



## **Sterling Mine Ditch Trail:**

### **Trail Management Plan**

OREGON PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT

# Sterling Mine Ditch Trail: Trail Management Plan

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© Oregon Parks and Recreation Department  
725 Summer Street NE, Suite C  
Salem, OR 97301  
503-986-0707

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## Part 1 – Trail Map and Description of Route

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The Sterling Mine Ditch Trail (SMDT) is an historic trail built in 1877 to carry water for gold mining. It is primarily located on public lands managed by the Medford District Bureau of Land Management (BLM) with some short sections on private lands in Jackson County, Oregon. It is approximately 10 miles south of Jacksonville, Oregon. The SMDT traverses the slopes of the ridges around Anderson Butte in the Siskiyou Mountains. The trail is open to non-motorized recreational users only, including hikers, runners, equestrians, and bicyclists. The trail elevation is less than 3,000 feet, so it is open and accessible to users year-round.

The trail follows the berm of the Sterling Mine Ditch, a 26 mile long ditch that was constructed in 1877 to carry water from the Little Applegate River to support hydraulic mining at the Sterling Mine. The trail follows approximately 22 miles of the original ditch except for three short sections where bypass trails have been constructed around privately owned parcels. The ditch was designed to follow the contours of a series of ridges as it gradually loses 200 feet of elevation over its length. This created a gradient that is nearly level for much of its length that provides a unique outdoor opportunity for hikers of all ages and abilities. There are currently seven access trails between ½ and 1 mile long that connect to the SMDT from parking areas on county or BLM roads, and one trailhead that accesses the ditch directly. Most of the access trails leading to the SMDT as well as two sections of trail that were constructed to bypass private property have steeper gradients as they traverse up or down the slopes of the complex of ridges surrounding Anderson Butte.





As the trail follows the contours of the land, it changes character many times, depending on the aspect of the slope. The terrain includes open oak, madrone, and manzanita woodlands, open meadows, and forested gulches. On the north-facing slopes there are stands of large Ponderosa Pine and Douglas Fir, and there are two seasonal waterfalls. The trail provides expansive views of the Siskiyou Crest, Little Applegate, and Applegate Valleys. The spring wildflowers are spectacular, including some rare and endemic species, and there is also a diverse population of birds and wildlife common to the region. There are some historic features along the trail, including a tunnel, rock walls, drilling scars where rock had to be dynamited to construct the ditch, and remnants of flumes that were constructed to cross gulches where it was not possible to continue the ditch.

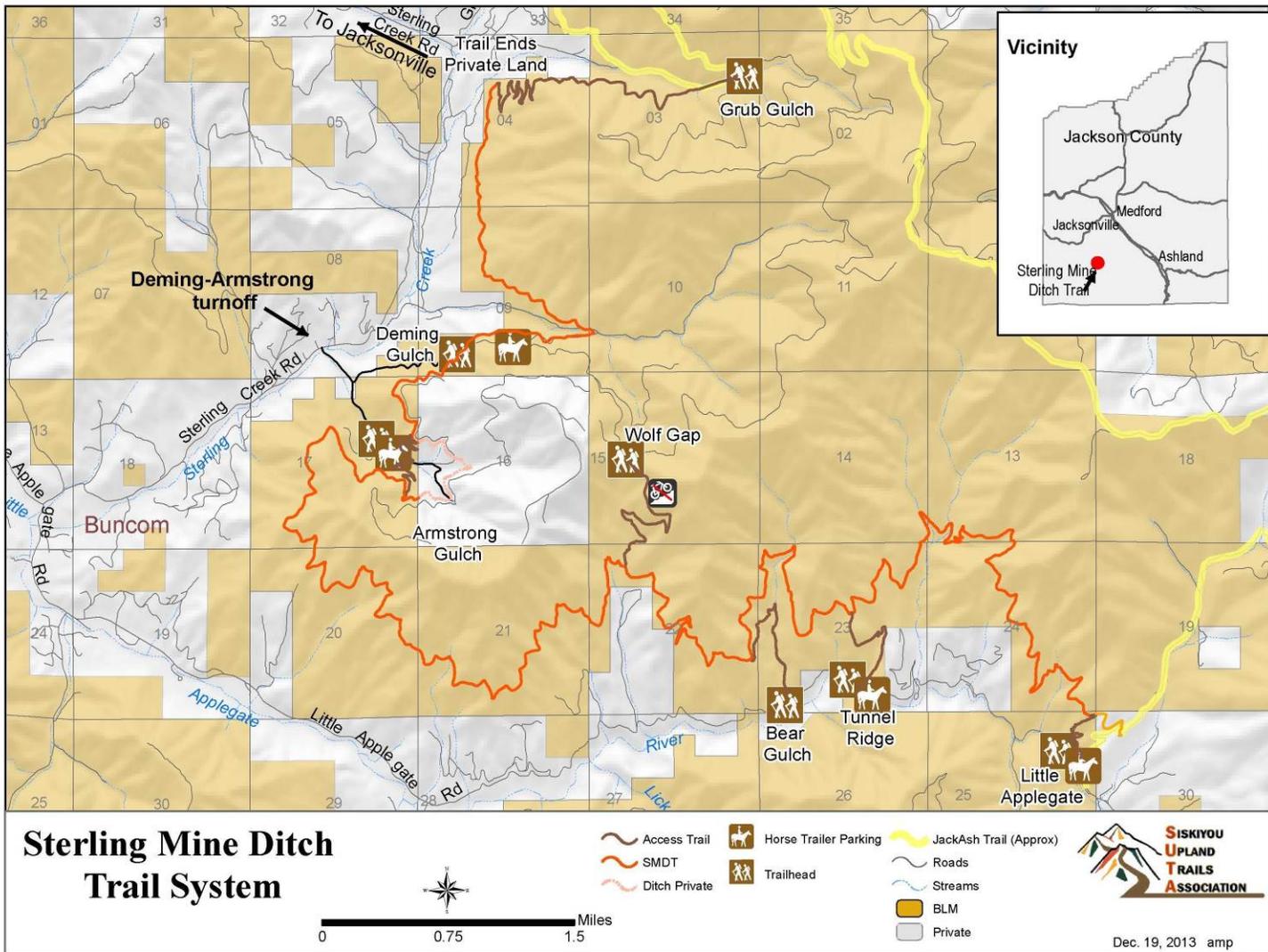


The Siskiyou Upland Trails Association (SUTA) is a non-profit organization that was formed in 2009 to maintain the SMDT and develop and maintain trails between the communities of Jacksonville and Ashland OR. SUTA partners with the Medford District BLM, the land manager for the SMDT and surrounding public lands. Until approximately 4 years ago, only a 5-mile loop of the SMDT was open and maintained. SUTA has led the effort to recruit volunteers and obtain grant funds to reopen much of the SMDT

that had become overgrown and inaccessible. In addition to reopening more than 15 miles of the trail and constructing several new access trails, projects that have been completed include improving and expanding trailhead parking and access, installing signs and trailhead kiosks, preparing interpretive materials, and promoting the trail for non-motorized users. SUTA also sponsored two highly successful 'SMDT History Night' events to highlight the rich history of the ditch and the gold mining legacy it represents.

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## Part 2 – Public notification and stakeholder involvement

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A public meeting to notify stakeholders about the State Scenic Trails application and process was held on March 4, 2014 at the Jacksonville, OR library.

The following stakeholders have been notified and requested to provide input about the Scenic Trails application process and what the Scenic Trail designation would mean for the SMDT and its users:

- The Medford District of the BLM, land manager for the SMDT and surrounding public lands. The Medford District's Recreation Planner is Jeanne Klein and the Ashland Resource Area Recreation Planner is Dennis Byrd. The BLM has reviewed and concurs with this Management Plan.
- Jackson County Parks and Recreation Department, Steve Lambert.
- Individual landowners who own property adjacent to the SMDT.
- Klamath-Siskiyou Wild and the Rogue Valley Chapter of the Sierra Club. Both organizations advocate for the public lands in the region and also sponsor hikes on the SMDT.
- User groups, including the Southern Oregon Runners and Rogue Valley Mountain Bike Association, Jackson County Horsemen, and Rogue Riders.

The following methods have been used to notify potentially affected parties about the Scenic Trails application and process and how it would benefit users, businesses, landowners, and any other interested parties:

- Electronic – SUTA has a comprehensive website ([www.sutaoregon.org](http://www.sutaoregon.org)) that provides historical information, trail maps and descriptions, information about upcoming events, and links to the BLM and other pertinent websites. The Scenic Trails application and process are posted on the website. SUTA also has more than 250 people on its email list and all participants have been notified about the Scenic Trails application and process via email.
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- Print - SUTA frequently provides articles to the local community newspapers to provide information about trail activities, new trail segments, hike descriptions, and any other related news. The Medford Mail Tribune and Jacksonville Review have published several articles about the SMDT and trail activities in the past several years, and the Scenic Trails application and process has been published in as many print sources as possible.
  - Social media – SUTA has many Facebook ‘friends and likes’ who receive trail activity updates and provide comments. The Scenic Trails application and process information have been shared via our Facebook page with a request for input.
  - Outreach: SUTA works closely with other local trails groups such as the Applegate Trails Association, Ashland Woodland Trails Association, and Jacksonville Woodlands Trails Association as well as other user groups such as Southern Oregon Runners, Rogue Valley Mountain Bike Association, Rogue Riders Jackson County Horsemen Association, and Oregon Equestrian Trails (Rogue Valley Chapter). SUTA members also attend the Trail Coalition Meetings for the Rogue Valley. The Trails Coalition pulls together all trail user groups in the Rogue Valley, both motorized and non-motorized to build relationships and understanding with other trail user groups who do volunteer work and promote trails in the greater area. These groups have been notified and asked for input.
  - Meeting documentation: All of the input received at the public meeting has been documented and reported to the Oregon Recreational Trails advisory council.
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## Part 3 – Trail facility review

**Trail** - The SMDT system has nearly 30 miles of single-track native surface trails open to the public for non-motorized use. The trail runs primarily along the top of the lower berm that was created when the ditch was constructed—it is approximately 3' above the ditch, and approximately 5' wide. The tread width ranges from 12 to 18 inches. The trail sections along the ditch have a nearly level grade, while the access trails and sections constructed to bypass private property can range up to a 15% grade for short spans. The BLM breached the berm in places to prevent flooding, so occasionally short sections of the trail drop into the ditch to bypass these 'cuts.' A few additional short trail sections follow the ditch because the berm has been overgrown by large trees or eroded by flooding. The SMDT system also connects to a number of unimproved or gravel BLM roads to form loops for longer distance recreational opportunities.

**Support facilities** – The trail has seven designated trail heads, four of which have horse trailer turnaround and parking areas. The trailheads and available amenities are shown in **Table 1**. In addition, wooden benches are placed at six locations along the trail to allow users to rest while enjoying the surroundings and often sweeping views, and short wooden puncheon bridges are located at Blacksmith and Muddy Gulch to provide safe and sustainable crossing at these small streams. Several of these are SUTA-sponsored Eagle Scout Projects.

**Table 1. SMDT Facilities**

Trailheads	Car Parking	Equestrian Parking	Kiosk	Trailhead signs and mileage signs
Deming Gulch	Yes	Yes (Equestrian parking above trailhead)	Yes	Yes
Armstrong Gulch	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wolf Gap	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Grub Gulch	Yes	No	Yes	Yes (by 6/2014)
Bear Gulch	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Tunnel Ridge	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Little Applegate	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

**Signage** – SUTA has obtained funding over the past several years for information kiosks, new trail signs, and way-finding signs at key points along the trail. By mid-2014 the information kiosks will be installed at all trailheads, and all relevant signage will be placed on the trail and at key road junctions. Seasonally relevant interpretive information will be posted on the kiosks (e.g. guides to spring wildflowers, migrating birds, tree leaves, animal tracks, etc.), and SUTA will also install several interpretive signs at unique points, such as the tunnel at the top of Tunnel Ridge, and signs identifying the surrounding mountains.

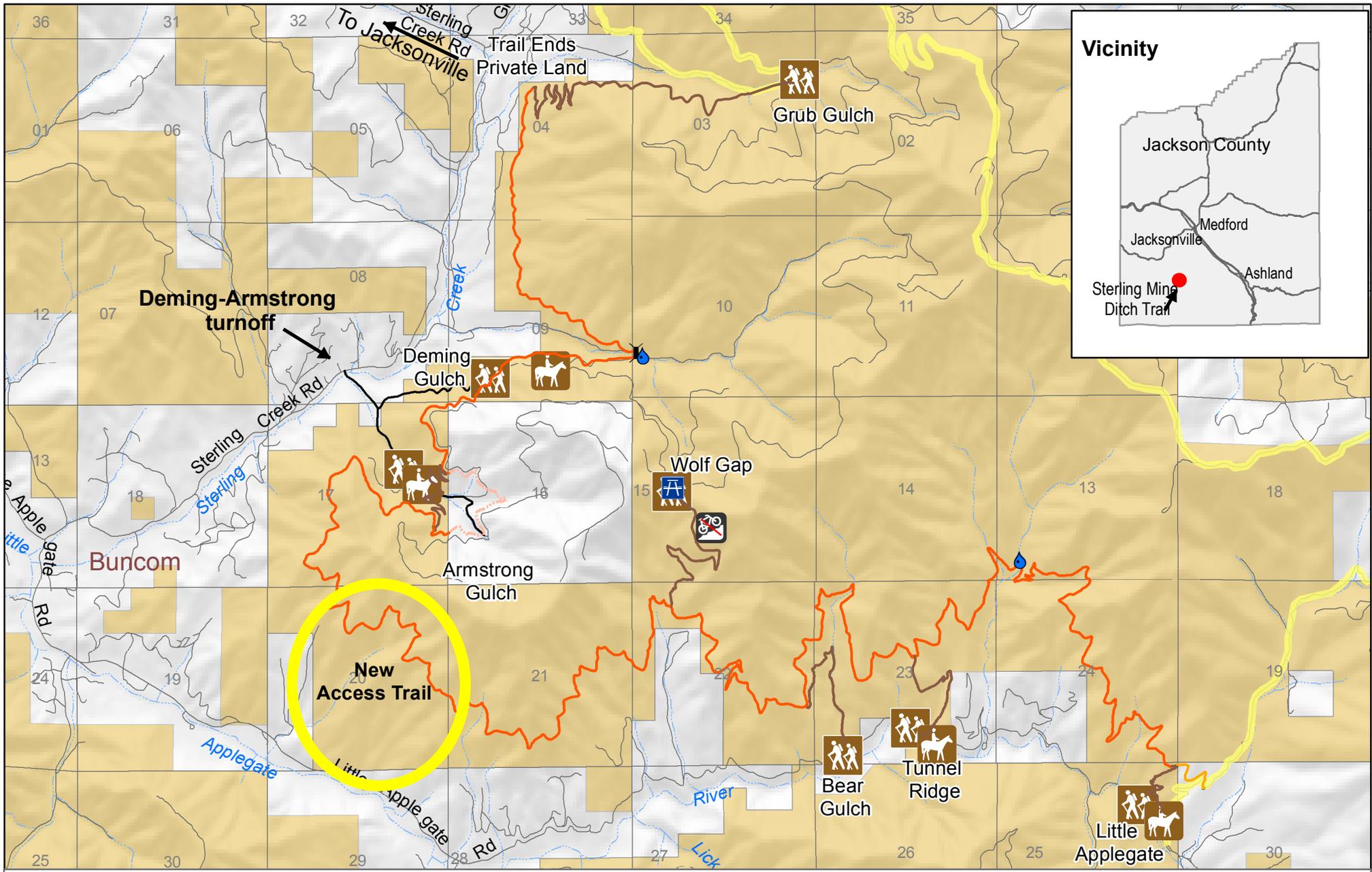
**Future trail facility needs assessment** - SUTA has identified several future trail facility needs, which will be reviewed and approved by BLM. All of the installation and construction field activities are also coordinated with BLM. The ability and timing to complete several of these projects will depend upon the availability of future funding, but they all are part of our long-term vision for the trail. Our list includes:

1. Reopen a short ditch section and construct a bridge over Deming Creek north of the Deming Equestrian Landing. A bridge will permit easier access and more sustainable conditions for lands on either side of this seasonal creek.
  2. Create a new access trail and trail head between Yale Creek and Buncom along Little Applegate Road to provide access to a relatively remote trail section and introduce a mid-distance loop.
  3. Create a by-pass around a large Madrone between the Bear Gulch and Tunnel Ridge trailheads to provide a long-term solution to a steep section of the trail that is susceptible to damage.
  4. Install several equestrian water troughs along the trail.
  5. Install additional rest benches (possible Eagle Scout projects) at selected locations along the trail where there are expansive views.
  6. Gain National Historic Registry status for the trail due to its history and role in gold mining in Southern Oregon.
  7. Purchase private inholding associated with key segment of the ditch between Armstrong and Deming Gulch: a 640 acre parcel is currently owned by a timber company. SUTA would like to obtain a permanent easement protecting the ditch on this land, purchase a portion of the land where the ditch travels or work with BLM to complete a land swap. Gaining control of this
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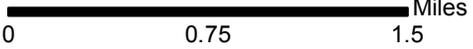
property would protect a heavily used portion of the trail and an extremely scenic section.

The following map shows the locations of these proposed facilities.





# Sterling Mine Ditch Trail System



-  Bridge
-  Picnic Table
-  Water Trough
-  Access Trail
-  SMDT
-  Ditch Private
-  Horse Trailer Parking
-  Trailhead
-  JackAsh Trail (Approx)
-  Roads
-  Streams
-  BLM
-  Private



# Part 4 – Management, maintenance and monitoring

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The following describes the management, maintenance, and monitoring procedures in place for the SMDT trail system.

## **Management**

***Medford District BLM:*** With the exception of a few of short segments, the SMDT is located on public lands. The Medford District BLM has management responsibility for the trail system, and has been extremely supportive of SUTA's efforts to re-open the entire SMDT. The BLM continues its support by providing BLM and other professional trail crews to perform large-scale chainsaw and trail work, as well as supporting our proposed projects to enhance the SMDT. The BLM provides tools and radios for use on volunteer trail work parties, and helps with production of required Environmental Impact Statements, trail brochures and more.

***MOU's:*** BLM and SUTA executed a MOU in early 2011 covering the SMDT as well as the future Jack-Ash trail. A copy of the BLM/SUTA MOU is provided in the Appendix. The MOU allows SUTA to serve as the community coordinator for the SMDT volunteer work crews, trail improvement projects, and events.

***SUTA:*** SUTA initiated re-opening the entire Sterling Mine Ditch Trail and has developed a strong working relationship with the Medford District BLM. We have taken the lead in continually monitoring conditions along the entire trail; we assess the conditions, develop an annual maintenance plan, implement improvements, and respond to un-anticipated conditions such as downed trees. SUTA organizes and leads volunteer trail maintenance work crews in the winter and spring months, and SUTA volunteers have participated in BLM's chainsaw certification courses, the Pacific Crest Trail/BLM-sponsored trails college to learn trail building and leadership skills, as well as BLM-sponsored first aid classes to gain skills for trail work crews. We report problems to BLM that are beyond our ability to address, such as felling or removing large hazard trees.

SUTA has successfully applied for three years of funding through Title II projects as well as outside grants to fund specific trail improvements, ranging from parking lot enhancements or construction, to trail signs, kiosks and hiring trail construction crews. We coordinate all such projects with the Medford District BLM.

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***Ongoing stakeholder involvement:*** SUTA has been growing as a community trail association since its formation in 2009. The significant increase we've observed in trail use is very encouraging and we anticipate ongoing community support. Attracting new volunteers to help with trail maintenance remains a constant challenge, but to date we have successfully recruited enough volunteers to lightly maintain the trail each year. With continued and expanded volunteer work party promotion through the local media and trail head kiosk displays, we expect increased participation.

SUTA has organized and publicly presented two Sterling Mine Ditch History Night events. The first was held in 2011 at the Jacksonville Library, and was standing room only. The second was held in 2013 in a church in Jacksonville, and about 150 people attended. Both events were reported very positively in The Medford Mail Tribune. SUTA also actively promotes the SMDT by staffing a booth at local community events like Buncom Days, Applegate Days, and the Jacksonville and Medford Farmers Markets.

The SMDT has been used for 5- and 10-mile races for the past two years by the Southern Oregon Runners Association, and the races are also planned for 2014. We anticipate other events will be sponsored on the SMDT, especially now that it is connected to a large network of BLM roads that allows long-distance recreational activities beyond the 30 miles of the SMCT and its access trails.

## **Maintenance**

***Coordination of Trail Maintenance:*** SUTA organizes volunteer work crews once a month from January through May. Our first trail work party was in the fall of 2009 and has continued with 4-5 work parties annually. The volunteer work crews have collectively logged more than 5,000 hours. A small group of board members and other volunteers determine which sections of the trail will need attention during the year's work parties. In the initial years of SUTA's involvement, our focus was on reopening the trail (in conjunction with BLM staff and professional crews) and repairing major tread problems. Now that the trail is fully opened, we can largely rely on fairly light brushing along much of the trail. For the past two years, our volunteer crews have brushed the majority of the ditch and access trails annually. In addition, when special projects arise, such as installing trail signs or kiosks, we enlist volunteers through our mailing list and Facebook Friends. Special projects such as bridge building, downed tree removal, or tread repair are usually handled outside of planned work parties, particularly if they require specific skills. We review our schedule and plans with the Medford District BLM. BLM has also provided professional trail crews such as the Job Council and Jackson County Community Justice trail crews on numerous occasions to focus on projects such as removing brush or stumps, and significant tread repair or refinement that require a greater degree of expertise and manpower.

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**Trail Standards:** The Medford District BLM is responsible for coordinating the management of the SMDT and sets the trail standards that SUTA volunteers must comply with. The standards include everything from how the trail is to be maintained to the types of signage or kiosks allowed on the trail. Because this is an historic trail, all volunteers also must comply with strict archeological and cultural resource preservation requirements – such as not disturbing the berm or any remaining artifacts along the ditch.

### **Monitoring trail and support facility conditions, adjacent land use, level of use**

**Existing plans review:** There is no current maintenance plan in place specifically for the SMDT. The requirements of this application represent the first effort to provide for long-term trail maintenance planning. The only plan covering the SMDT and other recreational resources within the Medford District BLM is the *Medford District BLM Resource Management Plan (RMP)*: The current RMP for the Medford District BLM encourages the development of recreational facilities such as the SMDT.

*Oregon Trails 2005-2014: A Statewide Action Plan* that lays out a series of goals and objectives such as connectivity, trails close to population centers, and the need for additional non-motorized trails. This plan provided the inspiration for developing SUTA's community trail system. The SMDT meets many of these goals on its own but also as part of the larger Jack-Ash and SMDT system that will ultimately link several existing trail systems in the Rogue Valley.

**Planned improvements:** Our planned improvements are divided into two categories: 1) the vision for how the trail maintenance will be conducted well into the future by instituting some ongoing improvements in annual trail clearing and 2) specific projects. Several of the planned projects are being funded by existing Title II grants. Others are coordinated efforts between BLM staff and SUTA volunteers.

#### **Our Future Vision of Trail Maintenance:**

1. Trail Condition Surveys: Each fall SUTA has conducted a survey of trail conditions for the entire length of the trail. This is accomplished by board members and volunteers – hiking or riding all of the sections of the trail. Based on this survey we plan the needed work parties for the winter. We anticipate continuing this practice as it allows us to monitor trail conditions. We have also posted a notice on all kiosks asking users to report downed trees or other trail hazards.
  2. Vegetation management: Nature abhors a vacuum; annual growth of trees, shrubs and other plants requires ongoing maintenance to keep the trail open. While our volunteer work crews provide light brushing on most
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of the ditch every year, by summer's end rapidly growing plants like poison oak encroach into the trail in some places. SUTA's original volunteer maintenance agreement restricted work to within a few feet of the trail (hands outstretched from the center of the trail). The Medford District BLM has now granted permission to more aggressively clear buck brush and other rapidly growing vegetation further out (approximately 6-8 feet) from the trail as needed and under their guidance. This will allow us to begin a more flexible trail maintenance rotation schedule, perhaps routinely maintaining some trail sections every-other year. This will improve sightlines for trail users. The goal is to keep the trail corridor clear year-round, even toward the end of the growing season.

3. Tread Management: As part of the long-term vision for the SMDT, SUTA would like to see the tread of the entire ditch provide a safe, stable surface for users. While the SMDT will always be a natural surface trail requiring users to pay attention, our long-term goal is to minimize hazards to the extent feasible on a trail through wild public lands. The trail travels through rocky areas and heavily forested sections, which requires users to be attentive to trail conditions. However, within reason, we want to ensure the tread is sloped correctly, is sufficiently wide, and to the extent possible, has minimal hazards such as stobs or hazardous branches close to the trail. SUTA anticipates the need to repair sections of the trail if large trees fall and damage the tread, and to maintain the outslope of the tread as it wears with use.
  4. Professional versus Volunteer Maintenance Crews: SUTA will coordinate with BLM to arrange for professional trail crews to periodically aggressively clear encroaching vegetation and perform treadwork if large repairs are necessary. A different trail section will receive this treatment each year—after four or five years the rotation will begin again. Although the precise number of miles and the frequency of this work will need to be determined with experience and trail conditions, we estimate that roughly six miles could be completed each year. Our volunteer trail crews can focus their efforts on trailhead infrastructure improvement and maintenance, light tread work, and light vegetation brushing on those portions of the trail in greatest need.
  5. The Medford BLM staff has been and will continue to take responsibility for felling large hazard trees or downed trees that are not lying on the ground, or are larger diameter (greater than 14 inches) than the chainsaw-certified volunteers are authorized to cut.
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## **Planned Maintenance Activities:**

1. Although the majority of significant tread problems have been corrected over the past several years, we will focus further tread work to widen and outslope the tread to improve trail safety in some sections, especially in the central area of the trail between Armstrong and Wolf Gulch, the Little Applegate and Wolf Gulch By-passes, and the trail section north of the Deming Gulch Trailhead.
  2. Removal of remaining stobs in the central section of the trail between Armstrong Gulch and Wolf Gulch (planned for 2014, supported by BLM-provided crews and/or committed Title II grant funds).
  3. Complete installation of new signage and kiosks by late Spring 2014 (committed Title II and REI grant funds).
  4. Complete the new Armstrong Gulch access trails and the Grub Gulch Access Trail by the end of spring 2014 (BLM staff and professional crews using Title II funds, and volunteers).
  5. Install motorcycle barriers at key trail entrances to prevent unauthorized motorized use (committed Title II grant funds).
  6. Develop additional interpretive material for wildflowers, birds, historical information that will be posted online and on the trailhead kiosks. Preparation of these materials is being coordinated with BLM naturalists and cultural resources specialists, and funded in part by committed Title II grant funds.
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## APPENDIX

1. Copy of BLM/SUTA MOU
2. Letters from BLM acknowledging continuing support of the SMDT State Scenic Trail application and this Management Plan