

Manti-La Sal NF Recreation Impact Management National Forest Foundation Final Report

Submitted by Plateau Restoration, September 15, 2008

Executive Summary

The primary objectives of the Manti-LaSal N.F. Recreation Impact Management project have been completed. The three main focus points for success were:

a) the La Sal Section of the forest is now well signed. Clear and effective signing is required to begin the long process of regaining control of open motorized use. This will give everyone the best possible opportunity to stay within Forest Service regulations during their visit. In addition, this provides agency staff with clear field markers to utilize when encountering visitors and adds clarity to regulation enforcement.

b) The second aspect is providing visitors with the best possible information about forest rules and why the agency requests them to follow these rules. Without quality educational information, the public often sees rules as arbitrary selections made by officials that are not in the field. Visitors are more likely to embrace regulations if a clear effort is made to provide a greater understanding of the process that has been utilized in developing the regulation. The new brochure provides good information on weed invasions, effects of soil compaction and importance of quality waterways, along with how to find more information on the internet.

c) The third vital point was to begin the process of blocking user created trails which are confusing for visitors and detrimental to forest health. This aspect goes hand-in-hand with good signing as it provides positive reinforcement to the approved route and shows that the agency is being proactive in its efforts to maintain forest health. Invasive weeds infestations surround the forest and with the reduction of unnecessary roads the expensive and frustrating task of weed control and removal may be avoided.

Tangible accomplishments included:

- a) signing and surveying, developing a database with photos and GPS,
- b) blocking and restoring illegal routes, delineating trails and campsites,
- c) conducting educational programs, using volunteers in on-the-ground work,
- d) development and distribution of educational outreach materials.

The financial aspects of the project worked well considering that the prices of transportation and materials changed dramatically during the grant period. We were able to complete the bulk of the work within the financial constraints as we watched prices climb by making the proper management decisions at the right time. With support from our membership, volunteer and educational programs, we were able to meet the cash match. The forest also benefited from the bulk purchase we made with the USFS for the signs. We both were able to buy more signs with the money we had available.

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Narrative Summary

Project's Needs and Objectives

The goals of the project were to reverse OHV recreational impacts in the La Sal Mountains, southeast Utah, by developing and implementing a well-defined plan, in collaboration with USFS recreation managers that is designed to keep users on approved trails and to educate the public about recreational impacts in the forest.

The primary objectives of this project were to

- a) ensure adequate signing of legal routes in the La Sal Mountains section of the Manti-La Sal National Forest to reduce confusion, discourage illegal use and support law-enforcement efforts in that travel regulations are clearer.
- b) educate users of resource issues and travel and camping regulations in order to minimize future impacts on resources and assist with law enforcement.
- c) block and commence restoration of user-created trails and illegal campsites, and reduce impacts on administrative roads, utilizing local and visiting members of the public in on-the-ground projects.

Methods Employed and Timeline

The first objective was accomplished by purchasing new signs, decals and hangers and surveying the mountains to ensure adequate and accurate signing. High priority was placed on routes that are passable by standard 4x4 vehicles and intersections where one wrong turn can lead to another. At the request of the Forest Service, efforts were concentrated in Utah, although a small portion of the NF is in Colorado. Areas that are currently open to cross-country travel were also not completely signed because there are confusing multiple routes and it is not clear which the Forest Service will adopt when they place restrictions in these areas this winter. The southern mountains were surveyed first because the connecting La Sal Loop Road was closed through most of 2007 for bridge construction. The northern and central sections were completed in spring and summer, 2008.

Maps, data sheets and the USFS sign location database were obtained from the USFS Recreation Planner for the surveys. During surveying, new signs were placed where necessary and old ones found, refurbished and reset if possible. All signs were photographed and GPS positions recorded for USFS use and for long-term monitoring. Routes that could easily be blocked with available materials and were clearly illegal and/or rarely used, with potential for significant resource damage, were dealt with on the spot. Closed signs were only installed

where absolutely necessary to avoid attention and minimize conflict. Along with verifying and recording signs, we recorded illegal routes and other areas that need work, damaged signs, missing regulatory signs, problem areas on routes, etc. This also allowed us to plan high-priority, suitable volunteer projects.

Our outreach and education efforts included conducting service-learning projects and educational presentations and producing a brochure and website. The brochure was thoroughly reviewed and greatly improved by input from the USFS Recreation Planner and four other professionals. 200 copies of the brochure were printed and have been left as free literature at the Moab Information Center in time for hunting season. It can also be downloaded from our website. We also created a set of travel maps that can be downloaded and printed more conveniently than from official sites and have posted these, along with additional forest information on a new website at <http://www.frontiernet.net/~lasalforest/LaSals.htm>. This has been linked to our organization's website, although navigation will be made clearer when we revise our entire website this winter. We will continue to update this website as we expect to use the material as background reading for future service learning programs. An article was recently published in the Times Independent, the local weekly newspaper, announcing this brochure, describing the project and acknowledging NFF for its support and an article will be included in our next member newsletter. We gave two presentations, one on resource issues and one on recreation impacts, to about eighty Utah high-school students as part of the annual Envirothon science competition, which was held in Moab in April, 2008. This population is responsible for a significant part of the present and future recreation use in the La Sals and other Utah forests.

Four separate on-the ground projects were done with volunteers. Three were projects we identified and planned in conjunction with the USFS Recreation Planner. These were part of five-day conservation service-learning programs for our student groups. We recruited volunteers and conducted the project work, without Forest Service supervision, using our tools.

Nine students and staff from University of Eastern Kentucky helped block and disguise numerous illegal ATV routes emanating from hunter camps near South Mountain. Several separate barriers were placed on each closed route to discourage use and impacted areas were naturalized for a line-of-site distance from the entrance, using timber, rocks and litter and breaking up compacted soil. In addition, this group from EKU helped sign and remove noxious weeds at the northern trailhead of the Trans Mountain Trail, where access was confusing. Ten students from University of Wyoming also helped with removal of the noxious invasive, Diffuse Knapweed, from this heavily infested trailhead area, to reduce the spread of weeds up this trail into the forest.

Fifteen middle school students and four adults from Westsound Academy, WA worked with us on blocking and naturalizing roadways in two areas of the

northern mountains. These were heavily used areas with easy access, close to the community of Castle Valley. One was a road that is available to the Forest Service for administrative use only. The first half-mile was blocked with timber and rocks in a way that it could be cleared if necessary. The second area is a historic Civilian Conservation Corps camp covering approximately 2 acres, which had multiple access points and numerous illegal roads through the site. One small parking area and single-track trail entrance to the site was established, to allow continued visitation, and other access points blocked and naturalized.

For the fourth project, Forest Service staff was with our group, supervising a high-priority trail reconstruction project identified by the USFS at our request. This involved a ¼-mile section of the Trans Mountain Trail that had been blown out by flooding of Brumley Creek, and where users were creating multiple routes. A creek crossing and section of trail was built and attempts made to stabilize a severely undercut section of the trail. Four volunteers and three USFS staff worked on this project that was advertised and organized by Plateau Restoration as a part of the American Hiking Society National Trails Day program.

Timelines and activities are outlined in the following table:

Task	Activities	Persons responsible	Start / end date
Signing and surveying	Purchased signing material; installed carsonite signs with decals as necessary; documented signs at major trailheads and intersections and problem areas	PRI staff with USFS manager	Sign purchased and delivered 9/30/07; signing and documentation completed 7/08
Blocking, restoring illegal routes; delineating trails and campsites	Blocked and disguised routes and impacted areas with volunteers using natural available material, signing where necessary	PRI staff with service-learning participants	10/07-7/08
Conduct education programs	Planned and recruited volunteers, conducted three service-learning programs	PRI staff with participants	3/08-6/08
Monitoring for compliance	Revisited sites, compiled photographs, recording damages and successes	PRI staff	4/08-7/08
Develop outreach materials	Developed, printed and started distribution of a brochure; Developed a website, wrote a press release	PRI staff and volunteer reviewers	8/08-ongoing
Evaluate educational goals	Conducted interviews with all service-learning participants	PRI staff	4/08-6/08
Reporting	Data sheets and photos submitted to USFS Final report to NFF	PRI staff	10/07-9/08
Develop partnerships	Worked closely with USFS Recruited schools for projects	PRI staff, USFS	5/15/07-9/14/08

Monitoring and Evaluation

Over 100 route intersections are now adequately signed and route markers documented for agency records and use in long-term monitoring of success rates. Copies of digital images and corresponding GPS location of all signs and comments where appropriate were forwarded to the USFS Recreation Planner and Engineer throughout the grant period and a final report and compiled database has been prepared for the Forest Service. Over 70 additional records (photographs, GPS points and comments) have been submitted of illegal routes, inappropriate campsites, damaged signs and other information of interest to the USFS.

The local Forest Service Recreation Planner has stated that he considers the forest to be very well signed at this point. Resurveying of all road closures and approximately 50% of the signs has shown no damage or rupture of barriers within the timeframe of this grant.

Volunteers received significant educational information on forest and recreation issues as part of project orientation and other educational components of the multi-day service-learning programs. In oral interviews, all participants indicated they had learned more about issues surrounding recreation impacts and effort required for rehabilitation, felt that they had contributed to mitigating the problems through the hands-on work and had a positive experience with the project work. Many cited the teamwork as a highlight.

Actual Results

Sixty fiberglass signs and several hundred decals were purchased with project funds. Forty-six signs were installed by our organization. This is now likely the best that the La Sal Mountains have ever been signed. The remainder of the signs will be used for follow-up during the rest of the year, especially in the northern La Sals where a wildfire has raged over the last two weeks and has likely consumed several signs.

Our organization recruited and led 32 volunteers for trail projects, 4 for review of the brochure, and 10 more that worked on noxious weed removal at trailheads. Volunteers contributed a total of 350 volunteer hours and 25% of the cash match. Fifteen of these volunteers were 7th-grade students.

We expect to reach thousands of visitors with our brochure, website, and press release. 200 brochures have been printed and active distribution has started. Future impacts from this outreach remain to be seen, but if the brochure is popular, an effort will be made to print more. Eighty Utah high school students attended two presentations we gave on resource issues and recreation impacts.

Over 100 photographs and GPS positions have been compiled of route markers, along with over 70 other records identifying illegal routes and camps and other problems. These have been reported to the USFS.

Twenty route entrances were blocked and disguised, representing a total area of approximately two acres of active rehabilitation. This work should allow an estimated 40 miles of unauthorized routes to recover. About ½ mile of hiking trail enhancement was done, a half of this involving active trail construction and the remainder including signing, delineating and weeding of the trailhead.

Most illegal routes and many illegal campsites have been identified and communicated to the USFS, along with records of routes we rehabilitated. Although the revegetation may take some time to complete, removal of the disturbance will aid in the recovery of the area.

Difference in Projects Outcomes from Expected

Original plans called for the use of T-post fencing to close illegal routes in less forested areas. However, the additional environmental assessment required by the agency caused us to focus on routes that could be closed without permanent structures, at least until we are able to see how compliance might be affected by efforts of this project. We were able to reach rehabilitation goals for most of the illegal routes identified in the mountains without fencing.

Due to delays in obtaining signing materials, partly because we were trying to coordinate a bulk purchase with the USFS and also due to distribution problems, we did not start survey work in the field until October 2007. Closure of the La Sal Mountain Loop Road for most of 2007 also affected planning and delayed surveying of the central portion of the La Sals. We were able to complete the project with the 3-month extension granted by NFF, although this affected the period over which re-surveying and monitoring could take place.

The snow pack this winter was heavier than normal, which made project areas largely inaccessible during spring, the peak period for our volunteer programs. We planned a summer camp project, but were unable to fill the program because of timing. This would have created additional youth volunteers and underwriting from the State of Utah. Although we had less than half of the 100 volunteers we anticipated working on the project, we were still able to obtain expected on-the-ground results, utilizing volunteers for longer hours.

Travel in the mountains was significantly more challenging than we had anticipated. Many of the lesser-used routes are impassable by standard 4x4 vehicles, and others are extremely rough and slow going. However, we are confident that we covered 90% of our target area. Sections that were not covered are areas that are soon to undergo management changes and areas that the USFS Recreation Planner suggested that we postpone.

Sharing project results with the surrounding community

Active marketing of the National Trails Day project was done on the local radio station and various websites including Utah.com, Orion, American Hiking Society and the Plateau Restoration website. A recently published newspaper article in the local newspaper, Times Independent, outlined project highlights and directed readers to our outreach materials. This article is also available on-line (week of 9/11/08) at http://www.moabtimes.com/pages/news_outdoors or in the site's archives. A brief article has also been prepared for our next newsletter, which will be mailed to our members and made available on-line.

Partners

Our main partner in this project was the USFS. Our efforts prompted the Recreation Planner to obtain additional signs and assistance from the Fire Crew in actively checking and installing signs, although we do not have records of exactly what was done by field staff. The in-kind match includes USFS staff meeting with our representatives and additional signing material. Other partners in the project have included:

- a) schools that participated in our service-learning programs and contributing in-cash donations
- b) the Moab Information Center for their assistance with distribution of the brochure
- c) American Hiking Society in promoting the National Trails Day project
- d) Utah Association of Conservation Districts for providing an opportunity to address Utah high school students in the two-day "Envirothon" event, while contributing to our direct costs.

Lessons learned

The biggest lesson we learned was the amount of time it takes to travel the forest roads and how many of the routes are impassable by standard 4x4 vehicles, requiring walking or very skilled and potentially dangerous ATV-riding. There were also project delays because the USFS was understaffed and our USFS contact, who was relatively new to the area at the start of the project, was extremely busy and still becoming familiar with the La Sals. USFS has since hired a new recreation technician who should help facilitate this type of project in the future.

Next Steps

The next steps to take this project further are to continue monitoring and follow-up work. Other illegal routes and campsites identified in our surveys will be the focus of future rehabilitation projects. Futhering the outreach should be achieved by additional printing of the brochure and exploring other channels for its distribution, e.g. Utah Division of Wildlife Resources who issues hunting permits. Continued update of the website developed with this grant and linking it to other sites will ensure even more dissemination of this important information.