



File Code: 1950 and 2350
Date: October 16, 2024

To: Interested Parties of Forest Service Trails
Project: Red Rock Trails Access Plan Phase II-Turkey Creek
Open for comment: Oct. 16 to Nov. 14, 2024

The Red Rock Trails Access Plan Phase II proposes trail enhancements within the Turkey Creek area on the Coconino National Forest's Red Rock Ranger District (RRRD). These trails within the Village of Oak Creek in Yavapai County would add approximately 31 miles of non-motorized trails and re-route and naturalize other trails (see attached maps).

Re-scoping: The Red Rock Trails Access Plan Phase II will be open for a 30-day public comment period October 16 through November 14, 2024. Trail enhancements in the Turkey Creek area were originally included as part of the Red Rock Trails Access Plan open for public comment November 21 through December 20, 2023. The majority of public comments focused on the Turkey Creek area, with many addressed in this updated Phase II proposal. Trail projects outside of the Turkey Creek area in the original proposal were finalized in a Phase I decision signed August 1, 2024. Comments regarding Turkey Creek received during both the 2023 and the upcoming 2024 scoping periods are considered official, with no need to re-submit prior comments. No public meeting is scheduled for this project.

Project Revisions: During the fall 2023 scoping period, the public raised general concerns regarding trail density, trail design, signage, and user conflict. Concerns specific to the Turkey Creek area included prohibition of equestrian use in some areas, traffic, and parking challenges. In response to these concerns, the Forest Service has modified the proposal.

High-level changes are bulleted here, at a glance, and incorporated into the full project description below.

- Equestrian access: this proposal does not prohibit equestrian access to any proposed trails
- Equestrian trailer parking: in addition to construction of a main Turkey Creek Trailhead parking lot, this proposal includes a separate equestrian-only parking lot
- Trailhead modifications: the main Turkey Creek Trailhead and equestrian-only parking lots in this proposal are located on Verde Valley School Road. The current "Turkey Creek East" trailhead at the corner of Verde Valley School Road and Turkey Creek Trail Road (also known as Forest Road 216B) is proposed to be closed and restored to a natural setting.
- Verde Valley School: the Forest Service has worked directly with Verde Valley School to retain sustainable trail connections and to avoid sensitive school infrastructure
- Cultural resource impacts: some proposed trail routes have been changed to avoid impacts to archeological resources

BACKGROUND

Demand for non-motorized trails in "Red Rock Country" surrounding Sedona, Ariz., has increased dramatically in the past few decades. In recognition of increased demand, the Red Rock Ranger District concluded a public trail planning process for the City of Sedona and the Village of Oak Creek areas in October 2013. Results indicated a strong public demand for the following: trail links and connectors to enhance the existing trail system; trail re-routes for added sustainability; improved trailhead access;

addition of high-interest user-created routes into the Forest Service system of trails; and enhanced resource protection through reduction of social trails.¹

A significant portion of the proposed trails and trail systems included in the 2013 planning process have now been constructed, and the district currently maintains a popular network of more than 400 miles of recreational trails, encompassing some of the most popular and heavily visited locations in Arizona. It is estimated that more than 3 million people annually use these trails.

PURPOSE AND NEED

Based on public trail planning input in 2013 and informal input since, significant demand exists for increased non-motorized trail opportunities on the Red Rock Ranger District and within the Turkey Creek area specifically where just one 3.5-mile National Forest System trail exists.

Relatedly, more than 20 miles of “social trails” have proliferated in the Turkey Creek area. These are unauthorized, user-created trails that often have negative impacts on the landscape. While some social trails may address visitor desires not met by National Forest System trails, social trails in the Turkey Creek area are often in soft sandy soils near Oak Creek, are not constructed sustainably, and contain poor alignments that can lead to erosion; denuding of vegetation; habitat loss; and cultural resource damage. Improperly designed or constructed trails can also lead to user conflict and safety concerns.

Additionally, the location of the current Turkey Creek East trailhead at the Verde Valley School Road and Turkey Creek Trail Road/FR 216B intersection has, during peak times, reportedly led to cars overflowing onto the road and blocking traffic. Moreover, no trailhead in the Turkey Creek area is large enough to accommodate horse trailers.

The 2018 Coconino National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) provides direction related to these trail issues. Desired Conditions and Guidelines for Trails and Trailheads and for the Sedona Neighborwoods and House Mountain management areas include:

- Providing trail experiences that enhance the quality of life for residents (FW-Rec-All-DC-1)
- Providing a variety of trail types and levels of challenge for a diversity of users within a variety of settings. (FW-Rec-Trails-DC-2)
- Trails are planned and designed to be harmonious with neighboring lands and trail systems. (FW-Rec-Trails-DC-1)
- Multi-use trails are more common than single-use trails. (FW-Rec-Trails-DC5)
- Trailheads are easily accessible and are compatible with the traffic flow along main roads. Access roads to trailheads are open and maintained, and trailheads provide parking and vehicle turnaround space. (FW-Rec-Trails-DC-10)
- Trail use remains on the established trail surface and unplanned user-created trails are rare. (FW-Rec-Trails-DC-11)
- Trails and trailheads are built, re-routed, or maintained utilizing current best management practices that promote sustainable trail surfaces, prevent conflicts with neighboring lands, address impacts to other resources, and consider user experiences. (FW-Rec-Trails-G-1).
- National Forest System lands are easily accessible and provide access to recreational opportunities, while retaining other resource values. (MA-SedN-DC-1)
- A network of primarily non-motorized trails provides opportunities at multiple development levels for hikers and equestrians, as well as opportunities for OHV recreationists and mountain

¹ Unauthorized trail construction is prohibited on all National Forest System land

bikers outside of wilderness, while helping protect fragile natural resources and community relationships. Non-motorized trails provide access to the landscape for the community. (MA-SedN-DC-2, MA-HouseMtn-DC-2)

- Roads should be maintained at the lowest standard possible consistent with safety and the desired recreation experience. (MA-SedN-G-2, MA-HouseMTN-G2)

Additionally, the Forest Plan provides Desired Conditions and Guidelines for Watersheds and Water and for Heritage Resources:

- Watersheds are functioning properly and are resilient to natural and human disturbances. (FW-Water-DC1)
- Best management practices for management activities should be identified, implemented, and monitored to maintain water quality, quantity, and timing of flows, and to prevent or reduce accelerated erosion. (FW-Water-G-4)
- Unplanned user-created trails that lead to archaeological sites should be eliminated to protect sites from damage and looting. (FW-HRTG-G-4)

Trail improvements are needed to address social trails and provide for the desired use they indicate while addressing negative natural and cultural resource impacts. Adding or re-aligning routes would allow equestrians to more easily traverse the forest; provide sustainable access to the forest for residents; and provide a variety of opportunities for all non-motorized users. Decommissioning unsustainable social trails and implementing best management practices for planned routes would improve resilience in the Turkey Creek drainage and Oak Creek watershed, including archaeological resource protection. Trailhead improvements would reduce impacts from unmanaged parking and provide space for equestrian trailers.

The purpose of this project, therefore, is to: improve visitor experience; reduce user conflict; reduce impacts to natural and cultural resources; and provide for community connection to the National Forest through targeted trail improvements.

PROPOSED ACTION

The Red Rock Trails Access Plan Phase II would construct 21.20 miles of new non-motorized trail; reroute 1.72 miles of National System Trails; adopt 10.21 miles of social trails; and close/naturalize 10.57 miles of social trails. Added trails would be placed on the Coconino National Forest trail system and would be managed as Class 2 or Class 3 trails, per the Forest Service National Trails Classification System. All trails would be constructed by hand and would be managed to maintain a narrow tread with a rugged character and be closed to motorized use. Social trails added to the National Forest System would be modified to meet trail sustainability standards.

	New Trail Construction	Social Trail Adoption	System Trail Re-route	Social Trail Naturalization	System Trail Naturalization
Turkey Creek System	21.20 miles	10.21 miles	1.72 miles	10.57 miles	0.96 miles
Construction, adoption and naturalization of social trails in the Village of Oak Creek, mostly west of Verde Valley School Road on 1,800 acres of National Forest lands. Includes closure of existing Turkey Creek East trailhead and construction of one trailhead along Verde Valley School Road, with an adjacent parking lot for equestrian users with horse trailers.					

Trail Network: The proposed multiple loop trail network would move users away from trailheads while minimizing user conflicts. Users would have a variety of trail experiences close to the trailheads, allowing for a constant flow of traffic in these higher-use areas. Away from the trailhead, trail density would become much lower as users spread out from the trailheads. The project would re-route portions of the Turkey Creek Trail and would link Forest Service trails to the Red Rock State Park and nearby trails to enhance overall trail capacity.

Trail Designed Use, Recommended Use, and Rating: These system trails would be designed and maintained with certain user groups in mind but allow for all compatible uses to the extent feasible. Equestrian, biking, and hiking uses would be standard uses for these system trails, though some trails may not be recommended for certain uses due to the grade, amount of rock present, soil stability, and similar factors. Trails recommended for all non-motorized users would implement design features, such as lower grades, embedded rock, and narrow tread to encourage lower user speeds and reduce erosion. Trails recommended for equestrian use would be cleared to provide enough space for horses, and trail rock armoring would only be placed where necessary. Trails recommended for mountain bike and hiking use only would receive less clearing of adjacent brush than equestrian trails to reduce speeds of bikers and prevent tread widening. For designed use by trail segment, see the attached Map 5: Turkey Creek Recommended Use. Difficulty ratings for all non-motorized trails would be incorporated on all kiosk maps provided at trailheads and on junction maps within trail systems.

Trail Signage: User etiquette and yield signage would be provided on all kiosks maps at trailheads and at the beginning of system trails departing from trailheads and at junction maps within the trail system. Additionally, “No E-bikes/No Pedal Assist” signage would be installed at the majority of entry points into the trail system.

Trail Restoration: Naturalization of approximately 10.57 miles of social trails and 0.96 miles of National Forest System trails would occur. Methods for trail naturalization would be determined on a case-by-case basis, whether active or passive. Passive measures include posting “trail closed” signage and/or placing debris to block access and let natural processes restore an area at a natural pace. Active methods include loosening the soil; seeding; installing check dams; placing cut boughs or vertical mulch to obscure the area; adding temporary area closures or fencing; or similar actions. To assist with restoration, out-of-view juniper trees could be cut to use in trail naturalization efforts. Trail naturalization would be done first where watershed concerns are the greatest and where effective system trails have been established.

New Trailheads: The Red Rock Trails Access Plan Phase II would construct a new main trailhead and parking lot that would accommodate approximately 35 vehicles (similar in size to the Baldwin Trailhead) as well as an equestrian-only parking lot to accommodate approximately five horse trailers. Both parking lots would be located along Verde Valley School Road southeast of the current Turkey Creek East trailhead location. Each parking lot may include infrastructure such as toilets, picnic tables, trash cans, and kiosk signage. The parking lots will be reviewed by Yavapai County officials prior to construction to ensure safe access to and from Verde Valley School Road.

Existing Trailheads: The existing Transept Trailhead would also be adopted officially. The Transept Trailhead would not be expanded, but kiosk signage would be installed. Forest Service staff would consult with Yavapai County officials to see if safety at the trailhead can be improved through signage, a crosswalk, or similar infrastructure. In addition, naturalization of the existing Turkey Creek East Trailhead would occur after the construction of the new trailheads. Naturalization activities would be similar to those described above for trails.

Categorical Exclusion

This proposed project falls under National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Regulation 36 CFR 220.6, which allows that a proposed action may be categorically excluded from further documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or Environmental Assessment (EA) only if there are no significant impacts to extraordinary circumstances and if the proposed action is within one of the categories in Title 7, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 1b (7 CFR part 1b) or Title 36 CFR 220.6(d) or (e). Based on experience with similar projects, a categorical exclusion is the proposed level of analysis for this project. This project falls under 220.6(e)(1): *Construction and reconstruction of trails*.

Resource Reviews

Archeological, botanical, and wildlife surveys have been completed for the project area and are being reviewed by Forest Service specialists. Input from this review will be considered prior to a decision.

Implementation Timeline

Trail improvements would begin as early as spring 2025. The Turkey Creek trail system would use Forest Service trail crews and volunteers. In addition, assistance from conservation youth corps crews over an approximately three-year implementation timeline would occur. Project implementation would be funding dependent, with the significant majority of funding from sources external to the Forest Service. The Coconino National Forest would also rely on local communities to help maintain new trails through volunteer work and participation with area non-profit organizations.

Related Future Projects

Oak Creek carries an Outstanding Arizona Waters designation and has strict water quality and anti-degradation standards tied to sedimentation. Relatedly, the Red Rock Ranger District considers Oak Creek to be a priority area to offer recreational opportunities while also protecting natural resources. Because roads and trails can increase sedimentation, the district intends to initiate planning in 2025 on a project to decommission unauthorized or closed roads within the Oak Creek watershed. This would build on road-decommissioning actions in the 2019 Oak Creek Watershed Restoration project and continue progress to restore Oak Creek.

Opportunity to Comment

We invite you to provide substantive comments regarding the proposed action. “Substantive comments” are within the scope of the project and the decision to be made, are specific to the proposed activities in the project area and have a direct relationship to the project. If you cite or include references with your comments, we ask that you state specifically how those references relate to the proposed action. Include hard copies or functioning internet links to any references. Please submit comments prior to the close of the comment period by **November 14, 2024**.

Submit comments in writing online at <https://tinyurl.com/RedRockAccessPhaseIIComment>; via mail to Red Rock Ranger District, Attention: Red Rock Trails Enhancement, 8375 State Route 179, Sedona, AZ 86351; or in person at the Red Rock Ranger District Office.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection.

Contact Person

View project information online at <https://tinyurl.com/RedRockAccessPhaseII> or contact Recreation Management Specialist Kevin Kuhl at Kevin.Kuhl@usda.gov or (928) 203-7519.

Sincerely,

ALEXANDER SCHLUETER

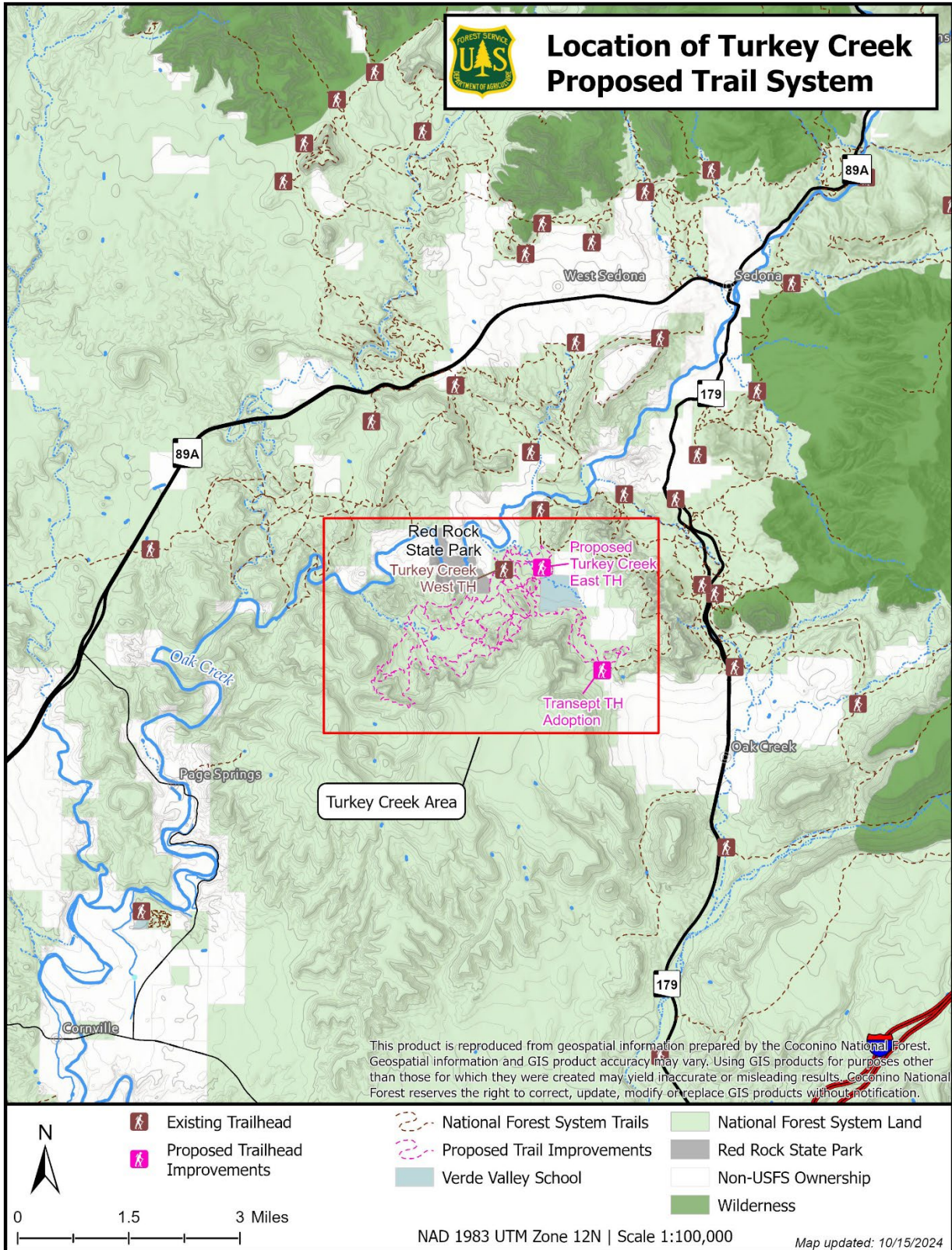
District Ranger

Map Enclosures

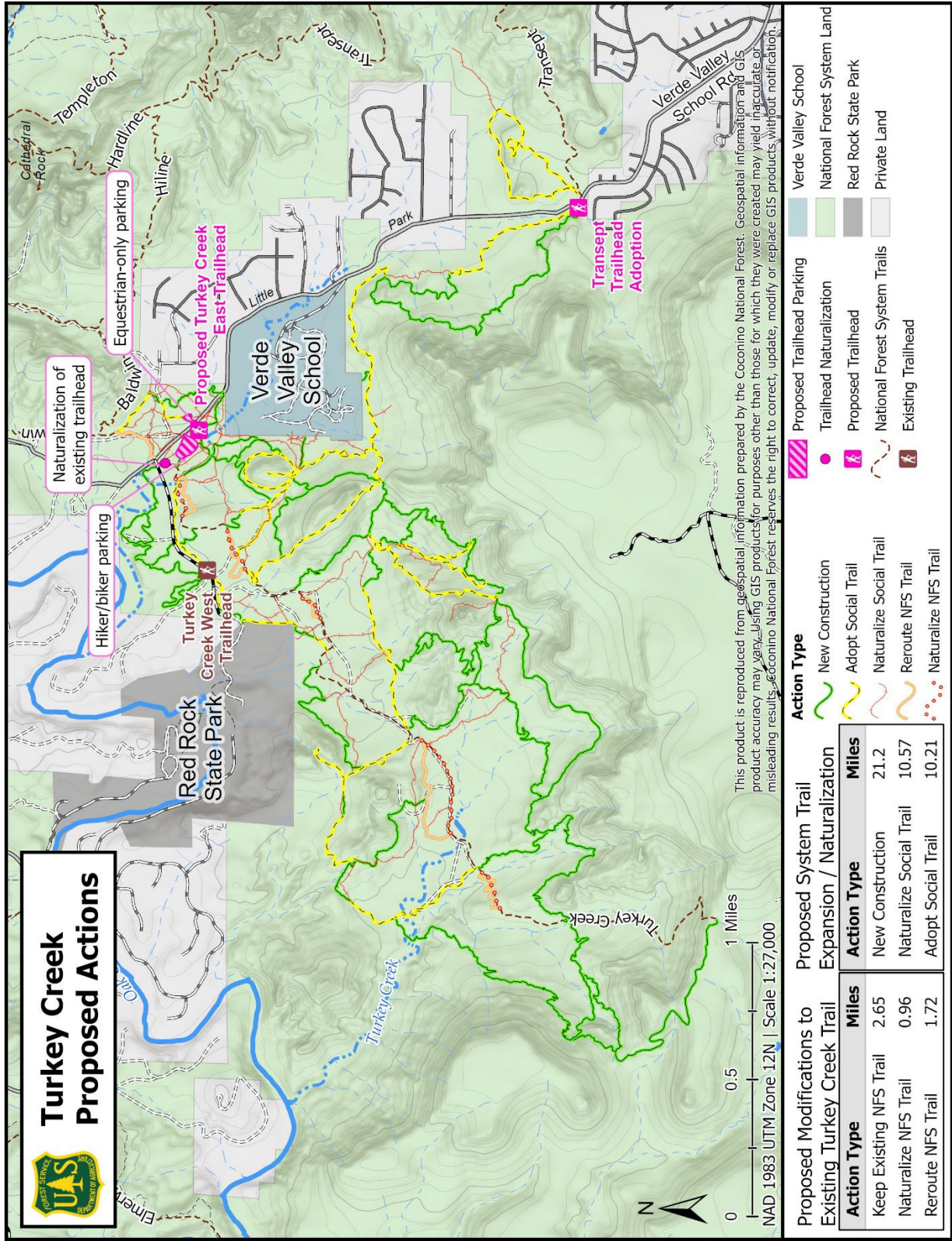
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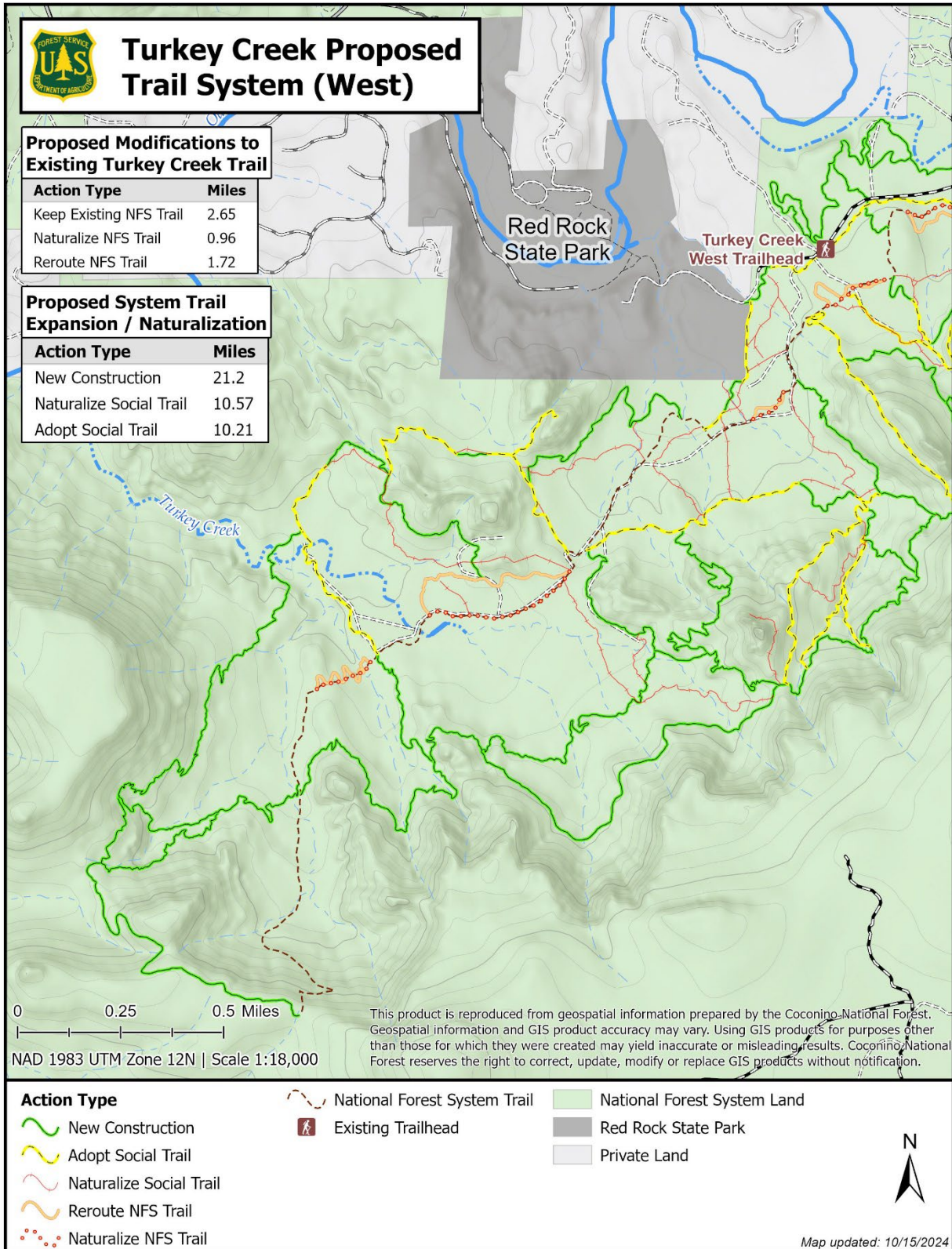
Map 1: Vicinity Map



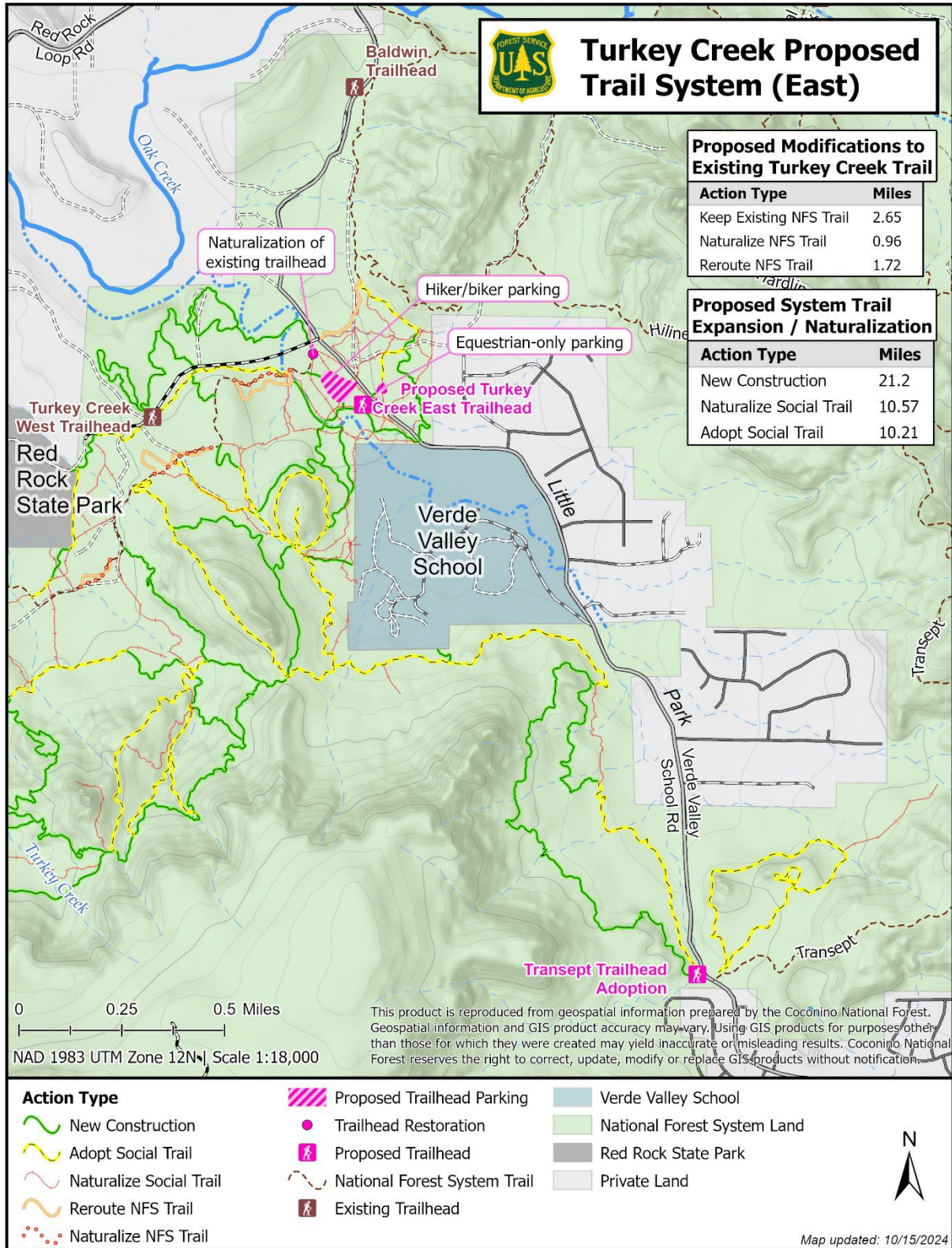
Map 2: Turkey Creek Proposed Action



Map 3: Turkey Creek West



Map 4: Turkey Creek East



Map 5: Turkey Creek Recommended Use

