



Department of
Environmental
Conservation

Division of Lands & Forests
Region 4

Elm Ridge Wild Forest Unit Management Plan Amendment

Towns of Jewett and Windham
Greene County

Andrew M. Cuomo, Governor

Joseph J. Martens, Commissioner

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JUN - 1 2015

MEMORANDUM

TO: The Record

From: Joseph J. Martens *jjm*

SUBJECT: Elm Ridge Wild Forest

The amendment to the Elm Ridge Wild Forest Unit Management Plan has been completed. The UMP is consistent with the Catskill Park State Land Master Plan, Environmental Conservation Law, and Department Rules, Regulations and Policies and is hereby approved and adopted.

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	3
I. Introduction.....	1
II. Inventory of Facilities.....	2
A. Trailheads (2).....	3
B. Trails (11.9 Miles).....	3
C. Bridges (6).....	3
D. Public Roads (6).....	3
E. Trail Registers (3) and Informational Kiosks (3).....	3
F. Scenic Vistas (1).....	3
G. Spring (1).....	4
H. Private Easements.....	4
I. Exterior Boundary Lines.....	4
III. Proposed Management Actions.....	5
A. Names.....	5
B. Signage.....	7
C. Trails.....	8
D. Recreational Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities.....	12
Appendix A - Response to Public Comments.....	13

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I. Introduction

Article XIV of the New York State Constitution (“Article XIV”) provides a basic guideline for management of the State’s Forest Preserve lands in the Adirondacks and Catskills. Furthermore, the Environmental Conservation Law assigns responsibility for the care, custody, and control of the Forest Preserve to the Department of Environmental Conservation.

The 2008 Catskill Park State Land Master Plan (“CPSLMP”) established five classifications of State Land: wilderness, wild forest, intensive use, administrative, and primitive bicycle corridors. Each classification calls for a different level of resource protection and public use, while still conforming to Article XIV. The CPSLMP describes different geographic units, each falling into one of the five classifications. Unit management plans (“UMPs”) are developed for each unit of state land and adhere to the CPSLMP guidelines for each classification.

The Elm Ridge Wild Forest (formerly part of the Windham High Peak Wild Forest) is identified as such a unit. A wild forest is a classification of Forest Preserve where the resource, though protected, can withstand a higher degree of human use than a wilderness area; it can accommodate present and future public recreation needs in a manner consistent with Article XIV while often lacking the sense of remoteness found in wilderness areas.

The CPSLMP identifies the Elm Ridge Wild Forest as an area where there are opportunities for increased bicycle use. In response to this suggestion and to the increase in popularity of mountain biking, an amendment to the Elm Ridge Wild Forest UMP was completed in January 2009 that called for the design and construction of new multiple-use recreational trails. Within the past 6 years, the unit has continued to see considerable growth in recreational use, particularly by mountain bikers. Much of this increase is due to the continued rise in popularity of mountain biking as well as the installation of the new trails called for in the 2009 UMP amendment. As of the summer of 2014, the Department has completed all of the recommendations in the 2009 amendment.

This current UMP amendment (2014) proposes the establishment of additional recreational trails that build upon the 2009 UMP amendment and addresses the growth in use seen over the past 6 years. The proposed layout will maximize the user experience, while still conforming to wild forest guidelines, as well as limit the amount of maintenance needed to keep the trails in the best condition possible. All of the trails proposed in this amendment will be open to multiple non-motorized uses, including hiking, mountain biking, and x-country skiing.

II. Inventory of Facilities

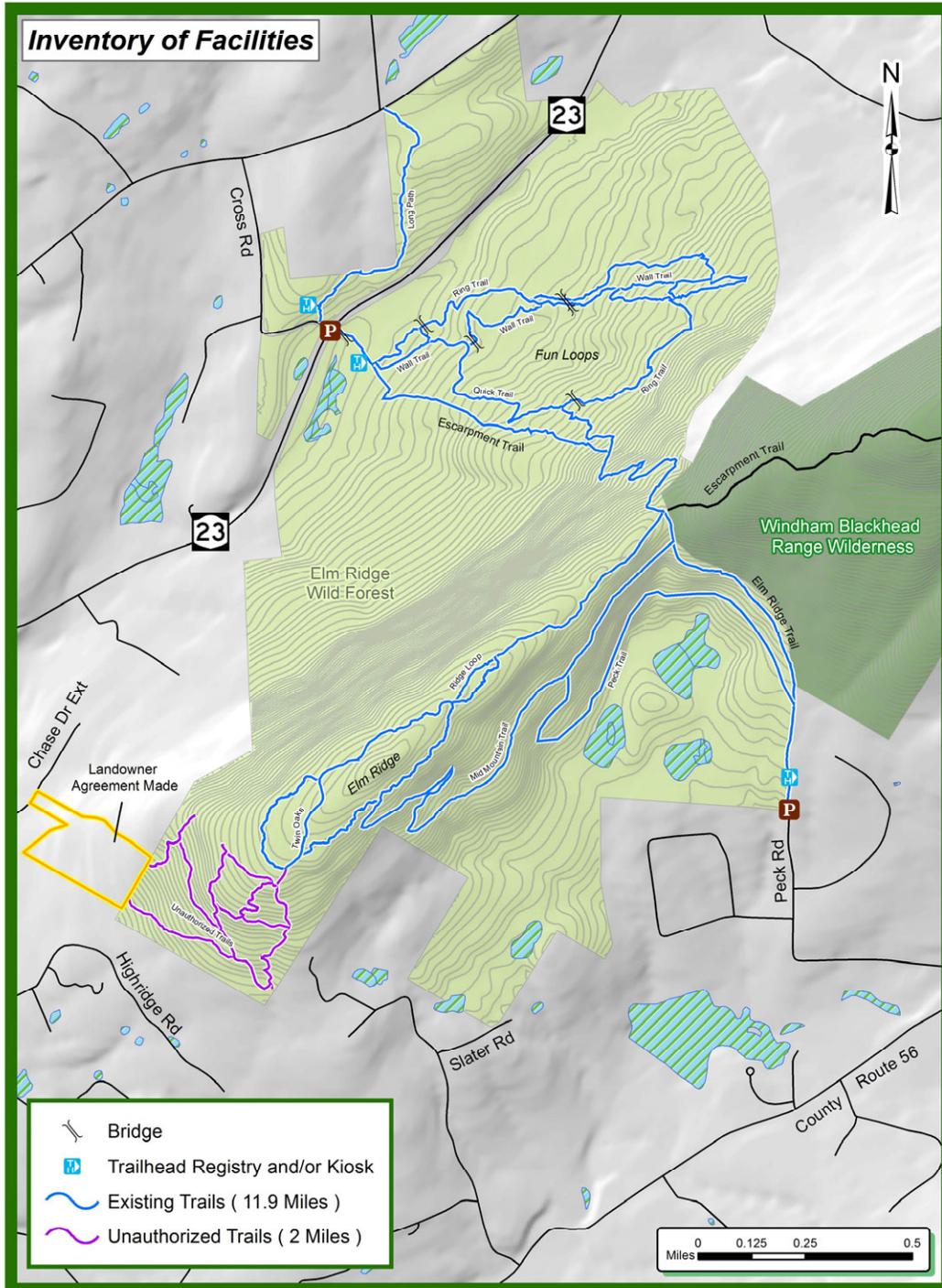


Figure 1 Inventory of Facilities Map

A. Trailheads (2)

1. NY Route 23 near East Windham. North terminus of the Escarpment Trail. Accommodates approximately 30 vehicles.
2. Peck Road near Maplecrest. Accommodates approximately 12 vehicles.

B. Trails (11.9 Miles)

1. There are currently 11.9 miles of recognized trails by the department. These trails are currently open to all non-motorized uses.

C. Bridges (6)

1. There are currently 6 bridges located on the unit and are maintained by recognized administrative personnel.

D. Public Roads (6)

1. New York Route 23 travels through the northwest corner of the Unit for 1.25 miles.
2. Cross Road (Town of Windham highway) crosses the same northwest corner for 0.6 miles.
3. Old Road (Old NY 23) is the Unit's northwest boundary for about 0.4 miles.
4. County Route 56 in the Black Dome Valley passes through the Unit for 0.3 miles.
5. Ridge Road, an un-maintained Town of Windham Road (reportedly), travels through the Unit across Elm Ridge for 1.5 miles; most of it is part of the foot trail system.
6. Slater Road (Town of Windham highway) is bordered by Forest Preserve for approximately 100 feet.

E. Trail Registers (3) and Informational Kiosks (3)

1. Informational Kiosk located at the NY Route 23 Parking lot.
2. Informational Kiosk and Trail register located approximately 0.2 miles south of NY Route 23 on the Escarpment Trail.
3. Informational Kiosk located at the parking lot on Peck Road.
4. Trail Register located approximately 0.1 miles north of Peck Road parking lot.
5. Trail Register for Long Path extension is 100 feet north of Cross Road.

F. Scenic Vistas (1)

1. Forest Preserve access parking lot on NY Route 23 in East Windham.

II. Inventory and Facilities

G. Spring (1)

1. Elm Ridge trail from Peck Road. The spring is located 0.65 miles toward junction with the Escarpment trail and 0.25 miles south of the Escarpment Trail.

H. Private Easements

1. A private parcel of land off the end of Slater Road has the right to pipe water from a spring on State land in Lot 89 of the State Land Tract. Rights were given through a 1934 Deed (267/315) when the land was purchased by NYS. Map No 1927. Present owner is Mamaroneck Fish and Game Club.

I. Exterior Boundary Lines

1. There are 11.1 miles of exterior boundary in the Unit.

III. Proposed Management Actions

A. Names

Current Situation

Currently trails are identified by a number system and identify stacked loops. Recreational users have stated that this tends to be confusing at times. A trail identified by one number can run in all directions; north, south, east, and west. It has been requested that the trails be named and identified in a manner that users can easily follow.

Proposed Management Actions

1. Trails in the Elm Ridge Wild Forest will be named (*Figure 2*) in this amendment as well as configured in a way to promote smooth transitions between trails and less stopping at trail junctions. Naming of the trails will be done in accordance with current department naming policies. The proposed trail names can be found on the Trail Names map on the following page.
2. Once evaluated and deemed to be suitable as formal trails, the unauthorized trails located in the southwest portion of the parcel will be named in accordance with current department naming policies.

Discarded Alternatives

1. Trails on the Elm Ridge Wild Forest unit will continue to use a number system. At this time many users find the current system in place difficult to read. The numbers describe a loop which means a trail may run north, south, east, and west leading the user to become disoriented easily.
2. Provide no names for the trails. This alternative would provide users with no information about where they are and may cause issues if emergency personnel need to respond to an accident if one were to occur.

III. Proposed Management Actions

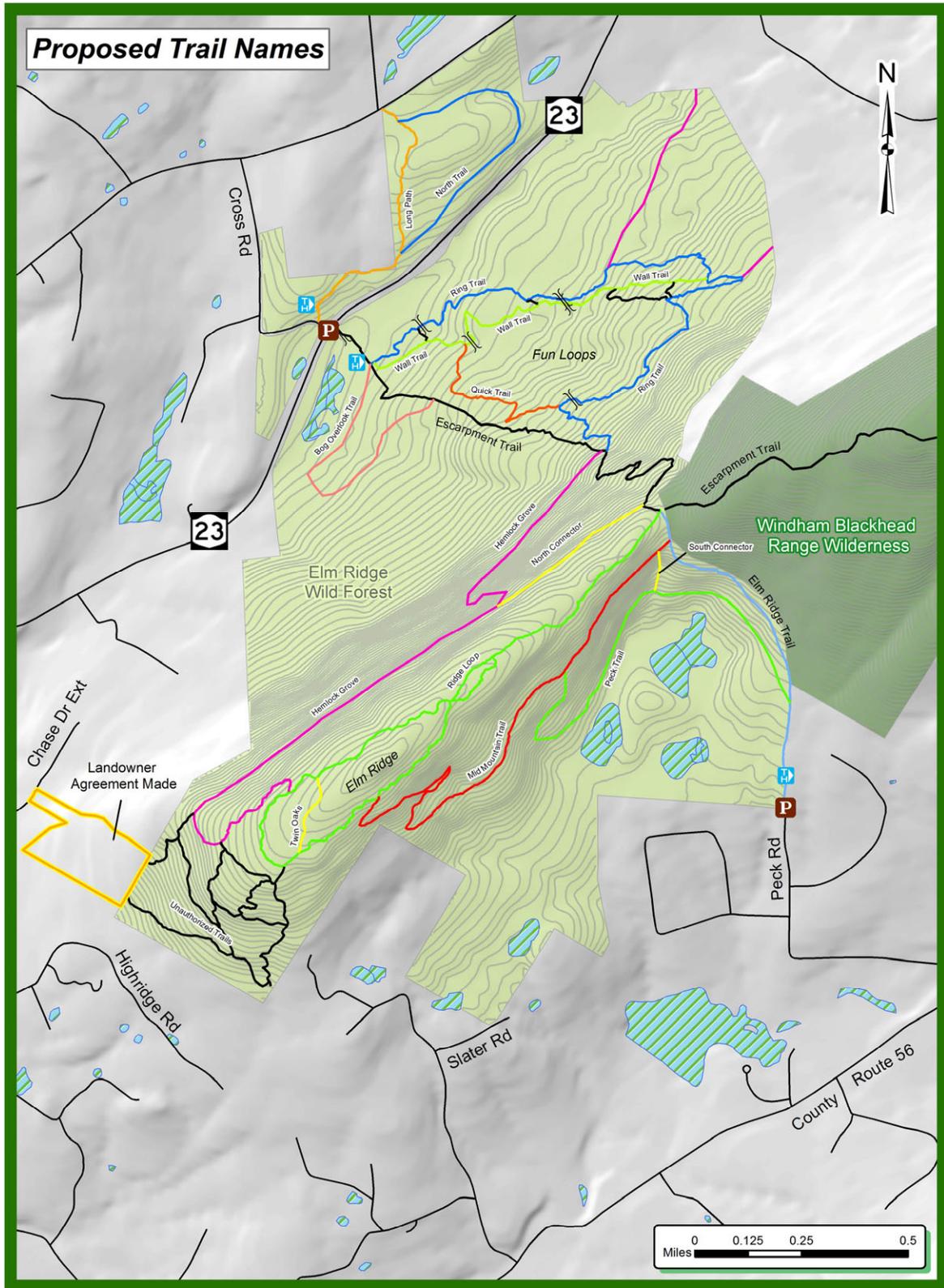


Figure 2 Trail Names Map

B. Signage

Current Situation

While signage is common and adequate in Elm Ridge Wild Forest several comments/concerns have been stated. Sign placement in particular has been identified as a priority. Often signs are placed high on trees and facing one direction. Users often have to stop at every intersection to orient themselves.

Proposed Management Actions

1. Signs will be placed on posts with trail names and mileage displayed. Signs will be oriented so that users can view the sign from as many angles possible.



Figure 3 Signs in Wilmington Wild Forest Adirondacks

2. Signs will also be used to acknowledge all allowed user groups that may be present in the unit and identify recreational right-of-ways.



Figure 4 Example Sign of Recreational Right - Of - Way

3. With an increase in user groups signage will also attempt to minimize overlap in uses. This will allow each user group to have a unique experience associated with that activity. While users can use any trail, they will be encouraged through signage to use specific trails. For example mountain bikers will be directed away from the escarpment trail where hiking is very popular.



Figure 5 Example of a Directional Symbol

III. Proposed Management Actions

4. All trail information will be updated in the kiosks throughout the unit providing up to date information including information about the Long Path.

Non Preferred Alternatives

1. Leave the signage as is. The unit will continue to operate as it has. If recreational right of way signage is not used an increase in user overlap may occur due to the anticipated increase in usage

C. Trails

Current Situation

There are currently 11.9 miles of multiple-use trails located in the Elm Ridge Wild Forest. At this time there are several different user groups that use the trails. Hiking is most prominent on the Escarpment, Elm Ridge, and “fun loop” trails. Snowshoeing and XC skiing are all very popular on the lower “Fun Loops” section as well. Mountain biking occurs regularly on the “Fun Loops” as well as the trails located along Elm Ridge.

There are also 2.8 miles of unofficial unauthorized trails that have developed over the years due to the increased use in the area.

Management Actions

In recognition of the increased demand for mountain biking opportunities in the Elm Ridge Wild Forest, as well as the identification of the area in the CPSLMP as suitable for a higher-intensity of mountain bike trails, this UMP amendment proposes five significant actions:

1. There are 5 new trails being proposed in this amendment (*Figure 6*). The Hemlock Grove Trail, North Connector, South Connector, Bog Overlook Trail, and the North Trail. These trails have been identified by the department as suitable locations for trail development and will increase the available mileage to each user group.
2. Continued maintenance on all existing trails by the department and any administrative personnel. Pending approval of this amendment the Department will maintain the Elm Ridge Trail only for emergency response purposes. The construction of the Peck Trail and South Connector will provide a more suitable option for hikers to access Windham Blackhead Range Wilderness as well as bike and foot access to the other Elm Ridge trails.
3. The unauthorized trails identified may or may not be suitable trail locations (*Figure 7*). The Department will evaluate the unauthorized trails during the 2015 field season to identify which are suitable to be officially designated as multiple-use trails in their current location, or whether any of them may be re-routed to meet the criteria of a sustainable trail. Those trails that become official will be named similarly to the other trails in the system.

4. The Department may establish connecting trails between private landowners and the existing trails in the Elm Ridge Wild Forest Unit. The location of these trails will be decided based on the most suitable location. Connections may be placed anywhere on the unit to provide access, but formal agreements or easements with the private landowners must be in place before trail connections are established. The connection trails shown on the maps in this amendment are for visualization only and do not represent the exact location or all available connections that may be created.
5. A portion of the long path will be re-routed to avoid problem sections.

Discarded Alternatives

1. Alternative locations have been sought out by the Department. At this time locations other than the areas identified in the management actions have been deemed unsuitable for trail development based on factors such as topography, drainage, and potentially heavy maintenance.

III. Proposed Management Actions

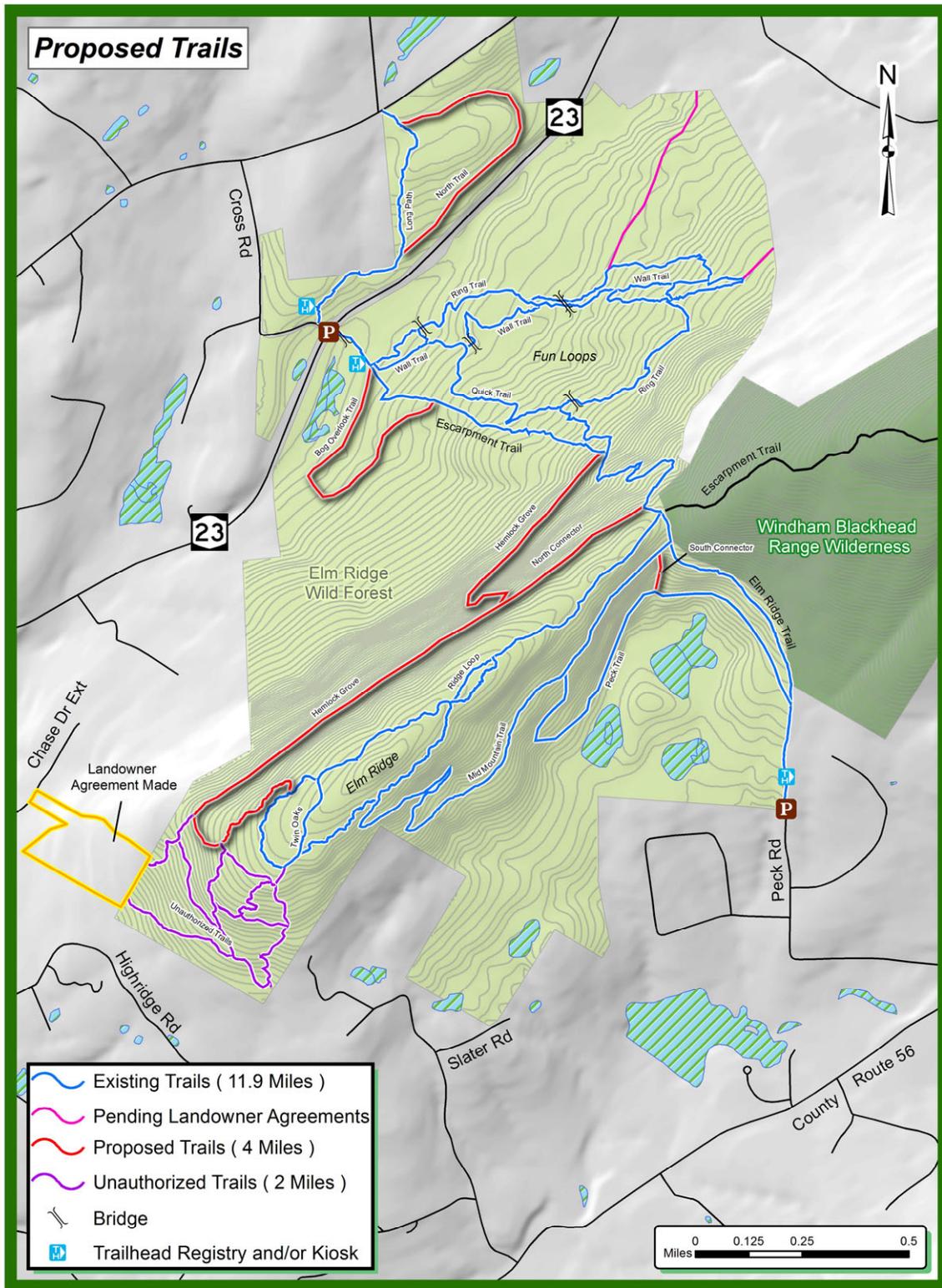


Figure 6 Proposed Trails - Red Trails

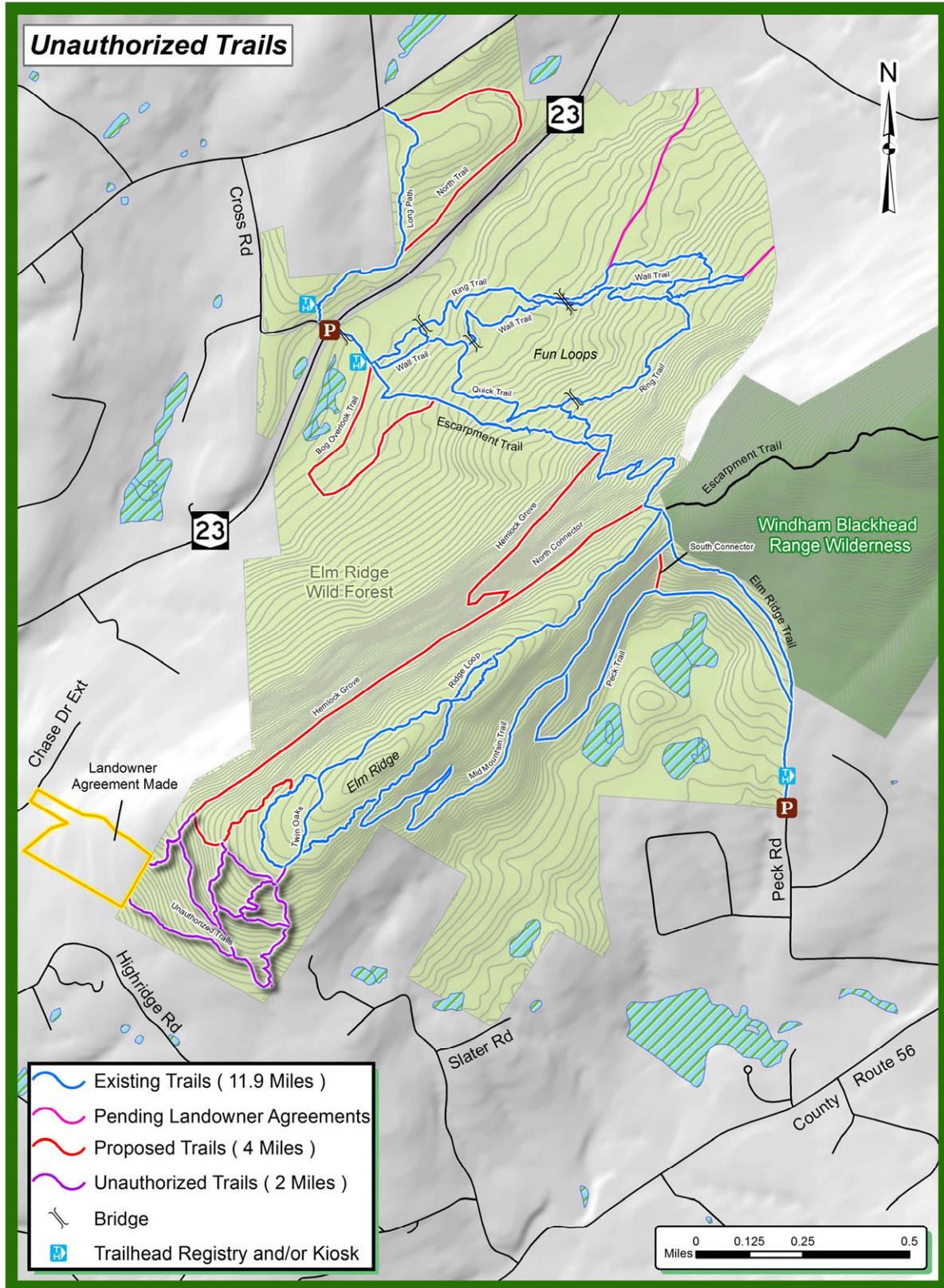


Figure 7 Unauthorized trails to be evaluated - Purple Trails

III. Proposed Management Actions

D. Recreational Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities

Current Situation

Currently there are no accessible features located on Elm Ridge Wild Forest.

Management Actions

The proposed trails in this amendment are interior trails which means these trails will not be connected to any trailhead or parking area and therefore they have not been considered for accessible development. Along with the location of the proposed trails, one of the primary uses of the existing and proposed trails on Elm Ridge Wild Forest is for mountain biking. In order to bring these trails into compliance with the technical provisions found in the Forest Service Trail Accessibility Guidelines (FSTAG), the fundamental purpose or function of these trails would be altered.

Appendix A - Response to Public Comments

Approximately 33 comments were received during the comment period. Most comments were in support of the amendment and required no further response by the department. Several other comments raised questions and concerns that will be summarized and responded to below:

1. A more detailed explanation of Article XIV would be helpful for the public's understanding of constraints on recreational development within the Forest Preserve.
 - a. *Response* – The constraints directly imposed by Article XIV on the development of recreational facilities on the Forest Preserve have largely been guided by case law, the details of which are not appropriate for this UMP amendment. The Catskill Park State Land Master Plan, which has not been found to be inconsistent with Article XIV, provides guidelines for management and use for each of the Forest Preserve land classifications.
2. With the planned increase in visitation why was consideration not given towards the expansion of the parking lots on Route 23 and Peck Hollow Rd?
 - a. *Response* – Current capacity of the parking lots has been determined to be sufficient. The department will continue to monitor the parking areas and if potential problems become apparent the department will address these with a future UMP amendment.
3. Will trail connections to private landowners for public use be included in another amendment?
 - a. *Response* – This amendment allows for future trail connections to private lands, on the condition that formal agreements or easements be obtained from the private landowners first. Any new trails for access to Elm Ridge through private lands will be designed and laid out according the best management practices.
4. How will carrying capacity be addressed with the potential increase in use?
 - a. *Response* – Monitoring any potential degradation to the natural resource is paramount. The trails mentioned in this amendment were designed to accommodate a higher level of use as well as to disperse recreationist throughout the unit. Any potential resource degradation will be monitored and mitigated through routine maintenance and best management practices by the department and volunteer groups.

Regarding social carrying capacity, the Department's experience with similar multiple-use trail networks in other wild forest areas suggests that additional use on the trails in the Elm Ridge Wild Forest will still be consistent wild forest guidelines, as outlined in the Catskill Parks State Land Master Plan.

III. Proposed Management Actions

5. How does Elm Ridge Wild Forest as a potentially major biking area fit into the Park's overall recreational development?
 - a. Response – In August 2008 the Catskill Park State Land Master Plan was approved. In the section titled “Bicycle Trails in Wild Forest” found on page 43 and page 44, Elm Ridge Wild Forest was specifically identified as an area “appropriate to develop bicycle trails”.
6. Is there data behind the assumption towards increased visitor use and will it be included in the inventory?
 - a. Response – The department has reviewed trail registry data from trailhead kiosks and determined that over the past several years overall visitation has increased in the area. Registration by visitors has almost doubled.
7. The inventory should include the unauthorized trails and there is concern that whoever has developed these trails has not been held accountable for their actions. The acceptance of these trails does not seem to be a deterrent to the future development of unauthorized trails.
 - a. Response- The department does not include these unauthorized trails in its inventory of official trails because they are not recognized as actual facilities. The unauthorized trails are discussed and shown on several maps for the purpose of identifying where they need to be evaluated for consideration as official trails. This amendment was developed in part to address concerns of future unauthorized trail development. The Department's Division of Forest Protection staff will continue to monitor the area enforce all state laws, with special emphasis on Environmental Conservation Law.
8. Additional information about the Long Path should be provided at the Route 23 crossing/kiosk.
 - a. Response – Information will be updated at all informational kiosks on the unit. Please see revised management actions in Section III, B. Signage Action # 4

9. Elm Ridge Wild Forest is located within the NYC Watershed Boundary. How has the department addressed potential impacts to water quality, wetland impacts, and erosional issues?
- a. Response –The department has completed a full environmental assessment form and has determined that this project will result in no significant adverse impacts on the environment. In the construction and design of these trails the department will carry out best management practices. The location of the trails proposed in the amendment has been carefully laid out with erosional issues in mind. These trails are not located on any old wood roads or farm lanes and will generally have no slope greater than 10%. These trail will incorporate rolling grade dips and grade reversal design and therefore no significant structures will be built into the trails.
10. How will the construction of these trails be funded?
- a. Response –Trail construction will be funded through the Environmental Protection Fund.
11. Will there be any opportunities for persons with disabilities?
- a. Response – At this time no facilities will be developed for persons with disabilities. Updated text has been included in Section III, D. Recreational Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities.