

Significance Statement

Revision of Feasibility Studies of Oregon, California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express National Historic Trails

(Proposed Additional Routes)

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Background

The National Trails System Act (P.L. 90-543, as amended through P.L. 111-11) directs the Secretary of the Interior to revise the feasibility and suitability studies of the existing Oregon, California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express national historic trails (NHTs) for consideration of adding certain new routes to the trails. (See Figure 1 for existing trail configuration.) Specifically, the bill requires study of the following:

- Oregon NHT (OREG) – 10 routes
- California NHT (CALI) – 40 routes (nineteen Missouri Valley routes, eight central routes, and 13 western routes)
- Mormon Pioneer NHT (MOPI) – six routes
- Pony Express NHT (POEX) – one route
- “Shared California and Oregon Trail Routes” (OREG/CALI) – seven routes
- Other routes as the Secretary of the Interior deems appropriate

This is not a National Historic Trail feasibility study to add a completely new trail to the National Trails System. Rather, this study would revise the original four feasibility studies, conducted by several different federal agencies between 1977 and 1987, by designated new routes to the existing Oregon, California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express NHTs. Altogether, the act lists by name some 64 routes and route complexes that must be considered for possible addition to the four NHTs. Ultimately, the planning team identified and studied 78 routes (Figure 2).

Alignment and historical information provided by independent trails researchers, federal agencies, and NPS researchers is compiled in an unpublished report entitled “Four Trails Feasibility Study, Study Routes and Historical Summaries.” For each study route, the report provides a narrative route description and map, lists places of related historic and recreational interest along the route, and summarizes the history and use of the route. Incorporating information from a variety of statistical and descriptive source material, this report has provided the primary basis for addressing questions of significance and eligibility, as described below.

FIGURE 1. Oregon, Mormon Pioneer, California and Pony Express NHTs as they are currently configured.

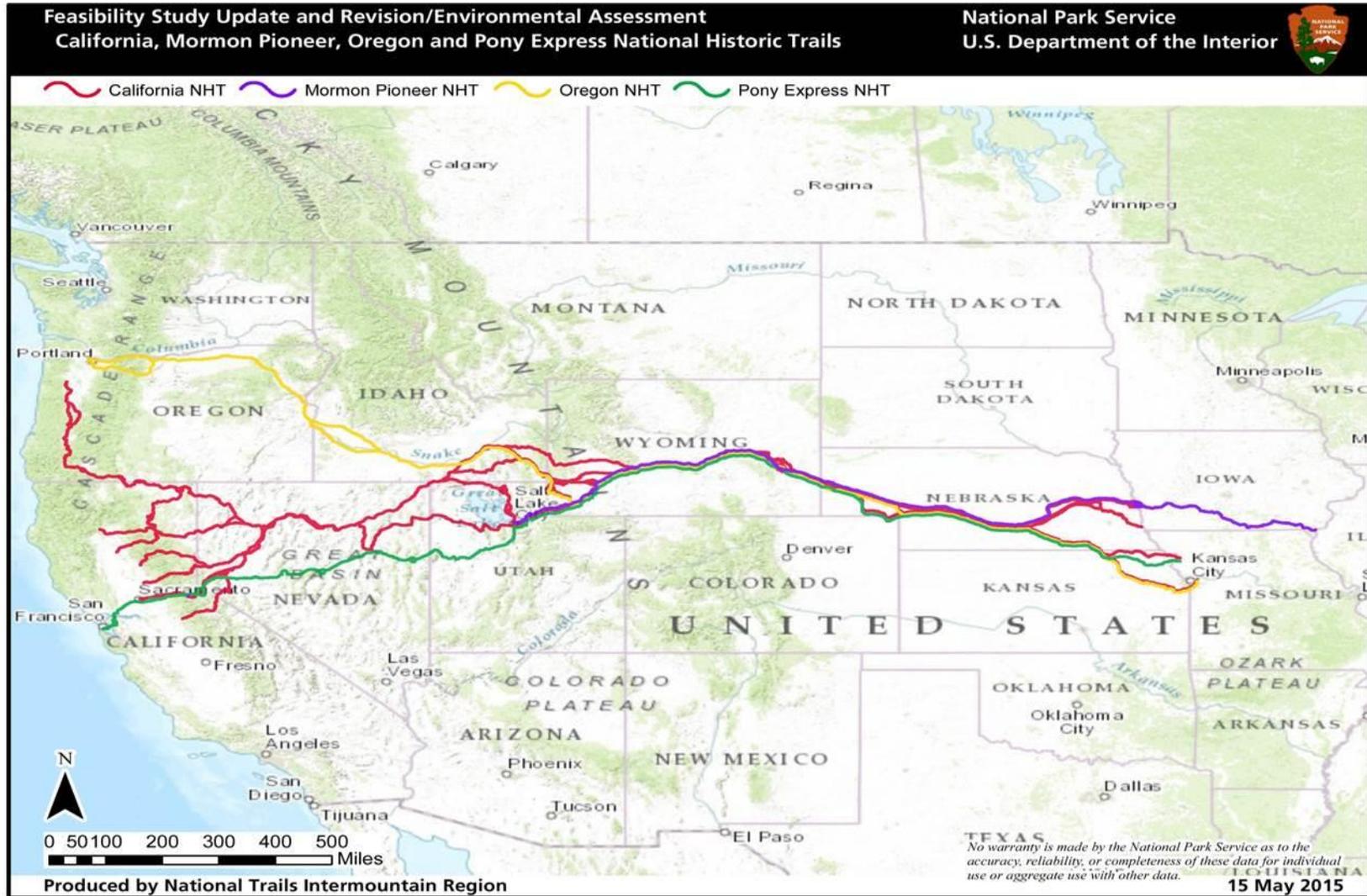
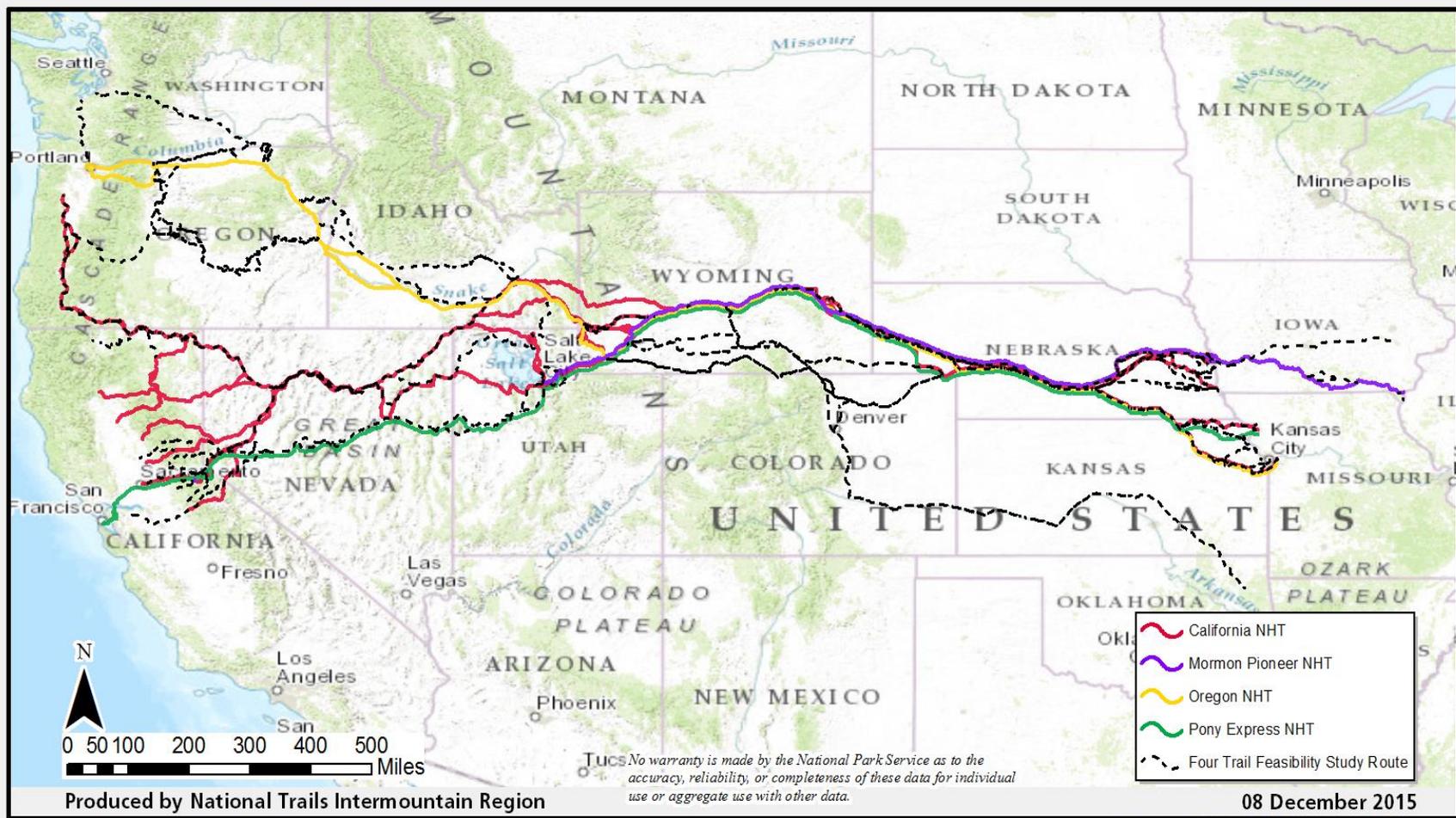


FIGURE 2. All routes considered for addition to the Oregon, Mormon Pioneer, California, and Pony Express national historic trails.



Statements of Significance

As part of their original processes of study and designation, the four parent NHTs were determined to be nationally significant under National Historic Landmark criteria. The following statements of significance are drawn from the original feasibility studies and authorizing legislation for the four NHTs.

Oregon National Historic Trail. The original 1977 Oregon Trail NHT feasibility study found the Oregon Trail to be nationally significant as one of the best-known, most heavily traveled routes in the nation's westward migration and a major determinant in the settlement of the American Northwest. In developing the NHT alignment between Independence, Missouri, and the Willamette Valley of Oregon, the Bureau of Recreation (BOR) planning team recommended designation of the primary route of the Oregon Trail, the route "thought by qualified historians to have received the most use as a wagon road by Willamette Valley-bound emigrants during the period 1841 to 1848, inclusive." To "simplify future route marking and public information," the BOR planners rejected all alternates and variants along the alignment, except for three that they considered to be equal to the primary route in terms of emigrant use and importance. The team identified the Oregon Trail's period of significance as the years from 1841, when the first party of emigrant families traveled overland to Oregon, through 1848, when discovery of gold in California radically altered the pattern of westward emigration. During those critical, pre-territorial years, some 12,000 American emigrants had established a wagon trail to the Willamette Valley and helped the United States wrest possession of the Oregon Country from Great Britain, and Congress had appointed a territorial government. Oregon's course was set.

In 1978, Congress accepted the BOR's recommended alternative and designated the Oregon NHT as "a route of approximately two thousand miles extending from near Independence, Missouri, to the vicinity of Portland Oregon" (National Trails System Act, P.L. 90-543, as amended through P.L. 111-11, March 30, 2009, Sec. 5).

Mormon Pioneer NHT. The original Mormon Pioneer NHT feasibility study, jointly prepared by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service and the NPS in 1978, found the 1846-1847 emigration of Brigham Young's vanguard company to the Great Basin to be nationally significant as "one of the most dramatic events in the history of the American Westward expansion" and the Mormons themselves to be "one of the principal forces in the settlement of the West." The feasibility study traced the route of that company from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Great Salt Lake Valley and described the trail's geography and landmarks, recreational opportunities, and points of historical interest along that single alignment. It did not offer any other trail configuration or routes, alternates, river crossings, or cutoffs taken by later Mormon companies as possible alternatives for designation. The trail's period of significance begins in 1846, when the first Mormon companies started west from Nauvoo to the Missouri River at present-day Council Bluffs, Iowa, and Omaha, Nebraska, and ends in 1847, when the Mormon pioneers continued their westerly trek to the Great Salt Lake Valley, Utah.

Congress accepted the recommendation of the 1978 feasibility study the same year the study was completed, designating the Mormon Pioneer NHT as “a route of approximately one thousand three hundred miles extending from Nauvoo, Illinois, to Salt Lake City, Utah, following the primary historical route of the Mormon Trail” (National Trails System Act, P.L. 90-543, as amended through P.L. 111-11, March 30, 2009, Sec. 5).

California NHT. The original California NHT feasibility study, completed by the NPS in 1987, found the California Trail to be nationally significant as “the route of the greatest mass migration in American history,” having “contributed directly to the occupation, settlement, and development of the western part of the United States, from the Missouri River to the Pacific coast.” The study included one action alternative that would designate only the “high value” historical routes of travel to California, creating a primary route much like that of the Oregon NHT, and another alternative that would designate “all routes and cutoffs.” In response to public support for “all routes and cutoffs,” the NPS recommended congressional designation of the more comprehensive “all routes” alternative. Neither alternative nor the study’s historical background section specified a California Trail period of significance. However, the historical discussion did identify the 1841 Bidwell-Bartleson Party as the earliest of the California-bound covered wagon emigrants, which establishes the beginning of the period of significance. For administrative, funding, and interpretive purposes, the NPS ultimately adopted 1869, the year the transcontinental railroad was completed between Omaha, Nebraska, and Sacramento, California, as the end of the California Trail period of significance.

In 1992, Congress designated the California National Historic Trail as “a route of approximately five thousand seven hundred miles, including all routes and cutoffs, extending from Independence and Saint Joseph, Missouri, and Council Bluffs, Iowa, to various points in California and Oregon” (National Trails System Act, P.L. 90-543, as amended through P.L. 111-11, March 30, 2009, Sec. 5). In contrast to the Oregon NHT, the California NHT includes multiple collector, distribution, and alternate routes used by early California emigrants, Forty-niners, and later gold seekers and settlers. This NHT is often described as resembling a frayed rope with strands (collector and distribution routes) fanning out from each end. Between the two frayed ends, the California NHT is a braid of primary routes, alternates, cutoffs, and variants.

Pony Express NHT. The original Pony Express NHT feasibility study, also prepared by the NPS in 1987, found the Pony Express to be nationally significant as “the nation’s most direct and practical means of east-west communications before the telegraph.” The Pony Express “proved the feasibility of a central overland transportation route” and demonstrated that such a route could be used year-round, thus showing that a cross-country railroad could be built, and “played a vital role in aligning California with the Union” by providing a fast communications link between the eastern U.S. and California on the eve of the Civil War. Moreover, the “collective heroism and determination of Pony Express riders and station masters...has left generations of Americans with remarkable examples of courage, endurance, and spirit of which the nation can be proud.” The study included an action alternative that would designate only the original Pony route that opened on April 3, 1860, between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento, California,

and a second alternative that would designate that original April 1860 route plus all subsequent changes used through October 26, 1861. In response to public comment, the NPS recommended the “trail plus subsequent changes” alternative to Congress for designation. The NHT’s period of significance is April 1860 through November 1861, the months between the opening and closing of the Pony Express.

In 1992, Congress accepted the “all routes plus subsequent changes” recommendation of the 1987 NPS feasibility study. The Pony Express National Historic Trail was designated as “a route of approximately one thousand nine hundred miles, including the original route and subsequent route changes, extending from Saint Joseph, Missouri, to Sacramento, California” (National Trails System Act, P.L. 90-543, as amended through P.L. 111-11, March 30, 2009, Sec. 5). A 101-mile segment between Sacramento and San Francisco was appended in 1997 by decision of the Secretary of the Interior, as authorized by Congress (*Federal Register* 62 [131]: 36840). The Pony Express NHT exists today as mostly a single alignment with a few short alternates that were used by horse-and-rider relays carrying “light mail” east and west.

Evaluation of Significance of the Study Routes

Section 5(b) 11A-11C of the NTSA provides specific criteria that a proposed national historic trail must meet in order to be eligible for designation. They are as follows:

(11) To qualify for designation as a national historic trail, a trail must meet all three of the following criteria:

(A) It must be a trail or route established by historic use and must be historically significant as a result of that use. The route need not currently exist as a discernible trail to qualify, but its location must be sufficiently known to permit evaluation of public recreation and historical interest potential. A designated trail should generally accurately follow the historic route, but may deviate somewhat on occasion of necessity to avoid difficult routing through subsequent development, or to provide some route variations offering a more pleasurable recreational experience. Such deviations shall be so noted on site. Trail segments no longer possible to travel by trail due to subsequent development as motorized transportation routes may be designated and marked onsite as segments which link to the historic trail.

(B) It must be of national significance with respect to any of several broad facets of American history, such as trade and commerce, exploration, migration and settlement, or military campaigns. To qualify as nationally significant, historic use of the trail must have had a far reaching effect on broad patterns of American culture. Trails significant in the history of native Americans may be included.

(C) It must have significant potential for public recreational use or historical interest based on historic interpretation and appreciation. The potential for such use is generally greater along roadless segments developed as historic trails and at historic sites associated with the trail. The presence of recreation potential not related to historic appreciation is not sufficient justification for designation under this category.

To meet the NTSA requirement for national significance, new trails under study for designation as national historic trails are evaluated under National Historic Landmarks Criteria for Evaluation, found in Code of Federal Regulations, Title 36, Part 65. The national significance of the existing Oregon, California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express NHTs, as related above, was established in their original feasibility studies. P.L. 111-11 Sect. 5302 mandates, “The study requirements and objectives specified in subsection (b) shall apply to a study required by this subsection” — meaning that the individual study routes, too, must meet the NTSA criteria for national historic trail designation. The NPS therefore evaluated whether each study route contributes to the national significance of the parent NHTs for which it is being considered.

The first step in the evaluation process was to establish each study route’s historical association with the parent NHT(s). In making this determination, the NPS considered the following questions:

- Is the study route’s historical use strongly related to and consistent with the existing statement of significance, period of significance, and other characteristics of the parent NHT?
- Is the study route alignment sufficiently known? To be sufficiently known, the route alignment had to be historically well documented (not largely conjectural) and agreed upon by key subject matter experts. If there is no consensus agreement on the route’s alignment, it is considered not to be sufficiently known.

In addition, the NPS had to determine whether the study route has trail-related historic sites, trail remnants, museums, visitor centers, or other possibilities for significant public recreational use or historical interest. A route had to pass all of these considerations in order to move forward in the study. This is how the NPS addressed NTSA criteria 11A and 11C.

Next, in order to determine whether the route contributes meaningfully to those “broad facets of American history” for which the parent NHT is nationally significant, the study routes were evaluated under the following questions:

- How well used was the study route? Did it carry better than negligible traffic to the Willamette Valley, the gold fields of northern California, or the Great Salt Lake Valley? (Traffic volume was estimated based on historical documentation.) For the Pony Express, was it a permanent route or route change, or was it a temporary alternate to detour around a temporary problem on the route?
- Did any event of national interest or prominence occur on the route? Examples of such events would be the Whitman Massacre on the Whitman Mission Route and the well-publicized disaster on the Meek Cutoff in Oregon.
- Did the route, landmarks along it, or the landscape it crossed attain iconic status as important and enduring symbols of the westward emigration, the Pony Express,

or the greater American West? Is it commonly featured in books, photographs, or movies?

- o Did the route represent an important pioneering effort, such as the route of the Bidwell-Bartleson Party, the first overland emigrants to California?
- o Was the route strongly associated with a person of national prominence, such as Brigham Young on the Mormon Trail or Marcus and Narcissa Whitman on the Whitman Mission Route?

A route had to meet just one of these considerations in order to be considered “contributing” and to move forward in the study. This is how the NPS addressed historical significance NTSA criterion 11B.

In addition, new national historic trails must meet other NTSA criteria and feasibility, suitability, and desirability requirements, and they must be considered under the National Environmental Policy Act. To this end, the NPS evaluated whether the study routes would serve a useful public purpose and bring added value to the parent trail and the National Trails System, considered whether the study routes are compatible with other existing and foreseeable land uses, and addressed other concerns voiced by the public during scoping. Where potential routing problems or land use conflicts for otherwise eligible routes were noted during this evaluation, the planning team tried to identify short reroutes, detours, best alignments or route combinations, or other compromises that might resolve or diminish those concerns. If a compromise solution could not be identified, the problematic route was dismissed from further consideration.

Results Under Action Alternative

Under the preferred alternative, 23 of the individual study routes go forward for designation to one or more parent NHTs (Table 1, Figure 3).

TABLE 1. Study Routes to be Added

Routes Count	OREG Routes Added	CALI Routes Added	MOPI Routes Added	POEX Routes Added
1	Westport Landing Rd.	Westport Landing Rd.		
2	Westport Rd.	Westport Rd.		
3		Fort Leavenworth-Big Blue River Rt.		
4	St. Joe Rd.			
5			1846 Subsequent Routes A & B	

Routes Count	OREG Routes Added	CALI Routes Added	MOPI Routes Added	POEX Routes Added
6	Council Bluffs Rd.			
7			1847 Alternative Elkhorn and Loup River Crossings	
8		Cherokee Trail [Selected sections, Okla. To Wyo., plus Southern Rt. Through Wyo.]		
9	Sublette Cutoff			
10		COER [Selected section, Simpson Rt.]*		
11		Weber Canyon Rt. of Hastings Cutoff		
12		Bidwell-Bartleson Rt.		
13		Bishop Creek Rt.		
14		Greenhorn Cutoff		
15	Raft River to the Applegate Trail			
16	Applegate Trail			
17	Meek Cutoff [Hambleton ver.]			
18	Umatilla River Rt. & Columbia River to The Dalles			
19	Cutoff to Barlow Rd.			
20	Cowlitz River Rt.			
21		Yreka Trail		
22		Hennes Pass Rt.		
23		Big Trees Rd.		
Total Routes Added	11	12	2	0

*COER: Central Overland Emigrant Routes

Under this alternative, the Oregon, Mormon Pioneer, and California, and Pony Express NHTs would have a new combined mileage of 12,577 miles.

Conclusions

Under the preferred alternative for the revision study, 11 routes would be added to the Oregon NHT. Among these is the Applegate Trail through Nevada, northern California, and southern Oregon, several feeder routes originating at the Missouri River jumping-off corridor, several alternate routes across Oregon, and a route north from Portland to the Puget Sound area of Washington State. All of the additional routes historically were part of and contribute to the significance of the Oregon Trail.

The Mormon Pioneer NHT today is a single-corridor, point-to-point trail. Under the preferred alternative for the current study, two study routes would be added. Both are short variants used by groups following closely behind Brigham Young's vanguard emigration parties in 1846 and 1847. Both were part of and contribute to the significance of the Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail.

Twelve routes to be added to the California NHT under the preferred alternative include several short alignments leading from eastern "jumping-off" towns on the Missouri River, and a partial alignment of the Cherokee Trail, a gold rush trail that originates at Oklahoma's Saline River and crosses Kansas, Colorado, and southern Wyoming, to join the California and Mormon Pioneer trail corridor at Fort Bridger in southwestern Wyoming. (The complete alignment was not added due to land use conflicts.) Also to be added are several routes across Idaho, Utah, and Nevada, and three short distribution routes into the Sierra Nevada. All of the additional routes historically were part of and contribute to the significance of the California Trail.

None of the routes studied for addition to the Pony Express NHT met both significance standards and the structured parameters of the preferred alternative. Consequently, the preferred alternative calls for no routes be added to the Pony Express NHT.

The NPS recommends addition of 23 routes to the Oregon, Mormon Pioneer, and California NHTs and no routes to the Pony Express NHT. The eligible routes are consistent with the respective statements of significance and periods of significance of the existing Oregon, California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express national historic trails, and contribute to the national significance of those trails.

FIGURE 3. Routes selected for addition to the Oregon, Mormon Pioneer, California, and Pony Express national historic trails.

