Cuesta Ridge. Members of the public and staff from San Luis Obispo County, California Army National Guard, Camp San Luis and the City of San Luis Obispo have contacted the district multiple times submitting complaints and requests to remedy the issues listed above. User created trails that begin on the Forest have encroached onto adjacent lands owned by the City of San Luis Obispo, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, and California Army National Guard, Camp San Luis. Some of these routes enter areas where unexploded munitions have been discovered.

### **Purpose and Need**

The purpose of this project is to improve resource conditions and protect desired landscape attributes, including the botanical special interest area, on West Cuesta Ridge by providing sustainable managed recreation activities consistent with Los Padres Land Management Plan (LMP), 2005. Part 2 of the LMP describes the desired conditions and program emphasis for the Cuesta Place:

*Cuesta Place is a natural appearing landscape that functions as the scenic backdrop and portal to the coast. The landscape attributes to be preserved over time are: the mosaic patterns of vegetation, the natural skyline silhouette, healthy watersheds, and non-motorized trail systems. Motorized use is limited to the existing road system. Regional habitat linkages are intact and functioning. (desired conditions).*

*Designate a trail system for the mountain bikes, equestrian, and hikers. Prevent unauthorized OHV use and recreation target shooting. Seek opportunities to increase interpretation of the designated botanical area and geologic resources. Work cooperatively with private landowners and San Luis Obispo County to provide access to the national forest. (program emphasis).*

There is a need to protect the Cuesta Ridge Botanical Area and restore the damaged caused by the unmanaged recreation activities that are occurring. Dispersed camping along the road sides and spurs has led to a continual and expanding encroachment within the botanical area. Native trees, including a small population of Sargent cypress trees have been damaged and cut illegally to expand road side camping areas, and to create trails. Sargent cypress stands, which are endemic to California and only grow on serpentine rich soils, including those on West Cuesta Ridge, are being cut without consideration for the resource. This plant species thrives in this fragile environment and once damaged, are very slow to recover. The dispersed camping and recreation target shooting pressure has also resulted in a lot of trash and waste throughout the area. They have also exacerbated fire risk to the surrounding forested landscape and nearby communities, particularly from abandoned campfires.

Unmanaged recreation development, including the unauthorized construction of trails that are not properly designed, results in unnecessary damage to government lands, soil loss, water quality impacts, and potential impacts to federally listed sensitive forest plant and animal species in the area, including the California red-legged frog, Cuesta Pass checkerbloom, San Luis sedge, San Luis mariposa lily, and Brewer's spineflower.

Given the popularity of the West Cuesta Ridge area and the recreation use it received, there is a need to provide sustainable recreation opportunity in the area. For instance, approved trails have been constructed on adjacent lands and there is interest from the community for connecting trails on Forest Service lands. Introducing desirable managed activities on West Cuesta Ridge can displace the undesirable and unsustainable recreation activities that are currently occurring. The goal of this project is to build partnerships with the local community to protect the West Cuesta Ridge Botanical Area and surrounding area while also providing sustainable managed recreation opportunities.

### **Proposed Action**

The proposed action is to create a sustainable network of mountain bike trails that start on the LPNF and connect to existing, authorized trails on adjacent lands owned by the City of San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo County, and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. Some existing trails will need to be rerouted to make them sustainable.

Many of the trails in the area are unauthorized user created routes that are not designed to standard and have been in existence for decades. Some of the trails were created from old mining roads or dozer lines created from past wildfires. The proposed action is to adopt trails that are already to Forest Service standards, reroute sections of trails where they are unsustainable (not to Forest Service standards) or intersect locations affecting threatened, endangered or sensitive plants. In total, the proposed action is to adopt or construct/reroute approximately 20 miles of non-motorized trails, and restore approximately 18 miles non-motorized trails to natural conditions (see Table 1). Of the 20 miles of non-motorized trails, 0.3 miles will be constructed through the botanical area and serve as an interpretive/educational trail emphasizing the uniqueness of the Cuesta Ridge Botanical Area and the geological features along the ridge. Trail Management Objectives (TMOs) will be established for all trails that are adopted and constructed/rerouted with a designed use for bicycles. In most instances, the existing trails will be narrowed to the determined managed width, and best management practices will be

implemented to reduce erosion potential, protect surface water quality, and protect sensitive resources.

Restoration of unauthorized trails will include contouring or outslipping where needed to address hydrologic issues and prevent erosion of sensitive soils. This also includes removing constructed features such as banked turn to reestablish the natural slope and allowing the area revegetate on its own. On entrenched trail sections, berms will be pulled back into the entrenched area, and water bars installed to mitigate erosion. No ripping of the ground will occur in order to protect the fragile serpentine soils. Barriers and trail head signs will be posted to inform users where designated trails are located.

Pipe fence barriers will be installed along the Forest Service Road 29S28 where vehicles are creating routes and widening unauthorized areas to disperse camp within and outside the West Cuesta Ridge Botanical Area.

Forest Service Road 29S28 (aka. TV Tower Road) will be closed to public vehicular traffic 1.55 miles from the intersection at Highway 101. A gate will be installed at the closure location. The road designation will change allowing for an updated Motor Vehicle Use Map to be reprinted with this change. A project specific travel analysis will be completed concurrently through this environmental analysis to assist in the development of the proposal to close TV Tower Road.

Trailhead parking will be developed in an open area 1.55 miles from Highway 101 providing a designated turn around location for vehicles. The trailhead parking will be graded to improve drainage, delineated with barriers, and a one-room SST toilet building will be installed if feasible.

Forest Service Road 29S28 will remain accessible for administrative use, firefighter access, and permittee access to the communication site. Closing the road will eliminate continued resource damaged caused by vehicles traveling off-road in and around the botanical area, dispersed camping in the botanical area, minimize target shooting, prevent abandoned campfires from dispersed campers, and dumping of household items and trash.

Information signs will be installed and will provide designated motorized route information, dispersed camping information, current restrictions including target shooting and wildfire restrictions, and Leave No Trace information. Maps will be installed where information signs are located to provide the public with designated motorized routes, authorized trails and other routes that are being restored. Interpretive signs will be installed along a new trail within the botanical area, and 41 Wildfire signs will be posted along trail access points and along the road.

#### **Forest Land Management Plan Consistency**

The project contributes to Forest Goal 3.1 which is to provide for public use and natural resource protection - by providing suitable and sustainable trails to limit erosion and sedimentation and restoring safe public recreation access for dispersed camping opportunities while preventing resource damaging in the botanical area.

This project is consistent with recreation strategy REC 2 - Sustainable Use and Environmental Design – Analyze, stabilize, and restore areas where visitor is negatively affecting recreation opportunities, public safety and environmental resources.

Manage visitor use within the limits of identified capacities:

- Implement capacity control measures in specific high-use areas as resource impacts become a concern.
- Conduct threatened, endangered, proposed, candidate, and sensitive species occupancy surveys within potential threatened, endangered, proposed, candidate, and sensitive species recreation conflict areas.
- Implement Adaptive Mitigation for Recreation Uses (Appendix D) in existing and new recreation sites and uses whenever a conflict between uses or sensitive resources is detected.

Adaptive Mitigation for Recreation Use for this area will follow the Recreation Implementation Guidelines as described in the LMP for Perimeter Control, Presence and Direct Action.

Perimeter Control

- Modify Visitor access to manage use. Install and maintain appropriate fencing or other barriers to protect sensitive resource areas. Limit the number of users at the site or area.
- Install and maintain appropriate multi-lingual informational, interpretive and regulatory signing in conjunction with perimeter controls to engage national forest visitors with protection of sensitive resources at recreation sites and areas.

Presence

- Provide adequate management presence to ensure protection of sensitive resources. This presence could include Forest Service personnel, peer education, contractors, concessionaires, other permit holders, and volunteer support.

Direct Action

- Where visitor use is allowed – seek opportunities to proactively rehabilitate, design, reconstruct and harden the site and/or locate new facilities and areas for redistributing human use away from sensitive resources.

The project also contributes and is supported by the Design Criteria for Special Interest Areas and Recreation Activities:

**S33:** Manage Special Interest Areas so that activities and discretionary uses are either neutral or beneficial for the resource values for which the area was established. Accept short-term adverse impacts to these resource values if such impacts will be compensated by the accrual of long-term benefit.

**S34:** Where a threatened, endangered, proposed, candidate, or sensitive species occurs in a recreation site or area, take steps to avoid or minimize negative impacts to the threatened, endangered, proposed, candidate or sensitive species and its habitat. Use the least restrictive action that will effectively mitigate adverse impacts to the species and habitat (refer to Appendix D).

**S35:** Manage dispersed recreation activities to ensure that environmental sustainability is maintained by utilizing the following measures:

- Discourage camping within 100 feet of sensitive resources and habitats, including meadows and bodies of water (springs, streams, ponds and lakes), or within 1/4 mile of developed recreation facilities.
- Discourage camping within 600 feet of any wildlife water source developments, such as guzzlers and water holes, in accordance with state laws.
- Motorized and non-motorized vehicle travel is restricted to National Forest System roads and trails and limited areas that are designated for vehicle use.

### Decision to be Made

The decision to be made is whether to complete the proposed action as described, modify it, or to take no action.

Table 1

| Proposed Action           | Trail Name                | Mileage         | Level of Use | Impacted Properties         |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------------------|
| Adopt                     | Shooters                  | 1.134826        | High         | City of SLO; USFS           |
| Adopt                     | Botanicals                | 0.822534        | High         | City of SLO; USFS           |
| Adopt                     | Morning Glory             | 4.892962        | High         | City of SLO; USFS           |
| Adopt                     | Firebreak                 | 0.925212        | Medium-High  | City of SLO; USFS           |
| Adopt                     | Chrome                    | 2.133355        | Medium-High  | USFS                        |
| Adopt                     | Moto                      | 0.872061        | Medium-High  | USFS                        |
| Adopt                     | Rollercoaster             | 2.308027        | Low          | Cal Poly; City of SLO; USFS |
| <b>TOTAL Adopted</b>      |                           | <b>13.08898</b> |              |                             |
| Construct                 | Pick & Shovel Alternative | 1.28922         | N/A          | USFS                        |
| Construct                 | Moto Extension            | 0.346663        | N/A          | USFS                        |
| Construct                 | Firebreak Reroute 1       | 0.040503        | N/A          | USFS                        |
| Construct                 | Firebreak Reroute 2       | 0.073242        | N/A          | USFS                        |
| Construct                 | Firebreak Reroute 3       | 0.083932        | N/A          | USFS                        |
| Construct                 | Firebreak Reroute 4       | 0.154169        | N/A          | USFS                        |
| Construct                 | Chrome Climb Reroute      | 0.493699        | N/A          | USFS                        |
| Construct                 | Chrome Decent Reroute     | 0.123114        | N/A          | USFS                        |
| Construct                 | El Chorro                 | 2.62278         | N/A          | USFS                        |
| Construct                 | El Chorro To Forest Edge  | 1.452884        | N/A          | Cal Poly; County; USFS      |
| <b>TOTAL To Construct</b> |                           | <b>6.680206</b> |              |                             |
| Restore                   | Lose Your Marbles         | 0.161054        | Low          | USFS                        |
| Restore                   | Bombers                   | 0.428295        | Low          | City of SLO; Cal Poly; USFS |



|                         |                             |                 |             |                                       |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|-------------|---------------------------------------|
| Restore                 | Upper Elevator Shaft        | 0.048576        | N/A         | USFS                                  |
| Restore                 | Elevator Shaft              | 0.209479        | N/A         | USFS                                  |
| Restore                 | Upper Roller Coaster        | 0.336363        | N/A         | USFS                                  |
| Restore                 | Watch Out For That Tree     | 0.280611        | N/A         | USFS                                  |
| Restore                 | Employees Only              | 0.276704        | Medium-Low  | USFS                                  |
| Restore                 | Pick & Shovel               | 1.412947        | Medium-High | City of SLO; USFS                     |
| Restore                 | Upper Traverse              | 0.539825        | Medium-Low  | Camp SLO; USFS                        |
| Restore                 | Pick Shortcut               | 0.270866        | N/A         | Camp SLO; USFS                        |
| Restore                 | Trinidad                    | 0.862218        | N/A         | Camp SLO; USFS                        |
| Restore                 | Upper Redneck Roundabout    | 0.362614        | Medium-Low  | USFS                                  |
| Restore                 | Redneck Roundabout          | 0.218647        | Medium-Low  | USFS                                  |
| Restore                 | What                        | 1.433256        | Low         | USFS                                  |
| Restore                 | Whachamacallit              | 0.385581        | Low         | Camp SLO; USFS                        |
| Restore                 | WAM                         | 2.758902        | N/A         | USFS                                  |
| Restore                 | Undercover Buddy            | 0.921808        | Medium      | City of SLO; Camp SLO; USFS           |
| Restore                 | TV Tower Shortcut           | 0.160644        | Medium      | USFS                                  |
| Restore                 | Unknown User Created Trails | 7               | N/A         | Camp SLO; City of SLO; Cal Poly; USFS |
| <b>Total to Restore</b> |                             | <b>18.06839</b> |             |                                       |