

# Curtis Canyon Road and Campground Project



## Scoping Document

Bridger-Teton National Forest  
Jackson Ranger District, Teton County, Wyoming  
January 31, 2023

### INTRODUCTION

The Forest Service is proposing to implement several projects in the Curtis Canyon area to address substantial resource issues (primarily associated with deteriorating roads) and enhance the experience for hikers, campers, and visitors seeking a scenic drive. These projects are all located in the Curtis Canyon area on the Jackson Ranger District, Bridger-Teton National Forest, about 6 miles northeast of Jackson, WY. Sandwiched between the National Elk Refuge and the Gros Ventre Wilderness, this area contains vitally important winter wildlife habitat, outstanding Teton views within a “backcountry” road setting, and the closest campsite availability near the town of Jackson.

With funding now available through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, also known as the bipartisan infrastructure bill, long standing road and campground issues can be addressed. Let us know of any concerns you may have about potential environmental impacts of the proposed actions and any ideas that might reduce the potential impacts. Your feedback will be used to determine whether to move forward with some or all the proposed projects or modify the proposals. If we find that there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposals, they may be authorized using categorical exclusions.

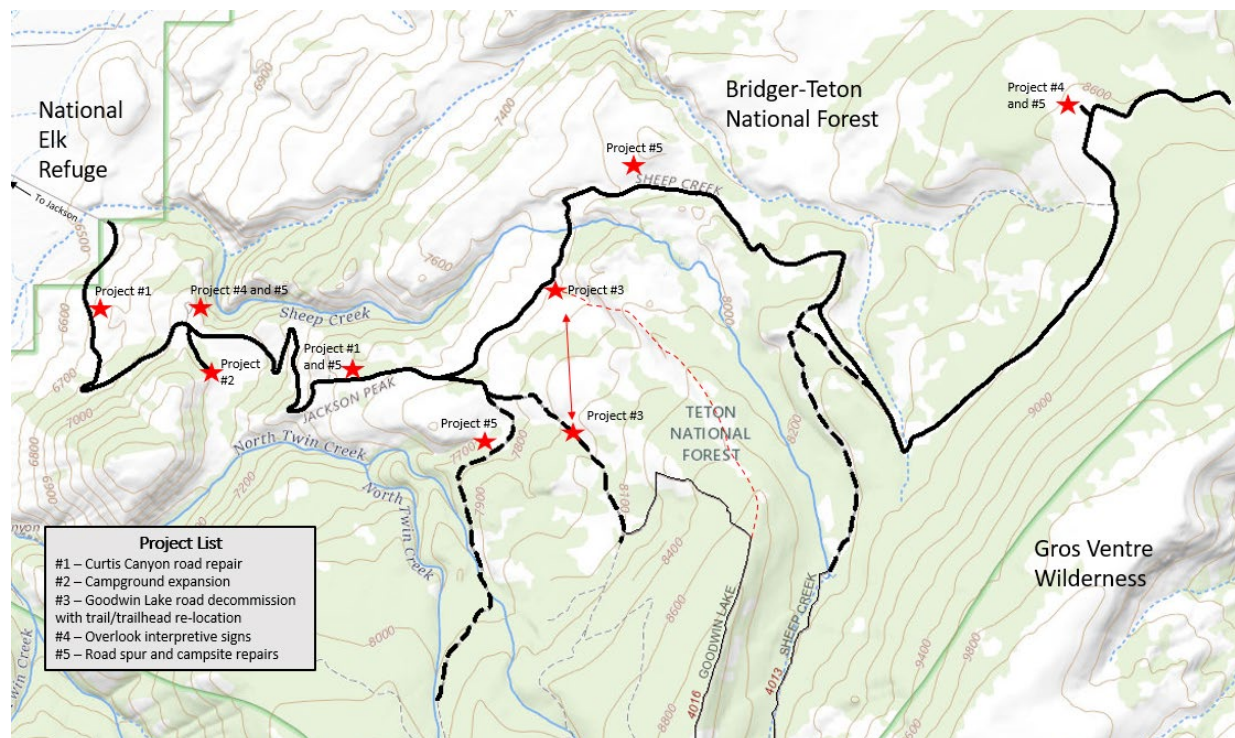


Figure 1. Location of Proposed Projects in Curtis Canyon, Jackson Ranger District

## BACKGROUND

The Curtis Canyon road and campground date back to 1962 (History of Teton National Forest, Allan 1973). The road was developed to provide access primarily for oil and gas exploration and timber harvest, the latter of which peaked in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The road also provided access to the Sheep Creek hunting camp established in 1968 by Charlie Petersen Outfitting. During the 1980s, recreation use of the area increased and is now considered the predominant summer/fall activity. Human use of the area is prohibited from December 1 – May 1 (6 am) annually to protect wintering wildlife.

## PURPOSE AND NEED

The heavy concentration of dispersed camping and off-highway vehicle use combined with a lack of road maintenance has resulted in serious public safety concerns, vegetation loss, human waste issues, and poor visitor experience. Chief among the concerns is the deterioration of the road. In particular, the 1-mile Goodwin Lake road (#30440) developed gullies in 2016 which worsened in 2017 with the significant runoff that spring. The road is currently characterized by deep ruts and exposed rocks with evidence of oil trails from vehicle damage. The road is signed as hazardous with high clearance, 4WD vehicles recommended. For the past few years, many hiking groups have elected to park at the bottom of the road and walk the last mile to the trailhead. The condition of the road is a source of frequent complaints and the mix of walkers with off-highway vehicles on the road makes for a less than ideal experience for hikers heading into the Gros Ventre Wilderness. This section of road was reconstructed in 1993 as part of a project to develop the trailhead. The decision memo at that time noted that the road needed to be rebuilt because it was steep and rocky and had become impassable for sedans. Thirty years later, the road is back to being impassable for sedans; a clear indication that the road location is not sustainable.

The main Curtis Canyon road (#30445) has also deteriorated. Based on engineering analysis, the deteriorated conditions are primarily caused by uncontrolled stormwater. The lack of functioning ditches and culverts has resulted in surface runoff being conveyed onto the roadway for long portions of the road, increasing erosion. Given time, this erosion will result in a significant loss of roadway width. Water ponding on the surface and standing water in roadway depressions is more common on the segment of the road beyond the junction with the Goodwin Lake road. Forest Service engineering staff have attempted to grade the road, but the deteriorated condition just damaged their equipment. The conclusion was that the road required extensive reconstruction using different machinery than they had available. With no source of funding available until now, the road has continued to deteriorate with every runoff event. The consequence of this road deterioration is (1) safety issues, dramatically illustrated by a 2021 incident where a vehicle fell into an erosion gully, blocking the road for hours, (2) the inability of vehicles necessary to service the campground dumpster or pump the toilet to make it up the road, and (3) the overall poor visitor experience and lack of access for many.

Curtis Canyon has also experienced a large increase in recreation use since 2016 necessitating an upgrade in visitor services and infrastructure. Visitor use is estimated to be roughly 15,000 people each summer with current use largely a mix of campers (mostly camping with small trailers or tents), side-by-side OHV vehicle touring, and hiking into the Gros Ventre Wilderness. In recent years, the small Curtis Canyon Campground has averaged around 90% occupancy, up from an average of 27% occupancy in 2010. Exposed human waste is increasingly an issue due to the lack of infrastructure to handle current recreation use. Over the years, Forest Service staff have addressed off-road issues by repeatedly installing log barriers and signing to keep vehicles on designated routes. Spur roads accessing campsites and road #30444 have not been maintained since the early 1980s and are leading to increasing

vegetation loss and erosion. To address dispersed camping impacts, the Forest implemented a designated site program, added signing to emphasize responsible recreation messages, and recruited a camping ambassador to help educate and assist visitors. These actions have helped reduce impacts but have not kept pace with increased use.

The time for repeated band-aids has passed. With its spectacular scenery and accessibility, the Curtis Canyon area has the potential to be a gem that focuses on introducing people to public lands, wildlife and wildlands. These projects support two goals of the Bridger-Teton National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan: Goal 2.5 - *A safe road and trail system provides access to a range of recreation opportunities and settings*, and Goal 2.2 – *High-quality developed recreation facilities exist to serve Bridger-Teton National Forest visitors*. Therefore, the purpose and need for the proposed projects is to (1) address the deteriorated condition of roads and associated safety concerns, (2) increase camping-related infrastructure to better handle camping demand and reduce resource impacts, (3) reduce vegetation loss from off-road vehicle use, (4) improve camping available near Jackson and the quality of the camping and hiking experience, and (5) improve educational/ interpretive opportunities afforded by destination overlooks. Photos that illustrate some of the issues are found on the next page (Figure 2).

## PROPOSED ACTION

The Jackson Ranger District proposes to implement five projects in the Curtis Canyon area over multiple years. The projects were developed through multiple field visits and benefited from a partner-funded, private sector engineering analysis that fleshed out road repair options. Available funding through the infrastructure grant will not be sufficient to implement all the proposed projects in the summer of 2023, thus implementation is likely to occur over 3 to 5 (?) years as funding is secured.

**Project #1: Curtis Canyon road (#30445) repair.** After reviewing the engineering analysis, we are proposing to implement a hybrid approach for repair of the Curtis Canyon road with emphasis on repair of the first 2.9 miles of road (segments 1 and 2). All work would occur on the existing road alignment and would require heavy machinery. We would strive to keep the road and campground access open throughout the project duration, but short closures may be necessary at times for public safety and construction operation efficiency. Segment 1 of the road (Elk Refuge boundary to Campground) would include re-establishing the drainage ditches, replacing 6 culverts, cutting back brush to improve sight distance, adding structural fill and gravel to make the surface passable by all vehicles, and implementing regular magnesium chloride treatment to stabilize the road surface on the steep grade. Segment 2 of the road (Campground to Goodwin Lake road junction) would include re-establishing drainage ditches, replacing 7 culverts, clearing brush, and patching rutted sections so the road is passable by sedans that have some clearance. Segment 3 of the road (Goodwin Lake junction to end of road) would receive maintenance of drainage features but would use the native surface to create a passable but rougher surface. This segment of road has much lower grades than the other segments so maintenance work could improve the road (see map 1).

**Project #2: Curtis Canyon campground expansion.** The Forest Service would add approximately 22 sites to the existing campground and add another vault toilet. The current campground offers 11 single-family sites, one host site, two vault toilets, and drinking water and would remain open. Expanding the campground would necessitate constructing about ¼ mile of new road to create a loop. The new road and campsites would take advantage of the forested area to provide shade and limit visual impact (see map 2).





Figure 2. Photographs of resource damage in the project area.

**Project #3: Goodwin Lake road (#30440) decommission with Goodwin Lake trail and trailhead re-location.** The Forest Service would close and restore to a natural condition, one mile of road and 0.7 miles of trail. The closed road and trail would be replaced by a new trailhead, located along the main Curtis Canyon road, and 1.56 miles of a new, very scenic trail to provide access to the Gros Ventre Wilderness. Decommissioning the road (i.e. closing and restoring) is proposed as the best long-term solution, given that the road already failed once after significant repair and fact that a repair would require around \$270,000, money which is needed to repair the main Curtis Canyon road. For hikers who currently walk the road, the new trail to Goodwin Lake would be ¼ mile shorter; for those who have been able to drive to the current trailhead, the new trail would add 0.68 miles to the Goodwin Lake hike. The trail would be all hand built with no tree cutting. The new trailhead would be built to accommodate about 12 vehicles (see map 3).

**Project #4: Overlook interpretive signs.** The Forest Service would install interpretive signs at the Curtis Canyon overlook and at the Sheep Mountain overlook. The Curtis Canyon overlook was designed to function as an interpretive site but signing was never added. The Sheep Mountain overlook is the destination for thousands of people renting off-highway vehicles. Initial work was done in 2022 to confine vehicle use at the overlook. Both sites offer an outstanding opportunity to enhance the visitor experience through interpretive signing that highlights the story of public land conservation in Jackson Hole (see map 1).

**Project #5: Road spur and campsite repairs.** The Forest Service would focus on drainage repairs to improve the sustainability of existing spur roads. Priority sites include road #30444 and the spur road accessing the Sheep Mountain overlook. The Forest Service would also install rock barriers to confine vehicle use around campsites and at the two overlooks. Restoration of closed routes at campsites 3 and 10 (Memorial Site) and the Curtis Canyon overlook would also occur with this project (see map 1).

An interdisciplinary team of resource specialists on the Forest will analyze the effects of the proposed projects and document their findings. If the analysis finds no significant adverse effects to “extraordinary circumstances” and no significant issues arise, the proposed projects are anticipated to be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement. The relevant categorical exclusion (CE) categories include:

- **36 CFR 220.6(d)(4):** Repair and maintenance of roads, trails, and landline boundaries.
- **36 CFR 220.6(e)(1):** Construction and reconstruction of trails.
- **36 CFR 220.6(e)(20):** Activities that restore, rehabilitate, or stabilize lands occupied by roads and trails, including unauthorized roads and trails and National Forest System roads and National Forest System trails, to a more natural condition that may include removing, replacing, or modifying drainage structures and ditches, reestablishing vegetation, reshaping natural contours and slopes, reestablishing drainage-ways, or other activities that would restore site productivity and reduce environmental impacts.
- **36 CFR 220.6(e)(22):** Construction, reconstruction, decommissioning, or disposal of buildings, infrastructure, or improvements at an existing recreation site, including infrastructure or improvements that are adjacent or connected to an existing recreation site and provide access or utilities for that site. Recreation sites include but are not limited to campgrounds and camping areas, picnic areas, day use areas, fishing sites, interpretive sites, visitor centers,

trailheads, ski areas, and observation sites. Activities within this category are intended to apply to facilities located at recreation sites managed by the Forest Service and those managed by concessioners under a special use authorization.

- **36 CFR 220.6(e)(23):** Road management activities on up to 8 miles of NFS roads and associated parking areas. Activities under this category cannot include construction or realignment.

Table 1 below outlines how the categorical exclusions will be applied to each project.

**Table 1.** Anticipated categorical exclusions for proposed projects

		1) Curtis Canyon road repair	2) Curtis Canyon campground expansion	3) Goodwin Lake road, trailhead, and trail	4) Overlook interpretive signs	6) Road spur and campsite repairs
36 CFR 220.6	(d)(4)	x (5.3 mi)				x
	(e)(1)			x		
	(e)(20)			x		x
	(e)(22)		x	x	x	
	(e)(23)	x (2.9 mi)				

## HOW TO COMMENT

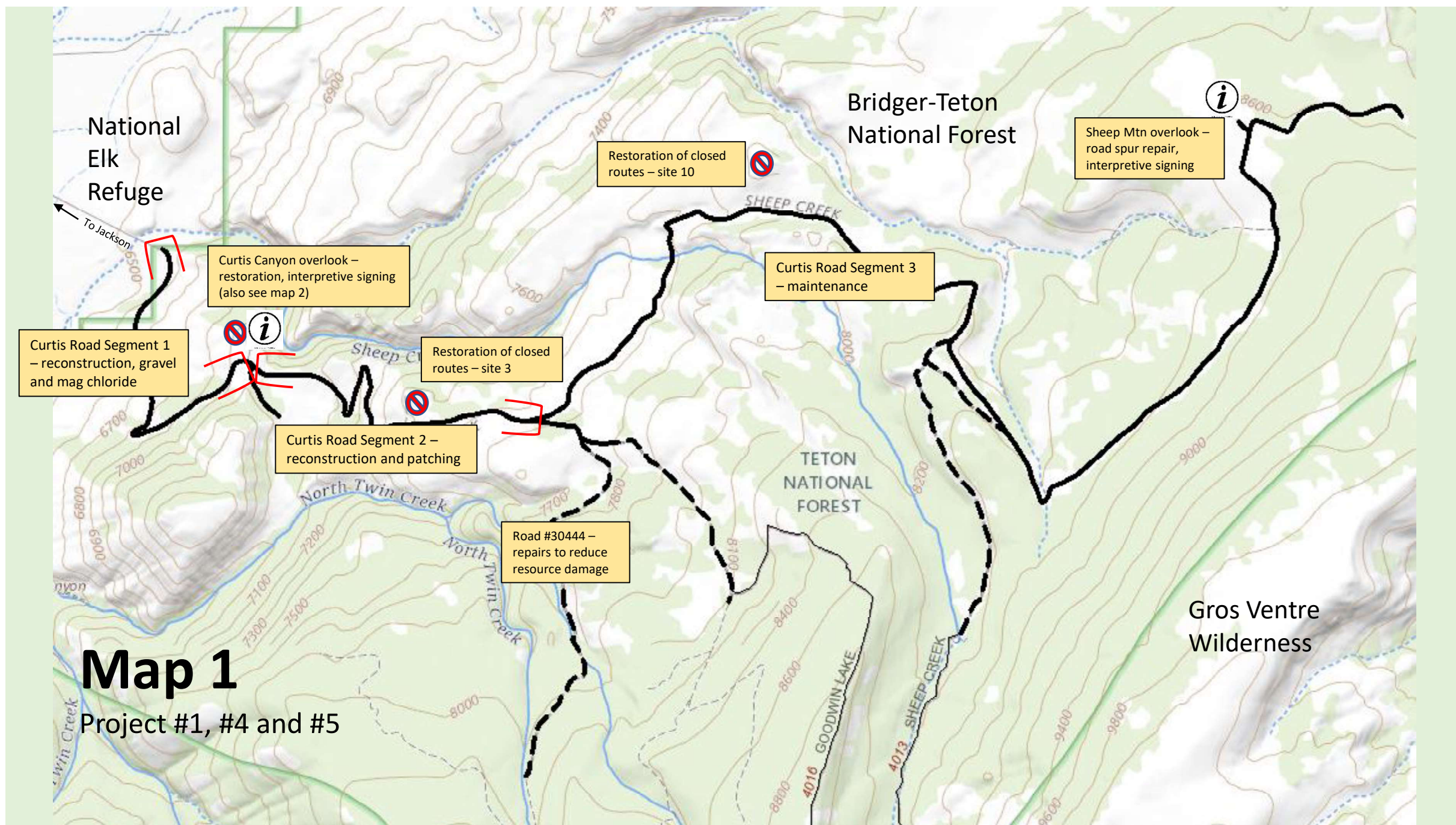
The purpose of scoping is to invite your comments and identify any issues or concerns with the proposed projects. Please submit comments on these projects within 30 days following the date of this notice. Please use the project's public web page <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=63443> and click the **Comment on Project** button on the right-hand side to send your thoughts. Comments may also be hand-delivered to 340 N Cache St between 8:00 AM and 4:30 PM, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Alternatively, comments may be submitted through the mail (USPS) to ----

Curtis Canyon Road and Campground Project  
Bridger-Teton National Forest- Jackson Ranger District  
P.O. Box 1689  
Jackson WY 83001

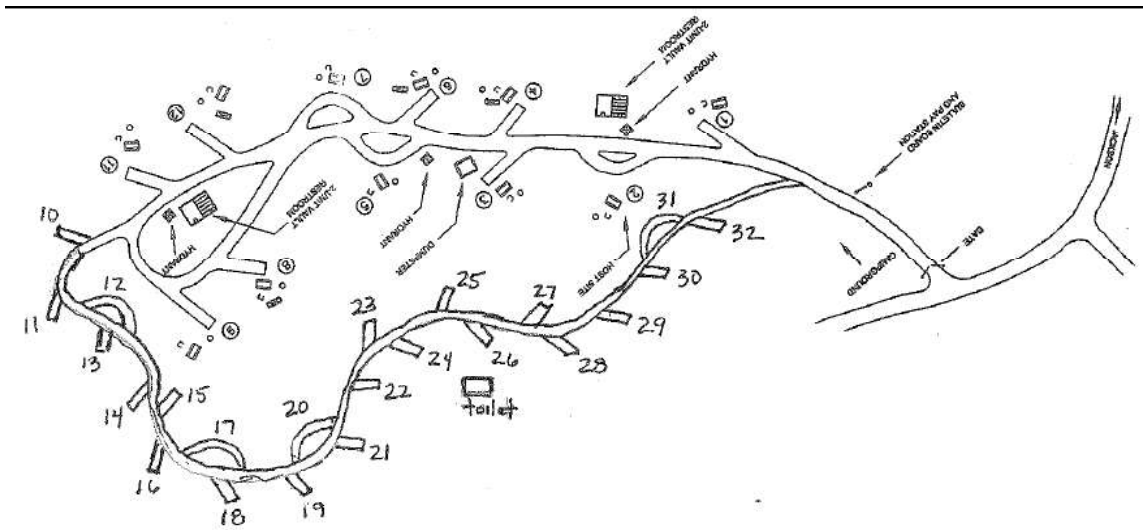
If you have any questions about this project or need more information, please contact Linda Merigliano at (307) 739-5428.

Attachments: Maps of proposed projects





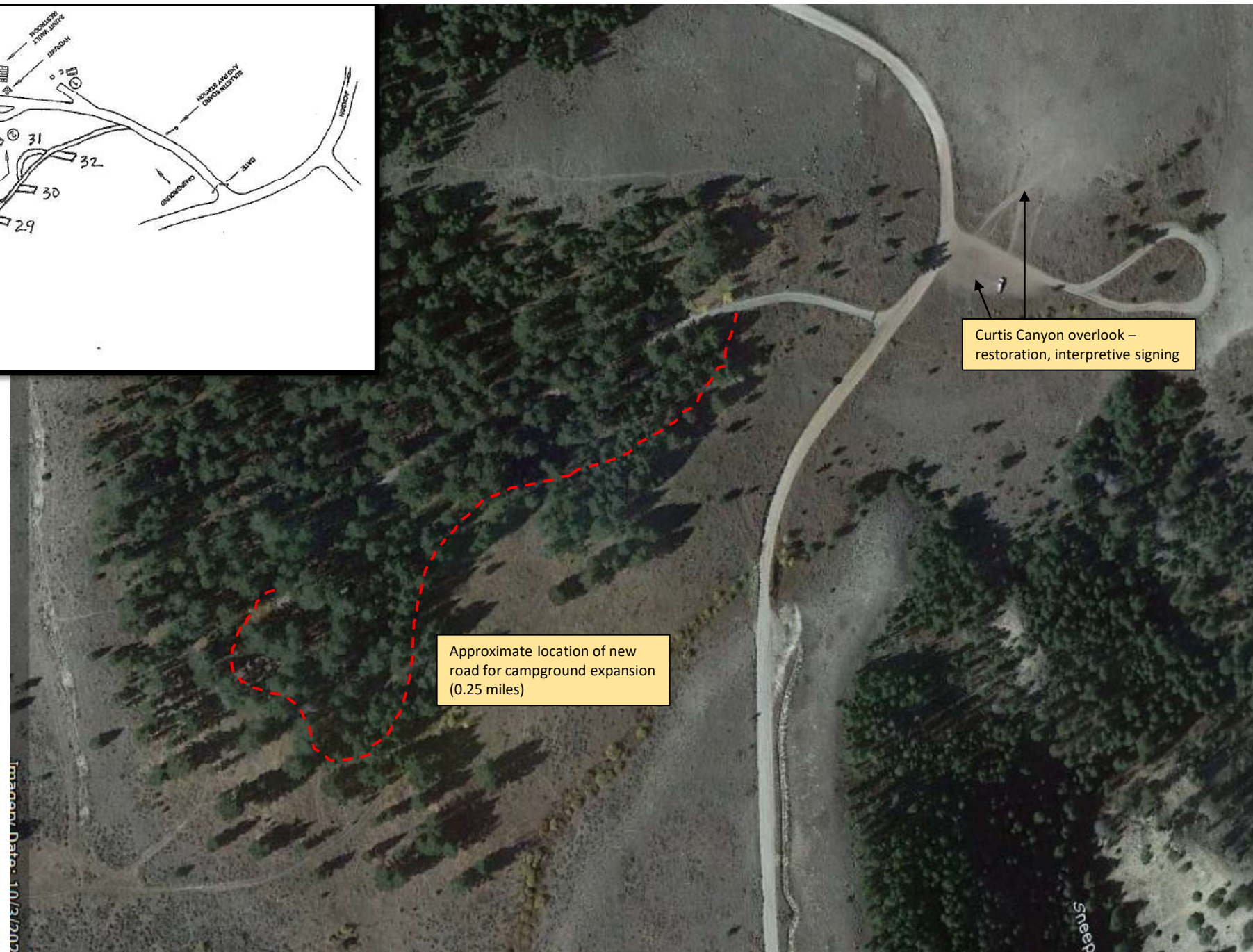




Rough sketch of possible campground expansion. Sites 11-32 would be new

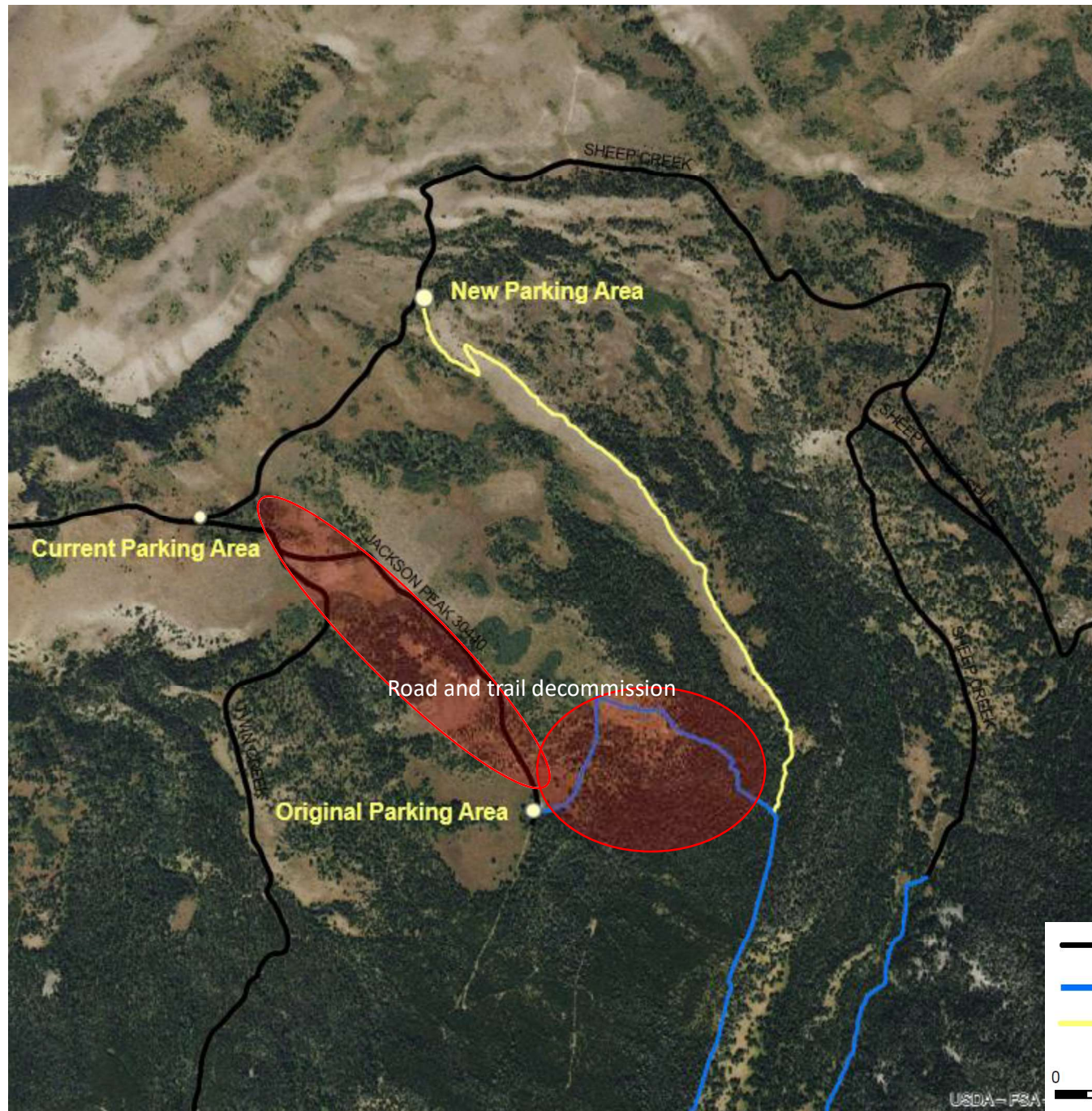
## Map 2

Project #2 and #4, #5





# Map 3 Project #3



View from proposed trail re-route



Location of proposed new trailhead/parking area

- Open USFS System Roads
- USFS System Trail
- Proposed reroute- 1.56 miles long

0 0.15 0.3 0.6 0.9 1.2 Miles

