Great Western Trail Summary, National Trail Study, Draft

United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service

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National Trail Study
Great Western Trail

March 2000

This National Trail Study Summary presents information on the feasibility and desirability of adding the Great Western Trail to the National Trails System.

The study concludes that the Great Western Trail is a nationally significant trail that meets National Trails System Act requirements.

The study concludes that establishing a continuous trail is physically feasible.

The study concludes that desirability of recognizing the trail is dependent upon the level of community involvement and support available. Also, that adequate funding must be ensured at the time of designation of the trail.

The study examines four alternatives for designation of the trail under existing National Trails System categories. The study also examines two alternatives under the proposed National Discovery Trail category.

Agencies and the public may comment during the 30-day draft review period ending April 14, 2000. Comments should be addressed to:

USDA Forest Service
Great Western Trail Study
2647 Kimberly Road East
Twin Falls, ID 83301-7976
Attn: Roshanna Stone

For additional information, please write to the above address or telephone (208) 737-3223.
INTRODUCTION

This is a summary of the Draft Great Western Trail Feasibility Study Report. The purpose of the report is to provide information to Congress to determine if it is feasible and desirable to add the Great Western Trail to the National Trails System. The study reviews information to determine if the Great Western Trail meets requirements for inclusion on the National Trails System.

1. The study includes 4,455 miles of existing trails and roads from Mexico to Canada.
2. The proposal combines existing Great Western Trail segments with other routes to provide a continuous interstate trail corridor.
3. 1,900 miles of Great Western Trail currently are in use in Arizona and Utah.
4. Existing routes in Arizona and Utah are currently not part of the National Trail System.
5. The study will examine whether the trail should be added to the National Trail System.

The Great Western Trail has been proposed as a connected corridor linking together existing roads and existing trails. The corridor encompasses an area that extends from the Arizona-Mexico border north to the Idaho-Montana-Canada border. As proposed, the trail would cross the scenic heartland of the American West, through the States of Arizona, Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana. The Great Western Trail could fulfill a unique recreation niche not currently being met by the national long distance trail system.

The Great Western Trail is unique among long distance trails in that it:

- Utilizes existing roads and trails;
- Is planned to be a broad “corridor” often encompassing parallel routes for different users (i.e.: hiking trails and ATV roads);
- Is a long distance trail designed to accommodate the entire trail community;
- Has many sections for motorized use (ATVs and snowmobiles) as well as hiking, horseback riders, and cross-country skiers.

Approximately 64% of the 4,455 miles of proposed trail is located on lands administered by the Forest Service. An estimated 20% is in private ownership, and 5% is located on State, city, or county land. About 8% of the trail is located on lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management, including a route through a national monument, and 3% is located on Tribal government administered land.
Map 1
Location of the Proposed Great Western Trail

Legend

- Proposed Trail
- Area of Consideration for Trail Location
- State Capitals
- Cities
LAND OWNERSHIP MILES (BY STATE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>National Forest</th>
<th>Private</th>
<th>State/Other</th>
<th>B.L.M.*</th>
<th>Tribal</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>611</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>1109</td>
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<tr>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>1268</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1860</td>
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<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>796</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>2871</td>
<td>912</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>4455</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument managed by B.L.M.

Almost half of the proposed trail corridor being studied for national Great Western Trail designation, or 1,901 miles of combined trails and roads, are already in use as the Great Western Trail. These segments, located primarily on public lands in the States of Arizona and Utah, have been designated for Great Western Trail use over the last ten years. Many of these marked trail segments are popular recreation routes.

GREAT WESTERN TRAIL MILES (BY STATE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Total Miles+</th>
<th>Alternative Routes</th>
<th>Existing GWT Miles</th>
<th>Proposed for Year 2000 Dedication</th>
<th>New Proposed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>1109</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>1860</td>
<td></td>
<td>1635</td>
<td></td>
<td>225</td>
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<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>796</td>
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<td>796</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>315</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>315</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>375</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana &amp; N. Idaho</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swan Valley Route</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wise River Route</td>
<td>425</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitterroot Route</td>
<td>540</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>4455</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>2133</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ Combines existing and proposed total miles
* One Montana alternative was used in total calculation
DESCRIPTION OF THE TRAIL

The proposed Great Western Trail follows a 4,455-mile corridor through the western States of Arizona, Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana. It incorporates stunning desert and canyon landscapes, high plateaus, open woodlands, alpine meadows, and densely forested glades. The proposed Great Western Trail links the paths of ancient people and early settlers to present day residents, by winding through remote abandoned settlements as well as thriving modern communities. Rather than a single trail route, the concept of the proposed Great Western Trail incorporates braided use of existing trails and roads to create a long distance system to serve many different types of trail users.

THE ROLE OF THE USDA FOREST SERVICE

The National Trails System Act (PL 90-543), as amended by H.R. 4236, directed the Secretary of Agriculture to study the feasibility and desirability of designating the Great Western Trail as a national trail. The Forest Service was assigned responsibility for preparing the study because much of the trail is located on Forest administered land. A study team was assembled in March 1998.

Other Federal agency representatives worked with the Forest Service study team. The interagency group consisted of the three involved Forest Service regions (Southwestern, Intermountain, and Northern regions), the Forest Service's Washington, D.C. office, the National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management. Representatives from the Great Western Trail Association and State agencies also contributed information and provided assistance to the study team as needed.
DEVELOPMENT OF THE GREAT WESTERN TRAIL PROPOSAL

The effort to establish a long distance trail began in Utah during the 1970s with the idea of a Wasatch Crest Trail. An interagency team including the Forest Service, Utah Department of Natural Resources, Bureau of Land Management, and National Park Service was formed in 1985. Public support grew for developing a long-distance trail corridor slated to connect the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone National Parks. This corridor was later called the "Great Western Trail".

Since 1987, Great Western Trail Conferences have been hosted annually in Utah and Idaho. A volunteer nonprofit support group, the Great Western Trail Association, has been active since 1989. Trail organizations, volunteer coordinators, and State and Federal agencies have participated in the development of the trail since that time.

In January 1995, U.S. Rep. James V. Hansen of Utah introduced legislation designating the Great Western Trail for study as a potential National Scenic Trail. Subsequently, the Great Western Trail study was authorized under the National Trails System Act (P.L. 50-543; 16 U.S.C. 1241 et seq., as amended through P.L. 104-333).

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND INTEREST

In order to learn of specific concerns regarding the proposal to designate the proposed Great Western Trail a National Trail, six open houses and four information sessions were held. In Arizona, meetings were held in Tucson, Phoenix, and Flagstaff. In Utah, meetings were located in Salt Lake City and Logan. A single meeting was held in Idaho at Idaho Falls. The Montana sessions were located in Bozeman, Butte, Helena, and Missoula.

To notify people of the open houses in Arizona, Utah, and Idaho, news releases were mailed to media in the meeting locations. In Montana, 55 outdoor recreation groups and conservation organizations were notified of the information sessions by mail. A newsletter was also developed and mailed to individuals on the Great Western Trail mailing list. Information was posted on the project website and the Internet address was highlighted in outgoing correspondence.
Figure 1.  
Number of comment letters received by state.*

Figure 2.  
Comments showing support (left figure) or non-support (right figure) by state.*

*No comments received from AK or HI.

101 comments did not indicate a preference for support or nonsupport as follows: AZ-12, UT-16, ID-15, MT-33, WA-6, NM-2, WY-3, CO-3, LA-1, CA-5, MS-1, MN-3, and OR-1.
A total of 272 visitors attended the meetings. The number of individuals who signed visitor rosters at Great Western Trail meetings follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ARIZONA</th>
<th>IDAHO</th>
<th>MONTANA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flagstaff 21</td>
<td>Idaho Falls 54</td>
<td>Bozeman 40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phoenix 40</td>
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<td>Butte 13</td>
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<td>Tucson 9</td>
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<td>Helena 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTAH</td>
<td></td>
<td>Missoula 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logan 19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt Lake City 29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A total of 903 public comments were received from 24 states. The majority of the letters received (91%) came from states that would be directly affected by the trail: Arizona - 5%, Utah - 5%, Idaho - 5%, Wyoming - 2%, and Montana - 74%. Letters were received from those who support the idea of a long distance trail, as well as those who oppose Great Western Trail designation.

Strong support is evident in the States of Arizona and Utah where development and use of the Great Western Trail has been ongoing. Comments from communities and organizations in eastern Idaho and western Wyoming are generally supportive of Great Western Trail designation. Reaction to a proposed Great Western Trail route through Montana has been mixed.

The Great Western Trail concept was founded on the premise that it would be administered and maintained in collaboration with a competent trail wide volunteer-based organization. In 1990, the Great Western Trail Association was incorporated under the provisions of the Utah Nonprofit Corporation and Cooperative Association Act. A president and board of directors were appointed to coordinate efforts to designate, develop, promote, and maintain the Great Western Trail through partnerships between Federal, State, and local government agencies as well as private property owners and user groups. The national association council is headquartered in northern Utah and also has four chartered State councils: one each in Arizona, Utah, Idaho, and Wyoming, seven local chapters and one currently being developed in Montana.

The mission of the Great Western Trail Association as stated in its business and operation plan is to assist in the promotion, construction, and maintenance of a multi-use corridor of trails from Mexico to Canada and to link and protect significant resources along the trails with the support of volunteers, public, and private partnerships. In March 1997, the Great Western Trail Association initiated and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and the States of Arizona, Utah, Idaho, and Wyoming to establish a general framework for coordination and cooperation between the Association and these agencies. The MOU has provided a foundation for working together on issues of common interest and carrying out mutually beneficial programs and activities.
Map 2
Great Western Trail
Arizona

Legend

- Existing Trail
- Proposed Trail
- Area of Consideration for Trail Location

- State Capital
- Cities
- Interstate highway

Land Ownership
- National Forest
- National Parks & Monuments
- Tribal Lands

20 0 20 40 Miles
30 0 30 60 Kilometers
Separate from this Congressional study, the Great Western Trail Association members and volunteers have been active since 1989 dedicating and signing segments of the trail. State coordinators located in Arizona, Utah, and Idaho working for the Great Western Trail Association promote the trail by recruiting local trail groups and volunteers. Partnerships have been developed with local Federal, Tribal, and State agencies, community leaders, groups, and individuals to identify and designate trail routes. To date over 1,900 miles of Great Western Trail have been approved and are signed. The Great Western Trail Association has published a Utah guidebook that contains maps of the trail.

Many community leaders, county commissioners, and business owners have supported Great Western Trail efforts in Utah and Arizona. Some communities in Utah have already made significant investments in land or facilities linked with proposed Great Western Trail development.

**GREAT WESTERN TRAIL CONCEPT**

The Great Western Trail differs from the familiar concept of a trail, a blazed path, or beaten track most widely associated with foot or horseback travel. For the purposes of this study, the term “trail” refers to a wide variety of travel routes which includes single track trails, two-track backcountry dirt trails, single lane dirt roads, gravel roads, and busy, high speed paved highways. The Great Western Trail combines already established roads and trails together to provide a connecting link for long distance travel. In some areas, these roads and trails are adopted along one singular route. In other areas, an interconnected braided system provides for separate routes, side trails, or loop trails that either terminate independently or rejoin a main trail route.

The purpose of using braided or separate routes is twofold. It is widely recognized that recreational trail use is increasing. The supply of trails is limited and cannot keep pace with the demand. There is competition for trails among recreation users who differ on preference of trail travel method. The braided trail system can provide opportunities to disperse trail traffic using existing trails and routes. This is an important consideration in areas where trail use is more concentrated. Secondly, access can be provided to different trail routes using fewer, common trailheads.

In discussing the Great Western Trail concept, questions inevitably surface about what types of trail use are expected and anticipated. When the concept for the trail originated, it was acknowledged that the Great Western Trail would incorporate principles of shared use. These were broadly interpreted to mean that some segments might best serve a combination of motorized and non-motorized uses where this mix is compatible (i.e. on forest roads). Other trail routes may be separated to maintain quality experience, for purposes of public safety, or to adhere to administrative restrictions (i.e. in wilderness areas). Specific trail use management decisions would be determined at the local level through local forest planning.
EXISTING STATE OF THE TRAIL

ARIZONA

Hundreds of miles of trail have been designated in Arizona in the area north of Phoenix to the Utah border. The Arizona State Parks Off-Highway Vehicle Program has published and distributed maps of the Arizona section of the Great Western Trail. The map depicts the existing and proposed Great Western Trail routes, as well as segments proposed for signing in the near future. Accompanying the map is a description of the trail routes and highlights of nearby historic and interpretive sites, known as “Points of Discovery”; and a mile-by-mile accounting of the potential trail experience. Magazine and newspaper articles on the Arizona section of the Great Western Trail have appeared in several Arizona publications.

Portions of the trail in the southeastern part of the State from the Mexican border to Phoenix are still in the planning stages. The developed Arizona section accommodates many trail users using existing backcountry roads. The first trail segment dedicated was the Bulldog Canyon Trail on the Mesa Ranger District in April 1996. In April 1998, the 72-mile Cave Creek Segment of the Great Western Trail was added along with Sears-Kay Ruin, recognized as the first sanctioned “Point of Discovery” on the Great Western Trail. Visitor interpretive signs are located at the ruin, an ancient Hohokam village atop a hill overlooking the Great Western Trail north of the communities of Carefree and Cave Creek. Another segment has been designated in the northern part of the State along Highway 89A from Marble Canyon northwest to Fredonia.

UTAH

Over 1,600 miles of Great Western Trail roads and trails are in place in Utah. The Great Western Trail was designated Utah’s Centennial Trail in 1996 by Governor Michael Leavitt as part of Utah’s Statehood Centennial celebration. The Paiute ATV Trail in Utah is part of the Great Western Trail that traverses three mountain ranges through the rugged canyons and deserts of central Utah. Including side trips, there are more than 820 miles of trail on the Paiute system. Information from trail counters in southern Utah on the Fishlake National Forest alone indicate that there were over 51,000 combined Great Western Trail and Paiute ATV Trail users in 1999. Monitoring and trail maintenance is a cooperative effort that is shared by seasonal Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management patrols, Utah State Parks employees, County Sheriff’s Departments, Trail Host programs, volunteers, and State Trail Ranger’s programs.

IDAHO, WYOMING, AND MONTANA

Although potential Great Western Trail routes using existing roads and trails are identified in eastern Idaho and western Wyoming, none of these routes are currently designated as part of the Great Western Trail. Three 50-100 mile wide study corridors have been identified in northern Idaho and western Montana. No routes have been dedicated in northern Idaho or western Montana.
CRITERIA FOR NATIONAL TRAILS

The amendment of the National Trails System Act that authorized the study specified that the Great Western Trail be studied for inclusion as a National Scenic Trail. However, due to the Congressional intent to identify characteristics that make the proposed trail worthy of designation, this study will consider the Trail for other categories of national trails including National Scenic, National Historic, National Recreation, and Connecting and Side Trails. The Great Western Trail will also be evaluated against National Discovery Trail criteria. This category of trail has been proposed as a new addition to the National Trails System. The study adheres to guidelines for national trail feasibility studies as described in Section 5 (b) of the National Trails System Act.

NATIONAL SCENIC TRAILS

National Scenic Trails are congressionally authorized long distance routes designed for hiking and other compatible uses. A National Scenic Trail does not allow motorized use unless an exception to Section 7 (c) of the National Trails System Act is made. The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail has such an exception that allows the use of motorized vehicles where trail segments were placed on motorized routes as long as it does not substantially interfere with the nature and purposes of the trail. The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail has been managed since 1978 using this authority. National Scenic Trails should be continuous, have high recreational values and pass through areas with nationally significant scenic, natural, historical, or cultural qualities. Administered by a Federal agency, National Scenic Trails should be capable of attracting visitors from throughout the country and abroad. As much as practical, they avoid motor roads, mining areas, commercial, and industrial developments that detract from the trail’s natural condition and recreational experiences.

NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAILS

National Historic Trails are Congressionally authorized routes, including motor transportation routes, that recognize prominent travel routes of exploration, trade, migration, and military action. These trails, which are administered by a Federal agency, generally consist of remnant sites and trail segments rather than continuous trails linked by a motor tour route. Their purpose is to identify, interpret, and protect nationally significant historic routes and their remnants and artifacts for public use and enjoyment.
Map 5
Great Western Trail
Wyoming

Legend

- Proposed Trail

- State Capital
- Cities
- Interstate highway

Land Ownership
- National Forest
- National Parks & Monuments
- Tribal Lands

40 0 40 80 Miles
50 0 50 100 Kilometers
NATIONAL RECREATION TRAILS

National Recreation Trails are existing trails recognized by the Federal government as contributing to the National Trails System. They provide a variety of outdoor recreation uses and vary in length and accessibility. National Recreation Trails are designated by the Secretary of the Interior or the Secretary of Agriculture and are managed by public and private agencies at the local, State, and national levels. Congressional action is not required to designate a National Recreation Trail.

CONNECTING AND SIDE TRAILS

Connecting and Side Trails are components of National Scenic, Historic, and Recreation Trails. They provide additional points of public access to or between the above trails. Congressional action is not required to designate these trails.

OTHER TRAIL CATEGORIES

NATIONAL DISCOVERY TRAILS

A new category of trail has been proposed for inclusion in the National Trails System Act. This category has not been incorporated into law. The U.S. Senate of the 105th Congress did approve the following definition, however:

National Discovery Trails are continuous, interstate trails that provide outstanding outdoor recreation and travel. They connect representative examples of America's trails and communities. National Discovery Trails should provide for the conservation and enjoyment of significant natural, cultural, and historic resources associated with each trail and represent locations in metropolitan, urban, rural, and backcountry regions of the Nation. The trail must be supported by a competent, trail wide nonprofit organization, and have extensive local and trail wide support.
PLANNING PROCESS

The initial task of the study team was to determine what key information was needed, conduct research to gather the information, analyze and present the data. Significant issues and concerns were identified throughout the process. Data on natural and cultural resources and other pertinent information was also compiled. Other tasks were to gather data regarding the purpose for the trail, and to investigate the significance, feasibility, and desirability of including the Great Western Trail in the National Trails System.

Members of the team visited areas along the proposed route where possible to get first hand knowledge of the resources, opportunities, potential problems, and issues involved in designating the Great Western Trail a part of the National Trails System. As team members were not able to personally see all aspects of the proposed trail route, they made contact with others who did have field knowledge or experience of the Great Western Trail route and general area. Criteria for feasibility studies was reviewed and included. National Trail classifications were evaluated and alternatives for trail designation were developed.

Public opinion and input was solicited throughout the process. The study team initially published and distributed a newsletter to communicate information on the trail study and an Internet website was established that provided basic information about the study. Open houses were subsequently held in several States. Telephone calls, meetings, and information sessions were held with local, State and Federal agencies, with trail and outdoor recreation organizations, and with Congressional delegations. Over 900 letters, calls, or e-mail messages have been received.

The draft report is being widely distributed to a mailing list developed over the course of the study that includes approximately 1,200 names of individuals and groups. After a 30-day public comment period, the report will be edited and a final feasibility study report will be prepared. The final study transmitted to Congress by the Secretary of Agriculture will also be made available to the public. Congress will ultimately decide what action to take on the trail.

I have been a supporter of the GWT for many years. The diversity for different trail users is very unique. The grassroots support for the trail is growing every year. My family and many friends have spent hours on the trail both hiking and building. It will be great to see the various segments come together. I hardly endorse further development of the trail.

—Provo, UT
**STUDY SCOPE**

It is important to note that Congress directed that the study provide an assessment of The Great Western Scenic Trail to include —

a) the current status of land ownership and current and potential use along the designated route;

b) the estimated cost of acquisition of lands or interests in lands, if any; and

c) an examination of the appropriateness of motorized trail use along the trail.

It is also important to note what the study does not include —

a) The study does not provide a detailed mile-by-mile description of the trail alignment.

b) The study does not provide decisions for future trail management. If the Great Western Trail is established as a national trail, a comprehensive management plan shall be completed to address this issue.

c) The study does not authorize a specific type of trail use (i.e. non-motorized vs. motorized). If the Great Western Trail is established as a national trail, a comprehensive management plan shall be completed to address this issue.

d) Much of the Great Western Trail route in Arizona and Utah is currently in place. These routes and other routes being studied are being included in the National Trails System.

e) A specific trail route has not been identified south of Phoenix in southern Arizona. Similarly, a specific trail route has not been identified for the northern-most portion of the trail from the Idaho-Montana border north to Canada. If a national trail is established, local issues, concerns, and opportunities will be significant factors in determining final trail alternatives and trail site selection.
Legend

Area of Consideration for Trail Location

- State Capital
- Cities
- Interstate highway

Land Ownership
- National Forest
- National Parks & Monuments
- Tribal Lands

Map 6
Great Western Trail

Montana
ISSUES

At approximately 4,455 miles in length and crossing thousands of acres of public land, the proposed Great Western Trail would become the longest shared use trail corridor in the country. If implemented, different types of trail or road related activities may be designated along this corridor. The national Trails System Act, Section 7 (j) states:

"Potential trail uses allowed on designated components of the national trails system may include, but are not limited to, the following: bicycling, cross-country skiing, day hiking, equestrian activities, trail biking, overnight and long distance backpacking, snowmobiling... Vehicles which may be permitted on certain trails may include, but need not be limited to, motorcycles, bicycles, four-wheel drive or all-terrain off-road vehicles."

Several concerns about trail recognition and national designation emerged during the study process. General categories of concern were developed in response to outreach efforts with private land owners, trail users, Tribal governments, and resource managers.

RESOURCE PROTECTION

Many people expressed concern for protection of natural resources. This category includes ensuring safeguards for maintaining water and air quality standards, and provisions for improving fish and wildlife habitat. There is a concern that national trail designation would result in new trail construction or an increase in overall trail use, which might cause soil erosion or water sedimentation problems.

Some stated their concern regarding increased off-trail or off-road impacts, including damage to stream banks, rutting, vegetation loss, and destruction of wildlife habitat. There is also a

The concept of a trail corridor that recognizes all the various forms of recreational trail use as legitimate would go a long way toward satisfying desires of recreationists for high quality outdoor experiences.

-Rio Rancho, NM
concern that fish and wildlife migrations or habitat would be negatively affected with increases in trail or road use. Some respondents felt their recreation use was being negatively affected by policies enforced to protect endangered fish, wildlife, or plant species.

**TRAIL ACCESS**

This category includes providing traditional access to both trails and roads and maintaining existing recreation use. There is a concern that a national trails designation may result in changes in management that could restrict access or use of areas of public land. Conversely, many respondents stated their fear that a national trail designation would result in increased use of backcountry areas.

**TRAIL CONFLICT**

Some people questioned the practicality and logic in establishing a shared use trail system. These respondents have stated that different types of trail users are not compatible. They stated that once motorized use is established on a trail or road, non-motorized trail users become permanently displaced. Some were also concerned about potential trail congestion, safety, vehicle noise, or air pollution in popular, heavily used areas.

**ECONOMICS AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT**

The logic of designating a new trail when adequate trails funding is not currently available to maintain and operate existing trails on public lands was questioned. There is a concern that designating a new trail will increase the maintenance burden and costs, further reducing available funding for existing trails. Some commented that resource managers do not have the ability to maintain existing trails adequately.

Some cited the potential economic benefit to rural and isolated communities through increased recognition and business associated with the trail. Some felt that designated national trails could add public value and an increased appreciation of trail recreation opportunities. Some were supportive of efforts to provide a unique opportunity for diverse recreation groups, organizations, and agencies to work together increasing trail opportunities for everyone. Some expressed interest in a continuous long-distance corridor that could be used by all.

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*I enjoy responsible riding with friends and relatives and am concerned that we may have less places and trails to ride in the future.*  
—Gillette, WY
PURPOSE

A key point for setting direction for the feasibility study and developing alternatives has been defining the basic purpose for establishing the Great Western Trail. A statement of purpose defines the reason for designation of the trail. It also insures consistency in identifying alternatives for trail use and management. Testimony submitted by U.S. Rep. James V. Hansen and statements provided to the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Lands Committee on Resources from Gray F. Reynolds, Deputy Chief of the Forest Service were reviewed with this purpose in mind. Meetings and correspondence with Great Western Trail Association members, Forest Service units, cooperating partners and Great Western Trail supporters added insight to this process. By using this method, the study team has concluded that the following statements represent key concepts for creation of The Great Western Trail.

• To provide a continuous long distance trail route from the border of Mexico to Canada that can be used by the entire trail community.
• To link residents of rural communities and urban areas through a connected trail system.
• To emphasize the richness of our natural and heritage resources along the trail corridor.
• To offer opportunities for economic growth and development to area communities.
• To increase trail opportunities for area residents.
• To provide opportunities for different trail user groups to work together and in partnership with land management agencies for enhancement of recreation trail systems.
• To fulfill a unique recreation niche for a growing segment of recreation users desiring a long distance, backcountry trail experience.

BENEFITS OF NATIONAL TRAIL DESIGNATION

Trails that possess special characteristics deserve the recognition that inclusion on the National Trails System brings. National Trails are federally protected routes under the administration of the Interior or Agriculture Departments. Comprehensive management planning for the trail corridor is mandatory to insure that a proper course of management and use for the trail has been identified. As a National Trail, the checks and balances for interactive resource planning are in place providing for coordinated development. Natural and heritage resource inventories are completed and monitoring plans are developed. Adequate mapping, trail signing, trail route identification, and public involvement are key components.
Financial Incentives include National Trails funding through Congressional appropriation and inclusion in national publications that result in increased national recognition and visibility. Often times, this results in increased visitation and business for nearby service communities. As National Trails draw interest from a nation-wide audience, they more readily attract a cadre of volunteers to nonprofit supporting trail organizations, such as the Great Western Trail Association. Because the Great Western Trail accommodates the entire trails community, a wider audience of trail users may become involved with National Trails, creating a more diversified National Trails System. In addition to working closely with Federal administrators, these private organizations have other opportunities to raise funds or develop partnerships that can benefit overall trail administration.

VISION FOR THE TRAIL

Future conditions are described through vision statements. Using a similar process to the above, team members have identified conditions necessary for fulfillment of this vision.

RESOURCE PROTECTION

- Resource inventories are complete. Protection measures are identified and in place.
- Natural and heritage resources are protected and interpreted.
- Trail signage is effective in providing directions and alerting users to trail conditions.
- Information and education systems are effective in keeping trail users on approved paths to protect sensitive resources.
- Sensitive areas are monitored.
- Mitigation or trail relocation occurs if persistent problems are unresolved.

TRAIL MANAGEMENT

- The Great Western Trail is established as a continuous trail.
- Adequate levels of shared funding exist to implement the management plan.
- Landowners and communities participate in management decisions.
- Trail users are active participants.

ECONOMICS AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

- Trail access and needed facilities are available.
- The trail is clean, maintained, and appropriately used.
- The trail accommodates many different trail users.
- A supportive community of partners exists.
LIST OF ALTERNATIVES

This is a feasibility study, not a management plan. Alternatives were developed that pertain to potential options for designation of the trail route. Three classes of alternatives are examined: 1) a no action alternative that continues existing conditions; 2) an action which would include the trail within the National Trails System; and 3) other reasonable concepts which could achieve the vision for the trail.

As a multi-purpose recreation trail, the proposed Great Western Trail emerges as a hybrid between the oldest and most traditional National Scenic Trail – the Appalachian Trail – and the newest national trail candidate, the American Discovery Trail, which proposes using a combination of trails, sidewalks, gravel, and paved roads to create an east-west trail corridor bridging the United States. As the proposed Great Western Trail comes before Congress, it is important to ask: Does the Great Western Trail fill a niche that has so far gone unmet among the Nation’s long distance trails?

The study presents six alternatives for designation of the Great Western Trail.

A. No-Action
B. National Scenic Trail (Mexico to Canada)
C. National Scenic Trail (Arizona, Utah, eastern Idaho, western Wyoming)
D. No National Trail Designation - Coordinated Administration and Management

In addition, the study also considers two other alternatives under a National Discovery Trail category. As the category of National Discovery Trail does not currently exist under law, Congress would need to enact legislation that authorizes this new category before these alternatives could be considered.

E. National Discovery Trail (Mexico to Canada)
F. National Discovery Trail (Arizona, Utah, eastern Idaho, western Wyoming)

ALTERNATIVE A: NO-ACTION ALTERNATIVE

Establishing a coordinated administration and national recognition for a connected trail route would not occur under this alternative. In place and future designated segments of the Great Western Trail would continue to be administered as they currently are. Agencies, organizations, or property owners would coordinate the management, development, interpretation, use, marking, maintenance, and enforcement of individual trail segments as they become recognized and developed. Lacking a coordinated management structure, establishment of the trail would most likely continue to occur as it currently does, in a fragmented fashion that is largely dependent upon local area initiative and availability of resources.

Under this alternative, there would be minimal emphasis on a unified effort to inventory, map, or connect routes. Comprehensive inventories of natural or heritage resources may not be conducted, as there would be no guiding comprehensive management plan.

A nonprofit group, such as the Great Western Trail Association, would most likely continue to promote and develop the trail to meet the goal to provide a continuous long distance trail. Even if the nonprofit group assumes responsibility for the identity and administration for
portions of the trail, Federal involvement would continue in the provision of technical assistance and trail routing to meet agency goals. On non-Federal lands, the nonprofit group would continue to coordinate with private, Tribal, State, regional, and local managers. Because of strong support and commitment to development of the Arizona segment of the Great Western Trail from Arizona State Parks and the Forest Service, trail segments in Arizona would most likely continue to develop. Strong commitment on the part of the Forest Service in Utah in combination with structural and financial support from Utah State Parks and Recreation would also likely result in continued development and recognition of the Great Western Trail in Utah.

Funding through annual State off-highway vehicle allocations (% proportioned to States based upon a combination of national share of fuel use and off-road recreation fuel use) or matching funds partnership projects sponsored through the Federal Recreation Trails Program, is expected to continue. Efforts to designate trail routes in eastern Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana may lose some vitality where supporting partners do not exist or are unable to fully contribute staffing, financial resources, or leadership. If a fully supportive network is not readily available, efforts at establishing new segments of the trail may languish without the structure of a coordinated administration. Lacking a consolidated effort and an accompanying boost in recognition as a nationally designated trail may tend to prolong efforts to establish a continuous long distance route.

Costs for administration of individual Great Western Trail segments would continue on a forest-by-forest basis. This has been estimated to cost $40,000 in annual operational expenses and $150,000 in annual development and maintenance trailside over the last 10 years. National Trail allocations would not be available so each affected forest would continue responsibility for financing their portion of the trail. If funding for the Great Western Trail is being diverted from regular Forest trail program funding, there may fewer funds available for local Forest trail maintenance in areas of Great Western Trail development.

FEASIBILITY AND DESIRABILITY

Under this alternative, the trail would not be designated a national trail. Nonprofit groups would be responsible for raising funds to develop and coordinate collaborative management efforts. They would continue, as presently occurs, to work in tandem with affected Federal, State, Tribal, or local entities in designating desired trail segments.

Great Western Trail segments would continue to be developed and maintained in areas where strong public and organizational support was in place. Efforts are expected to continue in Arizona and Utah regardless of the alternative chosen because interest and commitment is strong. Public interest in establishing the Great Western Trail in Idaho and Wyoming does exist, but it is not known if ample support is available to provide development at a rate that is concurrent with the States of Arizona and Utah. Under this no-action alternative, it is not likely that trail development would occur in Montana or northern Idaho in the near future. A strong, multi-level base of community support and interest would have to be established first.

The no-action alternative, Alternative A, would result in no immediate change in trail management for existing Great Western Trail segments in Arizona and Utah. The trail would not be uniformly administered as part of national trail system. Over time, new segments may be added if individual States, local communities, and agencies are supportive in developing new trail segments. Although this alternative is feasible, it would not serve to acknowledge the national significance of the Great Western Trail.
ALTERNATIVE B: NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL (MEXICO TO CANADA)

Under this alternative, Congress would take legislative action to amend the National Trails System Act (NTSA) to add the Great Western Trail. A continuous trail, using existing trails and back roads, would be designated within the conceptual Great Western Trail corridor, an area ranging from 50 to 100 miles wide. The routes, as identified on feasibility study maps, would accommodate normal trail or secondary road traffic. Federal segments would automatically become protected components of the trail. Non-Federal trail segments could not be added to the trail without the voluntary permission of the landowner.

This alternative would commit the Federal Government, in coordination with the State and local government agencies, to planning, historic interpretation, trail and resource protection, and development along the route under the authority of the NTSA.

As required by the NTSA, the lead Federal agency, most likely the USDA-Forest Service in this case, would prepare a comprehensive management and use plan. The Secretary of Agriculture would appoint an advisory council comprised of representatives of affected Federal agencies, State government, local agencies, representatives of the communities, corporate and individual landowners, users, and others with an established interest in the trail to advise on matters of trail management.

The Federal management role would most likely be one of administration, overall coordination, and oversight with State and local agencies, communities, and others as trail and site managers. Local land managers and volunteers would be encouraged to develop, operate, and maintain the trail. Both the NTSA and legislative history suggest that the best management scenario would provide State and local government agencies a major role. The comprehensive management plan would determine more precisely the Federal and State roles in right-of-way protection; interpretation of natural and cultural resources; protection of subsistence rights and traditional uses; development of facilities; and maintenance.

Federal funding would be required for preparation of a comprehensive management plan, completing resource inventories and protection plans, protecting resources, providing technical assistance and training in resource monitoring and interpretation, and support for other activities related to implementation of the management and use plan. Federal funding for land acquisition is not anticipated or projected in the cost estimate, although Federal funds could be used to acquire easements from willing sellers in limited instances.

Costs are based in comparison to current costs assumed with Forest Service administration of other National Scenic or National Historic Trails. Some National Trails advocates feel that this level of funding does not adequately reflect the need. Initial Federal costs to develop a comprehensive management plan and environmental impact statement required by this alternative is estimated to be $400,000 to $600,000. It is assumed that the Federal government would fund about one-half of the total costs for facility planning and development. Annual Federal operational costs are estimated to be $150,000 to $170,000. Great Western Trail staff
would most likely operate from a Forest Service office utilizing existing facilities and support staff. A logical centralized location for trail operations would be in Utah; however, other locations would also be suitable.

FEASIBILITY AND DESIRABILITY

Based on the definitions and requirements for National Scenic Trails described in the National Trails System Act, the Great Western Trail must meet qualifications for inclusion as a National Scenic Trail.

The study concludes that, although possible, the Great Western Trail is not a suitable candidate for inclusion as a National Scenic Trail. A National Scenic Trail does not allow motorized use unless an exception to Section 7 (c) of the National Trails System Act is made. The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail has such an exception that allows the use of motorized vehicles where trail segments were placed on motorized routes as long as it does not substantially interfere with the nature and purposes of the trail. The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail has been managed since 1978 using this authority. If the proposed Great Western Trail were designated a scenic trail, a similar exception would also be necessary.

The Great Western Trail is supported by a competent volunteer-based organization but this organization does not currently have full trail-wide support throughout northern Idaho and Montana. The study team has concluded that this alternative is not feasible at the present time because there is insufficient trail-wide support along the northern trail corridor. Opportunities for feasibility could be evaluated in the future, however, if a strong base of support from State, local government, or a grassroots organization does emerge.
ALTERNATIVE C: NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL (ARIZONA, UTAH, EASTERN IDAHO AND WESTERN WYOMING)

Under this alternative, the Great Western Trail would be designated a National Scenic Trail in the States of Arizona, Utah, eastern Idaho and western Wyoming. Forest Service administration, oversight and trail coordination would be provided along a corridor stretching from Mexico to the eastern Idaho-Montana border near West Yellowstone, Montana. No designation of the trail would be made in northern Idaho or Montana. Opportunities could be evaluated in the future, however, if a strong base of support from State, local government, or a grassroots organization does emerge. The Secretary of Agriculture would be available to lend assistance in planning, design, or implementation upon specific request. This alternative was developed in response to comments received opposing a National Trails designation in northern Idaho and Montana. This alternative only differs from Alternative B, a continuous National Scenic Trail from border to border, in the omission of trail routes crossing Montana and northern Idaho. Federal costs would be similar or slightly less than those proposed in Alternative B, however, as there would be fewer miles of trail under administration.

FEASIBILITY AND DESIRABILITY

With the involvement of State and local agencies, private landowners, and local groups, management of the trail would occur as a coordinated effort under Forest Service administration. An exception to Section 7 (c) of the National Trails System Act, which prohibits the use of motorized vehicles on National Scenic Trails, would be necessary. The study team has concluded that this alternative is possible and has sufficient public support. However, the suitability of designating a scenic trail along hundreds of miles of motorized routes is questionable and
may conflict with National Scenic Trail purposes. The team has concluded that although this alternative is possible, a National Scenic Trail designation is not well suited for Great Western Trail purposes.

**ALTERNATIVE D: NO NATIONAL TRAILS DESIGNATION – COORDINATED ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT**

Under Alternative D, the Great Western Trail would not be designated a National Trail. The Forest Service would, however, emphasize completion of a comprehensive management plan on the routes currently in place as well as proposed trail routes on the southern portion of the trail in Arizona, Utah, eastern Idaho, and western Wyoming. Northern Idaho and Montana would be excluded. Opportunities could be evaluated in the future, however, if a strong base of support from State, local government, or a grassroots organization does emerge. This alternative was developed in response to comments received opposing a National Trails designation in northern Idaho and Montana. Planning and inclusion of non-Federal lands would only occur with the permission of the landowner. Emphasis would be on a shared, coordinated administration and management of current Great Western Trail segments.

Federal expenses are estimated to cost from $400,000 to $600,000 to complete the management plan. Annual operating costs would be similar to Alternative A, where management and development costs are assumed on a forest-by-forest basis dependent on their involvement in Great Western Trail development.

**FEASIBILITY AND DESIRABILITY**

Although not allotted the full provisions of the National Trails System Act, this option could address natural resource concerns for the length of the existing and proposed southern Great Western Trail corridor. This option would ensure that comprehensive natural and heritage resource inventories are completed for the southern trail corridor. Necessary monitoring, mitigation, or trail relocation needs would be identified. A range of management options guiding current and future trail use would be analyzed with emphasis on shared responsibilities with competent volunteer-based organizations.

The study team has concluded that although this option could be an improvement over current conditions, without a National Trails designation it is not likely that completion of this plan would take high priority for agency funding or personnel. Also, this option does not afford the full provisions of National Trail status.
OTHER ALTERNATIVES TO BE CONSIDERED IF A NATIONAL DISCOVERY TRAIL CATEGORY IS ENACTED INTO LAW:

ALTERNATIVE E: NATIONAL DISCOVERY TRAIL (MEXICO TO CANADA)

Under Alternative E, the Great Western Trail would be designated a National Discovery Trail from Mexico to Canada. If the proposed Great Western Trail were to be authorized under a National Discovery Trail classification, Congress would need to amend the National Trails System Act to include National Discovery Trails as a class of trails in the National Trails System.

This new class of trails was examined in the feasibility study completed in January 1996 by the National Park Service for the proposed American Discovery Trail, a 6,000-mile east to west coast route incorporating local, regional, and national trails together. If passed into law, this would allow a new category of trails to be located along roadways, if necessary, in order to make trails continuous. National Discovery Trails, the study states, would link existing national, regional, and local trails into an integrated system, connecting urban areas with rural and backcountry areas. The purpose is for trail users to experience and learn (discover) about all aspects of American life and history. This includes the opportunity to learn about industry, agriculture, cultural settlements, Native American societies, historic sites and otherwise better understand this country and its diversity. This is a different purpose than just “scenic” as experienced on a National Scenic Trail, “historic” as experienced on a National Historic Trail, or “recreation” as experienced on a National Recreation Trail. Emphasis would shift toward Federal land management agencies sharing comprehensive trail planning, administrative operation, and maintenance of discovery trails with interagency groups and at least one competent trail wide volunteer-based organization. Although the Secretary charged with administration of a trail retains ultimate responsibility and accountability, strong State and local grassroots support, partnered with private support is an important component of this proposed trail category.

Costs are based in comparison to current costs assumed with Forest Service administration of other National Scenic or National Historic Trails. Some National Trails advocates feel that this level of funding does not adequately reflect the need. Initial Federal expense to develop a comprehensive management plan and environmental impact statement required by this alternative are estimated to cost from $400,000 to $600,000. It is assumed that the Federal government would fund about one-half of the total costs for facility planning and development. Annual Federal administrative costs are estimated to be $150,000 to $170,000. Great Western Trail staff would most likely operate from a Forest Service office utilizing existing facilities and support staff. A logical centralized location for trail operations would be in Utah; however, other locations would also be suitable.
FEASIBILITY AND DESIRABILITY

Congress would need to amend the National Trails System Act to include discovery trails as a category of trails in the National Trails System. The Forest Service, in coordination with others, would provide the comprehensive management plan with emphasis on connections to communities. The study team has concluded that this alternative is not suitable at the present time because there is insufficient trail-wide support along the northern trail corridor in northern Idaho and Montana. Opportunities could be evaluated in the future, however, if a strong base of support from State, local government, or a grassroots organization does emerge.

ALTERNATIVE F: NATIONAL DISCOVERY TRAIL (ARIZONA, UTAH, EASTERN IDAHO AND WESTERN WYOMING)

Under this alternative, the proposed Great Western Trail would be included in the National Trails System under National Discovery Trail designation. No designation of the Trail will be made in northern Idaho or Montana. Portions of the trail located north of the Idaho-Montana border near West Yellowstone, Montana would be designated only upon application from the State or local governments, if such segments meet the requirements of the National Trails System Act. The Secretary of Agriculture would be available to lend assistance in planning, design, or implementation upon specific request. This alternative was developed to respond to comments opposing designating of a Great Western Trail route along the northern reaches of the trail. This alternative only differs from Alternative E, a continuous National Discovery Trail from border to border, in the omission of trail routes crossing Montana and northern Idaho.

An amendment to the National Trails System Act authorizing a new category of national Discovery Trails to the National Trails System would be needed to implement this alternative, as a National Discovery Trail category does not currently exist. Federal costs would be similar or slightly less than those projected for Alternative E, a continuous border-to-border National Discovery Trail corridor, since the overall trail distance is less.

FEASIBILITY AND DESIRABILITY

In order to implement this alternative, Congress would need to amend the National Trails System Act to include discovery trails as a class of trails in the National Trails System. The study team has concluded that this alternative is feasible and desirable as this trail category best meets the purpose and vision of the Great Western Trail in accommodating the entire trails community. This alternative would afford the Great Western Trail protection as a National System Trail, provided a discovery category is added, and it has strong Federal, State, local government, community, and grassroots support. Opportunities for including portions of northern Idaho or Montana could be evaluated in the future if a strong base of support from State, local government, or a grassroots organization does emerge.
ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT ELIMINATED FROM FURTHER STUDY

NATIONAL RECREATION TRAIL – Much of the proposed Great Western Trail could satisfy the requirements in the National Trails System Act for this designation. However, National Recreation Trails must exist prior to designation. In the case of the Great Western Trail, some segments of the route have been designated but many follow existing roads that are not currently recognized as a part of the trail. There is not current strong support for adding the Great Western Trail as a National Recreation Trail because the benefits of such a designation are not as tangible. However, one option could be to fully designate additional segments with the future goal of applying for National Recreation Trail status.

NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL – In order to be designated a National Historic Trail, the Great Western Trail must meet three criteria: a) as a route or trail established by historic use and historically significant as a result of that use, b) of national significance in respect to any of several broad facets of American history; such as trade and commerce, exploration, migration and settlement, or military campaigns, and c) have significant potential for public recreational use or historical interest based on historic interpretation or appreciation. The Great Western Trail does partially meet stated criteria but fails to meet national significance as a continuous historic route because it is a composite of many different historic and modern travel routes, often isolated from each other. Therefore the trail does not meet requirements for inclusion as a National Historic Trail and this alternative was not explored.

NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL (discontinuous to include Federally administered land only) -- This alternative differs from the continuous National Scenic Trail alternative by including land administered by the Federal government only. State, county, or privately owned segments of the proposed Great Western Trail corridor would be designated only upon application from the States or local governmental agencies involved, if such segments meet the criteria of National Trails System Act and are administered by such agencies. The Secretary of Agriculture would be available to lend assistance in planning, design, or implementation upon specific request. Implementation of this alternative would significantly affect continuity of the trail system by segmenting and isolating Federally administered parcels of land. This would undermine effectiveness and defeat the main purpose for establishing the Great Western Trail: to provide a continuous long distance trail system. Therefore, this option was rejected from further analysis.

NATIONAL DISCOVERY TRAIL (discontinuous to include Federally administered land only) – Similar to the alternative listed above, with the exception that the designation consists of a National Discovery Trail, this alternative would include establishing the Great Western Trail solely on Federally administered land. As such, it does not meet the original intent and purpose to establish a long distance trail route and is therefore rejected from further analysis.
STUDY CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that the Great Western Trail represents a nationally significant trail, and that establishment of the route is physically feasible. The study also concludes that the Great Western Trail is not well suited as a candidate under the National Scenic Trail category. Even in areas of strong public support, the suitability of designating a scenic trail along hundreds of miles of motorized routes is questionable and may conflict with National Scenic Trails purposes.

The study team has found that the Great Western Trail is best suited under designation as a National Discovery Trail, a category that has been proposed, but not enacted into law. In areas where strong partnership relationships and public support exists, this proposal best meets the purpose and vision of the Great Western Trail in accommodating the entire trails community. Under all action alternatives, however, adequate funding must be ensured to provide for fully coordinated management of trail resources.