

Secret-Lamoille Trail Project

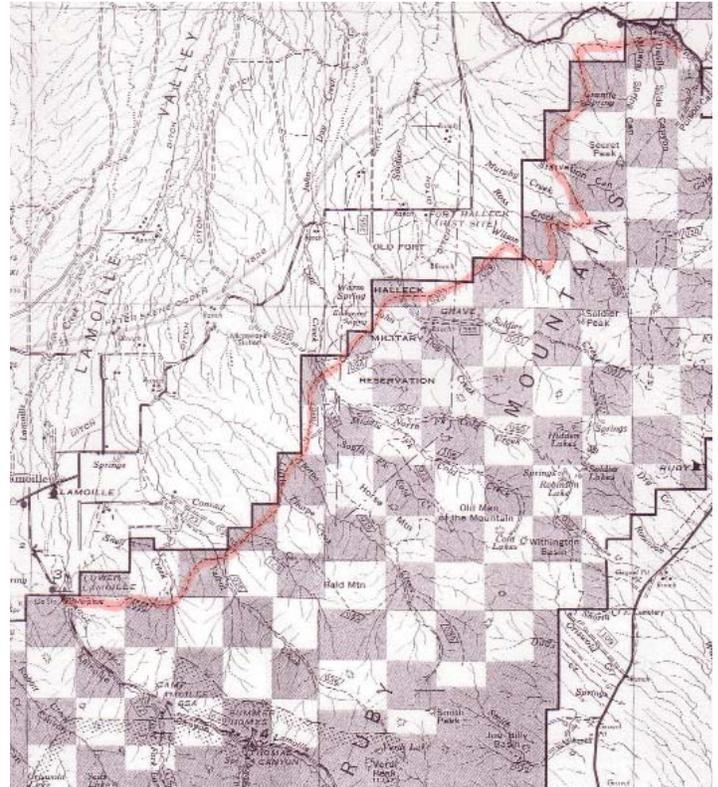
Historical Background

Over the years, the US Forest Service and a variety of Forest users have routed and constructed trails in the Ruby Mountains. Many of those trails have disappeared with little evidence other than a few old blazes on trees or as lines on old maps. Some of those trails can still be found on the ground with a little looking. The Secret-Lamoille Trail is one such trail.

The Secret-Lamoille Trail, as routed back in the 1920's and 1930's, runs along the flanks of the Ruby Mountains from Lamoille Canyon to Secret Pass, generally weaving in and out of the range's canyons at approximately the 7000 foot level. Back in the day it was used by local sheep ranchers to move their flocks from one canyon to another. Little attention was paid to trail grades, whether the trail crossed private inholdings, or whether it stayed within the Forest boundary at all. The first USFS reference to the trail appears in maintenance work orders from the 1930's, suggesting that the trail was constructed some few years earlier. It appears on old USFS maps as recently as the 1960's, and portions of the trail show up on current USGS topographic maps of the area. Recreation specialists from the USFS have been able to find most of the trail on the ground and have a GPS record of that route. Use of the trail appears to have waned in the mid-1980's, based on carvings left in aspen trees along the trail route.

Purpose and Need

In 2003 and 2005, the Northeastern Nevada Stewardship Group (NNSG), in conjunction with the Elko Convention and Visitors Bureau, the USFS and the BLM, held public meetings to determine priorities for recreational development in the area. Meeting attendees identified a need for lower-altitude, non-wilderness, non-motorized trail development, and for increased access to the Ruby Mountains.



The 1968 Forest Users Guide for the Humboldt National Forest - Ruby Mountain District shows the Secret-Lamoille Trail as it was originally routed.

For years, those visiting the Rubies have been limited by a bugaboo left over from the United States' expansion into the west: the checkerboard land ownership pattern left over from the land grants provided to the railroads by the federal government.

Because of the density of private land ownership in the Lamoille Valley, and because of the richness of the valley itself, ranchers and others have established deeded landholdings along the length of the Rubies. There is limited public land at the base of the Rubies along the western slopes, which is the side that faces the Elko/Spring Creek micropolis area. The US Forest Service has established access at only five points along the range: at Secret Pass, at Soldier Canyon, at Lamoille Canyon, at Cottonwood Creek, and at Harrison Pass. The rest of the range remains largely inaccessible unless a potential visitor knows a local landowner well enough to request permission for access – and because so much of the land has changed hands from ranchers to higher-density residential users, that permission can be hard to get.



North Fork Cold Creek Photo by David Ashby

For several years now, members of the Recreation Pod of the NNSG have looked for opportunities to expand Elko County's non-motorized, non-wilderness trail inventory in order to increase access to area mountain ranges and to promote adventure tourism in the area. There currently is no constructed mountain bike trail in Elko County, for example - a lack that is causing Elko County to forego tourism dollars from an attractive recreational group. Hunting access in the Rubies is limited to high-altitude trails, or to those who can gain permission for access from private landowners. Most of the trail miles in the Rubies are at high altitude, meaning that they are snow-covered for much of the year. And, many miles of Ruby Mountain trail inventory are currently inaccessible, as they can be reached only by crossing private land, through which the USFS often has no access easements.

In consultation with USFS rec planners, the NNSG learned that the best avenue for getting recreational projects approved and on the ground is by rebuilding suitable existing trails, rather than pursuing construction of trails on new routes. The agency encouraged NNSG to considering partnering on projects bringing failed trails up to current standards in order to achieve its goal of recreational expansion. The Secret-Lamoille trail was identified as a priority project for the agency, and suited the goals of the Recreation Pod as shaped by public sentiment shared during the 2003 and 2005 meetings.

Location

The Secret-Lamoille Trail, as currently routed, runs approximately 36.8 miles along the northwest flanks of the Ruby Mountains, from the mouth of Lamoille Canyon to Secret Pass. The project as proposed will necessarily include a reroute around private inholdings, and will be approximately 48.57 miles long. A proposed mountain bike loop will bring the total project trail miles to approximately 52.25 miles. See the attached maps for the proposed route.

As proposed, the project will have three major trailheads: in Lamoille Canyon, Soldier Canyon and off of Secret Pass.

The Lamoille Canyon trailhead will be approximately 20 miles from Elko, Nevada. The Secret Pass trailhead will be approximately 18 miles from Interstate 80, off of State Route 229, a total of 36 miles from Elko.

Project Description

The project as designed contains four phases. Phases 1, 2 and 3 contain the bulk of the new trail construction; Phase 4 is primarily a trail maintenance project with some grade improvements, and includes construction of a significant trailhead and improvement of an existing access road. A description of each phase follows:

Phase 1 - Lamoille Canyon to Conrad Canyon

Budget: \$573,716.00 (Cash and in-kind)

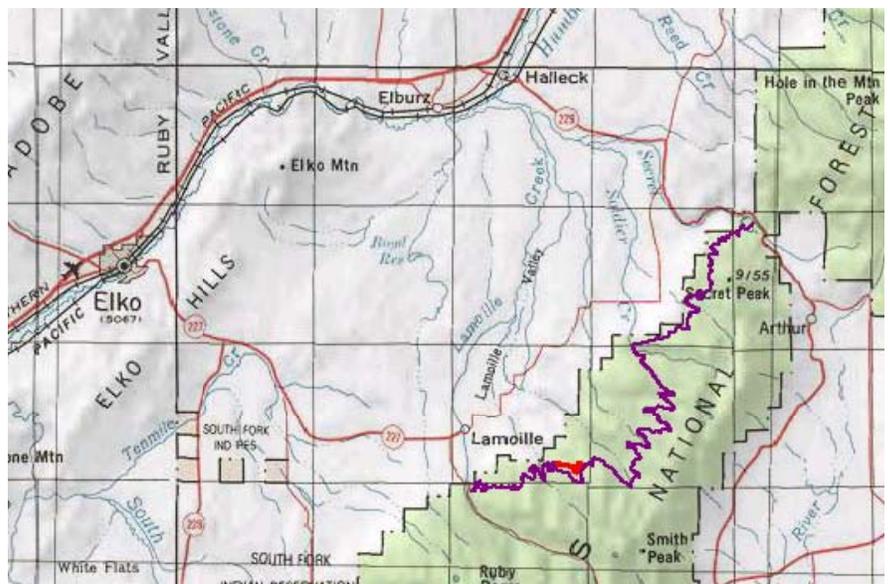
Of the project phases, the existing trail in Phase 1 has proven to be the most difficult to locate. Project trail designers have linked the faint existing clues and used common sense and good trail design principles to route a logical trail from the mouth of Lamoille Canyon to the existing Secret-Lamoille Trail crossing of Talbot Creek and beyond. The trail will intersect the existing Talbot Canyon Trail, providing access to Talbot Creek, Talbot Canyon and Verdi Lake, as well as an existing jeep track up Conrad Canyon. As currently designed, the first phase of the trail will run approximately 12.43 miles, and will cross about 500 feet of private property inside of the forest boundary. Project organizers have negotiated a public access easement for that crossing. See the attached map for route and for new tread vs. existing tread.

Project organizers anticipate receiving NEPA approval for the Lamoille Canyon to Talbot Canyon portion of the first segment at any time. The Talbot to Conrad portion will be included in the NEPA study for Phase 2. Pending that approval, trail crews can begin work on the first phase of the project in as soon as the weather breaks in Spring 2010.

Phase 2 - Conrad Canyon to Soldier Canyon

Budget: \$761,373 (Cash and in-kind)

The existing Secret-Lamoille Trail crosses miles of private land in this project segment, and even wandered outside of the forest boundary in places. Neither the private landowner nor the project organizers desired this much of the trail to be on private property, and so the project was of necessity re-routed into the Ruby Mountains Wilderness. Of the approximately 18.62 miles of trail in this phase of the project, 2.52 miles are on existing trail. The balance must be new trail construction interspersed with other existing trails in order to facilitate the necessary re-route.



Secret-Lamoille Trail Location



Verdi Lake, at the head of Talbot Canyon Photo by David Ashby

The trail will cross into wilderness approximately six miles past Talbot Canyon, near an obvious valley overlook. In order to provide a recreational opportunity for mountain bikers, and to discourage trespass by mountain bikers into the wilderness, trail designers propose creation of a loop trail by constructing approximately 3.68 miles of additional trail, from the overlook to a point approximately 1.4 miles from the Talbot Creek crossing. See the attached map for the proposed route. This additional 3.68 miles of trail will create a 26-mile loop ride for mountain bikers from the Lamoille Canyon trailhead, while protecting the integrity of the wilderness portion of the project.

Trail designers are in the process of flagging the second segment of the project at this time and anticipate completion of that work by the end of 2009. Many of the canyons crossed by the second trail segment already have existing trails on the ground; the emphasis has been to utilize as much existing trail as possible while creating a logical and enjoyable route for users of the reconstructed Secret-Lamoille Trail. Once that flagging is in place, the biological and cultural surveys can be completed in Spring 2010, and public scoping can be held. Coordinators anticipate an EA-level process for approval of this project phase, based on the necessary wilderness routing and on the total number of new trail miles needed.

Phase 3 - Soldier Canyon to Murphy Creek *Budget - \$450,000 (cash and in-kind - estimated)*

The scope of this portion of the trail project has changed significantly within recent weeks, as project organizers have received final word that the existing trail may not be utilized where it crosses a private inholding, and that new trail will have to be constructed. A preliminary design sketch has been completed, but more work will need to be done before accurate budgeting can take place. Based on per-mile costs of previous segments, we anticipate that re-routing this portion of the trail will take it from an inexpensive maintenance project to an approximately \$450,000 project ending with approximately 11.5 miles of non-wilderness trail - 8.76 miles of it in Phase 3, the balance in Phase 4. The new design, however, will mean that the trail will be more sustainable, more easily maintained, and more suitable for modern users. It will feature one nice day-hike from the Soldier Canyon trailhead, and will facilitate two backcountry loops combining this trail and the existing Ross Creek, Murphy Creek and Soldier Canyon trails. Mountain bikers will be able to do a 20-mile ride from this trailhead, ending at Secret Pass. They can then shuttle back to the trailhead in a car, turn around and do the ride in the opposite direction, or ride SH229 to Lower Lamoille Road for an epic MTB loop ride.

Phase 4 - Murphy Creek to Secret Pass Trailhead *Budget: \$306,025*

This final 8.76-mile phase of the project consists of the 2.65 mile balance of the new trail necessitated by the Phase 3 reroute around private land, maintenance of 3.2 miles of existing trail, and construction of a 2.91-mile re-route around a section of existing trail that can best be described as "improbable." This segment of existing trail follows an old fence line with no attention paid to grades, making it extremely unattractive to all but motorized users. As the Secret-Lamoille Trail is a designated non-motorized trail, reconstruction of this short segment will facilitate maintenance of the trail as non-motorized, while continuing to allow motorized users access to a short trail segment they already enjoy. The existing trail segment will be designated a motorized "trail", maintaining access by users of ATVs and dirtbikes. Non-motorized users will be routed onto the new trail, and will join the existing trail at a point where motorized users no longer drive the trail route. In addition to this trail work, completion of this segment will require construction of a new trailhead as well as improvement of an existing 1-mile access road off of SR229.

Much of the 2.54-mile re-route has already been flagged by a trail designer. The existing trail portion of this phase will require maintenance and minor grade-improvements only. Organizers can begin the cultural and biological surveys necessary for this phase of the project at any time. Because of the scope of the work needed for this phase, organizers anticipate needing EA-level NEPA approval for this work.



Soldier Canyon Photo by David Ashby

Other partners

Project coordinators have discussed project partnerships with a variety of area businesses, individuals and groups, including mining companies, consultants, construction companies, lawyers, surveyors, equipment companies, and more. All have expressed interest in the project. In addition, the Backcountry Horsemen and Elko Velo Club have agreed to serve as maintenance partners for the trail. As of the end of October, 2009, 85 people have signed up for a core volunteer group, Friends of the Secret-Lamoille Trail.

Conclusion

The Secret-Lamoille Trail Project is the result of hard work by a group of dedicated volunteers, with widespread support in the community. Organizers have presented the project to the national board of directors for Backcountry Horsemen, to the Elko Velo bicycle club, to the Elko Lions Club, the Elko Rotary Club, a conference on collaborative partnerships for the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, and a wide variety of local businesses and individuals. Organizers have done their best to address the concerns of those few individuals who have raised concerns with the project, and have enlisted others to join the project as sponsors or maintenance partners.

It is the hope of organizers that this project can serve as a demonstration of how future projects can be managed, here on the Forest and elsewhere. The goal has been to foster community collaboration - a real win/win for local residents and businesses, for forest users, and for the future of the Forest itself. By creating a Friends of the Secret-Lamoille Trail group that includes hikers, mountain bikers and horsemen - groups that have encountered user conflicts in other parts of the country - organizers hope to create a trail in which all parties are stakeholders, from which all parties can learn about other groups' needs and concerns. With the success of this project, the Secret-Lamoille Trail can serve as a national demonstration of the power of collaborative partnerships.

Project Partners

Project coordinators have secured the cooperation of numerous public and private entities for this project, as well as funding for a significant portion of the project. A brief description of these partnerships follows:

Northeastern Nevada Stewardship Group

NNSG is an organization made up of groups with an interest in public lands issues, dedicated to finding win-win solutions for the challenges stemming from public lands use. Volunteers from NNSG's Recreation Pod worked with recreation planners from the US Forest Service to get this project off of the ground, and remain intimately involved with the project's progress.

Great Basin Institute

Because of its experience with projects of this scope, NNSG asked the Great Basin Institute to join the project as its lead coordinator and grantholder. Long time Elko County local Bill Wolf, currently based in GBI's Ely office, is the project manager.

Nevada Division of State Lands

Project coordinators applied for, and have received, a grant of \$347,778 from Round 8 of the Question 1 bond program for construction of Phase 1 of the project.

Barrick Gold of North America

Barrick Gold provided project coordinators with necessary seed money for the project, a \$12,000 grant needed to pay for design of the first segment of trail. Having this money in hand and the design on the ground significantly improved this project's ranking in the tight competition for Question 1 monies.

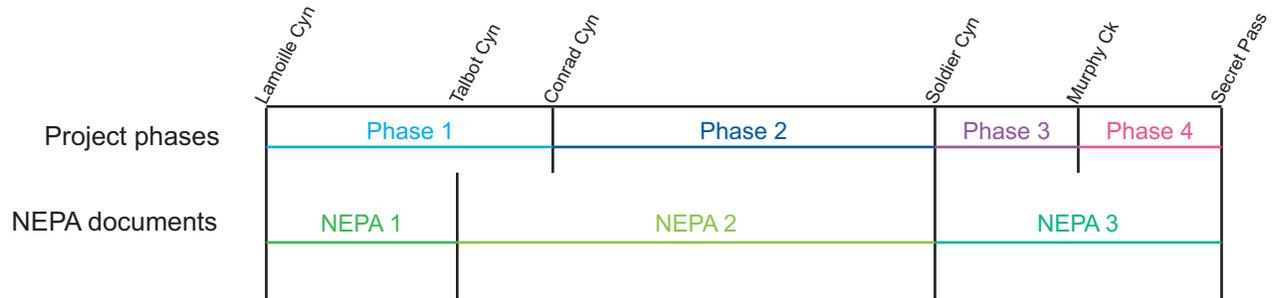
JBR Environmental

Consulting firm JBR Environmental has joined the project as providers of biological survey work. They are doing this project work on a pro-bono basis.



Biologist Jade Keehn conducts a wildlife survey on the first segment of the Secret-Lamoille Trail Photo by Sue Kennedy

Project Details



Project Timeline

Already Completed - 2008/2009

- Trail design - Phase 1
 - Trail design - Phase 4
 - Grant application and approval - Barrick Gold NA
 - Grant application and approval - NV Div of State Lands - Question 1
 - Public scoping for Phase 1
 - Archaeological survey - Phase 1
 - SHPO approval - Phase 1
 - Biological survey - Phase 1
 - Survey, map and legal description of public access easement - Phase 1
- November
- NEPA approval Phase 1 (LC to Talbot Creek)
 - Preliminary saw work - Phase 1 (Snell Canyon)
 - Recreational Trails Program grant application

- December
- Trail design - Phase 2
 - Budget finalization - Phase 2

2010

- April
- Trail design - Phase 3
- May
- Biological survey - Phase 2
 - Archaeological surveys - Phase 2
 - Public scoping - Phase 2
 - Preliminary saw work - Phase 1
- June
- NCC crew begins work on Phase 1
- September
- EA approval - Phase 2
 - Grand Opening Phase 1 - National Public Lands Day
- October
- Preliminary saw work - Phase 2

2011

- April
- Biological survey - Phases 3/4
 - Archaeological survey - Phases 3/4
 - Public scoping - Phases 3/4
- May
- Preliminary saw work - Phase 2
- June
- Construction of Phase 2 begins
- September
- EA approval - Phases 3/4
 - Preliminary saw work - Phases 3/4

2012

- May
- Saw work - Phases 3/4
- June
- Construction of Phase 2 continues
 - Construction of Phases 3/4 begins
- September
- Grand Opening Phases 2,3,4 - National Public Lands Day

Please note:

All future dates discussed are targets subject to funding and new information. Each phase of this project is a stand alone project that is worth doing, even if funding or other influences delay progress on future phases of the project. It is our intent to maximize the resources we already have through good design and construction techniques and wise use of community volunteers. We are actively pursuing additional funding sources; our success in this area will significantly impact our ability to achieve this timeline.