

TO: Board of County Commissioners (BOCC)

DATE AND LOCATION: Thursday, January 12, 2006, 5:00 p.m. Commissioners Hearing Room, 3rd floor Boulder County Courthouse, 1325 Pearl Street, Boulder

AGENDA ITEM TITLE: Recommendations for Lyons-Hall-Heil Trail Connections (Amendment to North Foothills Open Space Management Plan)

PRESENTER: Patrick Malone, Natural Resource Planner, BCPOS

ACTION REQUESTED: Adoption of the recommendations and plan amendment

Executive Summary

BCPOS recommends an amendment to the North Foothills Open Space (NFOS) Management Plan in order to show the proposed alignment of new trails that will connect the Hall Ranch and Heil Valley Ranch properties to the town of Lyons. A new loop trail within the Heil property, along with a new parking lot to serve the Heil property from the north, are also proposed.

Two modifications to existing closure areas within the Heil property are also recommended: one is a minor reduction of acreage in order to accommodate new trails, and the other is an addition of acreage that will serve to protect significant resources that were discovered during the planning process.

The Department's recommendations seek to achieve an appropriate balance between recreational access and environmental preservation. Staff is requesting that the BOCC adopt the recommendations outlined as an amendment to the NFOS plan.

Background

The NFOS Management Plan, adopted in 1996, outlined the goal of establishing trail connections from Hall Ranch and Heil Valley Ranch to the town of Lyons. The management plan included some conceptual trail corridors intended to achieve this goal.

Since that time, as part of the requirements of the 1993 countywide open space sales tax, the County has annually queried all county communities about their open space and trail priorities. The Town of Lyons has consistently stated that access and connections to the Hall Ranch and Heil Valley Ranch properties are their #1 and #2 priorities. Many users and user groups have also made it known that these trail connections are a high priority. Accordingly, BCPOS has included the Lyons-Hall-Heil trail connections in the Capital Improvement Projects (CIP) budget for a number of years.

BCPOS staff initiated this project at the beginning of 2005 and has conducted eight public meetings to date (three open houses, four meetings with the respective advisory boards, and one meeting with the Town of Lyons Board of Trustees). The goal of these meetings was to identify issues, gather public input, and help shape the Department's final recommendations. In addition to these public meetings, staff also met several times with affected landowners in the project area,

including our most recent meeting with the Old S St Vrain Rd. landowners held on Dec. 15, 2005.

Analysis of Alternatives

Staff considered a variety of information sources in developing the recommendations, including adopted management plans; independent natural resource and engineering studies; consultation with the Colorado Division of Wildlife; and input from the public, landowners, recreation interest groups, advisory boards, and County staff. Criteria used to evaluate the alternatives included, but was not limited to, environmental impact, visitor experience, public safety, impact to landowners, cost efficiency, and overall feasibility.

For the Hall Ranch connection, nine different alternatives were considered (several variations on two basic routes, SH7 and Old South St. Vrain Road, plus Corona Hill). At the request of some Lyons area residents, staff shared information about previous analysis done on Corona Hill when it was removed from further consideration by the North Foothills Open Space Advisory Committee in 1998. Staff also led a field trip to Corona Hill for interested people. Please refer to the attachments for a map of the Routes Considered and detailed information and comments on the various alignments.

For the Heil Valley Ranch connection, several alternatives were considered. Within the Heil property, several trail alignments that depart the existing trail system were considered. These routes then tie into a conceptual alignment that heads north to the property boundary. From this point, several routes run across private lands in order to connect to the town of Lyons. Please refer to the attachments for a map of the Routes Considered and detailed information and comments on the various alignments.

Summary of Recommended Routes

Staff is recommending an approach that contains recommended and alternate routes. This approach provides flexibility by allowing for short-term recommendations while accommodating other compatible long-term solutions. Please refer to the attachments for maps of the Recommended Routes and detailed information and comments on the preferred alignments.

LYONS TO HALL RANCH

Recommended Routes

Modified Option A: A hybrid approach is recommended -- one that provides for new access to Hall Ranch, but has the least amount of environmental impact and disruption to nearby homeowners and landowners. The recommendation includes the installation of a new bridge over the St. Vrain Creek and utilizes the existing SH7 underpass located on the County's Hall Ranch Meadows property. The existing, informal recreational use that occurs on Old South St. Vrain Road would be maintained -- no new recreational improvements along Old South Road would be initiated. Preliminary cost estimates for implementation of this approach range between \$160,000-180,000. This figure includes design costs, a bridge, approach trails, gates and safety signage. Permits will be required from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) for the project.

Since the Old South St. Vrain Road corridor is being used as a de-facto informal trail connection, the Department should monitor recreational usage and safety issues in the area. Incorporating the new connector trails, including the Old South Road corridor, into user surveys and providing appropriate staff presence in the area will be important.

SH 7 Shoulder Widening:

Widened shoulders along SH7 from town to Hall Ranch would provide a safer experience for cyclists and other users. This project has been a long-standing desire, but has not been a priority for CDOT or the County Transportation Department. Shoulder widening typically costs about \$220,000 per mile. This alternative should be pursued regardless of the location of the main connector trail.

Alternate Routes

Option E (N side of Highway 7): A grade-separated trail along SH7 provides for safe and direct access from Lyons to Hall Ranch and minimizes impacts to private lands, but it has limitations for users seeking a more serene connection from Heil Valley Ranch to Hall Ranch. This alternative requires significant financial resources. Preliminary costs estimates range between \$1.2-2.3 million. BCPOS does not have the necessary funding to implement this alternative and would be dependant on outside funding assistance. Therefore, BCPOS has collaborated with the County Transportation Department to submit the SH7 separated trail project as a grant request to the DRCOG Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

No Action: While BCPOS believes that there is value in pursuing and establishing a connector trail, doing nothing is an option that the Department accepts. Two existing roads currently provide access to Hall Ranch from Lyons for the majority of users. There are still safety concerns and limitations for some users, but the cost of remedying the situation far exceeds the expected benefits. This approach incurs no cost to BCPOS. Furthermore, it has become more evident that the Town's and public's priority is access to Heil Valley Ranch.

Other

In response to public interest about access to Corona Hill in Hall Ranch, the Department is committed to leading periodic guided hikes into this permanently closed conservation area. Such hikes should be conducted outside of the recommended seasonal closure for the nesting golden eagle.

HEIL VALLEY RANCH TO LYONS

Recommended Routes

Connector Trail: Staff has identified an "Area of Consideration" that can accommodate the footprint of both the connector and loop trails. The preferred route utilizes this conceptual zone to depart the proposed loop area and the existing trail system. The route then travels the edge of Red Hill Gulch, passing the Whitestone/Vickery quarry site. The trail then passes adjacent to the seasonal closure that is in place for the nesting golden eagle. In this area, all trail users will be required to stay on trail from Feb. 1 to July 31. The trail continues north to reach the northern property boundary. From there, several routes run across private lands in order to connect into the Town's existing trail system. A new bridge will be required to reach the proposed trailhead parking area located off of Highway 36/66. Total mileage of the recommended connector trail is approximately 5.75 miles (4 miles to the northern boundary of Heil Ranch and 1.75 miles to the proposed parking lot at Hwy. 66). Preliminary cost estimates for the project range from about \$380,000-430,000, which includes a bridge (\$150-200K), parking area (\$100K), and about 6 miles of natural surface trail (\$130K). The cost of land acquisition for trail corridors across private land has not been included and would come from available acquisition funds.

Based on recent discussions with affected landowners, it appears that an alternate trailhead parking area located on a parcel adjacent to the high school's practice fields may be more viable. This site was included in the original analysis and is identified on the map of Routes Considered as a potential parking lot site. Utilizing this location would have less impact on the Lyons Valley

Park development (and other private property owners), would reduce project costs by eliminating a bridge over the St. Vrain Creek, and would site the trailhead next to an existing public facility. However, it is not immediately accessible from the highway like the currently proposed site. Staff feels that this alternate site is in keeping with the overall project goal of establishing a trail connection to Heil Valley Ranch and offering a northern parking area.

Since this site was not identified as the preferred/recommended site throughout the process, the Department is committed to bringing this issue back to POSAC and the BOCC for additional review and providing an opportunity for public comment should it become the preferred site.

Loop Trail: Although this planning process was originally envisioned to address the connector trail, there has been significant public interest in an additional loop trail on Heil Valley Ranch. In response to this public input, staff identified an area suitable for an additional loop. Based on a recommendation from the County Parks & Open Space Advisory Committee (POSAC), the Department recommends a loop trail that maximizes trail length within the identified “Area of Consideration”.

The loop trail will depart from the existing Ponderosa Loop in the vicinity of the overlook and connect back into the Ponderosa Loop. The southern connection point has yet to be determined. Staff will identify some viable alternatives for the loop trail within the Area of Consideration, where impacts have been deemed acceptable, and work with interested parties to plan and create features that will improve the visitor experience for trail users while minimizing impacts where feasible. Trail corridors are still conceptual at this stage, and, therefore, this approach provides staff the flexibility to deal with difficult topography while providing for improved visitor experiences. The new loop trail will be close to two miles long, depending on topographic constraints.

Alternate Routes

Spur to Red Gulch Road: This route provides an alternate connection to Hall Ranch that does not require acquisition of private property by utilizing a County-owned easement that connects into Red Gulch Road. It is not the preferred route because it is steep, it passes between two private residential parcels, and construction would be difficult. Staff, however, believes the route should be retained and pursued in the event that property issues prohibit implementation of the preferred route. A new culvert or bridge would be required to cross the gulch (approx. 20-30 feet).

Closure Area Modifications

As part of the Department’s recommendations for trails in the Heil Valley Ranch property, staff has proposed modifications to two permanent closure areas: the “Goshawk” closure area and the east “Foothills” closure area. The boundaries of the recommended modifications are conceptual. The actual boundary amendment will be field verified by staff, GPSd, and then added to the Department’s relevant maps and records.

“Goshawk” Closure Area

This closure area was put into effect when the North Foothills Open Space management plan was adopted in 1996. It was intended to protect an area that contained old-growth forest, foothills shrub habitat, and riparian habitat associated with intermittent streams/drainages. This area was home to a northern goshawk nest and post-fledging family area and, more recently, a Cooper’s hawk nest. Observations of the Lewis’ woodpecker, three-toed woodpecker, pygmy nuthatch, and golden-crowned kinglet were also documented in similar habitat in both the Hall and Heil properties. The area that actually contains these old-growth characteristics is located in the central portion of the closure area.

An “Area of Consideration” that infringes upon the extreme southern portion of the closure area has been identified to accommodate a corridor for the connector trail. This area was developed based on topographical constraints and the location of known environmental resources. The location of the proposed area of modification is well away from the core habitat. Furthermore, the goshawk nest that was identified in the 1995 breeding season, which was a driving force for identifying the boundaries of the original closure area, is no longer present. The nest tree was destroyed in a storm in 1999 and, to the best of our knowledge, goshawks have not nested on the property since that time. However, suitable habitat is still present and our records show that goshawks are using the property, just not for nesting. Therefore, we intend to preserve the core area for possible future goshawk nesting and for other avian and wildlife use. BCPOS wildlife staff feels that the proposed modification to the closure area will not have a significant impact on this resource.

The southern boundary of the closure area will be modified to accommodate the alignment of the connector trail. Depending on the route that is selected for the final trail alignment, the net reduction in acreage of the closure area will be between 5-34 acres. Everything north of the trail will remain closed to public use and everything south of the trail will be open.

East “Foothills” Closure Area

This closure area was also put into effect in 1996 as part of the original management plan. It was intended to protect an area that contained different mixtures of Ponderosa pine woodlands, mountain mahogany shrubs, and several native grasses including big bluestem, little bluestem, needle-and-thread grass, New Mexico feathergrass, and Scribner’s needlegrass. This area was inventoried by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP) and was recommended for protection. Known as the the Red Hill Conservation Site, the area contains several occurrences of globally rare plant associations, one occurrence of a globally rare butterfly, and one occurrence of a state rare butterfly. The foothills shrub component is rich breeding bird habitat and supports a number of species of concern. The closure area also contains a prairie dog colony that serves as an important raptor feeding area, especially for the nearby nesting golden eagle.

The site of the proposed acreage addition is that of the Red Hill saddle. In addition to containing many of the characteristics described above for the Red Hill Conservation Site, this area serves as a critical movement corridor for large mammals, including deer and elk. Preserving movement corridors is key to maintaining habitat effectiveness. The area also contains several springs that act as important water sources for wildlife. The Red Hill saddle is actually part of the original conservation site that CNHP recommended for protection, but it was excluded from the closure area in the original management plan. New evidence and staff observations now confirm the significance of this area. Amending the closure boundary to include this area will help maintain this important connection.

Staff is recommending that the western boundary of the eastern “foothills” closure area be amended to include the Red Hill saddle. As a result, approximately 156 acres (0.24 square miles) will be added to this permanently closed and protected area.

Implementation Plan

Once the trail plan is approved, an implementation plan will be developed as part of the Department’s CIP budget. Exact timing of various implementation efforts will be contingent on acquiring private land for trail corridors and securing outside funding. Based on public input, the Department recommends completing the new trails (loop and connector) at Heil Valley Ranch first and then working on connections to Hall Ranch.

Summary of Most Recent Public Meetings

Lyons Pathways Commission -- Nov. 3, 2005

Staff presented the Department’s recommendations, including a discussion of the public comments heard at the final open house on October 25, 2005. The Commission agreed with the Department’s recommendations and encouraged staff to reconsider the idea of having a segment of off-road trail that parallels Old South Road through the Hall Ranch Meadows property. The Commission also encouraged staff to maximize the length of the potential new loop trail within the Heil property.

POSAC -- Nov. 17, 2005

Along with other project recommendations, staff presented several options for the new loop trail inside the Heil property: no trail vs. smaller loop vs. larger loop. A smaller loop offers the best chance to minimize the cumulative effects of recreational impacts, but obviously limits recreation experiences for mountain bikers, equestrians, and long-distance hikers and runners. A larger loop maximizes the potential to create a stacked loop system that offers significant new trail distance, but cumulative impacts from new trails and human presence will likely be more significant. POSAC recommended the larger loop by a vote of 6-4.

POSAC also recommended that the BOCC accept the staff recommendations on the three other major project elements: the Heil-Lyons connector trail, modification of the Heil closure areas, and the Lyons-Hall connector trail. With regards to the Lyons-Hall connector trail, POSAC also recommended that the Department add a new segment of trail to the Modified Option A alternative that was proposed by staff. This would result in 0.4 miles of new, off-road trail inside the Hall Ranch Meadows property. This segment of off-road trail was evaluated by staff as part of Options B & C on the *Routes Considered* map, but was not included as part of the Department’s final recommendations.

Lyons Board of Trustees- Dec. 5, 2005

Staff presented the project recommendations to the Town Board, and reported on the new trail segment inside the Hall Ranch Meadows property that POSAC recommended on Nov. 17. The Board had significant concerns about any new trails in the Old South Road corridor. A number of homeowners that live in the area also spoke in opposition to new trails. In general, the Board seemed to support a trail along the north side of SH7 and expressed some desire to have access to Hall Ranch via Corona Hill. If any new trails are created within the Hall Ranch Meadows property, it was suggested that fencing be used to keep visitors off of the balance of the parcel and away from the riparian corridor.

Staff Request

Staff requests that the BOCC adopt the recommendations outlined as an amendment to the NFOS management plan.

LIST OF ATTACHMENTS

Lyons to Hall Ranch

Analysis of Alternatives: Factors Considered

Map of Routes Considered

Description of Preferred Alternatives: Determining Factors

Map of Recommended Routes

Heil Valley Ranch to Lyons

Analysis of Alternatives: Factors Considered

Map of Routes Considered

Description of Preferred Alternatives: Determining Factors

Map of Recommended Routes

Map of Proposed Amendment to Closure Areas

Map of Wildlife Resources on Hall-Heil

BOA petition on Heil loop trail with 265 signatures (only one original copy submitted)