OVERLOOK MOUNTAIN WILD FOREST

Amendment

to the

1999 Overlook Mountain Wild Forest Unit Management Plan

NYS DEC, REGION 3, DIVISION OF LANDS AND FORESTS

21 South Putt Corners Road, New Paltz, NY 12561
(845) 256-3076 | r3.ump@dec.ny.gov

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OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation
625 Broadway, 14th Floor, Albany, New York 12233-1010
P: (518) 402-8545 | F: (518) 402-8541
www.dec.ny.gov

M E M O R A N D U M

TO: The Record

FROM: Basil Seggos

SUBJECT: Overlook Mountain Wild Forest

The amendment to the 1999 Overlook Mountain Wild Forest Unit Management Plan has been completed.

The amendment is consistent with Environmental Conservation Law, and Department Rules, Regulations and Policies and is hereby approved and adopted.

Basil Seggos
Commissioner
New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

Date: 2/27/17

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Overview

This is an amendment to the Overlook Mountain Wild Forest Unit Management Plan (UMP) which was adopted in May 1999. The UMP provides the area description and history, information on the inventory, use and capacity to withstand use, management and policy, proposed use and management, and a schedule for implementation and budget.

The Overlook Mountain Wild Forest is a management unit in the southeastern portion of the Catskill Park made up of Forest Preserve lands in the Town of Woodstock in Ulster County. The unit consists of approximately 590 acres of land bordered to the north and east by the Indian Head Wilderness Area.

This amendment proposes 4 projects to be implemented within the Overlook Mountain Wild Forest which address several areas of concern including: classification of recently acquired lands, visitor parking, public access and public sanitation (see Map 1).

Project 1 – Classification of Recently Acquired Lands

Five parcels of land have been acquired that are adjacent to this unit since the adoption of the UMP. Four parcels were acquired from the Open Space Institute (OSI) consisting of Magic Meadow (198.24 acres), former Illges lot (27.82 acres), former Berg lot (84 acres) and the former KTD lot (74.851 acres). The fifth parcel was acquired from the Town of Woodstock and is located off of California Quarry Road and is referred to as the California Quarry Road parcel (191.205 acres).

Catskill Forest Preserve lands can be classified through a revision to the Catskill Park State Land Master Plan or through an amendment to a Unit Management Plan. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (Department) proposes to classify the five parcels described above through this UMP amendment as Wild Forest to be added to the Overlook Mountain Wild Forest Unit Management Plan (see Map 1).

With the addition of the five parcels described above, this unit has grown from 590 acres to approximately 1,166 acres of Forest Preserve land.

Project 2 – Improve Visitor Parking

Overlook Mountain Trailhead Parking

Trailhead registers are used by the Department to estimate the amount of public use occurring on State lands and are used as a guide to assist with management decisions regarding the use of our public lands. Although trail registers do not capture complete visitor usage (due in part to registration being voluntary and rates of registration varying significantly from trailhead to trailhead), they do provide information regarding trends in visitor usage. The total amount of registered users may vary significantly from year to

year at a particular trailhead but the rate of registration (the percent of the actual users signing in), likely varies much less. This reasonably stable rate of registration allows for year to year comparisons regarding trends in overall usage at each trailhead.

The Overlook Mountain Trailhead, located on Meads Mountain Road, is the most visited trailhead in the southern Catskills according to visitor use tallies derived from trailhead registers maintained by the Department in Sullivan and Ulster Counties. Additionally, visitor use of the area appears to be increasing significantly on an annual basis (see Table 1).

Overlook Mountain Trail Register Sign In Totals	
2012	7,491
2013	9,246
2014	10,860
2015	12,610

Table 1

The Overlook Mountain trailhead register is estimated to have one of the lower sign-in rates (+/- 20%) when compared to other trailheads in the region. This may be due to the straightforward manner of the trail and it being located on the fire tower access road. Based on the estimated rate of registration of approximately 20%, the number of visitors utilizing the Overlook Mountain Trailhead parking area could be as much as five times the numbers shown in Table 1. This use is apparent on most weekends and many weekdays as visitor parking spills out of the current parking area onto both sides of Meads Mountain Road south towards the Village of Woodstock as well as to the north of the parking area on both sides of Macdaniel Road. This large overflow of parking has caused significant problems for the safe passage of the roads by the residents and visitors of the area as well as to the adjacent private lands owned by the Karma Triyana Dharmachakra (KTD) Monastery. This has prompted the Town of Woodstock to post “No Parking” signs along both roads to discourage parking in an attempt to allow for the safe passage of vehicles.

Due to the continual overflow of the Overlook Mountain trailhead parking area, the Department has determined that additional parking facilities are necessary to alleviate the problems caused by visitors parking on town roads and the overcrowding of current parking facilities.

The Department proposes to construct a 25-30 car parking area along the north side of Macdaniel Road, southwest of the Magic Meadow area (see Map 2). The proposed parking area will be located about ½ mile northwest of the current Overlook Mountain trailhead on Meads Mountain Road and if built, will nearly double the available parking. The parking area will include spaces designed, constructed and marked for

accessibility. In addition, an accessible information kiosk will be constructed to provide visitor information regarding recreational opportunities available in the area.

Although the addition of this proposed parking area is expected to alleviate some of the parking issues associated with the use of this area, it is unlikely that it will resolve all of the issues. The Department will continue to seek viable options for further improving access to the Overlook Mountain trailhead such as partnering with Ulster County Transit or the Town of Woodstock to provide a shuttle service as an alternative to trailhead parking.

California Quarry Parking and Access

The Department recently acquired the 191 acre California Quarry parcel located off of California Quarry Road from the Town of Woodstock to conserve the southeastern slopes of Overlook Mountain as well as to improve access to the Overlook Mountain Wild Forest and the surrounding Indian Head Wilderness Area.

To improve public access, the Department proposes to remove the existing gate currently inhibiting vehicular access to the California Quarry parcel and constructing a 10 car parking area in the old quarry located just beyond the existing gate. The gate would then be relocated to the east, adjacent to the fence surrounding the communication tower, to prohibit unauthorized vehicular access beyond the proposed parking area (see Map 4). The parking area will include spaces designed, constructed and marked for accessibility. In addition, an accessible information kiosk will be constructed to provide visitor information regarding recreational opportunities available in the area.

To provide the public with clear access to State lands, a short foot trail (< 0.5 mile) will be delineated and marked within the existing 50 foot wide public easement leading from the proposed parking area to State lands (see Map 4).

Forest Preserve access and parking signs will be installed at the junction of the access road and California Quarry Road to provide clear direction for public access of State lands.

Project 3 – Improve Public Access

Connector Trail

Due to the distance of the proposed Macdaniel Road parking area from the Overlook Mountain trailhead, the Department proposes to build a short foot trail connecting the proposed parking area with the red marked Overlook Mountain Spur Trail just beyond the gate and prior to the existing information kiosk and trail register (see Map 2). This will eliminate the need for the public to walk along the shoulder of Macdaniel road for nearly ½ mile to get to the Overlook Mountain trailhead. This new trail will be built in a sustainable manner using best management practices and best available techniques

and will take advantage of the user-created and unofficial network of trails that currently exist between Magic Meadow and the Overlook Mountain Spur Trail.

Loop Trails

In addition to the connector trail proposed above, the Department proposes to construct two short foot trail loops to provide additional opportunities for visitors seeking shorter hiking options. The proposed loop trails will utilize existing user created trails in the area where appropriate. Each trail will consist of approximately 1/3 mile in length and will connect to the proposed Macdaniel Road parking area via the proposed connector trail (see Map 3).

Opportunities to provide access for visitors of all abilities will be sought during the trail layout and design phase of all proposed trails listed above.

Overlook Mountain Fire Tower-Overlook Mountain Spur Trail

Currently, public access to the Overlook Mountain fire tower is attained via hiking approximately 2.4 miles along the Overlook Mountain Spur Trail beginning from the Overlook Mountain parking area located on Meads Mountain Road. This trail utilizes the existing gravel road which was constructed for access to the Overlook Mountain House and later, to access the fire tower. In addition, the Department is subject to two private leases utilized for operation and maintenance of several communication towers. The agreements permit the lessees to access the towers via motor vehicular and to perform maintenance on the access road (AKA Overlook Mountain Spur Trail) from Meads Mountain Road up to the communication towers, located adjacent to the Overlook Mountain House ruins. Due to the current level of use, the steepness of terrain and the amount of run-off this trail receives, several areas of the trail surface have been subject to significant erosion.

To improve public access to the summit, the Department proposes to repair the existing areas of erosion located along the trail surface and seek to improve drainage at these locations.

Access for Persons with Disabilities

The Department will seek to improve access to the fire tower and summit of Overlook Mountain for visitors of all abilities. The Department proposes to review the possibility of providing a limited motor vehicle service (a few times a year utilizing a qualified driver and suitable vehicle), to drive people with a qualifying disability to an area near the summit of Overlook Mountain. This service will occur during appropriate times that considers other users and natural resource impacts.

Information Kiosk and Wayside Exhibits

The Department proposes to construct an information kiosk or wayside exhibit near the Overlook fire tower to provide visitors with information on notable visible features such

as mountain peaks, the Hudson River, New York City Reservoirs and other similar objects of interest.

Project 4 – Improve Public Sanitation

Visitor usage at the Overlook Mountain trailhead has been increasing significantly on an annual basis as indicated by the amount of visitors signing in at the trailhead register. This increase in usage has prompted many visitors to seek formal sanitation facilities such as those found at the KTD Monastery located across from the trailhead parking area, causing an undue burden on the Monastery.

In an effort to protect the natural resources and to alleviate public pressure on neighboring landowners for sanitation facilities, the Department proposes to install two port-a-john style sanitation units at the Overlook Mountain trailhead. Sanitation facilities will be placed near the gate at the beginning of the Overlook Trail and will include at least one unit which meets current accessibility standards.

The Department will continue to monitor public use of the Overlook Mountain trailhead and Macdaniel Road parking area (if approved), to ensure that the sanitation facilities provided are adequate for the amount of use the area receives.

State Environmental Quality Review

An Environmental Assessment Form (EAF) has been completed for this amendment resulting in a determination that there are no moderate to large impacts expected as a result of the implementation of any projects listed in the Overlook Mountain Wild Forest unit management plan amendment.

Schedule of Implementation and Budget

Year: 2017-2018

Proposed Project	Cost
Construct new parking lot along Macdaniel Road with Information Kiosk, trail register	$60,000
Build new spur trail from parking area / Magic Meadow to Overlook Trail	$2,000
Provide sanitation facilities at Overlook Mt. Trailhead	$3,000/year
Construct parking area and information Kiosk at California Quarry	$5,000
Relocate gate at California Quarry	$1,000
Construct/mark foot trail from California Quarry parking area over existing 50’ easement to State lands	$2,000
Construct information kiosk/wayside exhibit at Overlook summit	$2,000
Repair eroded sections of the Overlook Mountain Spur Trail	$10,000

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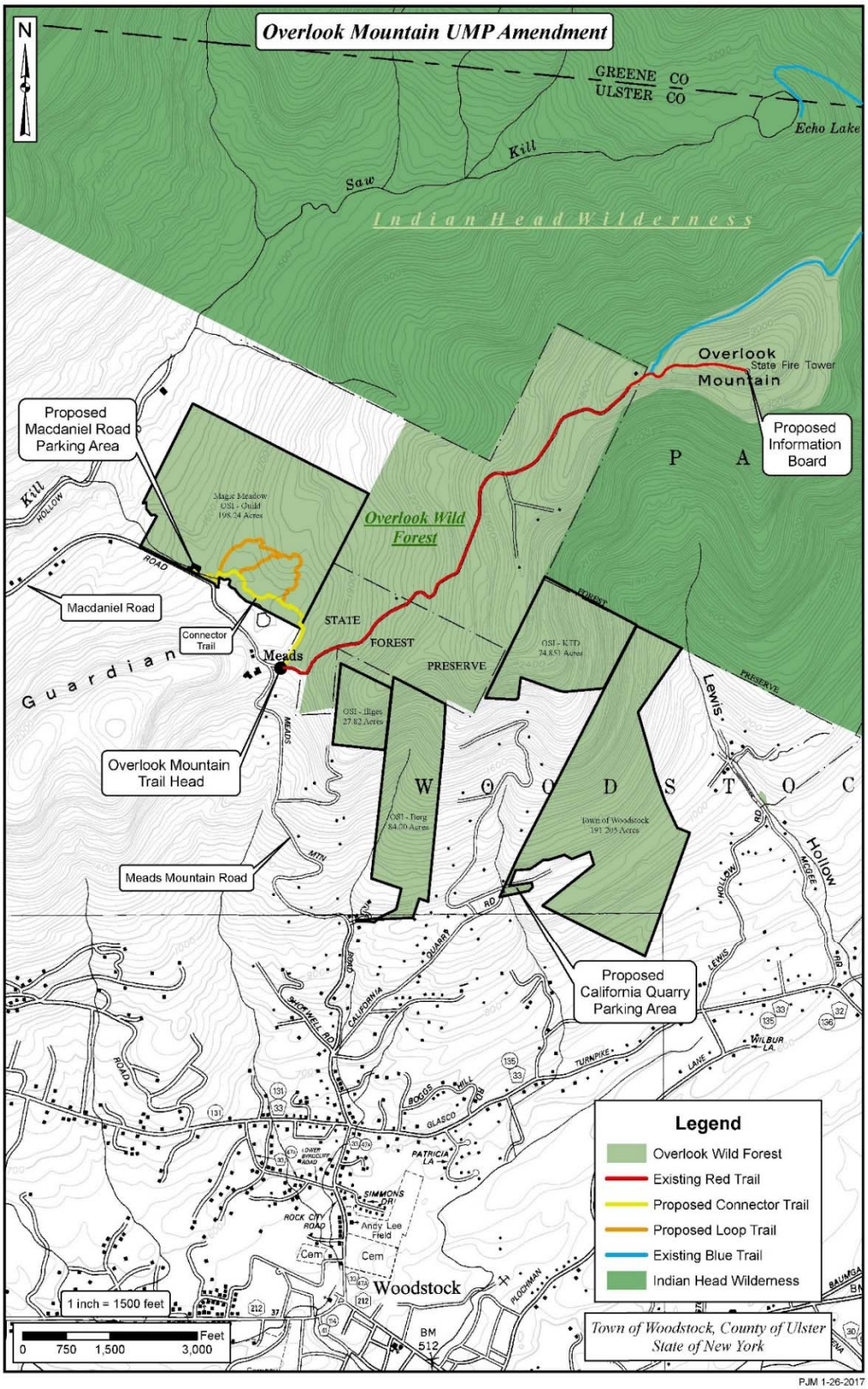
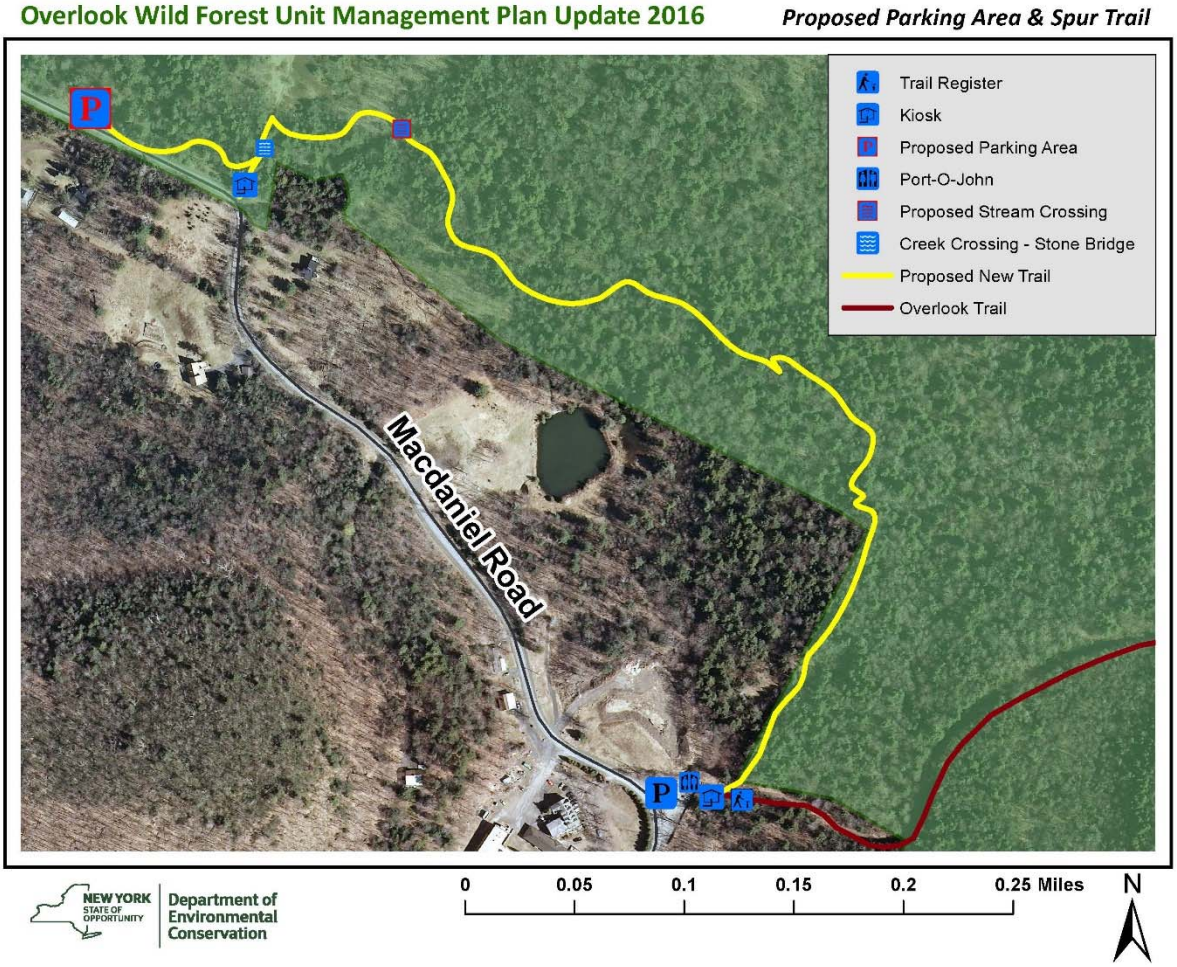
Appendix I: Maps

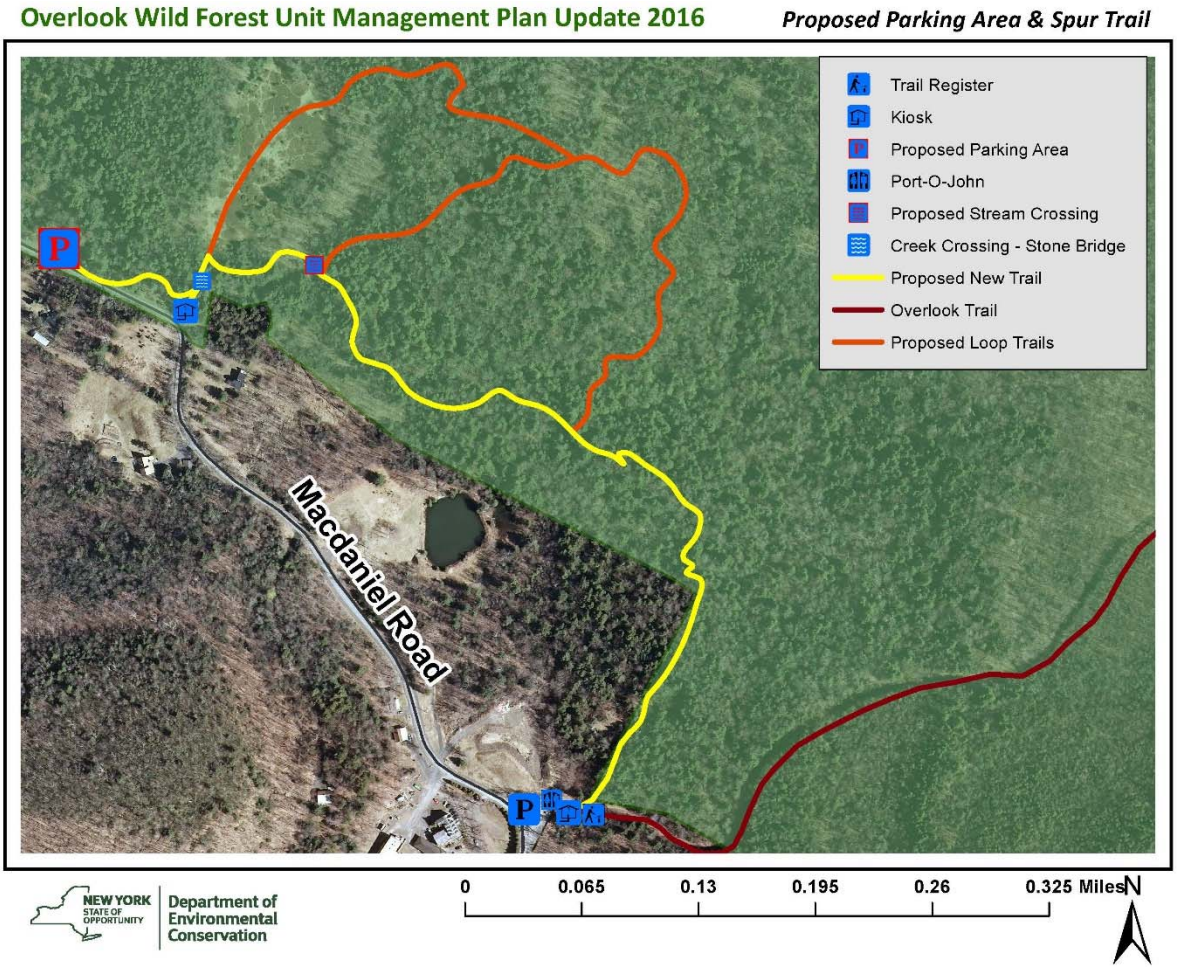


Map 1: Overlook Mountain Wild Forest Proposed Projects



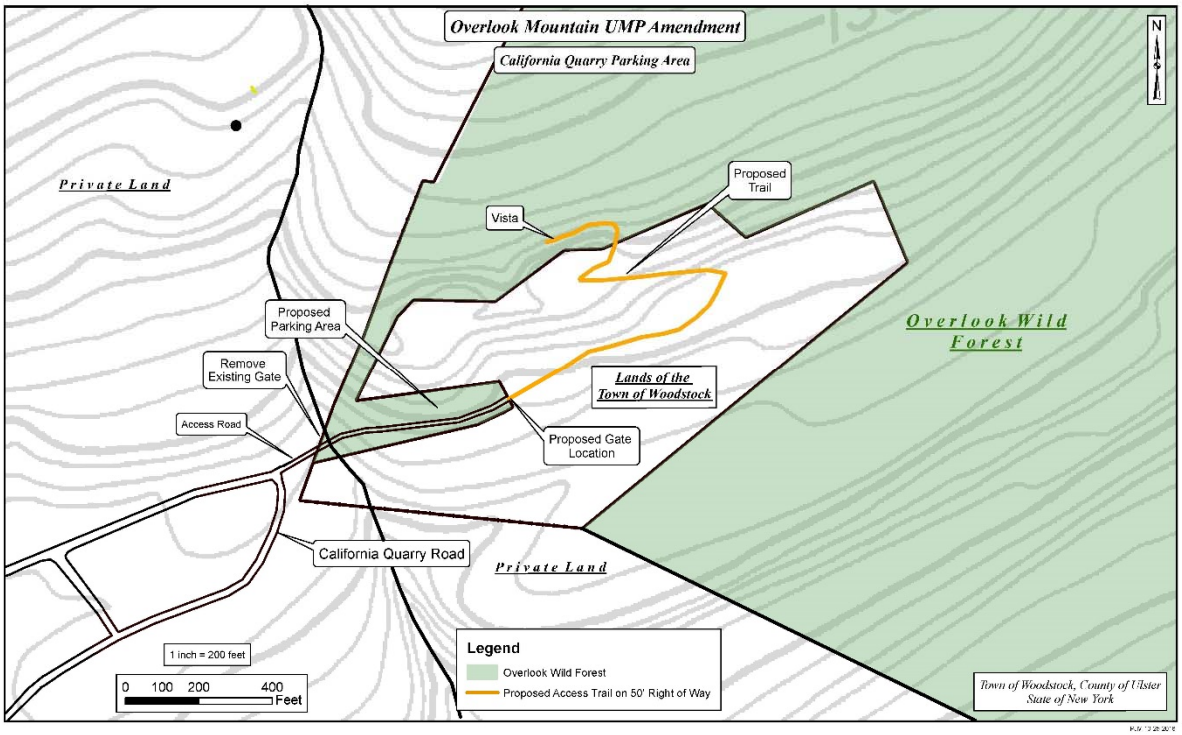
Map 2: Connector trail from new parking area to Overlook Spur Trail.

Projects outlined are conceptual in nature.



Map 3: Connector trail with short loops.

Projects outlined are conceptual in nature.



Map 4: California Quarry Proposed Projects.

Projects outlined are conceptual in nature.

Appendix II: Response to Public Comments

OPPOSITION TO THE PROPOSED DESIGNATION OF THE OVERLOOK SPUR TRAIL as open to motor vehicles by people with disabilities under permit from the Department under Commissioner's Policy #3 (CP3).

Several people expressed opposition to the proposed designation of the Overlook Spur Trail as a CP3 Route due to concerns of public safety, road navigability, vandalism, and concerns for the threatened eastern timber rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*).

The Department, upon further review, agrees that there are significant challenges to overcome should we allow public motor vehicle access to this road. Challenges include very steep road grades, sharp turns, significant erosion and a high volume of pedestrian traffic. The Department has concluded that the Overlook Spur Trail will not be designated as a CP3 route. The Department will continue to seek alternatives for providing access to people with disabilities, including reviewing the potential for providing a limited vehicle service to the fire tower (a few times/year) with a qualified driver and suitable vehicle at appropriate times that minimize user conflicts and natural resource impacts.

There are more appropriate places for CP3 Summit access in the Catskills than Overlook Mountain.

See response above. In addition, the Department will seek additional opportunities for CP3 routes on Catskill Forest Preserve lands during the unit management plan revision process.

CONCERNS ABOUT CATSKILL FOREST PRESERVE LANDS OFF OF CALIFORNIA QUARRY ROAD

Will the proposed trail be accessible and open 24 hours/day?

State lands designated as Wild Forest within the Catskill Forest Preserve are open to the public 24 hours/day, 365 days/year.

Will overnight camping be permitted, and if so where?

Overnight camping is permitted in areas that are 150 feet from trail, road, or water.

Because the land drops off sharply in different areas, we are concerned about safety. Particularly at night.

State lands are open to the public. The proposed trail for this area will keep adequate distance from any ledges or sharp drop offs. There are many places in the Catskill

Forest Preserve where lands drop off sharply. Users must take responsibility for knowing where they are with respect to these areas.

Will the DEC be posting signs on contiguous boundaries informing hikers of the end of State land and the beginning of private property?

Property boundaries will be painted yellow with DEC Catskill Preserve Wild Forest signs posted facing out towards private lands. It is the private landowner's responsibility to post their lands if they choose to do so.

How will this be controlled or enforced? Do we call our local police or the DEC if problems occur?

If illegal activity is observed, we encourage the observer to call the local police, Forest Rangers or Environmental Conservation Officers (for emergency dispatch phone 1-877-457-5680) for assistance. Questions regarding management or public use of lands classified as Forest Preserve should be directed to the Forester who manages the Catskill Forest Preserve lands in Ulster County at (845)-256-3083.

Provide a shuttle service from the hamlet of Woodstock to address the limited parking at the trailhead.

The Department will seek partnerships with the Town of Woodstock and local transportation service providers such as Ulster County Area Transit to provide alternatives to the trailhead parking.

Provide bathrooms at the trailhead.

The Department contracted with a sanitation service to provide "port-a-johns" at the Overlook Mountain Trailhead for 2016. The Department will continue contracting for this service.

<u>CONCERNS ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FORM (EAF)</u>

In regards to question 7 of the EAF, Is the Overlook Wild Forest not a Critical Environmental Area (CEA)? Shouldn't question 7 of the EAF be answered "Yes"?

The proposed action is not located in a state listed Critical Environmental Area (CEA).

In regards to question 8 of the EAF, the proposed action could significantly increase vehicle traffic on the Overlook Mountain Trail above present levels? Shouldn't question 8 of the EAF be answered yes?

*The Department, upon further review, will not designate the Overlook Spur Trail as a CP3 route. Therefore, we do not expect **any** increase in vehicle usage on the Overlook Spur Trail. No **significant** increase of either vehicle or foot traffic was expected in the original CP3 Route proposal.*

The area of action, especially the area of the proposed CP-3 trail, is habitat for the threatened Timber Rattlesnake *(Crotalus horridus)*. Shouldn't question 15 of the EAF be answered yes?

Question 15 of the EAF should have been answered as yes in terms of area of the proposed CP3 route being habitat for the threatened timber rattlesnake. However, based upon further review, the Department no longer proposes designating the Overlook Spur Trail as a CP3 route.

In Part 2 of the EAF, Questions 1,2,3,5, and 9 were answered as "No, or small impact may occur". Shouldn't these questions be answered as "Moderate to large impact may occur"?

Upon review, the Department believes that no moderate to large impact may occur in relation to these questions. No moderate to large impacts are expected from the implementation of any projects listed in the Overlook Wild Forest Unit Management Plan Amendment. The projects listed in this amendment are minor in nature and create little disturbance in the Wild Forest landscape.

The classification of 600 acres as Wild Forest is a type 1 action. These parcels could be considered for inclusion in the Indian Head Wilderness Area.

Classification of lands as Wild Forest will not change the current use. Lands acquired as forest preserve are managed as wild forest lands until classified. The Catskill State Park Master Plan permits a classification to be accomplished through a Unit Management Plan revision. All parcels addressed in this amendment were acquired with the intent of Wild Forest classification to expand the Overlook Mountain Wild Forest.