



The Gunnison to Crested Butte Trail

Crested Butte

Crested Butte





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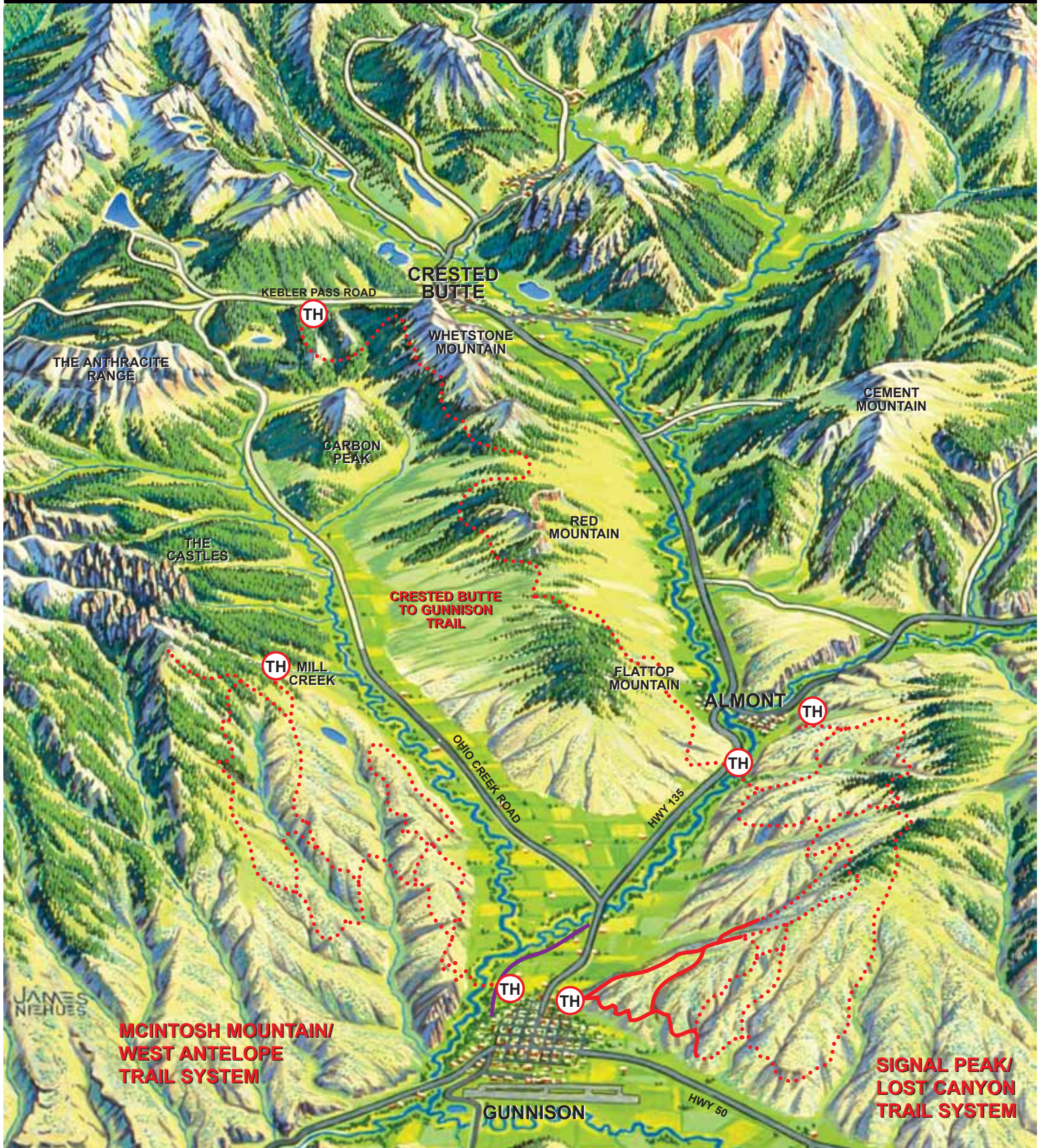
RIO GRANDE

GUNNISON TRAILS

A COLORADO NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION

Proposal for New Trails in the Gunnison Area

	Trailhead
	Potential Trail Alignment
	Existing Trail
	Proposed City Loop Trail



The Gunnison to Crested Butte Trail

Gunnison Trails, a non-profit trails advocacy organization, first proposed a non-motorized, backcountry singletrack trail connecting Gunnison and Crested Butte in 2006. This trail, a 40 to 50-miler, would begin on the campus of Western State College and ply public lands (BLM and USFS) exclusively to a northern trailhead adjacent to the town of Crested Butte, a renowned destination for mountain biking. Not only would this trail be an amazing asset to the citizens of the upper Gunnison Valley, it would also become a significant economic driver for visitors, as *mountain bikers from around the world would immediately place the Gunnison to Crested Butte trail on their bucket list.*

Why Trails for Mountain Biking?

- Mountain biking tourism has become a significant contributor to the economies of mountain towns in Colorado. Different than the winter economies based around destination resorts, mountain bikers value the trails, not only in resort communities like Crested Butte, Aspen and Vail, but also in the lower-profile communities like Gunnison, Cortez and Glenwood Springs. Mountain biking has become an important element of the spring, summer and fall economies of these lesser-known parts of our state.
- Not solely for tourism, quality non-motorized trails and trail systems adjacent to communities have become important factors influencing relocation of individuals, professionals and businesses, also positively affecting local economies.
- Trails offer the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors and also the health benefits and peace of mind that can only be gained from exercising on the spectacular and expansive public lands of Colorado. Trail based exercise and recreation makes for happy, healthy people of all ages.
- The creation and maintenance of local trails is undertaken almost exclusively by volunteers or funded through the activities of non-profit trail advocacy organizations like Gunnison Trails. This creates opportunities for employment and also, fosters a culture of volunteerism, stewardship of our public lands, and a cooperative environment and working relationship with local land managers, many of whom are scrambling under the pressure of drastically reduced budgets.
- While this proposal primarily discusses trail use by mountain bikers, these same trails are also great assets to walkers, hikers and runners. Indeed, there are many crossover trail-users that ride bikes and use trails on foot, too.

Loops and Connectors: Bringing Communities and Colorado Together

Even though the total length of the Gunnison to Crested Butte trail would be 40-50 miles, it is more practical to understand the trail as a connector that links two distinct trail systems. As with most communities in the mountains of Colorado, both Gunnison and Crested Butte have evolving systems of trails surrounding them. By connecting these isolated trail systems, we begin to establish a vibrant network that links our tourism-based economies. While this proposal would connect Gunnison and Crested Butte, it should be considered a model for establishing non-motorized trail connectivity throughout the mountainous regions of our state.

Called something along the lines of The Great Colorado Interconnect, imagine the possibilities of having our great mountain communities linked by high-quality trails: Glenwood Springs to Aspen to Crested Butte to Gunnison; Lake City to Silverton to Ouray to Telluride to Durango to Cortez...

The Role of Community-Based Trail Advocacy Organizations

Gunnison Trails is but one trail advocacy organization of many that exist in communities around the State that are working continually to improve and establish trail opportunities for citizens and visitors. Grand Junction, Steamboat Springs, the Roaring Fork Valley and Durango are just a few examples of communities with non-profit trails advocacy organizations that annually rack up thousands of hours of volunteer efforts on trails.

The partnerships between land managers and local advocacy groups that already exist and those yet to be created will be critical to the management of our public lands in the future. Trail advocacy will not only establish valuable new opportunities on public lands, but will also help effectively manage our public lands by creating better access for conservation-minded citizens who will act as a sort of “neighborhood watch” program able to monitor activities on public lands and keep land managers informed.

What Is It Going to Take?

Funding and Execution

Gunnison Trails is not asking the USFS or BLM to fund this project. Agency resources would be required throughout the process of establishing this trail; but with the exception of NEPA clearance, Gunnison Trails possesses the expertise to execute all aspects of this project from initial conception and layout, to trail construction. Gunnison Trails will lead funding efforts for all aspects of the Gunnison to Crested Butte trail.

Ambitious projects like the Gunnison to Crested Butte Trail are rarely completed quickly. It will be built in stages and different temporary iterations will accompany this phased-build. These may include using existing routes temporarily until final sections of trail or key infrastructure can be completed. One example of this is a bridge across the Gunnison River on the proposed alignment south of Almont. This bridge site, located along Highway 135 on USFS lands, offers the potential for further amenities, such as a river launch point and angling and hunting access.

Gunnison Trails plans to execute, under the guidance and direction of the land management agencies, all aspects of building this trail and would employ a multi-faceted approach that would include volunteers and a paid trail crew, funded and led by Gunnison Trails.

This program would create four to six summer jobs ideal for students or other ambitious young adults. Opportunities with volunteer organizations, such as Volunteers for Outdoors Colorado (VOC) and Volunteer Youth Corps (YVC) and others, will be enthusiastically pursued. Members of Gunnison Trails will contribute consistently, as well.

Natural Resources - Considerations

Gunnison Trails understands and is a leader in natural resource protection. Wildlife protection and a decrease in route density are always two primary goals of any project undertaken by Gunnison Trails. The Gunnison to Crested Butte trail would be subject to seasonal closures for wildlife. Also, protection of all wildlife habitat and wildlife life-stages, especially those of the threatened Gunnison Sage-grouse, would be top priorities. Overall route density and fragmentation will be reduced as agencies, other groups and Gunnison Trails work to decommission and obliterate the abundant user-created routes in the area.

Ranchers and Ranching – An Important Stakeholder



Ranching has been abundant in the Gunnison Valley since the mid-1800's and is an important, foundation industry today. Cattle spend summers grazing on the public lands all around Gunnison leased by ranchers from the USFS and BLM. In the last 25 years, recreation on these public lands has increased significantly as people have developed a passion for experiencing wild and natural

places. Ranchers not only have the challenge of managing their cattle on these leased lands, but also the additional challenges presented by recreational users sharing the landscape.

Most often unintentional and not malicious, recreational users can hinder ranching operations by leaving gates open, running cattle and instigating herd movement within a grazing allotment.

Gunnison Trails is committed to working with the ranching community and the grazing lessees affected by the Gunnison to Crested Butte trail to minimize conflicts with trail users and hopefully forge a partnership with livestock growers that will allow both of these important activities to coexist and continue to enrich the economy and the lives of citizens and visitors to the Gunnison Valley.

The Route – An Approved Trail Corridor

The first and most challenging step in making this trail a reality is determining a complete trail corridor that has Natural Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) clearance. Gunnison Trails will work with the various stakeholders to define this corridor. Once general agreement has been reached, Gunnison Trails will flag and survey the corridor. NEPA specialists will then scrutinize this corridor.

When/if the corridor earns NEPA clearance, a construction plan and timeline will be created, sleeves will be rolled up and hard work will commence. As physical as building this trail will be, the most challenging aspect will be gaining a trail corridor with NEPA clearance.

The Contouring Alignment – Flat Top, Red Mountain and Whetstone Mountain

(please see accompanying maps)



Critical to the northern section of the Gunnison to Crested Butte trail is the proposed alignment between Highway 135 and County Road 730, the Ohio Creek road. The landforms along this alignment afford the opportunity for the trail to contour the landscape to a great extent. This allows the trail to avoid repetitive large gains and losses of elevation, often a requirement of an alpine trail spanning this distance. What this means to a mountain biker or long-distance runner or hiker is a much more attainable and user-friendly experience. This allows access for a wider range of fitness levels, too.

The Southern and Northern Sections

The route proposed for the Gunnison to Crested Butte trail by Gunnison Trails is best considered as two sections: a northern alpine section; and, a southern high-desert section. Highway 135 divides these sections. The southern portion is primarily on BLM public lands but does cross onto USFS lands near Almont. This section is approximately one-third of the total distance. Important considerations for this section include:

- The inclusion of language in the 2010 Federal Record of Decision for Travel Planning, that states that a Gunnison Trails proposal for a trail system in this area will be considered
- The area contains habitat and populations of the threatened Gunnison-sage Grouse
- Ultimately, the proposal calls for a bridge across the Gunnison River, but interim access currently exists by way of a detour through Almont

The northern portion is exclusively on USFS public lands and contains two-thirds of the total distance of the trail. Important considerations for this section include:

- The southern portion of this area also contains habitat and populations of the threatened Gunnison-sage Grouse
- The northern portion of this area is included in the Hidden Gems Wilderness proposal— bikes are not allowed in Wilderness; however, corridors for bicycles, or alternative or companion designations are possible solutions if Wilderness becomes an issue
- Molybdenum mining operations are a possibility in the northern portion of this area

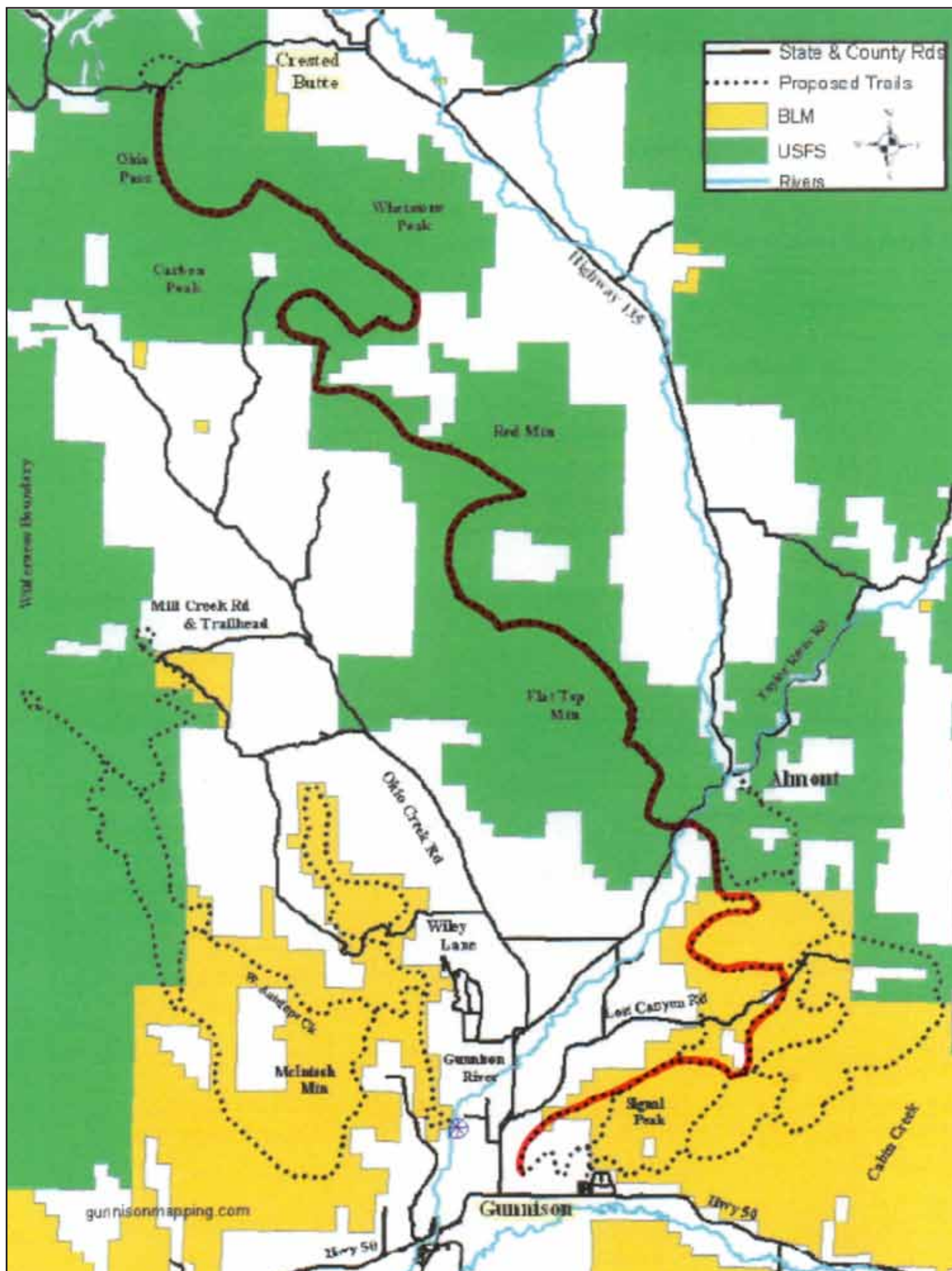
Moving Forward



During the summer of 2011, representatives from the USFS and Gunnison Trails spent time surveying trail alignment options in the Flat Top Mountain area. Portions of this section of the trail pass through threatened Gunnison Sage-grouse habitat. For this reason, the USFS felt that this

section presents the biggest challenge of the entire alignment. They instructed Gunnison Trails to focus our efforts on this section. At the request of the USFS, Gunnison Trails produced a report solely for this section that includes a proposed trail alignment corridor and other details. This report was delivered to US Forest Gunnison District Ranger and Wildlife Biologist in December of 2011.

The Gunnison Ranger District office also requested a proposed trail corridor alignment for the entire trail for internal review and study by the fall of 2012. Additionally, Gunnison Trails continues to tirelessly engage stakeholders and proponents of this project. As one of the primary elements of the mission of Gunnison Trails, the Gunnison to Crested Butte trail remains a priority for the organization.





View north into Carbon Creek drainage. Whetstone Mountain on right, Mt. Axtel on left. This is the heart of 3 varied proposals: a mountain biking trail; a wilderness area; and tailings reservoirs for a mining operation.



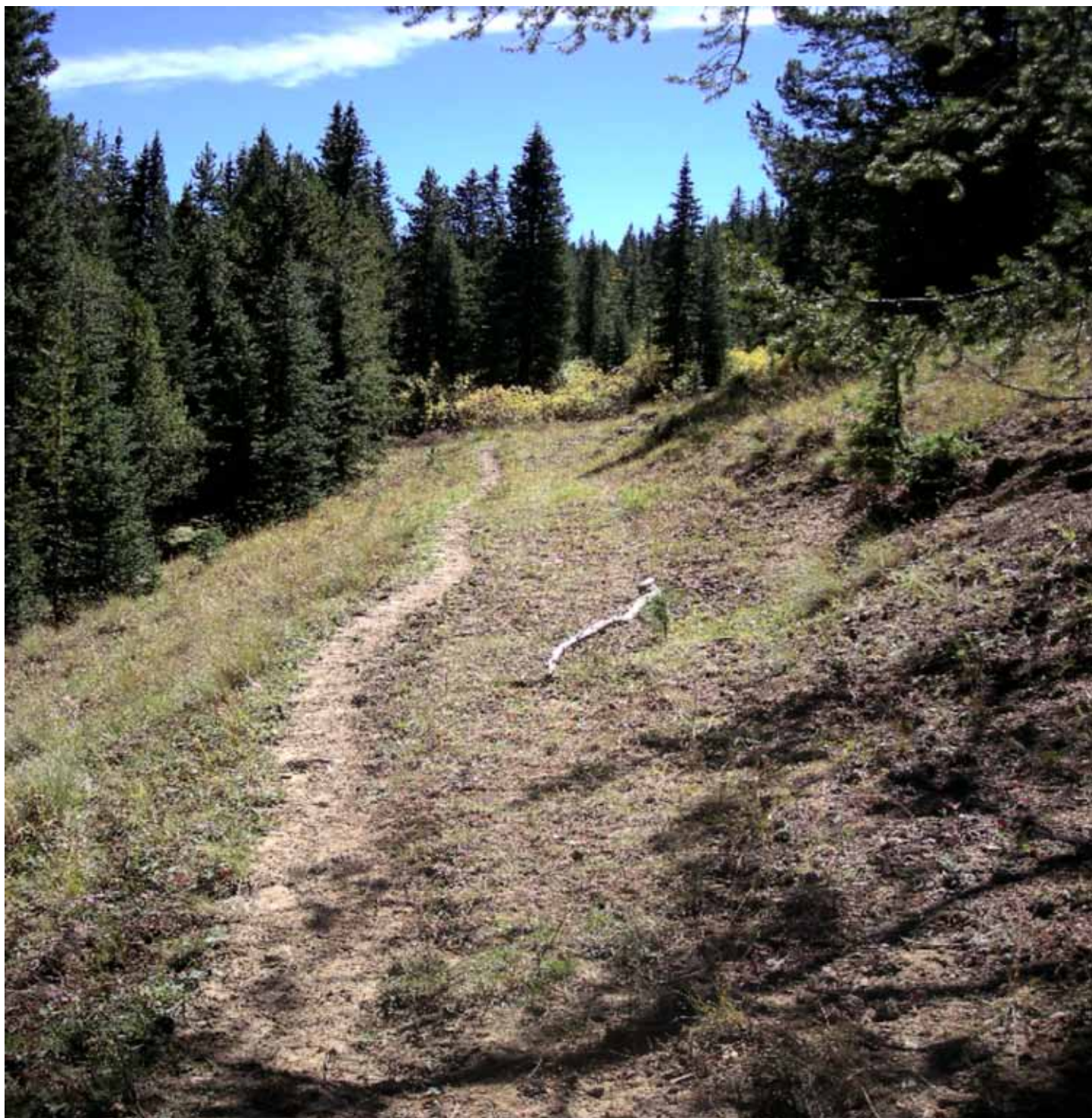
A majestic male Gunnison Sage-grouse strutting during the annual springtime mating ritual. Seasonal closures and respect for Gunnison Sage-grouse habitat will be important considerations when planning the Gunnison to Crested Butte trail.



Remnants of US Forest Service Trail 436?
Location: The southern flank of Whetstone Mountain



Livestock trail on an old road grade.
Location: Looking north down upper Carbon Creek drainage. Whetstone Mountain is upper left.



Livestock trail on an old road grade.
Location: Upper Carbon Creek drainage, Red Mountain side.