
Upper Mill Creek Canyon Road Improvement Project

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What National Environmental Policy Act document was the Federal Highways Administration, Central Federal Lands Highway Division (FHWA-CFLHD) proposing for this project? What type of environmental review document did the Federal Highways Administration's Central Division (FHWA-CFLHD) decide to use for this project?

For federal projects like this one, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires federal agencies to decide the NEPA class of action. This decision helps guide the amount of analysis and public and agency outreach is needed. In the case of this project, the team originally believed the project could be approved with a more streamlined review called a categorical exclusion, as outlined in 23 CFR § 771.117(d). However, after meeting with project partners and evaluating the high-level of public interest, it was decided to elevate the NEPA class of action to an environmental assessment.

2. What is the purpose and need for project?

The purpose of the project is to improve user safety, access to recreational opportunities for all users, and water quality degraded by surface erosion and poor drainage infrastructure.

The project is needed because Upper Mill Creek Canyon currently has traffic congestion, safety issues, and resource damage resulting from inconsistent roadway widths, limited pedestrian and bicycle facilities, substandard parking, and poor drainage infrastructure.

See Upper Mill Creek Canyon Road Improvement Project EA section 1.2.

3. Who makes the decision on the project? How is the Forest Service involved?

Salt Lake County has an easement to operate and maintain the roadway. This easement, which was established in 1991 under the Forest Road and Trail Act (FRTA), granted a non-exclusive 66-foot-wide easement to operate and maintain the roadway in the upper and lower portions of the canyon. The Federal Highway Administration is funding the project under the Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP) and is the lead federal agency making the decision on actions within the FRTA easement.

The Forest Service is a cooperating agency and has limited decision space on the Proposed Action. The Forest Service will issue a separate decision document using the FHWA-CFLHD EA to make decisions on the:

- Termination of the existing 1991 FRTA easement and authorization of a FRTA easement of similar width over NFS lands. The new easement would include additional areas that would require frequent maintenance by Salt Lake County, such as drainage features.
 - Authorization of construction on NFS lands outside of the new FRTA easement to stabilize slopes adjacent to the roadway. These areas would not require frequent maintenance by Salt Lake County.
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- Replacement of unsafe and environmentally damaging informal roadside parking with parking lots.
 - Proposed improvements outside of the easement, including trailheads, picnic areas, and trail relocations to connect existing trails to the relocated improvements.

4. What Alternatives were considered?

The Proposed Action and No Action Alternative were fully considered in the EA. Additional alternatives were considered but dismissed from further analysis such as increased roadway width throughout the canyon, extending the proposed bike lane to Upper Big Water Trailhead, adjusting parking areas, and more.

These were dismissed due to these actions not meeting the purpose and need of the project due to resource and safety concerns, and/or were determined to be infeasible due to physical and/or natural resource related constraints (slope, stream proximity etc.).

5. Was a shuttle system considered? What about fees, differing days, parking lot counters etc.?

While these operational changes have the potential to reduce congestion and improve user safety in upper Mill Creek Canyon, they do not address existing erosion issues or the inadequate drainage infrastructure. The ability of these operational considerations to improve recreational access varies, and many of them would restrict access to certain user groups, which is counter to improving recreational opportunities. Furthermore, the current degraded state of the roadway, erosion issues, and inadequate drainage infrastructure must be addressed regardless of whether shuttles and/or other operational changes are considered in canyon.

As proposed, the project would not inhibit the implementation of any of these operational considerations in the future and would serve to facilitate the implementation of shuttle service.

However, these and similar types of operational considerations are beyond the scope of this project and fail to fully meet the project's purpose and need; thus, they were excluded from further analysis in this EA.

The Forest Service and FHWA-CFLHD decisions on the Proposed Action do not preclude any future decisions the Forest Service and/or Salt Lake County may make regarding public transit or other visitor use or vehicle management systems such as timed-entry, permits, etc. in Mill Creek Canyon.

Proponents of a shuttle system in Mill Creek Canyon should continue to advocate for such a system through local interest groups, Salt Lake County, and the Forest Service.

6. How will this road width compare to other canyons?

The 10-foot-wide lanes proposed in Upper Mill Creek Canyon would generally be narrower than those in adjacent canyons. For comparison, standard highway lanes like those in Little and Big Cottonwood Canyons are 12 feet wide. The narrowest lane width recommended by the Utah Department of Transportation for any road is 10 feet (Design Manual Drawing No. DM 4.1).

Similarly, federal lane-width guidance for rural and urban collector roads is 10 to 12 feet (A Policy on Geometric Design of Highways and Streets). The road shoulders would also be narrower than those found in adjacent canyons, contributing to an overall roadway width that is less than the roads in these comparison canyons.

7. How will the character of the canyon change?

The widening of Mill Creek Canyon Road would result in a roadway that looks similar to the existing road in many areas. Some areas would require cut slopes, fill slopes, and retaining walls to stabilize slopes adjacent to sections of the existing and realigned roadway, many of which would be visible to motorists and recreationists travelling through the project area.

In many areas, vegetation overhangs the road, especially in the upper canyon. Vegetation removal required for the reconstructed roadway could result in a more open viewshed as seen by roadway users in some areas. While the reconstructed road would involve minor realignments, it would follow natural topographic contours and visually fit in with the landscape in much the same way as the existing road.

Independent from the Upper Mill Creek Road Improvement Project, the Forest Service is planning a fuels reduction project in Mill Creek Canyon. The fuels project will remove some vegetation along the existing roadway to improve wildfire resiliency in the canyon, including the removal of diseased and hazard trees adjacent to the roadway.

While there would be visual changes associated with the Proposed Action, the anticipated visual impacts would be consistent with the landscape character and Scenic Integrity Objectives defined by the Forest Service for the analysis area. Aesthetic considerations and context-sensitive design elements would further contribute to reducing visual impacts and maintaining the current level of scenic integrity throughout the analysis area.

8. Upper Mill Creek Canyon naturally lends itself to reduced vehicle speed because of the narrow roadway and multiple uses. Will the increased road width and bike lane result in increased vehicle speed in the canyon?

The speed limit in the canyon would not increase as part of this project. Lane widths in the upper and lower portions of the project area would be made more consistent (10 feet throughout most of the project area, as described in Section 2.2.1 of the EA), which would increase the predictability and safety for all users. Many portions of the roadway already meet the design widths and would not be widened.

Increased lane width can increase operational speeds, although this relationship is complex and dependent on several other variables. A [FHWA report](#) notes that operational speeds tend to increase approximately 0.4 to 1.1 mph on two-lane highways for every 1-foot increase in lane width. Applying this to the Proposed Action, where lane width increases vary between 0 and 3.5 feet (assuming an average increase of 1.75 feet), the anticipated speed increase compared to existing conditions would be about 0.7 to 2 mph. The safety benefits associated with consistent lane width, increased sight distance, constant radius curves, and consistent striping are predicted to outweigh the expected nominal increase in average vehicle speed.

Further, as evidence of the success of bicycle lanes increasing safety, the Wasatch Canyons General Plan Update notes that the uphill bicycle lane added in lower Mill Creek Canyon in 2018 successfully

mitigated conflicts in that area. Studies cited by FHWA found that bicycle lane additions can reduce crashes on collector and local roads by 30%.

9. How was appropriate lane width determined?

Lane widths were designed using guidance in state and federal design manuals such as the AASHTO Green Book, A Policy on Geometric Design of Highways and Streets, and the Utah Department of Transportation's Roadway Design Manual.

Considering the design speed, traffic volume, and width of many emergency vehicles (9.5 feet, including mirrors), the proposed 10-foot lane width is the minimum practical width. The design uses this minimum practical lane width to intentionally keep the roadway narrow to preserve the character of the canyon, reduce environmental impacts, and discourage excessive speeds while meeting project objectives.

10. What other cyclist safety improvements would be made?

Bicycle safety features proposed in the project include bike lane symbols, sharrows, and yield arrows using thermoplastic pavement markings with glass beads. Thermoplastic pavement markings are known for their durability and longevity, remaining visible and vibrant far longer than paint even in high-traffic areas.

11. How long will Mill Creek Canyon Road, above the Winter Gate, be closed for as part of these proposed changes? Why would the project take this amount of time vs. alternative options (e.g. a partial closure)?

Construction of the upper Mill Creek Canyon Road Improvement Project is anticipated to take from Spring 2025 through Fall 2026 to complete. The construction season would start as soon as seasonal snowpack is receding and conditions are suitable for construction activities. Construction start is anticipated in May 2025, conditions allowing, and would continue until winter conditions halt construction, likely around December 1.

The project team evaluated all proposed alternative methods of construction without a road closure. Constructability and safety are primary considerations for the road closures. Due to the limited existing roadway width and tight confines of the canyon, there isn't sufficient space to pass construction equipment, stage materials off the roadway, and only limited opportunity to perform concurrent construction activities. To minimize impacts of the road closures on canyon users the trails will remain open to the extent practical, Firs Cabin access will be allowed at designated times, and the road will be open for snow grooming and normal winter recreation during a winter shutdown of construction activities.

12. Will the public be notified of temporary road and trail closures? How would this occur?

The construction contractor would be responsible for preparing and implementing a traffic control plan with public noticing. Salt Lake County and the Forest Service will also post updates at physical locations in the canyon, on agency websites, and on social media regarding trail and traffic closures in the canyon

during the project. The Forest Service would be responsible for posting signs along trails at major intersections and trailheads before construction. Information will be available at the Mill Creek Canyon fee booth to inform the public of the planned and current trail detours and closures.

13. How can I access the Upper Canyon (Winter Gate to Upper Big Water Trailhead) during construction?

Trails and the road will be open to winter recreation opportunities as discussed below. Outside of the winter recreation period upper Mill Creek Canyon Road, adjacent recreation areas, and some trail segments in the project area would be closed to the public during construction. Most trails connecting through Mill Creek Canyon would remain open year-round, including a crossing through the construction area at Elbow Fork (a decision is still being made as to whether Old Red Pine Road and Little Water trails will remain open).

Recreationalist can access Upper Mill Creek Canyon Trails from:

- Lower Pipeline Trail in Mill Creek Canyon starting at the Burch Hollow Trailhead in Mill Creek Canyon
- Terraces/Elbow Fork Trail via Porter Fork Trailhead and the Terraces Trailhead in Mill Creek Canyon
- Lambs Canyon Trail via the Lambs Canyon Trailhead from Lambs/Parley's Canyon
- Wasatch Crest Trail will remain open, which has numerous starting points from Big Cottonwood Canyon and Summit County
- Access to Dog Lake/ Big Water Trails via Mill D North Trailhead starting in Big Cottonwood Canyon
- The new Upper Pipeline Trail that parallels the Upper Mill Creek Canyon Road will remain open. This trail will provide access from Elbow Fork to Alexander Basin and the Big Water Trails to Dog Lake. This trail will be open and accessible via the Elbow Fork Trail Crossing

A trail closure and detour map can be found at the end of the FAQ.

Recreation sites available during construction:

Trailheads and picnic sites below the Winter Gate in Mill Creek Canyon will be open and operated normally during construction, including:

- Rattlesnake, Porter Fork, and Burch Hollow Trailheads
- Church Fork, South Box Elder, Main Box Elder, and Upper Box Elder Picnic Sites

Recreation sites not available during construction:

Trailheads above the Winter Gate are being improved and/or relocated during construction and will therefore be closed during for the entire project duration from approximately May 2025 through December 2026 (construction schedule may be revised as needed; check project website for more information). Likewise, access to picnic areas at and above the Winter Gate will be modified as part of the road reconstruction and therefore these picnic areas will be closed for the duration of the project. Restrooms and other amenities at these sites will not be open or available during this time. Sites that will be closed for the duration of the project include:

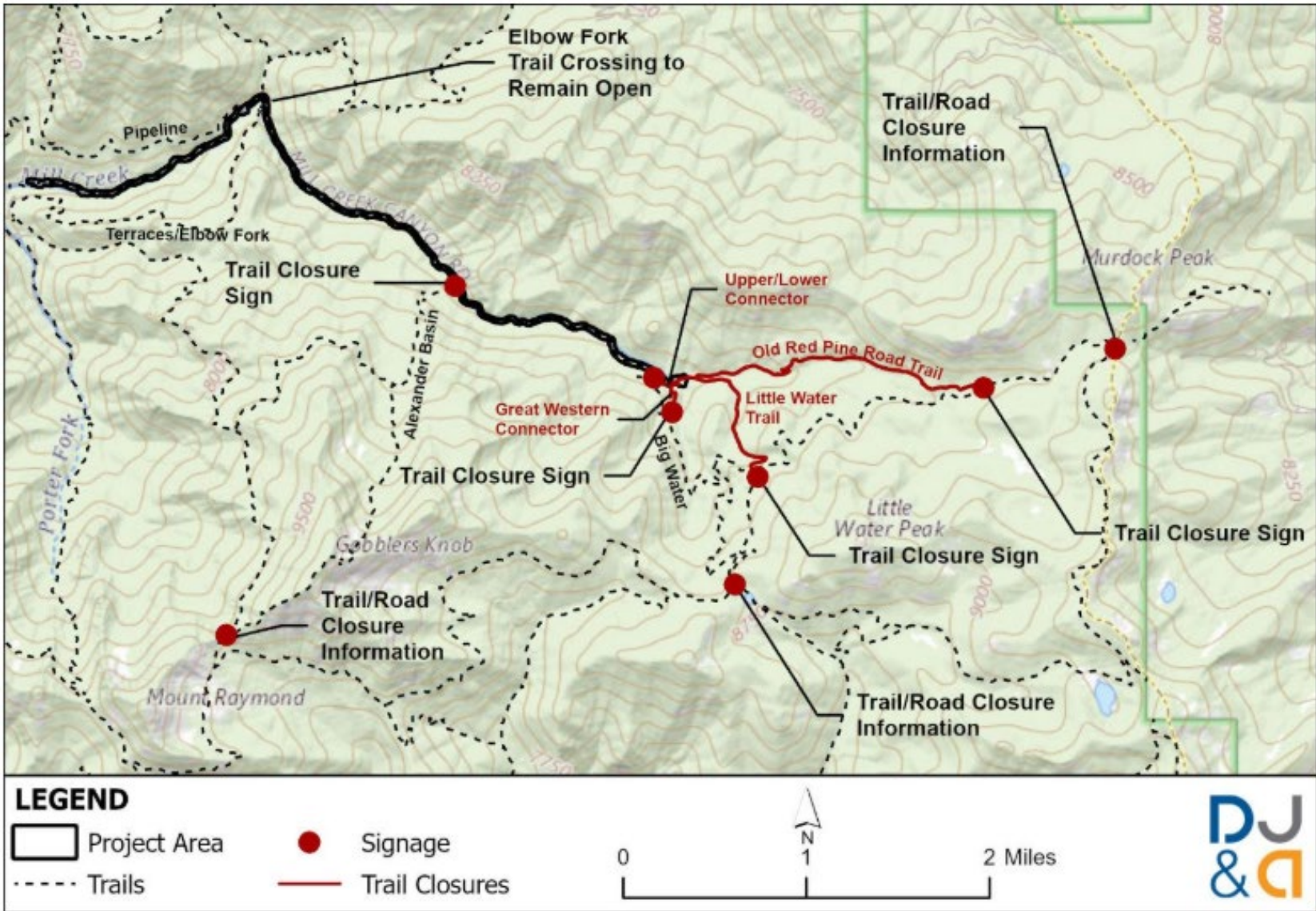
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- Elbow Fork, Alexander Basin, Lower Big Water, and Upper Big Water Trailheads
 - Maple Grove, White Bridge, Maple Cove, Evergreen, Clover Springs, and Fir Crest Picnic Areas

Mill Creek Canyon Road above the Winter Gate will be open for winter recreation.

Construction will pause during the winter months, and Mill Creek Canyon Road would be open above the Winter Gate for winter recreation activities between roughly December 15 and March 15, and possibly longer depending on conditions and the actual construction schedule. The USFS would continue to groom the snow along the road for recreation uses during the winter pause of construction activities.

Firs Cabin Owners will be able to access their cabin over designated weekends.

Firs Cabin owners will be provided with access to their cabins over four designated weekends (Memorial Day, Pioneer Day, Independence Day, and Labor Day) each construction season to check on cabins and perform any needed maintenance. During these scheduled access times, the roadway would be drivable by high-clearance vehicles such as trucks or sport utility vehicles. Steel plates will cover ditches, open trenches, and holes would be installed as necessary to allow vehicle passage. Mill Creek Canyon Road within the project area would remain closed to the public during these weekends.



Proposed Trail Closure and Detour Plan current as of April 12, 2024