

Comment Regarding Roads in Wildcat Canyon (The Gulches)

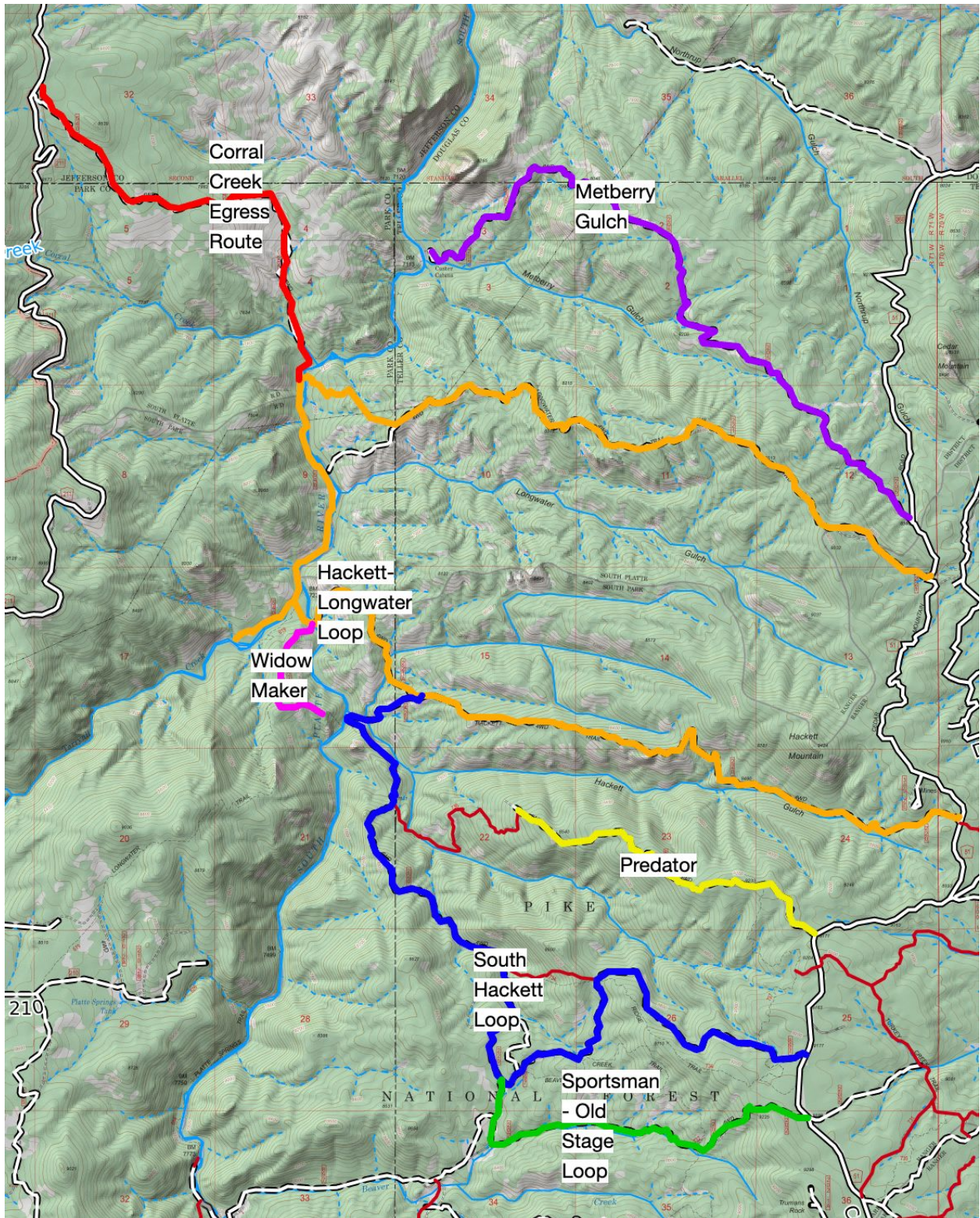
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1. Introduction

I am a Jeep and off-road vehicle enthusiast living in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. I am a Colorado native who grew up in the Denver suburb of Parker, and have enjoyed a wide variety of recreational activities in the Colorado mountains since childhood. I am also a non-practicing Colorado licensed attorney currently working as a software developer. While I do not represent any organization in an official capacity, I am a member of Colorado Offroad Enterprise (CORE), and I trust that my sentiments are shared by numerous other off-road vehicle enthusiasts.

I am writing this comment specifically to request that four-wheel-drive roads in the Park County portion of Wildcat Canyon along the South Platte River north of Lake George be reopened to public motorized use, specifically as *trails open to all vehicles*. I also ask that all currently open motorized roads and trails in the area be kept open. I will address other roads and trails throughout the planning area in a separate comment. The roads I will be discussing in this comment (commonly referred to collectively as “The Gulches”) are the following (shown on the map below):

- FS 220 Hackett Gulch (partially open)
- FS 220.A Crossover (closed)
- FS 220.B Widow Maker (closed)
- FS 540 Corral Creek (closed)
- FS 221 Longwater Gulch (partially open)
- FS 205 Metberry Gulch (open)
- FS 202 Old Stage (open)
- FS 897 Sportsman (open)
- FS 895 Predator (open)



Map of the Gulches showing the three classic loop routes: (1) Hackett to Longwater (orange), (2) South Hackett to Sportsman (blue), and (3) Sportsman to Old Stage (green). The egress route along Upper Corral Creek to Matukat Road is shown in red, which when run in conjunction with Longwater or Hackett can provide a straight through route from Cedar Mountain Road to Matukat Road.

2. Area Characteristics

The Gulches have long been enjoyed by off-road vehicle enthusiasts as one of Colorado's premier low elevation four-wheel-drive trail systems, with the roads in the area dating back to the mid-20th century and predating the 1984 Forest Plan. This area has been highly prized by motorized users for many decades due to its spectacular scenery dominated by deep canyons, sweeping views of the Tarryall Mountains and Lost Creek Wilderness to the west, towering rock formations, and easy access to a remote portion of the South Platte River.

Located between 8000 and 9000 feet elevation, these trails are accessible year-round and are snow-free for most of the year. The Gulches are some of the first 4WD trails in the mountains to melt out in the spring, and they receive heavy traffic in the spring and fall when most other trails in Colorado are covered with snow. Because of their close proximity to Denver and Colorado Springs, they are a frequent destination for trail runs by Front Range four-wheel-drive clubs.

The 1984 Forest Plan designated the entire area as a 2A management area emphasizing semi-primitive motorized recreation opportunities including four-wheel driving, motorcycling, and ATVs. Motorized recreation has always been the dominant use in the area. There are no significant hiking trails in Wildcat Canyon, with most hikers choosing to go to the nearby Lost Creek Wilderness Area instead.

Metberry Gulch and Predator have always been strictly out-and-back trails for full-size vehicles (Predator connects to a motorcycle trail that loops with FS 220). The rest of the roads in Wildcat Canyon have historically connected to form a series of loops. The northern loop comprised of FS 220 Hackett Gulch, FS 220.A Crossover, FS 540 Corral Creek, and FS 221 Longwater Gulch was the most popular. The Hackett to Longwater loop was particularly renowned for challenging rock obstacles and its three deep river crossings (two on the South Platte and one on Tarryall Creek), with the deepest crossing at the bottom of Longwater Gulch earning the nickname, "Teller County Car Wash." FS 220.B Widow Maker is a short spur at the southern end of FS 540 which historically was known for a steep hill climb up to a high point overlooking the Platte River, dubbed "Widow Maker Hill" because of its difficulty.

A second more difficult loop was formed by continuing southwest on FS 220 Hackett Gulch past the junction with FS 220.A, proceeding down to the river, then continuing back up the steep hill to the southeast over several challenging rock obstacles, until FS 220 intersects with FS 897 Sportsman. FS 897 Sportsman and FS 202 Old Stage can also be run as a loop, and are the only full-size loop opportunity currently legally available in the area. The Hackett to Longwater and South Hackett loops are



Part of the South Hackett Loop in 2017.

currently closed in Park County, forcing them to be run run as out-and-back trails. The upper section of FS 540 Corral Creek (also closed) historically connected the Gulches trail system to FS 211 Matukat Road to the west and provided an important ingress and egress route to the area.

Hackett, Longwater, and Metberry Gulch roads have featured prominently in every four-wheel-drive trail guidebook (see appendix with scans) and website for Colorado. I have run them multiple times myself and this is one of my favorite areas for low-elevation four-wheeling. It is no exaggeration to say these are some of the most popular and highly valued motorized trails in Colorado.

3. History of the Gulches

Prior to 2002, the four-wheel-drive trail system in Wildcat Canyon was one of the most popular areas in the Pike National Forest for motorized recreation, with visitors enjoying a wide variety of additional activities including camping, fishing, hunting, and rock climbing. The Forest Service described the pre-Hayman Fire conditions in its 2004 Environmental Assessment:

The Wildcat Canyon area was extremely popular because of the 4x4 challenge of the roads, the South Platte River destination point, the opportunity for long and scenic loop rides, the close proximity to the Colorado Front Range and the many other dispersed recreational opportunities available in the area like fishing, hunting, camping, picnicking, and rock-climbing. Furthermore, many local OHV clubs were involved in the maintenance and upkeep of these roads through grant agreements with the Colorado State Parks OHV Fund and partnerships with the US Forest Service. Over the past 8-10 years, a considerable amount of volunteer hours and over \$100,000 in grant monies has been dedicated to hardening and rehabilitating four-wheel drive roads in the area, especially Longwater, Corral Creek and Hackett.¹

In 2002, much of Wildcat Canyon was devastated by the Hayman Fire, which was caused by a Forest Service ranger. All of the roads and trails in the area were closed for years after the fire, to the significant detriment of motorized recreationists. Following the Hayman Fire, the Forest Service conducted a travel management process for the burn area which was completed in 2004. This travel planning process was extremely controversial, with motorized groups asking for the trails in Wildcat Canyon to all be reopened and environmental groups demanding they be closed (primarily based on claims of damaging impacts to the South Platte River). According to the final decision document:

A majority of the comments received focused on roads in the Wildcat Canyon area such as Metberry, Longwater, Hackett and Corral Creek roads. The comments regarding water quality and motorized recreation access in Wildcat Canyon were divisive and polarized enough that the Forest Service sent a letter to 42 Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) and environmental groups on March 11, 2004 requesting that they work together to develop a compromise alternative sufficient to both groups. However, for various reasons, not all groups were in agreement to seek a compromise alternative. Subsequently, the four project alternatives presented in the EA were developed by the Forest Service to cover the broad range of issues raised by the public during scoping and to present a broad range of alternatives to the Proposed Action.²

The action the Forest Service settled on was frankly, to pass the buck. The Forest Service decided that Hackett, Crossover, Longwater, Metberry, and Corral Creek could be reopened to the public, *“if and only if a written easement, agreement or special use permit is entered into with a public road management agency with respect to each road, and such easement, agreement or permit contains an agreed maintenance standard for each road”*.³ While the Forest Service accepted reopening the roads in principle and concluded that the

¹ “Environmental Assessment”, Hayman Fire Roads Management Project, USDA Forest Service, July 2004, p. 3-17.

² “Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact for Hayman Fire Roads Management Project (Wildcat Canyon)”, USDA Forest Service, September 9, 2004, p.4.

³ Id. at p. 2.

benefits of such reopening outweigh the risks, it wanted the counties to bear the burden of restoration, maintenance, and enforcement rather than take responsibility for them itself.

Thanks to years of negotiations led by Predator 4 Wheel Drive (which had long been the primary caretaker of these trails), in 2005 Teller County was granted an easement and officially assumed jurisdiction over the portions of Hackett, Longwater, Metberry, and Old Stage, and Sportsman inside its boundaries. Douglas County (not Jefferson as some documents mistakenly state) was given an easement over a portion of Metberry, which it then gave over to Teller County to manage. Metberry Gulch opened first, all the way to the Platte River. By 2009, the rest of the trails with easements were reopened to the public and are now shown as “other public roads” (county roads) on the current MVUMs. Hackett, Longwater, and Old Stage were opened only to the Park County line, with a crucial portion in the middle of the southern Hackett loop being closed in Park County. Predator was reopened by the Forest Service. Crossover, Corral Creek, Window Maker, and the bottom of Longwater in Park County remained closed.

Subsequently, Park County also applied for an easement to assume jurisdiction over the portions of the roads in that county, which included the most controversial sections along and across the Platte River. However, the paperwork the county filed with the Forest Service in 2013 was somehow lost, prompting the county to file another application in 2014. This paperwork was also somehow “lost”, after which the Park County Commissioners officially abandoned the effort to adopt these trails in 2015.

In spring 2019, a number of motorized advocacy groups petitioned the Park County Commission to try again to assume jurisdiction over the Park County portions of the Wildcat Canyon trails. Political winds had changed, and the Commission announced in a press release on April 16, 2019 that they were not interested in taking responsibility for these roads, and that they would defer to the Forest Service:

Park County Commissioners have had many requests from various 4-Wheel Clubs and off-road enthusiasts to reconsider our position as related to the re-opening of Wildcat Canyon, Hackett Gulch, Longwater Gulch, and Corral Creek to motorized vehicles.

Even though the commissioners are strong supporters of all recreation within Park County's boundaries, "We are not the experts in this type of recreation or establishing the needs for this type of recreation. We have left that up to the experts that we recognize as those individuals who manage public lands within the Forest Service."

In or around 2015, the County informed the South Park Ranger District that we have no interest in obtaining any easements related to the above mentioned areas. We are inclined to support any management plan the Forest Service will put forward in those areas.⁴

Now, going on 20 years since the roads in Wildcat Canyon were first closed by the Hayman Fire, the roads in Park County remain in limbo, closed to the public in ML1 status. The Forest Service's attempt in 2004 to evade responsibility for these roads and turn over jurisdiction to the counties failed to achieve a definitive result. Park County has made it clear that they will not take responsibility for these roads. It is up to the Forest Service to finally make a decision in this travel plan what their ultimate status will be. Given that the stated goal of the 2004 decision was to enable these roads to be reopened to the public, that intent should be followed now by reopening the closed roads as trails open to all vehicles under Forest Service jurisdiction.

4. The Situation on the Ground is Untenable and Unsustainable

As a result of only one of the two counties assuming jurisdiction over the Wildcat Canyon roads, Hackett and Longwater remain closed at an arbitrary political boundary, with Hackett (FS 220) split into separate northern and southern segments that cannot be legally connected. This boundary forms an inconvenient, unnatural end to these trails, causing them to end on barren hillsides in the middle of the Hayman burn area, well above their natural terminus at the Platte River. This makes for a fundamentally unsatisfactory experience and it is extremely tempting for riders to continue past the closure points down to the river.

In the past, either the Forest Service or Teller County has attempted to set up gates blocking the ends of these trails. In every case, the gates were quickly torn down and stolen or else people simply drove around them. As a result, there has been no sign on the ground for many years that the roads in Park County are technically closed, and numerous motorized users drive the closed roads every week either out of ignorance of their status

⁴ "Press Release - Park County Wildcat Canyon Area", April 16, 2019, <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:qlvN9vO5jVQJ:https://www.parkco.us/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID%3D477&hl=en&gl=us&strip=1&vwsrc=0>.

or simply not caring. Occasionally rumors have spread online that the full Hackett to Longwater loop is open, spurring a rush of people to drive that loop before they learned that was not the case. My first exposure to this trail system came in the wake of one such rumor in 2017, when I rode with a friend on that route.

The Forest Service compounded matters in 2014, when it listed all of FS 220 as open in the Federal Registry, mistakenly opening the portion of the southern Hackett loop in Park County between the junction with FS 220.A and the southern portion of FS 220 in Teller County. Between 2014 and 2017, most online trail guides listed that section as open, and it became common for most users running Hackett to drive all the way to the point where the trail meets the river, with many proceeding up the hill to the southeast and running the full South Hackett loop. One of the patrols of the Mile High Jeep Club did an official trail run on the South Hackett Loop in fall 2017. Sometime in late 2017 the Forest Service again marked the trail as closed at the Park County line in online maps and databases, but it wasn't until a full year later in December 2018 the word got out in the offroading community that it was again closed and online trail guides were updated to indicate this.

The net result of this confusion has been that for the last 10 years, illegal motorized activity on the closed roads has been rampant, with little to no enforcement. While I do not condone illegal riding on closed trails, in this case illegal use should be considered indicative of the high public demand for these roads. Those running the trails illegally are in most cases well-meaning, responsible riders who wish to follow the law and stay the trail, but are unable to do so because of the lack of good information about the status of roads in the area and the complete absence of signage on the ground. In terms of signage, just across the river crossing at the junction of FS 220.A and FS 540, an old stamped metal sign from the 1980s still stands, welcoming riders with a message that the trail is maintained by Predator 4WD, further giving the impression that the trail is open. While these roads may be technically closed, as a practical matter on the ground, they are not.

Because the roads in Park County have not been maintained for the last 10 years despite people continuing to drive them regularly, the conditions of the roads have

deteriorated in some places. Overall they are in surprisingly good condition and are still very much present on the ground and easily drivable by appropriately equipped vehicles. However the steep hill on FS 220 ascending to the southeast from the Platte River has become extremely rutted and eroded, to the point where the main route is impassable to most vehicles. As a result, a bypass has formed adjacent to the main route, and most riders now take this route. While this section of hillside could be stabilized and reopened with some maintenance work, or possibly rerouted, that has not happened due to that section's status as technically closed.

While the impacts of vehicles crossing the Platte River have been extremely exaggerated, those impacts are not lessened by the roads' status as technically closed. People continue to drive across the river on a regular basis, and multiple times every year recovery groups have to be called out to recover stalled vehicles that hydrolocked in the unregulated river crossings. This could be prevented if the trails were actively managed and the Forest Service implemented seasonal closures of the river crossings during spring runoff and high water conditions.

The Forest Service's current approach to the Park County portion of the Gulches of nominal closure, neglect, and non-enforcement have failed. Closure isn't management. If these trails were legally opened and properly managed, almost all negative impacts could be mitigated. As it is, negative impacts continue to accumulate, compounded by the Forest Service's negligent refusal to properly manage the area. It's time for the Forest Service to do its job, take responsibility for the area, and meet the strong public demand for these trails by reopening them and managing them as the valuable recreational assets they are.

5. The DEIS Alternatives Are Inadequate and Do Not Meet Public Demand

The range of alternatives in the DEIS are completely inadequate with regard to the currently closed trails in Wildcat Canyon. These trails received some of the most comments during the scoping phase, yet despite numerous motorized groups and individuals asking for an alternative in which all of the closed Park County roads are opened to public use, none of the proposed alternatives do this.

Alternative A leaves these roads as they are now, in perpetual limbo under ML1 or admin status. Alternative B nonsensically converts the lower section of FS 540 to a trail open to all vehicles while making all the roads connecting to it admin roads, leaving the public with no way to legally access this supposedly open trail. It would also decommission the currently open FS 895 Predator and several nearby ATV and dirt bike trails. Even worse, it would decommission the short segment in the middle of FS 205 Metberry Gulch in Douglas County which is currently open, dramatically shortening this trail. This would not only violate the easement already granted to Douglas County over this section and currently administered by Teller County, but would leave the Teller County segment at the end of Metberry orphaned with no legal way to reach it. Rather than the trail ending at the well established parking area by the Platte River where it does now, it would end at an arbitrary political boundary with no suitable place for vehicles to turn around.

The Preferred Alternative C would at least leave Predator and Metberry open, and would make part of the southern loop of FS 220 in Park County a trail open to all vehicles. This would connect the currently open portion of FS 220 to the existing motorcycle trail 736, allowing dirt bikes at least to ride a loop. There would be no benefit to full-size vehicles, however, as the segment down to the river and then back up to the main Hackett Gulch trail would be decommissioned. Corral Creek, lower Longwater, Crossover, and Widow Maker would be decommissioned, permanently depriving motorized users of the valuable loop opportunities they would allow.

Alternative D, which is supposedly the alternative meant to provide the greatest opportunities for motorized recreation, comes closest to meeting the desires of motorized users. It opens FS 220.A Crossover, FS 220.B Widow Maker, and the lower section of FS 540 Corral Creek. However it would decommission the lower section of FS 221 Longwater connecting the open Teller County segment with FS 540 across the river, preventing motorized users from completing the classic Hackett to Longwater loop. It would make the Park County portion of FS 220 an admin road, preventing the public from running that loop also. Finally it would decommission the brief segment of FS 205 Metberry in Douglas County, causing the same problems as Alternative B. Even though it is allegedly focused on improving motorized opportunities, and loop opportunities in particular, Alternative D

does not provide any new loop opportunities in the Gulches. It would in fact would have the effect of closing much of Metberry Gulch, taking away a valuable motorized opportunity that exists now.

Finally, Alternative E, the conservation emphasis alternative, decommissions numerous currently open roads and trails in the area including FS 211 Goose Creek Road, an ML3 dirt road which provides critical access to two of the most popular hiking trailheads of the Lost Creek Wilderness, Cheesman Lake, and numerous private properties. Inexplicably, this alternative would open the lower segment of FS 540 along the Platte River while decommissioning all of the roads connecting to it, leaving it, along with the lower portion of Metberry Gulch, orphaned with no access.

It is clear that the Forest Service has NOT met the public demand to analyze an alternative that would open all of the currently closed Park County roads in Wildcat Canyon and which would restore both the Hackett to Longwater and South Hackett loops. I urge the Forest Service to modify at least Alternative D and ideally Alternative C to include opening all of these roads, including the upper portion of FS 540 Corral Creek connecting to Matukat Road, which would allow Longwater to be run as a straight through route to the Goose Creek area. These alternatives should consider designating these roads as trails open to all vehicles, which would provide the greatest management flexibility and would allow them to be eligible for grants from the Colorado Parks and Wildlife OHV fund.

If the Forest Service does not consider at least one alternative that opens these trails, it is sure to face numerous objections and appeals from motorized users on that ground alone. Given the strong demand for these roads to be reopened to public use, the failure to consider an alternative which opens them would undermine public trust in the travel management process and destroy any belief that travel planners are willing to listen to public input. For this process to have any credibility, an alternative that reopens the Gulches MUST be considered.

6. Flawed Travel Analysis Caused the Wildcat Canyon Roads to be Improperly Excluded from the Minimum Road System

The roads in Wildcat Canyon underwent the Travel Analysis Process in 2015, and those TAP scores were used in formulating the alternatives in the DEIS and evaluating the minimum road system (MRS). Unfortunately, because that process happened while all of the roads were closed to the public in ML1 status, the resulting scores did not properly take recreational benefit into account and were heavily biased in favor of decommissioning the roads.

| Administrative Ranger District | NFS Identifier Number | NFS Identifier Name | Beginning Milepost in INFRA | Ending Milepost in INFRA | Route Segment Length in INFRA | TAP Recreational Use Benefit Rating | TAP Fire/Fuels Access Benefit Rating | TAP Timber Access Benefit Rating | TAP Special Use Access Benefit Rating | TAP Resource Management / Range Access Benefit Rating | TAP Watershed Risk Rating | TAP Wildlife Risk Rating | TAP Botany Risk Rating | TAP Archaeology Risk Rating | TAP Public Health and Safety/ Financial Burden Risk Rating | TAP Combined Benefit/Risk Rating | TAP Comments |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|---------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|--|----------------------------------|---|
| SOUTH PLATTE | 540 | CORRAL CREEK | 0 | 3.05 | 3.05 | L | M | L | L | L | H | H | L | H | L | L/H | Admin Rd, Recommend granting esmts to Park and Jefferson Counties for their management; decommission it if Counties won't take it |
| SOUTH PARK | 540 | CORRAL CREEK | 3.05 | 4.89 | 1.84 | H | L | L | L | L | H | H | M | M | H | L/H | Admin Rd |
| SOUTH PLATTE | 221 | LONGWATER R | 3.93 | 4.63 | 0.7 | M | L | L | L | L | HH | H | L | M | L | L/H | OP ML1, Recommend granting esmt to Park County for their management; decommission it if County won't take it |
| SOUTH PARK | 220 | HACKETT | 3.9 | 4.74 | 0.84 | L | H | L | L | L | H | H | L | L | H | L/H | OP ML1 |
| SOUTH PARK | 220 | HACKETT | 4.8 | 5.55 | 0.75 | L | H | L | L | L | H | H | L | L | H | L/H | OP ML1 |
| SOUTH PARK | 220 A | CROSSOVER | 0.2 | 1.33 | 1.13 | L | H | L | L | L | HH | H | L | L | H | L/H | OP ML1 |
| SOUTH PARK | 220 A | CROSSOVER | 1.33 | 1.4 | 0.07 | L | H | L | L | L | HH | H | L | L | H | L/H | OP ML1 |
| SOUTH PARK | 220.B | WIDOW MAKER | 0 | 0.8 | 0.8 | H | L | L | L | L | H | H | L | L | H | L/H | OP MP1 |
| SOUTH PARK | 895 | PREDATOR | 0 | 2.2 | 2.2 | M | M | L | L | L | H | L | L | L | M | L/L | N/A |
| SOUTH PARK | 897 | SPORTSMAN | 0 | 2.65 | 2.65 | H | H | L | H | M | M | L | L | L | H | H/L | N/A |
| SOUTH PLATTE | 205 | METBERRY 4WD | 3.26 | 3.64 | 0.38 | No data | No data | No data | No data | No data | No data | No data | No data | No data | No data | No data | N/A |

Chart containing the TAP scores for the roads in Wildcat Canyon

In the TAP reports for both the South Park and South Platte ranger districts, decision makers appear to have been convinced by commenters that because these roads were closed to the public, they should automatically be listed as having low recreational benefit, irrespective of whatever recreational benefit they had prior to being closed after the Hayman fire. For example, the lower section of FS 221 Longwater Gulch leading down to the Platte River crossing originally was given a high recreational benefit rating, but was downgraded to moderate only because it was closed:

Comment #1: Closed ML1 roads should not have any recreational motorized benefit, but the draft TAP shows a High recreational use benefit rating for the 221 road. This rating should be lowered to a Low rating on the TAP.

Response #1: Recreational use ratings for the specific road listed above was re-evaluated, and the result of that re-evaluation is as follows:

- Change the Recreational Use Benefit rating for NFSR 221 from High to Moderate, as nonmotorized recreation is still available to access the river.⁵

Likewise the South Park Ranger district downgraded multiple other roads to low recreational benefit because they were in closed ML1 status:

Comment #13: Closed ML1 roads should not have any recreational motorized benefit, but the draft TAP shows a Moderate recreational use benefit rating for the 155, 276, 278, 289, 295.B, 829 & 843 roads. These ratings should be lowered to a Low rating on the TAP.

Response #13: Recreational use ratings for the specific roads listed above were re-evaluated, and the results of that re-evaluation are as follows:

- All roads listed above have been changed to a L value for recreation⁶

Though they were not mentioned specifically, it can be surmised that this is the reason that the closed sections of upper FS 540, FS 220, 220.A, and 220.B were given a low recreational benefit rating. Interestingly, the decision makers refused to downgrade the lower section of FS 540 along the Platte River, leaving it with a high recreational benefit rating despite its closed status.⁷ Given that both Longwater and lower Corral Creek originally had high recreational benefit ratings, it is safe to assume that Crossover and the Park County segments of Hackett also would have been given high recreational benefit ratings if not for their ML1 status, as they are all part of two highly valued loop routes. The upper section of Corral Creek also would likely have been given a high recreational benefit rating because it provides the only motorized ingress and egress route to the Gulches trail system from the west.

While it makes sense that the TAP Reports only considered these roads' present value in their current status, the current travel management process is considering

⁵ "South Platte Ranger District TAP Report Addendum", USDA Forest Service, August 26 2015, Appendix B, p. 1.

⁶ "South Park Ranger District Tap Report Addendum", USDA Forest Service, September 28, 2015, Appendix B, p. 4.

⁷ Id. at Comment 14.

whether or not to reopen them to public use. Therefore it must take into account not only their present value as closed roads but also their potential and historic value as motorized routes open to the public. According to the TAP recreational benefit criteria:

A High (H) rating was assigned to roads that are the primary access routes to developed recreation sites/facilities, or primary access routes to popular dispersed recreation areas, or the road has high value as a recreation experience.⁸

The historical significance of these routes, the numerous comments in both the scoping phase and the present comment period the Forest has and no doubt will receive, and the high levels of ongoing unauthorized use indicating strong public demand for these routes, all demonstrate that these routes have extremely high value to the public for their recreational experience. Regardless of whatever rating they received in the TAP reports, travel planners should evaluate these routes as having a high recreational benefit.

These routes should arguably be regarded as having even an HH rating, which would raise their overall rating from L/H to H/H. The TAP planners used the HH rating to ensure roads with exceptionally high recreational value but which rated low on other benefit criteria would receive an overall high benefit score meriting their inclusion in the minimum road system. Considered objectively apart from their currently closed status, the Park County segments of Hackett, Longwater, Crossover, and Corral Creek are prime candidates for this HH status, as they all provide critical links and loop routes in the Gulches trail system. Because Widow Maker is only a side spur but was historically famous for a challenging hill climb, its appropriate recreational benefit is moderate.

Assuming for the moment that the risk criteria in the TAP process were all appropriately applied, these roads should be evaluated as either H/H or L/H routes with high recreational benefit. Both of these ratings make the roads good candidates for inclusion in the minimum road system with mitigation efforts to address particular risks. According to the management recommendations described in the DEIS, and given the high watershed risk for all of the roads in question, the most appropriate management recommendations for each of these roads are:

⁸ Id. at p. 5-1.

- *Reinforce and harden stream crossing* (most appropriate where roads cross watercourses)
- *Convert to trail open to all vehicles*⁹

The criteria for watershed risk, maintenance and safety risk, and recreational use benefits for either L/H or H/H roads all favor conversion to trails open to all vehicles. This recommendation from the DEIS for roads rated L/H with at least moderate recreational benefit is particularly relevant to the roads in Wildcat Canyon:

If the road has potential to provide a loop or connection to other trails open to public motor vehicle use, then the management recommendation is *Convert to trail open to all vehicles*.¹⁰

These conditions are both true here. The Park County portions of Hackett, Crossover, lower Corral Creek, and Longwater all provide loop opportunities, while the upper portion of Corral Creek provides a connection to Matukat Road. When properly evaluated in terms of potential recreational benefit if they were reopened to public use, it is clear the most appropriate management recommendation for all these roads is *convert to trails open to all vehicles*.

Finally, while most of these roads received no specific management recommendations in the TAP reports, upper Corral Creek and lower Longwater had a recommendation to grant easements to Park County, or else decommission if the county wouldn't take it. While the PSI staff generally deferred to TAP recommendations in the screening process, the DEIS notes that for Alternative C, they were able to deviate from the TAP recommendations based on a site-specific analysis.¹¹ While the DEIS does not describe any site-specific analysis done for the roads in Wildcat Canyon, such deviation is entirely appropriate here. *I ask that travel planners re-evaluate the management recommendations for the roads in Wildcat Canyon in the final EIS to determine which are most appropriate.*

The press release from Park County has indicated they are not willing to assume jurisdiction over these roads. Decommissioning them is also not appropriate given the

⁹ "Pike and San Isabel National Forests Public Motor Vehicle Use Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS)", USDA Forest Service, August 2019, p.2-7.

¹⁰ Id. at p. 2-8.

¹¹ Id. at pp. 2-5 - 2.6.

conditions on the ground and extremely high public demand for these routes. Based on the reasons above, the best course of action would be to modify Alternative C in the final EIS to have the recommendation of *Convert to trail open to all vehicles* for each of these roads: FS 220, FS 220.A, FS 220.B, FS 540, and FS 221.

7. Environmental Impacts Are Overstated and Easily Mitigated

A. Watershed Impacts

To the best of my knowledge, the principal concerns regarding the environmental impacts of reopening the closed Park County roads to public motorized use are over water quality and sediment issues from the river crossings and harm to fish in the river. This is corroborated by the H or HH watershed risk ratings that these roads received in the TAP reports.

Having researched the comments in the scoping period and publications by the primary opponents of motorized use in the area, nowhere can I find these concerns stated in anything more than general terms. It appears there has never been any attempt made to quantify what harm, if any, motor vehicles cause to the river or fish dwelling in it. Nor has there been any attempt to isolate harms from motor vehicles in Wildcat Canyon from those caused by motorboats allowed in multiple reservoirs along the South Platte River, both upstream and downstream of Wildcat Canyon. Any sediment runoff entering streams due to roads acting as conduits is due to the mere existence of the roads rather than the presence of vehicles, and would occur regardless of whether the roads are open to the public as long as they are still present on the ground. Given that vehicles have been crossing the river in the Gulches for many decades, and continue to do so (albeit illegally) today, it is highly unlikely that they truly cause any measurable harm, whether from sediment, oils, etc. It is even more unlikely that vehicles, which are in the water only briefly, cause more harm to water quality than motorboats in Eleven Mile Reservoir or Chatfield Reservoir.

There are four river crossings along the currently closed roads. One at the bottom of Hackett Gulch FS 220 is not on the main route but is an optional water play area where people like to drive across the river to a flat area on the far bank, and then back across.

Though it has long been a popular place to drive in the river, this crossing could be easily fenced off without affecting the main travel route, and should not pose any barrier to reopening the South Hackett loop.

The other three river crossings are crucial parts of the Hackett to Longwater loop. The first crosses the Platte at the junction of FS 220.A and FS 540, the second crosses Tarryall Creek on FS 540, and the third recrosses the Platte at the junction of FS 540 and FS 221. The third crossing (nicknamed the “Teller County Car Wash” despite being in Park County) is



Hackett Crossing in 2000.

consistently the deepest, though all three are passable for stock 4x4s except during high water conditions. The two crossings of the Platte have sandy bottoms while the Tarryall Creek crossing is mostly rocky, so none of them result in significant amounts of silt or mud being churned up by passing vehicles. Most vehicles cross in under 30 seconds, so any oils or fluids leaked into the river would be minimal.

While the crossings of the Platte River may be somewhat wider and deeper than typical in Colorado, river crossings on four-wheel-drive trails are hardly unusual in the Pike San Isabel National Forest. There are numerous other roads throughout the PSI with water crossings where motorized use is perfectly acceptable under both the existing and proposed travel plans. Any objections that travel planners may have to the water crossings in Wildcat Canyon clearly do not stem from any generalized policy against motorized water crossings, or else many more popular 4x4 trails would be closed.

Given the lack of any concrete evidence that allowing motor vehicles to the river causes measurable harm to fish or water quality, there is no reason the Forest Service

should not reopen the routes through and across the Platte River to the public. If water quality issues remain a concern, the Forest Service should implement a scientific monitoring program to measure the actual impacts of motorized traffic. If it is proven that motor vehicles are causing unacceptable impacts to the river, the Forest Service's Design Manual 0625 1808-SDTDC lists multiple types of engineered low water crossing structures that could be installed to mitigate these impacts.

As a last resort, the offroading community would even accept bridges being constructed at these crossings, though eliminating the water crossings altogether would somewhat decrease the quality of the recreational experience. If these roads were to be designated as trails open to all vehicles, they would be eligible for Colorado Parks and Wildlife OHV fund grants to fund the construction of any needed water crossing structures, and multiple four-wheel-drive clubs would be happy to volunteer to install them. Being classified as trails rather than roads would make them subject to less stringent engineering requirements and would allow the trails to be preserved in their natural state with less maintenance required.

B. Erosion

Another potential environmental impact concern is erosion. While erosion was a major problem in the immediate aftermath of the Hayman Fire, the area has largely recovered in the intervening 17 years. Grasses and low shrubs have grown back, stabilizing the soils on the steep slopes of the canyon. Both the open and closed roads in the area are mostly in good condition with stable road beds that see minimal erosion. The screening criteria in the DEIS for each of these trails listed no for erosive soils. The roads



Steep eroded hill on FS 220 in 2017.

in Teller County are actively maintained by four-wheel-drive clubs that have adopted them, and they are quick to fill in any washouts or areas with serious erosion. If the Park County roads were legally opened, they would also be quickly adopted by clubs eager to take care of any maintenance issues that arise.

The only place I am aware of where there is still a significant unaddressed erosion problem is the steep, rutted hill on FS 220 climbing up to the southeast from the Platte River.¹² Historically this was always a challenging, rutted hill-climb. Because it has received no maintenance work in the last 10 years while vehicles continue to use it regularly, the main route has become largely impassable to all but the most heavily modified vehicles. A bypass route has formed to the left (north) side of the main route which is passable to most vehicles. If this section of road is to be reopened, some moderate maintenance work would be needed here, including filling in ruts, installing water bars, and either closing off the bypass, re-routing the trail onto the bypass, or simply allowing both routes to stay open. These maintenance tasks could again be funded through CO Parks and Wildlife OHV grants if this route was designated as a trail open to all vehicles, and the four-wheeling community would eagerly volunteer to perform any needed work.

C. Wild and Scenic River Designation

Another concern is the potential that allowing motorized recreation along the Platte River could jeopardize its chances of being designated a Wild and Scenic River. Given that Congress has only designated one such river in Colorado, the chances of that ever happening seem remote to begin with. It is also highly unfair to motorized users to deprive them of a highly prized historical motorized route merely based on the unlikely chance the river might someday receive this designation.

In the 2004 Hayman Roads Final Decision, the Forest Service concluded that reopening the roads along the Platte under county jurisdiction would not affect the river's eligibility for Wild and Scenic study:

¹² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZjjbojPJZ8> for a video of a side-by-side doing this climb when it was open in 2017.

The key eligibility-related value in the South Platte Wild and Scenic River study area is fisheries (EA, pg. 4-58). (The EA also identified recreation as a value, but a commenter noted this was an error. ... As noted in the EA (pg. 4-58), the selected alternative will protect the fisheries value by the long-term reduction of sediment delivery to the river. The selected alternative will not adversely affect the finding of eligibility and will maintain the classifications identified in the South Platte Wild and Scenic River Study (EA, pg. 4-59).¹³

Contrary to an assertion by Josh Hicks of the Wilderness Society in a comment during the scoping period¹⁴, reopening these roads in a potential Wild and Scenic corridor will not require a Forest Plan amendment. These roads are already in a 2A motorized management area and Appendix C of the DEIS indicates that all of them are fully compliant with the Forest Plan, under which the Wildcat Canyon portion of the river is eligible for Scenic classification but not Wild. Decommissioning roads would not in itself make this section eligible for Wild classification. That would in fact require a Forest Plan amendment.¹⁵

As long as the Forest Service (or clubs that adopt the roads) perform any necessary mitigation measures to minimize sediment loading, reopening the roads along the Platte should not pose any obstacle to future Scenic eligibility. This is a poor reason to justify keeping the Wildcat Canyon roads closed to the public, and should not be given any credence by travel planners.

D. Noise and Dust

Other environmental concerns raised in the comments during the scoping period include dust and noise, which are simply side effects of motorized recreation generally and are to be expected in any area designated for motorized use. Wildcat Canyon is a 2A management area designated for motorized recreation, so the noise and dust of motorized activity is expected there.

E. Impacts of Keeping the Roads Closed vs. Benefits of Reopening

Finally, it is important to consider the Impacts of NOT reopening the Park County trails versus the benefits that would come from reopening them. The currently open roads

¹³ Hayman Roads Decision Notice at p. 6.

¹⁴ "Scoping Report - Pike and San Isabel National Forests Public Motor Vehicle Use Environmental Impact Statement", USDA Forest Service, Sept. 2017, Comment No. 1007-204, at p. D-122.

¹⁵ Hayman Roads EA at p. 2-5.

that have been adopted by Teller County are extremely popular and heavily trafficked, particularly in the spring and late fall when most other four-wheel-drive trails in Colorado are closed by snow. Hackett and Longwater Gulches are the most popular, followed by Metberry Gulch.

Historically Hackett and Longwater were most commonly run together with Crossover and Corral Creek as a clockwise loop, as this provided the greatest challenge by requiring drivers to go uphill on most of the major obstacles. Now that both of these trails may only be run as out-and-back routes, the amount of traffic each one sees is effectively doubled. This increases the potential for conflicts between motorized users as there are many more vehicles having to pass each other on narrow roads. Off-trail resource damage is increased by vehicles having to pull off the road to let other vehicles pass. Users are far more densely concentrated on the few available routes instead of dispersing throughout the multiple interconnected loop routes that would otherwise be available. Motorized users that cannot find a satisfactory experience on the trails in the Gulches are displaced to other trail systems (especially China Wall) in the PSI or other National Forests, increasing impacts there.

Reopening the closed roads as trails open to all vehicles would mitigate these impacts by reducing crowding and user conflicts on the currently open trails in the area, reducing displacement to other areas, and providing a higher quality recreation experience by making multiple interconnected loop routes available. The Forest Service recognized these benefits in 2004 when it contemplated allowing them to be reopened under county jurisdiction:

Alternative C as modified addresses many of the public access concerns from motorized recreation users. Many of the recreation opportunities available in the Hayman area before the fire would be made available following the required road rehabilitation work (EA, pg. 4-52). As a result, there would be less displacement of visitors to motorized areas outside of the Hayman area since many popular Forest roads would be reopened (EA, pg. 4-53). Keeping more classified Forest roads open to motorized use in the Hayman area will help reduce the potential for crowding, low visitor satisfaction, and resource impacts being felt at other parts of the South Park Ranger District, such as China Wall and Breakneck Pass (EA, pg. 4-53).¹⁶

¹⁶ Hayman Roads Decision Notice at pp. 5 - 6.

The Forest Service has a duty to consider not just potential negative impacts of reopening these roads, but positive aspects as well. When the totality of impacts is considered, it is clear the benefits outweigh potential harms, and these roads should be reopened.

8. The Supplemental Information Report is Inaccurate and Labels As Changed Circumstances Issues That Were Fully Considered in the 2004 EA

In April, 2019 the Forest Service issued a Supplemental Information Report (SIR) for Wildcat Canyon, which asserted that changed conditions requirement additional environmental analysis before the Wildcat Canyon roads could be reopened as per the 2004 Hayman Roads EA. The SIR cited four things as evidence of changed conditions requiring further analysis: (1) The confirmed presence of the Pawnee Montane Skipper in Wildcat Canyon, (2) slower than expected fish and vegetation recovery and continued sedimentation impairment of the South Platte River, (3) increased levels of OHV recreation and increases in Colorado's population jeopardizing Scenic River classification, and (4) the introduction of a herd of Bighorn Sheep into the area. The SIR stated:

The slower successional recovery of the vegetative and aquatic habitats in the South Platte River and the increased frequency of OHV users on National Forest System land, including within Wildcat Canyon, are two conditions not analyzed in the Hayman Roads EA. As a result of the changed conditions, the lack of fisheries data, and the lack of scrutiny specific to reopening the roads in Wildcat Canyon within the original assessment, additional analyses would be necessary to determine the effects to riparian systems before further implementation of the Hayman Roads Decision Notices could occur.¹⁷

In reality, none of the allegedly changed conditions that the Forest Service claims necessitate further study are substantially different than those already contemplated and thoroughly evaluated in the 2004 Hayman Roads EA. It is telling that of the nine sources the document cites, five were available in 2004. Of the remaining four sources post-dating the the 2004 EA, one is simply the 2010 census results for Colorado while the other is a 2008 report on OHV recreation. The other two sources are reports on skipper butterflies from 2017 and 2018, and are the only recent documents cited. The SIR also contains

¹⁷ "Hayman Fire Roads Management Project -- Wildcat Canyon Supplemental Information Report", USDA Forest Service, April 24, 2019, p. 3.

factual inaccuracies such as stating that Jefferson (rather than Douglas) County was given an easement to a small segment of FS 205.

While the 2016 confirmation of the presence of the Pawnee Montane Skipper may be new information, the original 2004 EA already thoroughly evaluated effects on skipper habitat if it was present, and determined that all alternatives considered were not likely to adversely affect the skipper. The 2004 EA also planned how to proceed if the skipper's presence was confirmed in the area:

- Prior to decommissioning a road in mapped Pawnee Montane Skipper (butterfly) habitat using ground-disturbing techniques (ripping, recontouring, etc.), a survey will be conducted to evaluate the road for potential habitat. If the skipper is present and/or if quality habitat occurs, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) will be contacted prior to implementing the activity. This contact will include informal discussions regarding the activity and the potential effects on the skipper and determine if additional Section 7 consultation with USFWS is needed.
- All maintenance and reconstruction activities will remain within the existing road prism to the extent possible. Minor disturbances along the transition zone between the road prism and mapped Pawnee Montane Skipper habitat will not exceed a total of four (4) acres or three (3) miles of road. Major reconstruction or road realignment activities that are expected to exceed this will require additional USFWS Section 7 consultation.¹⁸

Now that the skipper's presence has been confirmed, no further analysis is needed beyond simply following the procedure the EA already established for this eventuality, namely consulting with the USFWS and minimizing disturbance during maintenance activities. Beyond that, the simple act of allowing the public to drive on roads that already exist on the ground and occupy only a tiny fraction of the surface area in Wildcat Canyon could have only minimal effect on a butterfly. The idea that these roads cannot be opened because of possible effects on a butterfly is frankly absurd.

As for slower than expected recovery of vegetation and fish populations and continued high levels of sedimentation in the Platte River (a) these conditions are not unique to the areas immediately surrounding roads but are common throughout the entire Hayman burn area, (b) they are hardly attributable to off-road vehicle activity, and (c) these are all things that were fully analyzed in the 2004 EA. The entire Hayman burn area has had slow vegetation recovery because the fire was exceptionally hot and effectively sterilized the ground. The slow return of vegetation naturally lead to looser unanchored

¹⁸ Hayman Roads EA at p. 2-3.

soils on the steep slopes surrounding Wildcat Canyon and increased erosion, which in turn is likely the chief cause of river sedimentation and the slow recovery of fish populations. None of these things have anything to do with OHVs.

Contrary to the assertion in the SIR that, “the decisions did not consider the cumulative effect of unorthodox vegetative recovery exacerbated by vehicles on nutrient-lacking soils,”¹⁹ the original EA thoroughly examined the effects of hydrologically connected roads acting as conduits for sediments into the river and concluded that reopening them to the public along with performing necessary restoration and maintenance work would actually *decrease* sedimentation in the river. The original EA carefully studied which roads could be repaired with water bars, culverts etc. to reduce sediment channeling, and which roads would be impossible to repair and needed to be decommissioned. It concluded that the roads discussed in this comment were safe to reopen, and stated that:

The cumulative long-term effects on aquatic organisms of reducing sediment from roads and improving riparian conditions by closing, decommissioning, or improving maintenance under any of the action alternatives and other concurrent burn area restoration projects would be beneficial.²⁰

Sedimentation caused by hydrologically connected roads acting as channels to conduct sediment into the river would happen by virtue of the mere existence of the roads regardless of whether they are driven by vehicles. It is only logical that reopening them and also performing regular maintenance on the roads themselves and related water bars and culverts would result in a net *decrease* in sediment runoff from roads. While vehicles driving the roads can disturb small amounts of soil, such effects would be mitigated by regular maintenance, which could be performed by clubs at no cost to the Forest Service.

That recovery of the area may be taking longer than anticipated does not change the fact that the Forest Service already concluded in 2004 that reopening the roads and maintaining them would have a net beneficial effect on sedimentation. Any negative effects that unauthorized vehicle traffic may be causing currently is due to the complete lack of management and maintenance of the closed roads, as discussed above.

¹⁹ Hayman Roads SIR at p. 3.

²⁰ Hayman Roads EA at p. 4-11.

The 2004 EA also fully anticipated increased OHV activity in Wildcat Canyon and increases in Colorado's population, and thoroughly analyzed the potential impacts of motorized recreation on the eligibility of the Wildcat Canyon section of the Platte for Scenic status under the Wild and Scenic River study. The EA acknowledged multiple times that OHV use and motorized recreation in general has been increasing in the area, to the point where its drafters questioned the appropriateness of the Semi-Primitive Motorized ROS for the area instead of Roaded-Natural:

The Wildcat Canyon area is chiefly located in the 2A Management Area where the primary management direction is for semi-primitive motorized recreation opportunities such as snowmobiling, four-wheel driving, and motorcycling. The ROS setting for the portion of this MA is Semi-Primitive Motorized (SPM) which is mostly appropriate since the area appears natural and the presence of other users is limited since only four-wheel drive vehicles can handle the roads. However the tremendous popularity of this area and prevalent management presence especially on weekends and holidays makes this area to appear at times to be more in the ROS setting for Roaded-Natural.²¹

The EA also included an extensive discussion of demographics and the increasing populations of surrounding counties.²² Nevertheless, as discussed above, the Final Decision Notice concluded that anticipated increases in motorized recreation in the area did not threaten the Wildcat Canyon section of the Platte's eligibility for Scenic classification under the Wild and Scenic River study.²³ That planners failed to predict the exact growth rates of OHV recreation or Colorado's population does not constitute changed circumstances meriting further analysis, when such growth in general terms was fully accounted for in the EA.

The introduction of Bighorn Sheep is the only truly changed circumstance in the area that was not analyzed in the original EA. The effect on Bighorn Sheep of reopening already existing roads to public use will likely be minimal (Bighorn Sheep are after all frequently found along far more heavily trafficked paved highways) and certainly no greater than that of any other four-wheel-drive roads in Bighorn Sheep habitat. Any additional analysis regarding effects on this one species could easily be done as part of

²¹ Hayman Roads EA at p. 3-20.

²² See Hayman Roads EA at p. 3-26.

²³ Hayman Roads Decision Notice at p. 6.

the current travel management project. This should not pose any significant barrier to reopening these roads.

9. The Gulches Are Unsuitable for Quiet Use But Ideal for Motorized Recreation

During the scoping period, multiple groups and individuals (including the plaintiffs in the original lawsuit that necessitated this travel planning) commented asking that the Park County roads in Wildcat Canyon remain closed and that the area be dedicated to so-called “quiet use” recreation (meaning primarily hiking). These calls will certainly be repeated in the current comment period.

Let us be clear what these comments are asking for. This is a travel management process to decide which motorized routes will remain open and which ones will be closed. The only way this process can create new hiking trails is by closing motorized routes and designating them solely for hiking. Calls to increase quiet use opportunities through this process are really asking that the Forest Service take away existing historical routes for motorized recreation and give them to hikers instead. Given that hikers are already free to hike on any motorized route they wish, this is nothing more than an elitist attempt to secure exclusive access for a single user-group over all others.

Such an approach of depriving one user group of recreational opportunities in order to favor another is antithetical to the Travel Management Rule, which recognizes that, “*Motor vehicles are a legitimate and appropriate way for people to enjoy their National Forests,*”²⁴ and again, “*Motor vehicles remain a legitimate recreational use of NFS lands.*”²⁵ Motorized recreation is a legitimate, co-equal form of recreational activity that is by no means inferior to hiking, biking, horseback riding, or other “quiet uses.”

The Travel Management Rule was never intended as a mandate to disfavor motorized recreation and to favor other forms of recreation by depriving motorized users of routes in order to award them to others. Wherever possible, the Forest Service should

²⁴ “Travel Management; Designated Routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use”, USDA Forest Service, Federal Register / Vol. 70, No. 216, November 9, 2005, p. 68264.

²⁵ Id. at p. 68272.

allow for a wide variety of uses in keeping with its multiple use mandate, rather than playing favorites between user groups and robbing one in order to give to another.

Assuming for the moment that it is desirable to close motorized routes in order to dedicate them to quiet uses like hiking, Wildcat Canyon is an especially poor place to do this, as it is on the whole *unsuitable* for quiet use recreation. As mentioned above, the entire area is designated as a 2A management area under the Forest Plan, emphasizing semi-primitive motorized recreation. As a result, almost all routes in the area are motorized. There are very few places in the canyon to hike without sharing the trail with motorized users, and nowhere in the area where a hiker would not be able to hear motorized vehicles nearby.

On the east side of the canyon, the full-size roads discussed in this comment are intermixed with a network of single-track ATV and dirt bike trails. On the west side of the canyon, there are only two established routes down to the Platte River -- the currently closed Forest Road 540 (Corral Creek), and Forest Trail 619 (Longwater Trail). The latter is the only dedicated hiking trail in Wildcat Canyon, starting at the end of FS 210 and ending at the point where FS 220.A crosses the Platte River and intersects FS 540. There is very little information available online about this trail, and I can only surmise it is not very popular and is only lightly used.

Other than that one hiking trail, motorized recreation is the predominant activity in Wildcat Canyon, commensurate with its 2A status. While occasional hikers or fishermen might hike down the motorized routes to reach the river, the distance required to reach the river from the east (8 miles one way on FS 220 Hackett Gulch from Cedar Mountain Road) is prohibitive for most people, as is the fact that most hikers do not enjoy hiking on roads with motor vehicles. Corral Creek Road would provide a shorter hiking route to the river from the west (2.8 miles from Matukat Road), but I cannot find anything online to indicate it receives any significant use by hikers.

Even if all of the roads in the Park County portion of Wildcat Canyon were to be permanently closed and decommissioned, it is likely that they would receive no greater use by hikers than they do now. Regardless of the outcome of this travel management process, the upper portions of Hackett, Longwater, and Metberry Gulches in Teller County

will remain open to motor vehicles because the Forest Service no longer has jurisdiction over those roads. The only way hikers could reach the closed roads from the east would be to hike down open motorized routes. They could hike down the two routes from the west, but even now when both of those routes are closed to motorized use, few people choose to do so. Closing the Park County trails to motorized use would therefore cause significant harm to motorized recreation while providing only marginal benefit to non-motorized users.

Finally, it is important to note that the main reason Wildcat Canyon receives little use by hikers and is apparently lacking in quiet use opportunities is because there are abundant opportunities for quiet use recreation literally nextdoor in the nearby Lost Creek Wilderness Area. Using the bottom of Longwater Gulch at the Platte River as a reference point, the Lost Creek Wilderness boundary is only 1.5 miles away, on the other side of Matukat Road. The Lost Creek Wilderness contains an extensive network of 136 miles (105 miles inside the wilderness boundary) of dedicated hiking trails,²⁶ which are far from any roads and provide the perfect opportunity for those seeking quiet use recreation in the broader region around Wildcat Canyon.

The Lost Creek Wilderness has very similar topography and scenery to that found in Wildcat Canyon. It has the same ecosystem and is dominated by the same kinds of towering rock formations, boulder fields, and rocky canyons as the area around the Gulches. The only thing it lacks is a river the size of the Platte, though it has many smaller streams including the eponymous Lost Creek. Given that the hiking trails in the Lost Creek Wilderness already provide a superior quiet use experience in a very similar setting, it is no surprise that most people who desire to hike in that region choose to go there instead.

The opportunities the Lost Creek Wilderness provides for quiet use recreation should be more than sufficient for those commenters desiring exclusive hiking trails. It is simply greed that motivates those who have (hikers) to want to steal from those who have not (motorized users) in order to secure more exclusive access for themselves. This then should be the Forest Service's answer to those calling to close the motorized routes in

²⁶ "Lost Creek Wilderness," USDA Forest Service, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/recarea/psicc/recarea/?recid=37208>.

Wildcat Canyon and dedicate them to hiking: “You already have all the trails in the Lost Creek Wilderness. If you want to hike, go there.”

10. Conclusion and Requested Action

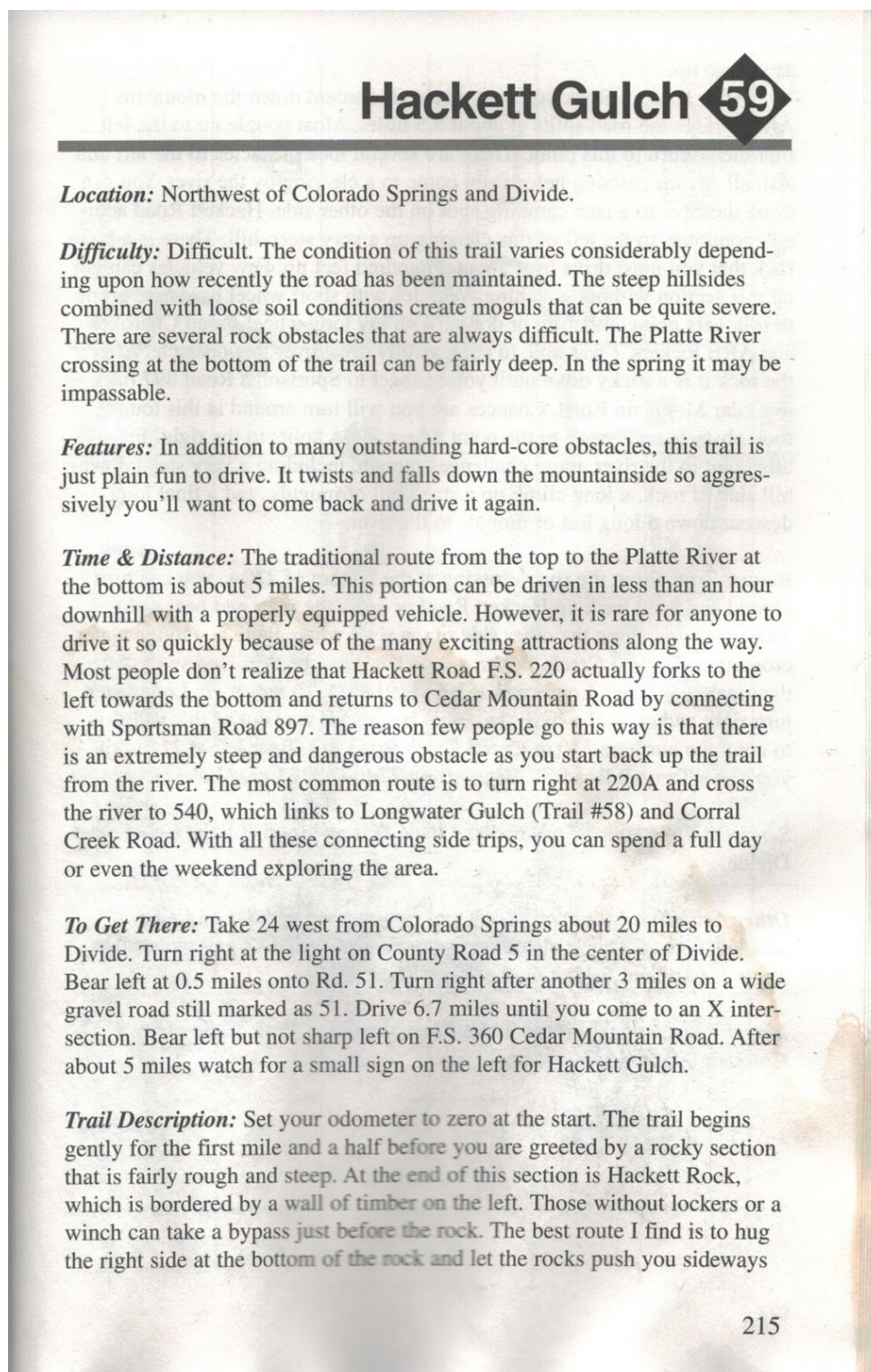
In conclusion, the importance of the four-wheel-drive roads in Wildcat Canyon (aka “The Gulches”) to the offroading community cannot be overstated. These roads are some of the most highly prized four wheeling routes in the PSI, and offer an exceptional combination of technical challenges, spectacular scenery, and easy, all-season access from the Front Range. The roads in Park County have remained closed and in limbo for 17 years since the Hayman Fire, and it is time for the Forest Service to take responsibility for these roads and reopen them to the public. The Forest Service has acknowledged in the past that the benefits of reopening these roads outweigh any environmental impacts to the South Platte River corridor, which can be mitigated through proper management.

Based on the arguments above, I request that the PSI travel planners revise Alternative C in the final EIS to designate FS 220, FS 220.A, FS 220.B, FS 540, and FS 221 in Park County as *trails open to all vehicles*. Additionally, I ask that the final EIS keep FS 202, FS 897, FS 895, and the short segment of FS 205 in Douglas County open to public motorized use as either roads or trails open to all vehicles. Regardless of the outcome, I ask that at the very least, the final EIS contain a site-specific analysis of the Wildcat Canyon roads justifying the final decision.

Finally because current information on the Wildcat Canyon area is difficult to come by, I would be happy (with appropriate permission) to organize a trail ride with knowledgeable off-road enthusiasts and invite any interested member of the PSI travel planning team to ride along and tour the currently closed Park County trails to see the current conditions on the ground, first-hand. I hope that the travel planners will realize how much these trails mean to us and be willing to consider reopening them so that offroaders may continue to enjoy them well into the future. Thank you for your consideration.

Appendix

1. Scans of the 1998 edition of the ***Funtreks Guide to Colorado Backroads & 4-Wheel Drive Trails*** by Charles A. Wells, describing the Hackett and Longwater Gulch trails as they existed prior to the Hayman Fire. That these trails were chosen as two of only 65 of the best four-wheel-drive trails in southwestern Colorado for inclusion in the book demonstrates their historical importance to the off-roading community.





This obstacle is known as Hackett Rock and is more difficult than this picture shows.



One of many difficult mogul runs. This one is located on F.S. 220A.



This optional obstacle is very dangerous and nearly impossible to climb without winching.

as you go up.

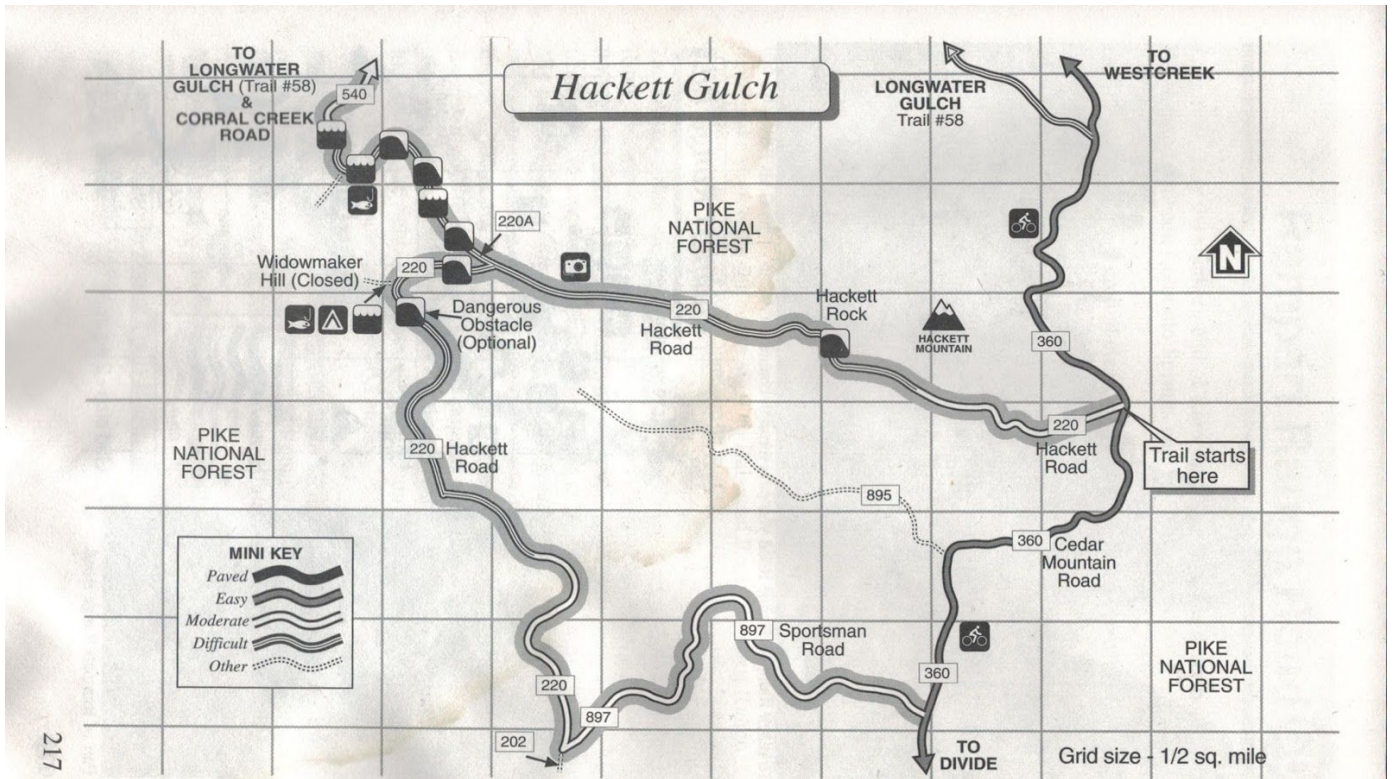
After Hackett Rock you start a steeper descent down the mountain. After a ridge the road splits at about 3.5 miles. Most people go to the left first then return to this point. There are several nice obstacles to the left and a small stream crossing before you come to a clearing by the river. You can cross the river to a nice camping spot on the other side. Hackett Road actually continues to the left of this clearing up a very steep hill. There is a large rock that you must drive over about a hundred feet up. Few vehicles can get up this section without winching. Vehicles with short wheel bases are prone to rollovers going either up or down. With my long wheel-based Cherokee and ARB lockers, I was able to successfully drive over this obstacle. After the rock it is a tricky drive until you connect to Sportsman Road 897 back to Cedar Mountain Road. Chances are you will turn around at this tough rock obstacle and return to the point where 220A splits to the right. From this point to the river, more challenges remain, including a very steep downhill slab of rock, a long climb up a steep hill of moguls, and a final long descent down a long hill of moguls to the river.

Return Trip: From the river crossing at the bottom of 220A, you can turn around and head back up Hackett Road or cross the river and bear right. This takes you along the other side of the river where there is a tough water crossing at Tarryall Creek. It is not wide but it can be deep and swift. After the creek, you reach Longwater Road (Trail #58). To return via Longwater, turn right and cross the river. An easier but longer way out of this valley is to continue north on 540 to Corral Creek Road 211. Bear left at 211 until you reach Tarryall Road 77. Bear left on 77 to U.S. 24 near Lake George.

Services: Full services in Woodland Park. Gas and food at Lake George and Divide.

Other Activities: Mountain biking and camping are popular on Cedar Mountain Road. This is also a very popular area for ATVs and motorbikes. There is excellent fishing on the Platte River.

Maps: Pike National Forest, Trails Illustrated Pikes Peak, Canon City #137, Colorado Atlas and Gazetteer.



Longwater Gulch 58

Location: Northwest of Colorado Springs and Divide.

Difficulty: Difficult. Going downhill is easier than going up. There are several spots where the moguls are large with loose soil, requiring lockers or winching going up. There is one big rock obstacle that is smooth but steep. The river crossing at the bottom varies from bumper deep to too deep.

Features: A very popular trail with the hard-core crowd. The steep rolling and twisting trail is extremely fun to drive.

Time & Distance: The total length of the trail is 4.7 miles. Going down takes less than an hour. Coming back up can take a lot more time. Allow additional time to wait for others on the trail.

To Get There: Take Route 24 west from Colorado Springs about 20 miles to Divide. Turn right at the light on County Road 5 in the center of Divide. Bear left at 0.5 onto Rd. 51. Turn right after another 3 miles on a wide gravel road still marked as 51. Drive 6.7 miles until you come to an X intersection. Bear left but not sharp left on F.S. 360 Cedar Mountain Road. After 7 miles watch for a small sign on the left for Longwater Gulch, less than 2 miles after Hackett Gulch (Trail #59).

Trail Description: Reset your odometer at the start. The road drops quickly like a roller coaster. At 2.9 miles you reach a large slab of tilting rock that you must drive across. Select your line carefully. After this obstacle there is a steep run of moguls in loose soil. At 3.6 miles, after passing under a power line, the road splits for a short distance. Left is more difficult. You reach the river at 4.7 miles. It is often too deep to cross in the spring.

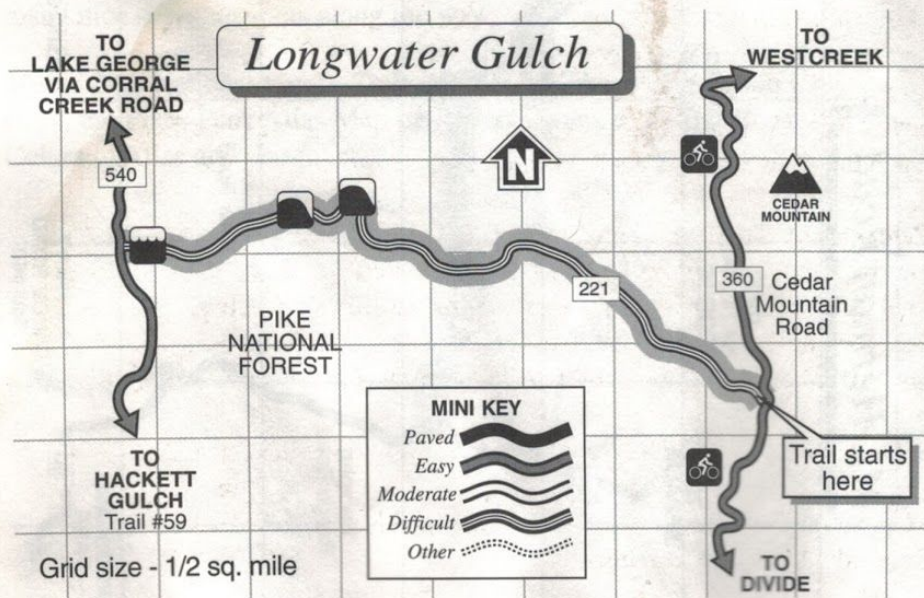
Return Trip: There are three options: 1. Return the way you came. 2. Cross the river and turn right on easier F.S. 540. When you reach Corral Creek road 211 turn left on a long stretch to County Rd. 77. A left turn at 77 takes you back to Rt. 24 near Lake George. 3. Cross the river and turn left following 540 to difficult Hackett Gulch. This way has two deep water crossings.

Services: Full services in Woodland Park. Gas in Divide and Lake George.

Maps: Pike National Forest, Trails Illustrated Pikes Peak, Canon City #137, Colorado Atlas and Gazetteer.



Crossing the Platte River at the bottom of the trail. Water is much deeper in the spring.



2. Scans of the 2010 edition of the **Funtreks Guide to Colorado Backroads & 4-Wheel Drive Trails** by Charles A. Wells, describing the Gulches trails immediately after their partial reopening in 2009 and efforts to get them fully reopened. This demonstrates their continued importance to the offroading community.



The Gulches

AREA 6 map on page 188





One last climb before Hackett Gulch Trail begins its final steep descent into Wildcat Canyon.



Hackett and Longwater end 1/4 mile from river.

Historical Highlight: After the Hayman Fire in 2002, Hackett, Longwater and Metberry were closed by the Forest Service. The closures were considered permanent unless another public entity volunteered to take them over. Almost immediately, Predator 4 Wheel Drive, who has worked hard for years to keep these trails open, began negotiations with Teller County. After many setbacks and frustrations by everyone involved, Teller County agreed to accept responsibility for the trails. Metberry opened first, followed by portions of Hackett and Longwater. Negotiations are still underway with Park County to open the last remaining section along the river. Check our Web site at www.funtreks.com for major announcements.

Overview: In 2002, Hackett Gulch, Longwater Gulch and Metberry Gulch, three of the most popular trails in the Pikes Peak region, were closed due to the Hayman Fire. Fortunately, all three trails are now open, at least in part. Efforts are still underway to open one key section along the Platte River that connects Hackett to Longwater, which would once again make a loop. This section has several difficult obstacles, including three deep water crossings.

Rating: Difficult. All routes descend steeply into spectacular Wildcat Canyon. Trails have been tamed somewhat due to maintenance after the fire; however, natural erosion is slowly returning the trails to their former legendary hard-core status. Hackett Rock, unfortunately, has been permanently knocked down.

Stats: Length: Hackett and Longwater each measure 3.5 miles one way. Metberry is 4.5 miles. Time: 3 to 5 hours for all three trails combined. High point: 9,000 ft. Best time of year: July-September.

Current Conditions: Although trails are in the Pike National Forest, best number for trail conditions is Predator 4 Wheel Drive at (719) 528-5790.

Getting There: From Hwy. 24 in Divide, head north on C.R. 5. Swing left at 0.5 miles on C.R. 51. Go another 2.9 miles and bear right, staying on C.R. 51. After another 6.5 miles, you'll see a parking area on right where you can air down or unload. Stay left after parking area and go north on Cedar Mountain Road. Turn left for Hackett at 5.4 miles, Longwater 7.3 miles, and Metberry 7.7 miles.

START MILEAGE LOG:

0.0 Zero trip odometer [Rev. Miles]

HACKETT GULCH:

Head west downhill. [3.9]

01 N 39° 04.70' W 105° 16.32'

2.0 Hackett Rock. [1.9]

2.3 Stay right. Scenic overlook on left. [1.6]

3.7 Stay left. Closed road on right is original route to Longwater Gulch. [0.2]

3.9 End of trail. Return to Wpt. 01 and head north 1.9 miles to Wpt. 02. [0.0]

0.0 Zero trip odometer

LONGWATER GULCH:

Head west uphill. [3.9]

02 N 39° 05.89' W 105° 16.50'

2.9 Difficult section. [1.0]

3.6 Stay right. [0.3]

3.9 Reach gate. Return to Wpt. 02 and head north 0.4 miles to Wpt. 03. [0.0]

0.0 Zero trip odometer

METBERRY GULCH:

Stay left where main road goes right. [4.5]

03 N 39° 06.16' W 105° 16.63'

2.7 Driver's choice. [1.8]

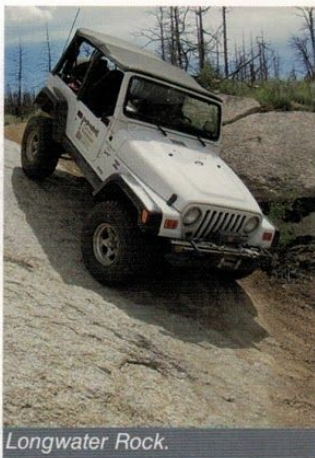
3.0 Driver's choice. [1.5]

3.5 Stay left. [1.0]

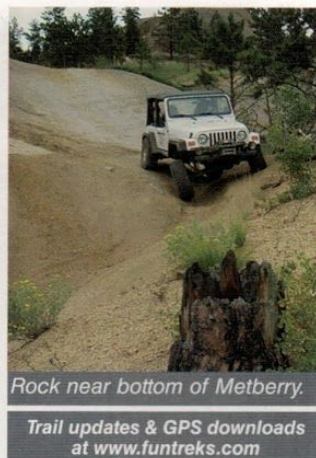
3.8 Descend steep hill. [0.7]

4.5 Trail ends at camp spots along river. [0.0]

04 N 39° 07.44' W 105° 19.61'

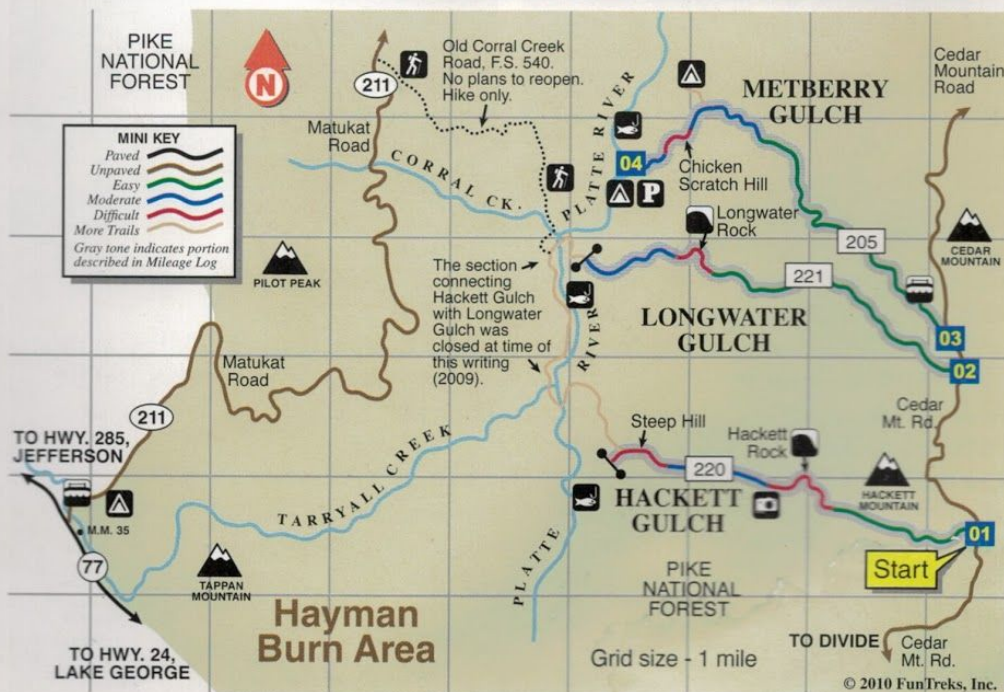


Longwater Rock.



Rock near bottom of Metberry.

Trail updates & GPS downloads at www.funtreks.com



3. Scans of the 2019 edition of the **Funtreks Guide to Colorado Backroads & 4-Wheel Drive Trails** by Charles A. Wells, describing the Gulches trails as they exist today and the continued efforts to reopen the closed trails. That the offroading community has continued to fight for these trails for over 10 years indicates their extreme importance.

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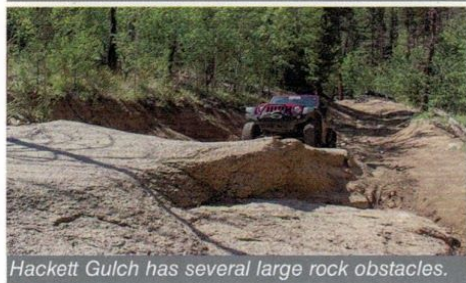
The Gulches



AREA 7 map on page 196



Longwater Gulch drops dramatically into Wildcat Canyon through the Hayman Burn Area.



Hackett Gulch has several large rock obstacles.

IMPORTANT NOTICE: After the Hayman Fire in 2002, Hackett Gulch, Longwater Gulch and Metberry Gulch were closed by the Forest Service. The closures were considered permanent unless another public entity volunteered to take them over. Almost immediately, Predator 4 Wheel Drive, which has worked hard for years to keep these trails open, began working with Teller County. In the end, Teller County accepted responsibility for the roads and that's why the trails are open today. Extreme environmental groups have been trying for years to permanently close this area to motorized recreation. Do your part by following the rules. Don't cross the river.

Overview: Hackett Gulch, Longwater Gulch and Metberry Gulch are three of the most popular hard-core trails in the Pikes Peak region. Each section of trail offers something fun and different. The area is extremely popular on weekends. Trails are closed in the spring until things dry out. Cedar Mountain Road allows unlicensed vehicles north of Trail #86. Trails officially end at the Teller County line before the Platte River. Do not cross river. We'll try to post updates at www.funtreks.com. Better yet, call Predator 4-Wheel Drive for the latest.

Rating: Difficult. Steep, loose descents and climbs with interspersed rock obstacles and muddy spots. Lots of fun twists and turns. A winch might come in handy. You'll need lockers, good articulation and a confident driver.

Stats: Length: Hackett and Longwater each measure 3.9 miles one-way. Metberry is 4.5 miles. Time: 3 to 5 hours for all three trails combined. High point: 9,000 ft. Best time: July-Sept.

Current Conditions: Pike N.F., South Park R.D. (719) 836-2031. See Motor Vehicle Travel Map (not MVUM). Or, call Predator 4WD at (719) 528-5790.

Getting There: From Hwy. 24 in Divide, head north on C.R. 5. Swing left at 0.5 mile on C.R. 51. Turn right at 3.5 miles, staying on C.R. 51. At 10 miles stay left following C.R. 51/Cedar Mountain Road. Go another 0.8 mile to large staging and parking area. Continuing north from parking area, Hackett Gulch is 4.5 miles, Longwater Gulch is 6.4 miles and Metberry Gulch is 6.8 miles.

START MILEAGE LOG:**0.0 Zero trip odometer** [Rev. Miles]**HACKETT GULCH:**

Head west downhill. [3.9]

01 N39 04.701 W105 16.318**2.0** Hackett Rock. [1.9]**2.3** Stay right. Scenic overlook on left. [1.6]**3.7** Stay left. Closed road on right is original route to Longwater Gulch. [0.2]**3.9** Reach county line. Return to Wpt. 01 and head north 1.9 miles to Wpt. 02. [0.0]**0.0 Zero trip odometer****LONGWATER GULCH:**

Head west uphill. [3.9]

02 N39 05.888 W105 16.503**2.9** Longwater Rock, no bypass. [1.0]**3.9** Reach county line. Return to Wpt. 02 and head north 0.4 mile to Wpt. 03. [0.0]**0.0 Zero trip odometer****METBERRY GULCH:**

Stay left where main road goes right. [4.5]

03 N39 06.158 W105 16.627**2.7** Driver's choice. [1.8]**3.0** Driver's choice. [1.5]**3.5** Stay left downhill. [1.0]**3.8** Descend steep hill. [0.7]**4.5** Trail ends at camp spots along river. [0.0]**04 N39 07.441 W105 19.612**

Longwater Rock is a popular spot to take pictures.



Metberry, like all the other trails, has lots of steep twists and turns.

