

SCOPING DOCUMENT

**THE BLACKWATER RIVER LOOP PROJECT
TUCKER COUNTY, WEST VIRGINIA**

Submitted to:

**USDA FOREST SERVICE
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement was established in 1977 when Congress enacted the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act. One of the purposes of this act is to ensure that land mined for coal would be reclaimed as part of the surface coal mining operations, and that mined lands abandoned without adequate reclamation prior to the act would be reclaimed [30 United States Code (U.S.C.) §1202].

The Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement, through its Abandoned Mine Land reclamation program, addresses the hazards and environmental degradation posed by these legacy mine sites left or abandoned in either an unreclaimed or inadequately reclaimed condition prior to August 3, 1977. The Abandoned Mine Land reclamation program is funded by a reclamation fee assessed on each ton of coal produced for sale, transfer, or use. The Abandoned Mine Land Inventory System is the system used to store, manage, and report on the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement's Inventory of Abandoned Mine Land Problems. This includes both problems in need of reclamation and those that have been reclaimed.

The state of West Virginia has an Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement approved Abandoned Mine Land program (primacy), and the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection's, Office of Abandoned Mine Lands & Reclamation oversees and facilitates the resolution of public safety issues such as mine fires, subsidence, hazardous highwalls, mining-impacted water supplies, open shafts and portals, and other dangers resulting from coal mining prior to 1977.

An additional funding program, the Abandoned Mine Land Economic Revitalization Program was authorized by Congress with the purpose of reclamation of abandoned mine lands in conjunction with economic and community development and reuse goals. The Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement administers the Abandoned Mine Land Economic Revitalization program and provides eligible states and tribes with Grants from program funding and guidance to use the funds and track the progress of projects that provide a combination of reclamation and economic growth opportunities in the areas of Abandoned Mine Land.

The Friends of Blackwater is proposing to complete the Blackwater River Loop Project with fiscal year 2020 Abandoned Mine Land Economic Revitalization funding provided by Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement through the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection's, Office of Abandoned Mine Lands & Reclamation to promote hiking, biking, and tourism. The Friends of Blackwater is a non-profit organization that was founded in 2000 to protect and raise awareness about the Blackwater Canyon area.

The proposed Blackwater River Loop Project would be located south of the towns of Davis and Thomas in central Tucker County, West Virginia. The location of the existing and proposed trails relative to roads and other principal surface features is shown on Figure 1. The project would be located on land owned by the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources as part of the Blackwater Falls State Park and the USDA's Forest Service, Monongahela National Forest.

Several linked actions beyond the AMLER-funded project are included in this scoping document. These linked actions would be related to parking and vehicular access on USFS land to accommodate the expected increase in vehicular traffic to the Douglas Falls portion of the proposed project area, located near the Historic Coketon Industrial Complex. These actions would be proposed in a manner as to not encroach on the contributing resources in the Historic Coketon Industrial Complex that are eligible for listing under the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP).

Civil and Environmental Consultants, Inc. (CEC) prepared this scoping document on behalf of the Friends of Blackwater, in conjunction with the USDA's Forest Service and Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement for the Blackwater River Loop Project. This scoping document has been prepared to fulfill the scoping requirements for the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements for USDA's Forest Service and Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement. The proposed actions on USDA's Forest Service property would be verified for consistency with the 2006 Monongahela National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (hereafter referred to as the Forest Plan), would comply with USDA's Forest Service NEPA regulations [36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 220], and would be subject to project level pre-decisional administrative review (objection) process found at 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B.

Portions of the project located on USDA's Forest Service property would be implemented to provide residents and visitors the opportunity to explore and learn about significant cultural sites. Proposed actions on USDA's Forest Service property would be evaluated to determine if they achieve desired conditions referenced in the Forest Plan, described in the Forest Integrated Desired Conditions and Forest-wide Management Direction section of the Forest Plan.

2.0 PROJECT PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of the project would be to construct and connect a beginner level trail that would begin at Davis Park in Davis, and continue to the Town of Thomas, West Virginia. The project would promote an increase in users to stimulate economic development. The FOB proposes to improve outdoor recreation resources, link areas of existing employment through alternative transportation, and highlight historic buildings and cultural resources. This project would incorporate trail development, historic site improvement as trail heads, and tourism promotion, to create a dramatic scenic loop between the two towns, ultimately resulting in job creation and increased economic activity in Tucker County. This increased tourism would be anticipated to help off-set the economic decline in the region that has experienced the narrowing of natural resource industries, predominantly coal mining.

Historically, the economy of Tucker County has been tied to coal and timber, with a particularly strong concentration of coal mines around the towns of Thomas, Coketon, and Douglas. Of the three communities, only Thomas remains incorporated. Davis was primarily known for the timber industry, but also had several active mines. Today, there is only one active coal mine in the County, the Mettiki Mine located along Corridor H, and mining employment is a small fraction of the historic levels. Tucker County has seen a diminished economic decline due to the downturn in the coal industry and decreased employment opportunities.



Image 1 - Historic Western Maryland Station in Thomas, WV

This region was once a hub of coal production and a main route of the Elkins to Cumberland railroad built by Henry Davis Gassaway. The impact of the coal industry is still felt through the many abandoned mine land sites in the Thomas and Davis area. Today it is left with hundreds of miles of abandoned mine tunnels beneath the area, which discharge acid mine drainage. However, there are more than historical legacies of the decline of the coal industry throughout this region. The 2015 Appalachian Regional Commission-sponsored *Economic Analysis of the Appalachian Coal Industry Ecosystem: County-level CIE Supply Chain Analysis* report found that Tucker County has become one of the hardest-hit counties, ranked 19th worst in Coal Dependence.

Blackwater Falls State Park is Tucker County's most notable attraction. The Corridor H highway provides a convenient travel way for residents of eastern cities to access the area. Additionally, Tucker County is located within 200 miles of major urban centers like Pittsburgh, Washington DC, Baltimore, and Richmond, and the completion of Corridor H will make the area accessible to new visitors.



Image 2- Blackwater Falls

The Blackwater River Loop Connector Trail Project would promote sustainable economic development that preserves and improves the unique characteristics of these communities. Highlighting Tucker County’s historic resources through building redevelopment, interpretive signs and educational materials would make the area a more well-rounded attraction. The project would promote a connection to the land and the people by providing the opportunity to reflect on the relevance of the heritage resources through use of interpretative signs, thus enhancing visitor’s experiences.

In addition to the economic benefits of increased visitor spending, local residents would enjoy amenities like improved trails and historic interpretation. Quality of life is a key factor in attracting and retaining residents, and something that rural areas have struggled with in the modern era. By continuing to improve the appeal of local trails, this project would continue to attract new residents, small business owners, and visitation to the area.

The county is well positioned for an increase in tourism by diversifying its assets and managing growth in a way that is both environmentally and economically feasible while promoting visitor safety. Local emergency management organizations have expressed concerns over traffic and lack of emergency access. This project proposes actions to address these concerns and alleviate the burden of increased traffic.

Several actions would involve replacing, improving, and constructing new bridges to allow visitors and residents to safely utilize the trail systems. Currently the existing conditions in the area lack sufficient parking to accommodate the anticipated visitation to the area. The project proposes improvement to existing parking and proposes the addition of new parking areas. The parking areas would be configured in such a manner as to allow safe ingress and egress. Additionally, the proposed parking would alleviate stress on emergency management agencies needing access to areas during response. The transportation related action items on USFS land would be completed in such a manner that is safe and minimizes adverse impacts to natural and heritage resources. These actions will be evaluated to ensure consistency with the Forest Plan.

To improve upon safety and trespassing, the project proposes directional and wayfinding signage to direct visitors to parking areas and trail systems. The project would reduce trespassing concerns of local residents by directing those unfamiliar with the area to public recreation areas, while also providing controlled access.

The portion of the project located on USFS land would achieve the desired conditions associated with the Forest Plan by not only completing the proposed actions in a manner that care for the land but also serve the residents, while attracting visitors.

3.0 SCOPING

External scoping was not conducted for the portion of the project located on property owned by the WVDNR as part of the Blackwater Falls State Park. However, those action on USFS property require notification and are subject to project level pre-decisional administrative review.

4.0 PROPOSED ACTION

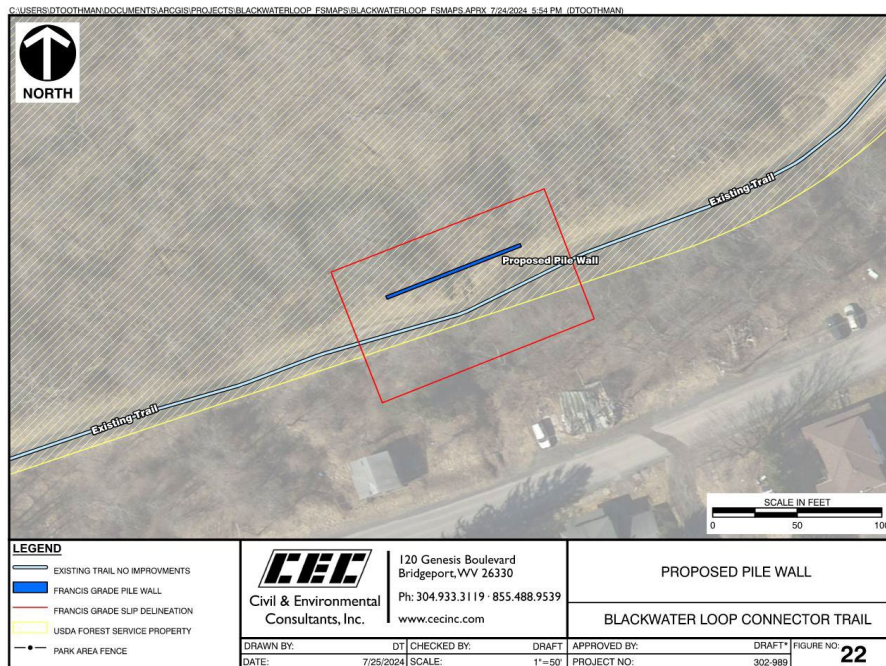
This scoping document was prepared in accordance with the USDA’s Forest Service and Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement’s NEPA requirements. This section presents a discussion and analysis of the proposed actions considered for achieving the project objectives. Two alternatives were evaluated during the preparation of this scoping document. The two action alternatives involve a series of common activities, described below in Section 4.1. The uncommon activities, described in Alternatives 1 and 2 are confined to USDA’s Forest Service property.

4.1 Activities Common to Action Alternatives

The common activities for the action alternatives are described beginning on the Thomas portion of the trail and heading southeast towards Davis:

Proposed Pile Wall

The proposed pile wall is located on USDA’s Forest Service property in Thomas, WV. This action is along the Francis Grade which is a spur trail that provides access to the rail trail. This piling wall is necessary in order to keep the integrity of the trail. Currently this section is failing and if not repaired a major landslide will occur which would destroy this access. (See Figure 21)



Existing Gravel Parking Area

Located just before the Y intersection of county route 27 and Rail Falls Road, there is a gravel parking lot. Currently, cars, trucks, and buses utilize this unstructured lot as a turnaround area. However, this setup poses safety concerns, as rail trail users must cross through the parking lot to access the existing trail along Rail Falls Road. Installation of a fence along the rail trail will ensure the safety of trail users while maintaining space for parking and turning around. (See Figure 20)

Existing Long Run Bridge

The Existing Long Run Bridge is located on USDA's Forest Service property along Rail Falls Road and spans the Long Run. The bridge is approximately 50-feet-long, with a 9.8-foot-wide deck. The bridge was originally constructed with steel I-beams and cross-bracing, including girders, beams, and balustrades. Railroad ties were used for the deck construction. The space between the deck and balustrade wall measures 44-inches on each side of the bridge.

The bridge is supported on each back by concrete abutments and wing walls fabricated in 1918. According to the information contained on the HPI form, the bridge is eligible for listing under the NHPA as a contributing resource in the Historic Coketon Industrial Complex.



Image 3- Long Run Bridge Existing

The existing bridge lacks handrails and is unsafe as pedestrians could fall through the 44-inch spacing between the bridge deck and balustrade wall to the creek below. The Friends of Blackwater is proposing to install railing that would be 54-inches in height along the edges of the bridge deck to facilitate safe usage by pedestrians and cyclists. Coated wire mesh (2-inches by 2-inches) would also be installed along the railing to serve as a protective barrier, while still allowing individuals to view the steel sub-structure of the bridge. The bridge decking is also proposed for replacement. The intent would be to upgrade the bridge to improve pedestrian safety, while preserving the historic integrity. This proposed action is a typical treatment for bridges along rail trails. (See Figure 18)



Image 4 - Long Run Bridge Improvement Example

Existing Gate Replacement and Fence Installation

An existing gate near Douglas Falls on USDA’s Forest Service property is slated for replacement with removable bollards. The specific location of these bollards will depend on the chosen alternative (refer to Figure 18 and Sheet 19 for details). The primary purpose of this replacement is to prevent vehicles from obstructing emergency access to Douglas Falls. Both alternatives ensure that vehicles cannot park in front of the bollards, thus keeping the roadway clear.

Additionally, a fence will be installed from Long Run Bridge to Douglas Falls Access. This fence aims to prevent trail users from accessing the North Fork of the Blackwater River. Douglas Falls, situated along the North Fork Blackwater River, contains Acid Mine Drainage (AMD) resulting from historical coal mining and coke production. These AMD impairments can create slippery surfaces on the rocks, posing a significant safety risk for trail users attempting to gain access. Furthermore, the fence will help prevent trail users from encroaching on private property along the rail trail section between Long Run Bridge and Douglas Falls.



Image 5 - Existing Gate at Douglas Falls

Douglas Falls Suspension Bridge and Trail Construction

The construction of a .21-mile-long trail aims to connect Rail Falls Road within the USDA's Forest Service, Monongahela National Forest, to the Pase Point Trail on Blackwater Falls State Park property. This undertaking includes the construction of a cable suspension bridge. The project spans both the USDA's Forest Service and West Virginia Division of Natural Resources properties.



Image 5 - Douglas Falls

As previously mentioned, Douglas Falls along the North Fork Blackwater River is known for hazardous conditions and the creation of the trail and supporting features would allow for controlled access and pathways for recreational users, while maintaining safe viewing opportunities. In order to address these conditions a suspension bridge connecting is being proposed as well as a series of viewing platforms and boardwalks similar to those at Blackwater Falls. The cable suspension bridge is modeled after the USDA's Forest Service cable suspension bridge designs used across other areas.



Image 6 - Blackwater Falls View Platforms and Boardwalk

The design intent is to blend in with the natural environment, by removing as few trees as possible during the construction. It is anticipated that the new proposed bridge and boardwalks would become a destination for tourism within the overall project, by its location and architectural character. On West Virginia Division of Natural Resource property, the trail would cross a perennial stream (UNT-21) via a proposed 30-foot-long by 6-foot-wide FRP Beam bridge with railing, replacing the existing crossing, located upstream. The existing crossing location exhibits significant bank erosion and stream substrate disturbance from use, while the proposed bridge crossing would allow safe crossing for trail users, provide scenic views of stream cascades. In addition to safe pedestrian access, the prefabricated modular boardwalk will be constructed using helical piers in order to minimize the amount of disturbance during construction.

Pase Point Trail and Overlook

This proposed action takes place on West Virginia Division of Natural Resource property. The approximately 1.73-mile Pase Point Trail brings hikers and bikers to Pendleton Lake, which is near other park features at Blackwater Falls State Park. The trail is proposed for improvements, which would include construction of six new bridges to replace ford crossings, rerouting portions of the trail exhibiting poor grade and/or drainage issues, cutting back vegetation, widening sections of the trail, and construction of a viewing platform. The new bridges would include 6-foot-wide FRP beam trail bridges with reinforced approaches. The length of each bridge would be determined by the spanning needs of each stream crossing, but in no case would exceed 12 feet in length or 30” in height.



Image 9 - Pase Point Overlook

Approximately 156-feet of the Pase Point Trail exhibited drainage issues. These locations are proposed for closure and rerouting. The proposed reroutes would divert the trail around these damaged portions with construction of new 4-foot-wide compacted dirt trail along the same grade as the existing trail.

This action also proposes the construction of a viewing platform to provide safe, unobstructed scenic overlooks along the Pase Point Trail. The proposed platforms would consist of single level

decks approximately 20-feet by 20-feet, with safety railing. The platform would be placed on the existing rock outcropping with beams driven into the ground surface for stability. This platform would be similar to what is currently located in Blackwater Falls State Park at the Lindy Point Outlook and would blend into the natural environment. In addition to these improvements, a kiosk sign is being proposed at the entrance of the Pace Point overlook trail.



Image 10 - Proposed Improvements to Pase Point Overlook

Pendleton Falls Spillway Bridge Replacement

The existing 79-foot-long by 3.5-foot-wide wood constructed Pendleton Falls Bridge is currently located in the spillway of Pendleton Lake, with cabled supports lagged into the bedrock of the spillway. This current bridge configuration poses a potential risk of failure during high flow events through the Pendleton Lake Spillway.



Image 7 - Existing Pendleton Lake Spillway Bridge

The proposed change is replacing this bridge with an 80-foot full spanning pre-engineered bridge over the spillway to accommodate the walkway into Blackwater Falls State Park and the Monongahela National Forest without impeding flow of water during high rain events. Improving access to the Pace Point trail network for hikers, bikers, trail equipment, and emergency personnel by the removal of a DEP non-compliant spillway bridge and installation of an 80-foot full spanning pre-engineered truss bridge that will benefit both Blackwater Falls State Park and the Monongahela National Forest.



Image 8 - Proposed Pre-Engineered Spillway Bridge

Pendleton Falls Overlook Trail & Bridge

A 0.05-mile-long, 4-foot-wide compacted dirt spur trail (Pendleton Falls Overlook Trail) is also proposed, which would access two proposed observation platforms at one of the largest waterfalls on Pendleton Creek. It would begin near the proposed Pendleton Creek cable suspension bridge on the left descending bank and travels downstream to the waterfall. Three to four rectangular landing switchbacks would be cut into the hillside in conjunction with individual timber pin steps, to allow the trail to safely descend to the lower waterfall observation platform. The lower observation platform would provide controlled and safe viewing of Pendleton Creek Waterfall while the upper observation platform would provide panoramic view of Pendleton Creek and the waterfall. The proposed platforms would consist of single level decks approximately 20-feet by 20-feet, with safety railings. The platforms would be supported and leveled with beams driven into the ground surface for stability. (See Figure 08)

Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP) Trail

The WWTP trail connects Blackwater Falls State Park at the southwest terminus to the town of Davis at the northeast terminus. Currently, the WWTP Trail system is underutilized due to a gate that was installed by Blackwater Falls State Park in spring 2020 due to overuse by vehicles. The newly installed gate at the entrance to this trail protects the trail from traffic and would allow the proposed improvements to be made to the trail's surface. These surface improvements would occur on Blackwater Falls State Park property and would include fixing drainage issues created by years of vehicle traffic, upgraded railing to an existing bridge, and installation of a new bridge.



Image 11 - Existing Conditions on WWTP Trail

Approximately 322 feet of the WWTP Trail are proposed for surface repairs and construction of drainage structures. These proposed repairs will restore proper trail drainage, reduce ongoing environmental damage, and provide a safer trail use experience. During repairs to these sections, drainage structures such as turnpikes, french drains, grade dips, and rock armoring will be installed where necessary.

The WWTP Trail crosses an existing stream (UNT-5) with an existing 32-foot long by 6-foot-wide multi-log stringer bridge. The existing railing is proposed to be replaced with new rail caps that slope inward, towards the bridge. Sloped railing caps would deter trail users from sitting on or

placing items the railing cap; thus, improving safety of the bridge and helping to prevent congestion by deterring users from resting on the bridge.

The WWTP Trail crosses UNT-4 at an unimproved ford crossing. The crossing exhibits poor trail drainage, surface washouts, and user hazards. Upgrades to this crossing includes construction of a 14-foot-long, 6-foot-wide FRP beam trail bridge with reinforced approaches.

Educational, Interpretive and Directional Signage

The FOB is proposing to install signage throughout the scenic loop. The signage would consist of interpretative, historical, and directional signs. The intent would be to tell the story of Tucker County, from logging to mining, while highlighting the heritage, flora, and fauna of the area.



Image 12 - Existing Interpretive Signage

The WWTP Trail between Davis and Blackwater Falls State Park passes the remnants of several historic structures. The Davis signs would introduce the story of timber harvesting, sawmill, pulp mill, and tannery industries that briefly made Davis a boomtown. The intent of this signage would be to educate visitors while encouraging them to visit local businesses.

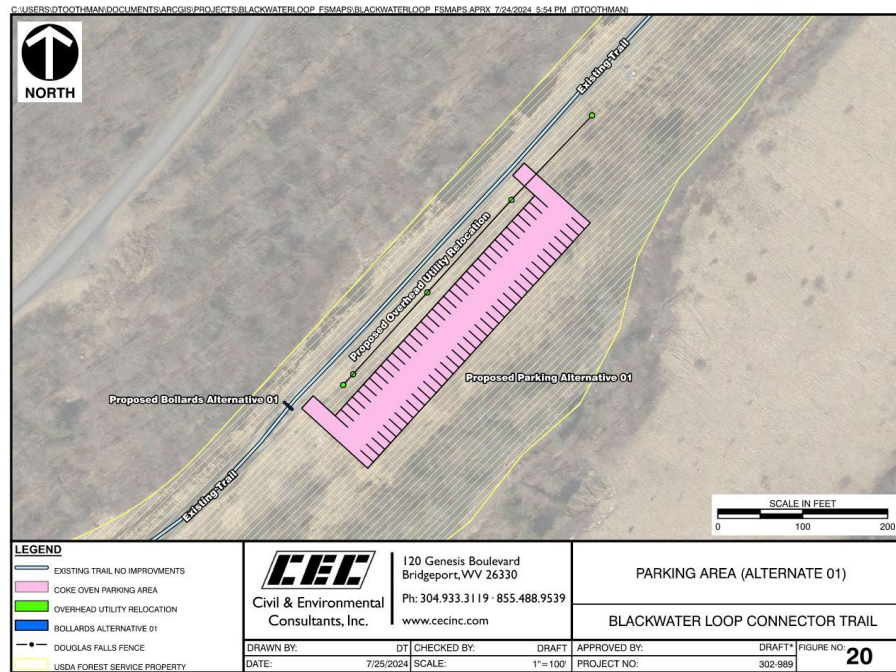
The signs in the Thomas area would be focused on the railroad and the coal industry. They would be positioned near existing structures like building foundations and coke ovens to educate visitors about the history of the area and ultimately add a new dimension to riding and walking along the

trail. In addition to the signs themselves, kiosks are proposed at strategic locations. The first kiosk would be located at the beginning of the Davis Trail and the second would be located at the end of the Davis Trail, prior to entering Black Water Falls State Park. Further, maps, brochures, and web content are proposed to package and market new and existing signs as a heritage walking tour. The signage and informational material would be coordinated with the USDA's Forest Service Heritage and Recreation Staff for both signs located on USDA's Forest Service property and those located elsewhere. The proposed locations of the signs and kiosks are shown on throughout the drawing set accompanying this document.

4.2 Alternative 1 – Coke Oven Turn-around

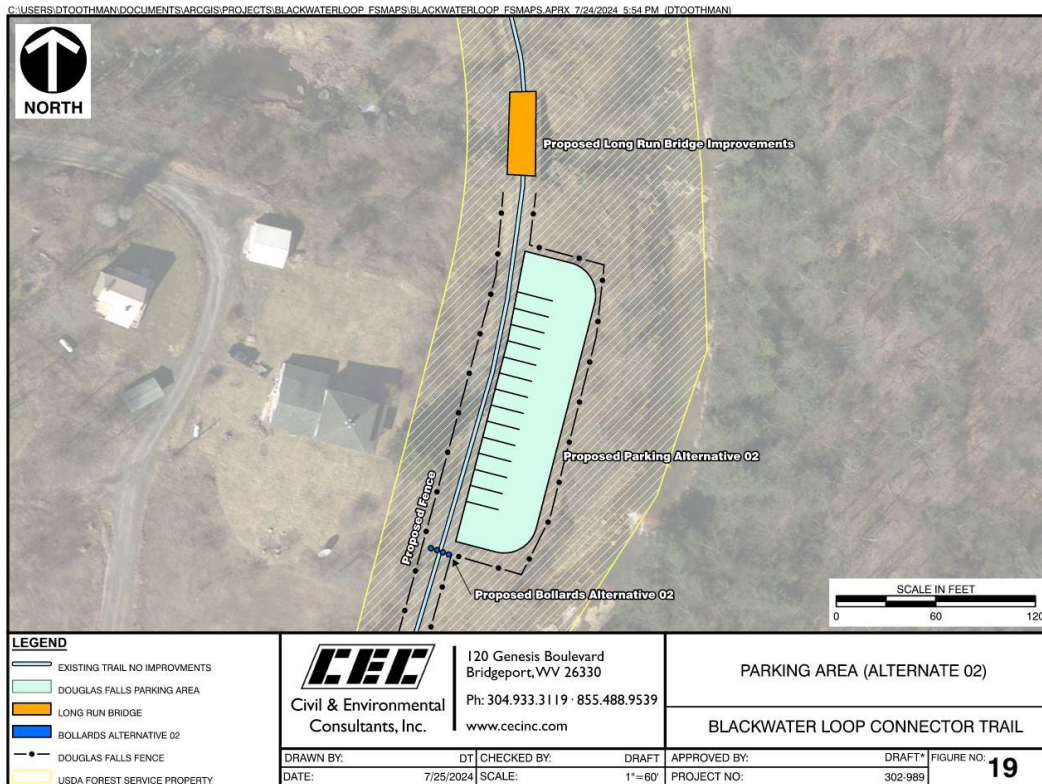
Alternative 1 is located on USDA’s Forest Service property and would involve closing a section of Rail Falls Road to traffic south of the coke oven parking area with the proposed installation of removable bollards. The bollards located south of the coke oven parking area would be the replacement for the existing gate mentioned above. This newly proposed closed section would be designated as rail trail south of this point but would still allow access for emergency personnel. Traffic would remain open to two-way vehicular traffic and pedestrians from County Route 27 to the improved parking area south of the coke ovens.

A proposed parking lot would be constructed on the east side of Rail Falls Road, south of the coke ovens. This parking lot would accommodate 74 vehicles, based on approximately 10-foot-wide parking spaces and one way entry, and exit drive aisle. Four spots would be designated as handicap and a notice posted that no overnight parking is allowed. (See Figure 19)



4.3 Alternative 2 – Douglas Falls Parking Area

Alternative 2 is located on USDA’s Forest Service property. Under this proposed action alternative, the Rails Fall Road would remain open to two-way vehicle and pedestrian traffic, with a dead-end near Douglas Falls. The existing parking area, south of Long Run Bridge, would be extended to maximize available spaces. Under this alternative, it is estimated that approximately 15 vehicles would be able to utilize the parking area, based on approximately 10-foot-wide parking spaces and one way entry and exit drive aisle. The parking area surface would consist of 6-inch crushed aggregate. Two spots would be designated as handicap and a notice posted that no overnight parking is allowed. This alternative proposes installation of removable bollards along the parking area to prevent vehicular traffic beyond the parking area and would replace the existing gate mentioned above. (See Figure 18).



4.5 Ownership and Objectionable Space

The action items associated with Alternatives 1 and 2, Long Run Bridge, Gate 2 Relocation, and a portion of the Douglas Falls Suspension Bridge and Trail Construction are located on USFS land and are subject to the project level pre-decisional administrative review (objection) process found at 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B, while the remaining proposed actions are located on OSMRE decision space and are not subject to objections. Table 1 provides a summary of the ownership for each action, which are also shown on the drawing set accompanying this document.

**TABLE 1
OWNERSHIP SUMMARY**

Action Name	Ownership	Decision Space	Objection Status	Figure Number
Long Run Bridge	USFS	USFS	Objectionable	18
Gate 2 Relocation	USFS	USFS	Objectionable	18 & 19
Douglas Fall Suspension Bridge and Trail Construction	WVDNR / USFS	OSMRE / USFS	Partially objectionable	17
Pace Point Trail and Overlook	WVDNR	OSMRE	Non-objectionable	11
WWTP Trail	WVDNR	OSMRE	Non-objectionable	2-4
Educational Signage	WVDNR / USFS	OSMRE / USFS	Partially objectionable	
Alternative 1 – Coke Oven Turn-around	USFS	USFS	Objectionable	19
Alternative 2 – Douglas Falls Parking Area	USFS	USFS	Objectionable	18