



Forest Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Northern Region/Custer Gallatin National Forest

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Rendezvous Nordic Ski Area Improvements Scoping Document

Introduction

The Rendezvous Nordic Ski Area is adjacent to, and southwest of, the town of West Yellowstone on the Custer Gallatin National Forest, in Gallatin County, Montana. It consists of about 1,670 acres containing about 24 miles of gently rolling, groomed Nordic ski trails that wind through tall stands of lodgepole pines and open meadows. Created in 1978, the Rendezvous Ski Area is managed through a cooperative partnership between the Forest Service, the West Yellowstone Chamber of Commerce, and the West Yellowstone Ski Education Foundation.

The cooperative partnership created a new 2023 Master Development Plan for the Rendezvous Nordic Ski Area to provide direction for future management. The Master Development Plan contains elements such as trail modifications and infrastructure improvements designed to meet the current and future needs of trail users. Many of these elements require environmental analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). This scoping document has been prepared as part of the NEPA process.

The Purpose of This Scoping Document

At the end of the NEPA process, the District Ranger of the Hebgen Lake Ranger District of the Custer Gallatin National Forest (Responsible Official) will decide whether to authorize the implementation of all, some, or none of the elements of the proposed action described below. The success of the Rendezvous Nordic Ski Area over the past 45 years has always depended on collaboration between the public, West Yellowstone community partners, and the Forest Service, and we value your feedback! Comments received during scoping will help us refine the proposed action and identify issues for analysis.

After scoping, we expect to prepare an environmental assessment to analyze and disclose the effects of the proposed action on the environment. Once a draft environmental assessment has been prepared, we will provide another 30 day public comment period. We expect to complete the NEPA process by spring of 2024. If the Responsible Official decides to authorize implementation of the proposed action, then changes may be made in the Rendezvous Ski Area as soon as the summer of 2024.

Why Are We Proposing This Project?

The previous Rendezvous Nordic Ski Area Master Development Plan was authorized in 2006. Many of the proposals from the 2006 Master Development Plan have been implemented and new needs have been identified.

A fee increase was implemented in December 2020 to allow for additional features requested by trail users. The 2023 Master Development Plan provides direction for future management and the implementation of additional features made possible by the fee increase. The Master Development Plan was created through an iterative, collaborative process between the Rendezvous cooperative partners to ensure the continued availability of high-quality recreation opportunities during all seasons.

The 2022 Land Management Plan for the Custer Gallatin National Forest contains an integrated set of plan direction, known as components, that provide for social, economic, and ecological sustainability and multiple uses of our national forest. Projects on the Custer Gallatin are typically designed to move current conditions in a project area toward Land Management Plan desired conditions. The need for the Rendezvous Nordic Ski Area Improvements project is framed below in terms of Land Management Plan desired conditions and goals.

- 1. The elements of the Master Development Plan are needed to ensure that a range of winter and summer activities are available in the Rendezvous Ski Area to meet a range of public recreation desires, consistent with the Custer Gallatin Land Management Plan desired condition FW-DC-RECSKI 01 (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2022).**

Currently, a range of beginner, intermediate, and expert ski trails are professionally groomed daily (depending on snow conditions) from approximately November 10 to April 15. In other seasons, trails are used by bikers, hikers, joggers, and dog walkers. Elements in the Master Development Plan would expand the range of activities available in all seasons. Proposals include the construction of single-track trail for use by snowshoers during the winter season and bikers during the summer season, paving of a track for roller sports, and a fitness par course for summer use.

- 2. Elements in the Master Development Plan are needed to ensure that recreation opportunities, and facilities that accommodate growing demand, are available in the Rendezvous Ski Area, consistent with Land Management Plan desired condition FW-DC-REC 03.**

Over the past five years, the Rendezvous Ski Area has received an average of about 33,000 skiers annually. Use of the Rendezvous Ski Area has trended upward since the early 2000s¹. The number of total skiers (as determined by trail counters) varies considerably year to year, so the average use over a three year period was considered. Use increased 36 percent between 2005-2008 and 2019-2022. Pass sales are similarly variable, but again the three year average increased by 38 percent between 2001-2004 and 2017-2020. Between 2010 and 2020, the population of Gallatin County Montana grew by nearly 20 percent². Based on these increases, the Forest expects the use of Rendezvous Ski Area to continue to grow during the planning period. Proposals to meet the anticipated growth in demand include stadium improvements, warming huts, and rental yurts.

- 3. The implementation of elements in the Master Development Plan is needed to continue to meet the Forest goals of working with the community of West Yellowstone to achieve a national and**

¹ Use determined from available data; use before early 2000s unknown. Total skier days determined by trail counters from December 1st to March 31st from 2005-06 to 2021-2022 and pass sales data from 2001-02 to 2019-20.

² US Census Bureau 2022. "[PEPANNRES](#)" and "[P1](#)" Reports.

international destination for winter recreation, and to maintain our partnership which sustainably operates the Rendezvous Nordic Ski Area (MG-GO-HWREA 01, 02).

Currently, the Ski Area draws local, regional, and international visitors with its Olympic-caliber trail system and proximity to Yellowstone National Park. This destination status has been achieved by maintaining our cooperative partnership, and successfully managing the Ski Area for over 40 years. The implementation of the proposed action represents the opportunity to continue to meet the goals described in the Land Management Plan.

Note: To view the Land Management Plan, including the desired conditions and goals listed here, visit https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd1008515.pdf.

Proposed Action

The Forest Service is proposing to implement the elements in the Rendezvous Ski Area Master Development Plan, as described below. The maps illustrating these elements are available on the project webpage: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=63829>.

Modification of Existing Routes

Modifications to existing trails are proposed to improve user convenience, grooming efficiency, and safety. All trails listed below would be Trail Class 4 with a Designed Use of cross-country skiing. Trails would be double lane, receive regular machine grooming, and have a native surface with no protrusions or obstacles. Trails would be constructed by machine, typically to a finished width of 20 feet. The following elements are shown in Figure 6 on page 15.

Cutoff on Wolverine Way

A new cutoff, about 165 feet long, is proposed on Wolverine Way to allow for a 0.6 mile loop from the stadium area (the stadium area is the area around the biathlon range). This would allow for a shorter return loop for beginning skiers and more alternatives for training and competition loops.

New Tele Hill Descent

A new trail segment, about 1,000 feet long, is proposed to allow for a gentler descent on Tele Hill. This would allow for greater accessibility for a wider variety of users to this area of the trail system because the current descent of Tele Hill is steep, can be extremely challenging in some snow conditions, and has resulted in multiple injuries.

Wolverine Junction Bridge

The installation of an overpass bridge at Wolverine Junction is proposed to increase skier safety and provide more flexibility for skier route combinations. The overpass bridge would be similar to the style of the bridge shown in figure 1. The junction is a high-traffic four-way intersection located near the stadium area. Wolverine junction has the potential for dangerous high-speed versus low-speed skier interactions and two-way traffic.

The bridge would be designed to allow a groomer to pass both over and under it, and would consist of a culvert, Quonset hut or similar plus concrete supports. Construction is expected to temporarily disturb about 0.25 to 0.5 acres.



Figure 1. Example of a ski overpass similar in style to the proposed overpass.
Photo courtesy Killington Ski Resort.

Windy Ridge Re-Route

A re-route of the Windy Ridge trail (shown in Figure 6) is proposed to economize grooming patterns and improve access for skiers. Currently, the trail is a four mile loop located on the edge of the trail system with only a single point of access. Its layout requires nearly 2 miles of inefficient double passes with a groomer. A re-route would decrease double pass grooming to about 300 feet and create an additional access point. Re-routing would also prevent future conflicts regarding access to the town of West Yellowstone's water tank; plowing to access the tank in the past has impacted the Windy Ridge Trail.

The existing Windy Ridge trail would be abandoned west of National Forest System Road 6958 (Whiskey Springs Road) while segments of the trail east of National Forest System Road 6958 would be rerouted. Portions of the trail that do not fall on the powerline access road would be decommissioned. A few physical barriers to bar outside motorized incursions on the re-routed ski trails and decommissioned trail segments would be necessary.

Race Start and Teaching Area

A new race start and teaching area are proposed as shown in Figure 7, and would be created by clearing about 4.3 acres. About 3.3 acres of clearing would be to increase the corridor width of the existing trail, and about 1 acre would be to create a staging area. The current location of the race start and teaching area is likely to become unusable as the town of West Yellowstone develops their adjacent land because participants stage on town land during large events. The proposed change would ensure that events, such as the annual Rendezvous Ski Race (which receives over 700 participants), can be accommodated into the future by creating space for staging within the ski area boundary. The new start area would also benefit teaching and youth programming. The clearing would likely be done by machine (such as a

bulldozer) and would include soil disturbance for levelling and removing tree root balls and other obstacles.

Stadium Area Improvements

The stadium area is the area around the existing biathlon range, timing building, and Taylor Fork warming cabin. The following are shown in Figure 5 on page 11.

Skier Services Building

The Forest proposes the construction of a new building in the Stadium Area. The proposed building would have a footprint up to 7,000 square feet in size and consist of two stories that house public areas, such as restrooms, a warming area, and competition areas (such as wax rooms and changing rooms). This building would also accommodate event management needs such as timing, equipment controls, and medical supplies. The building would meet Architectural Barriers Act accessibility standards and require a well, septic system, and electricity. Electric is currently available in the stadium area.

Expanded Parking Area

The Forest proposes to expand the current parking area by up to 0.5 acres and re-route a portion (about 0.1 miles) of the current access road. The adjusted road would be designated as administrative access in the database of record. The portion of the road no longer in use would be decommissioned.

New Single-Track Trail

The Forest Service proposes the construction of about nine miles of single-track trail, as shown in Figure 8, to expand winter snowshoeing options and increase summer options, especially for biking. The new trail would be a Class 3 Trail with a single lane tread width and a native surface tread. The trail would be constructed by hand or machine with Forest Service or contract crews.

New trail would likely be located on decommissioned ski trails and in logged areas to minimize new tree cutting. The trail would be routed to allow access to the established ski trail system at regular intervals for cutoffs. For lynx habitat considerations, the new trail would not be groomed.

Lighted Trails

The Forest Service proposes to install outdoor lights along nine miles of trail and in the Stadium Area as shown in Figure 9. In West Yellowstone, daylight lasts for fewer than nine hours during December. Trail lighting would expand skiing opportunities before and after work hours for users. Lights would be installed in three phases. Phase 1 would include lights in the stadium area, the biathlon target range, range Quonset hut, all winter biathlon racecourses, the In and Out Trail, and Tele Hill which would total about 4 miles of lighting. Phase 2 would add an additional 3.8 miles of lighting on the Rendezvous Loop and all cutoffs. Phase 3 would consist of another 1.2 miles of lighting on part of Deja View and Doug's Doodle.

The trail lighting for all phases would be energy efficient, dimmable, and either dark sky compliant³ or use other technology that meets the dark sky basics (see proposed Design Feature 3). Lighting would generally be no brighter than necessary to offer a mood lighting effect. Lighting may be increased in brightness to fully illuminate trails needed during events. Lighting in the target range may not be dark sky compliant or similar if it is designed to be used only during events. The use of stand-alone solar lights

³ As determined by the International Dark-Sky Association "Fixture Seal of Approval".

would be investigated for the southwestern half of Phase 2, and all of Phase 3, for sustainability and to minimize necessary trenching for utility lines. Necessary powerlines would likely be buried on existing ski trails.

Paved Multi-Use Trails

The Forest Service proposes asphalt surfacing on 2.3 miles of existing trail to improve accessibility and expand summer recreation opportunities to include roller-skiing, bicycling, and other roller sports. The proposed paving would accommodate a variety of loops, from about 0.2 miles to 2 miles in length.

Access to the paved loops would begin at the junction with National Forest System Road 1700. Nearby land, owned by the Town of West Yellowstone, would be developed in the future, and paving would allow users to link the Rendezvous Trail System with the paved Yellowstone Shortline Trail, eventually providing a varied and extended paved recreation opportunity. Where existing trail width allows, portions of the proposed trail would include two-lane divided pavement (with periodic connectors) to maximize loop options while minimizing pavement footprint.

Snowmaking System

The Forest proposes to install an artificial snowmaking system. The elevation of the Rendezvous Ski Area is relatively low at about 6,600 feet. At lower elevations, climate change is anticipated to reduce the amount of precipitation that falls as snow (Halofsky et al. 2018), and therefore potentially reduce snowpack and the number of skiable days. A snowmaking system is needed to ensure adequate snow is available into the future, especially for early season events such as the Yellowstone Ski Festival in November.

Snowmaking is proposed on about 10 acres which would include about 3.7 miles of trails (In and Out, Purple Haze), the stadium area, and the trailhead area. This may require installing about four linear miles of snowmaking lines. The proposed lines would be trenched on existing ski trails. A well and pump/compressor building may be installed as part of the snowmaking system.

Warming Shelters

The Forest Service proposes the construction of up to three warming shelters along the trail system to improve visitor enjoyment and safety. Skiers of all ability levels use the Rendezvous Ski Area, and trails are not regularly patrolled. Warming shelters would improve safety for skiers who become fatigued or experience equipment malfunctions or accidents. The shelters may be three sided sheds, small cabins, or yurts potentially with wood stoves inside. Shelters would not experience overnight use. Shelters would likely be between 500 and 850 square feet in size (though they may be smaller), and may include a small porch. Shelters would be for winter day use and situated so that they are obvious and accessible from trails. Shelters would be distributed across the trail system and would meet applicable accessibility standards.

Fitness Par Course

The Forest Service proposes the development of a fitness par course. A par course is outdoor fitness equipment arranged in stations that typically include strength training, balancing, and stretching stations. A par course would expand the range of activities available in the summer and promote long-term physical and mental health by providing varied exercise opportunities.

Par course equipment would be designed to harmonize with the natural environment and to meet applicable accessibility standards. Equipment would likely be constructed of wood or metal and examples of par course equipment are shown in figure 2.

An illustrated graphic panel that shows how to use the equipment may be included at fitness stations. The par course would be configured either as a full-body exercise circuit with about 15 pieces of equipment separated into stations located along a trail, or as a shorter circuit with the pieces of equipment grouped in stations located along a trail. Installation would likely require up to 500 square feet of ground disturbance per equipment piece. Permanent effects would likely be limited to less than 100 square feet per equipment piece accounting for the structure itself and trampling resulting from use. The course would most likely be located near the trailhead building, along the In and Out Loop, in the Stadium area, or along trail sections near the stadium area. Equipment would be located adjacent to trails, but would not impact winter grooming.



Figure 2. Examples of constructed par course stations similar to the style envisioned on the Rendezvous. Photos courtesy Virginia State Parks, Leesylvania State Park ([CC 2.0 Flickr](#)).

Rental Yurts

The Forest Service proposes constructing up to three rental yurts, similar to the yurt shown in figure 3. Each unit would likely be a yurt that is between 500 and 850 square feet in size. Units may include a small porch, which would increase impacted area to about 1,200 square feet. Construction of rental units would also include the installation of vault toilets. The vault toilet would likely have a compacted gravel or concrete pad for accessibility, which would result in about 850 square feet of impacted area. In total, each structure and associated visitor use are expected to impact about 0.12 (1/8th) of an acre.

Rental units would be accessed by skis or snowshoes and would be available for rent during the winter only. These units may be located along the Dead Dog Trail, or near the intersections of: Rendezvous Loop and Jerry's Journey, Jerry's Journey and Dead Dog, and/or Dead Dog and Windy Ridge.



Figure 3. A yurt similar to the style envisioned for rental yurts. *Photo courtesy J Brew, Lake Chelan Nordic Ski Club* ([CC 2.0 Flickr](#)).

Proposed Design Features

Note: Design Features are constraints intended to minimize the potential environmental impacts of a proposed project or to ensure that projects are designed to meet applicable law and policy. This list will likely expand during the course of project development.

1. The existing winter-use timing building and Taylor Fork warming cabin located at the stadium area used for race administration, warming, and other purposes would be decommissioned or removed once the new facilities (skier services building and warming huts) are constructed.
2. Trail lighting would only be used during the grizzly bear denning season, December 2 through February 28 annually. Use of the trail system during nighttime hours, during the non-denning season, March 1 through December 1 annually, would not be encouraged.
3. Outdoor trail lighting will be dark sky compliant as determined by the International Dark Sky Association Fixture Seal of Approval, or use other technology to meet dark sky outdoor lighting basics. The basics are: lights on only when needed or limited hours, only light the desired area, be no brighter than necessary, minimize blue light emissions, and eliminate upward-directed light. (Refer to the International Dark Sky Association website www.darksky.org for design guidance.)
4. Any structures for overnight use would be temporary (such as yurts) and would only be used during the grizzly bear denning season, December 2 through February 28.
5. Temporary overnight structures (yurts) would be erected and taken down as close to the beginning (December 2) and end (February 28) of the grizzly bear denning season as possible

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given weather and other factors. The Forest Service shall inspect temporary structures at the end of the rental season (February 28) to ensure that no attractants that could lead to human-grizzly bear conflict are present.

6. Temporary structures (yurts) would not be used for any purpose (daytime or overnight uses) outside the grizzly bear denning season (December 2 through February 28).
7. Permanent structures for overnight use are prohibited. New permanent structures used solely for day use during the non-denning season and for the public ski trail recreational use would be allowed (skier services building, warming huts, groomer building).
8. The 2023 Custer Gallatin Food Storage Order (Forest Order # 01-11-00-23-02) would be enforced for the construction, administration, and maintenance of facilities from March 1 through December 1 annually.
9. No long-term storage of attractants would be allowed at ski trail infrastructure (new skier services building, groomer building, and so forth) to prevent potential human-grizzly bear conflicts.
10. Provide bear safety messaging at the area entry points (the Trailhead on Town of West Yellowstone property and the South Plateau Road gate) for skiers and other trail users during the non-denning season (March 1 through December 1).
11. Decommission abandoned trails and roads effectively to ensure they are not accessible to motorized vehicles.
12. Avoid or minimize impacts to Canada lynx multi-story structure habitat during layout and implementation of new trail construction where possible. Conduct lynx habitat surveys in areas that may have adequate understory vegetation (generally 25-30 percent understory cover based on ocular estimates) to support a multi-storied structural condition.

Appendix A: Maps

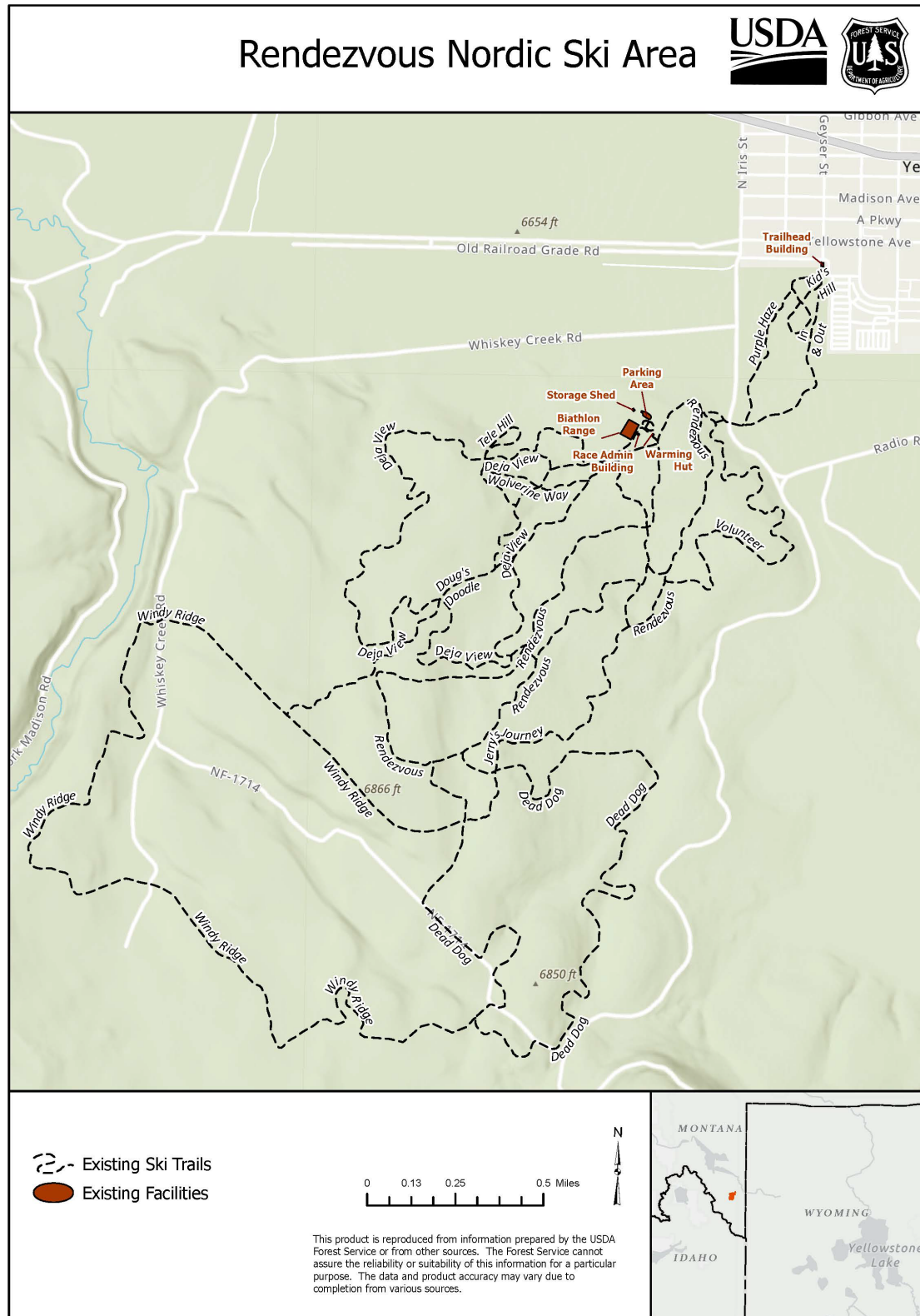


Figure 4. Rendezvous Ski Area overview map

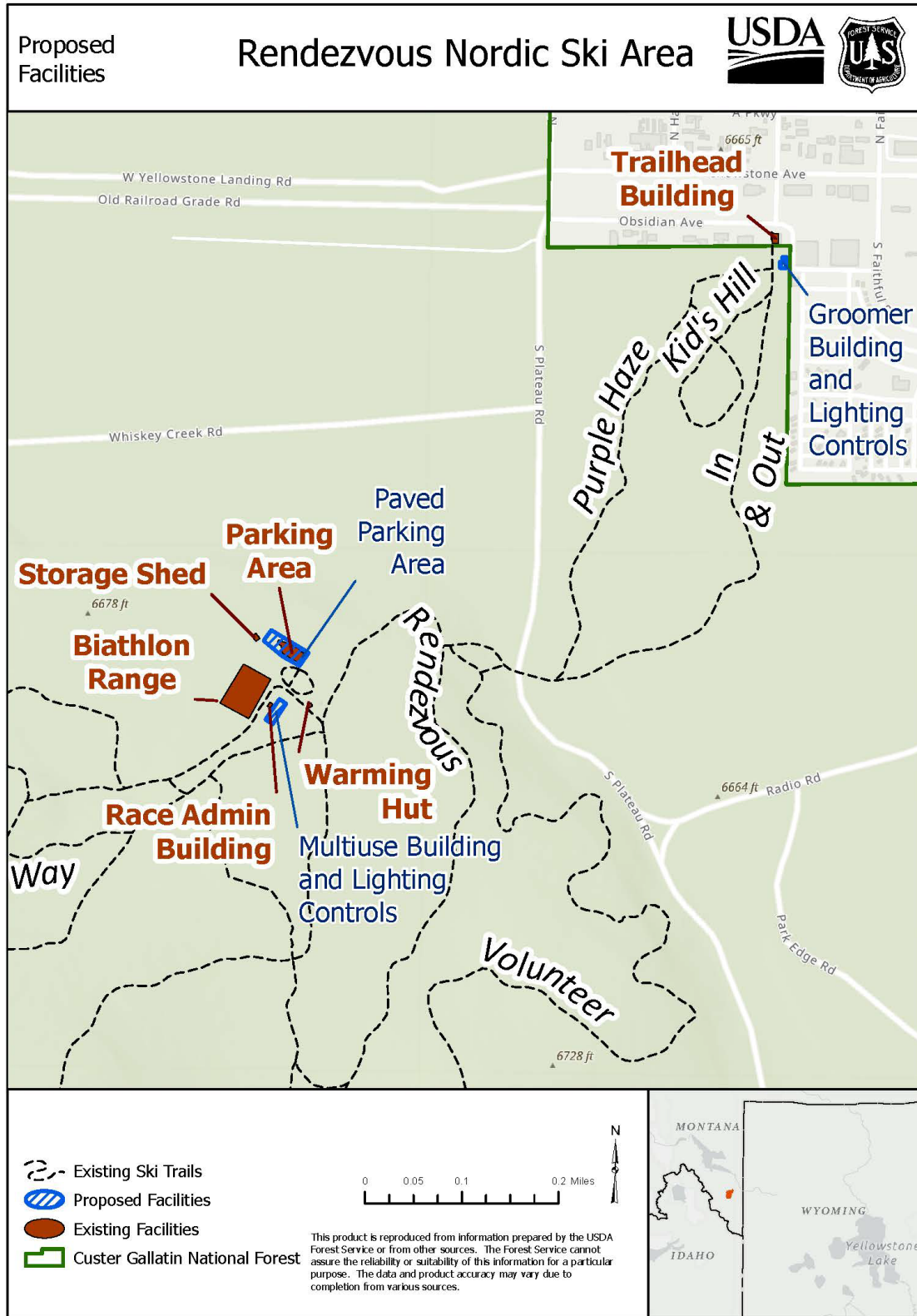


Figure 5. Map of proposed facilities

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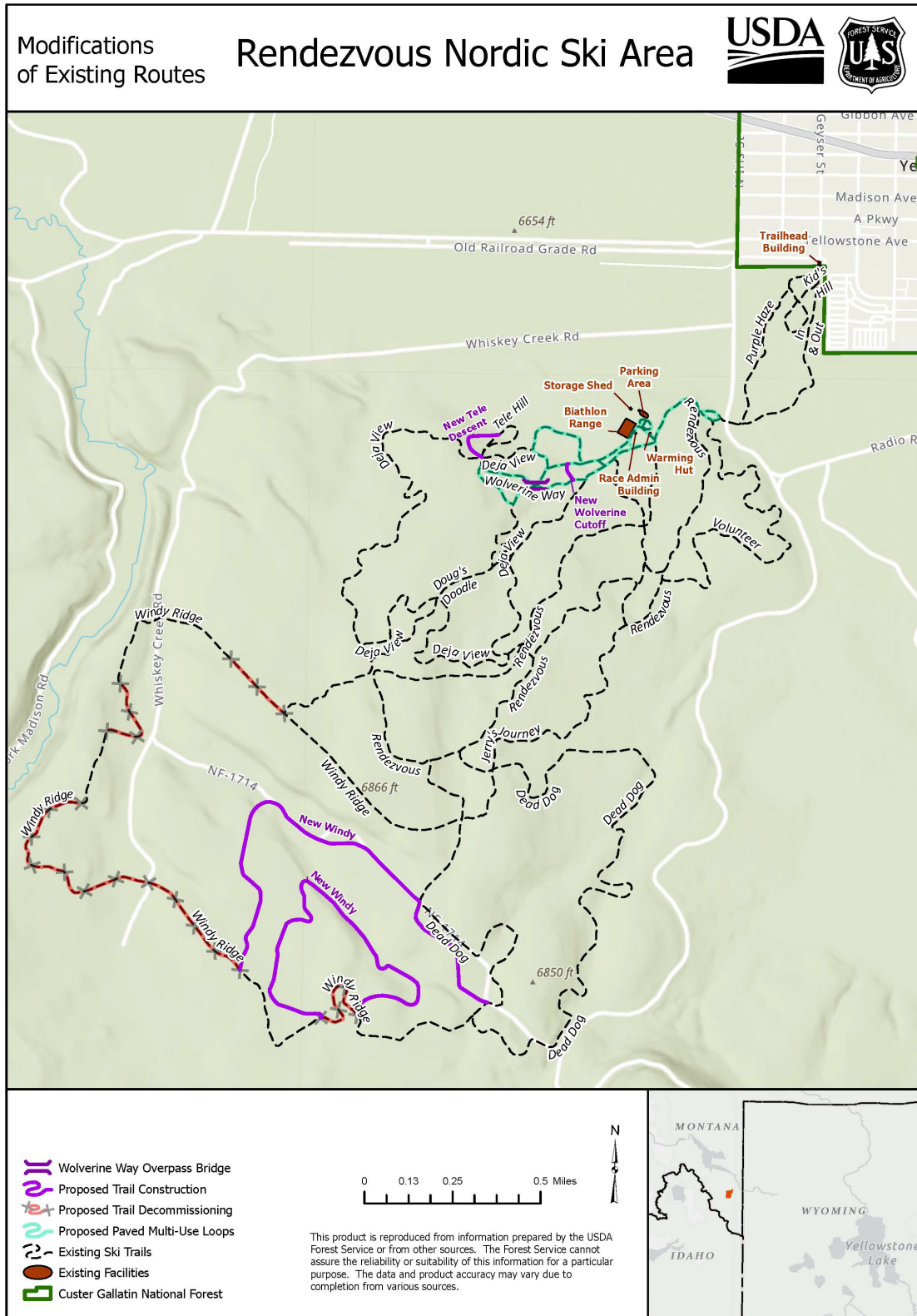


Figure 6. Map of modifications of existing routes

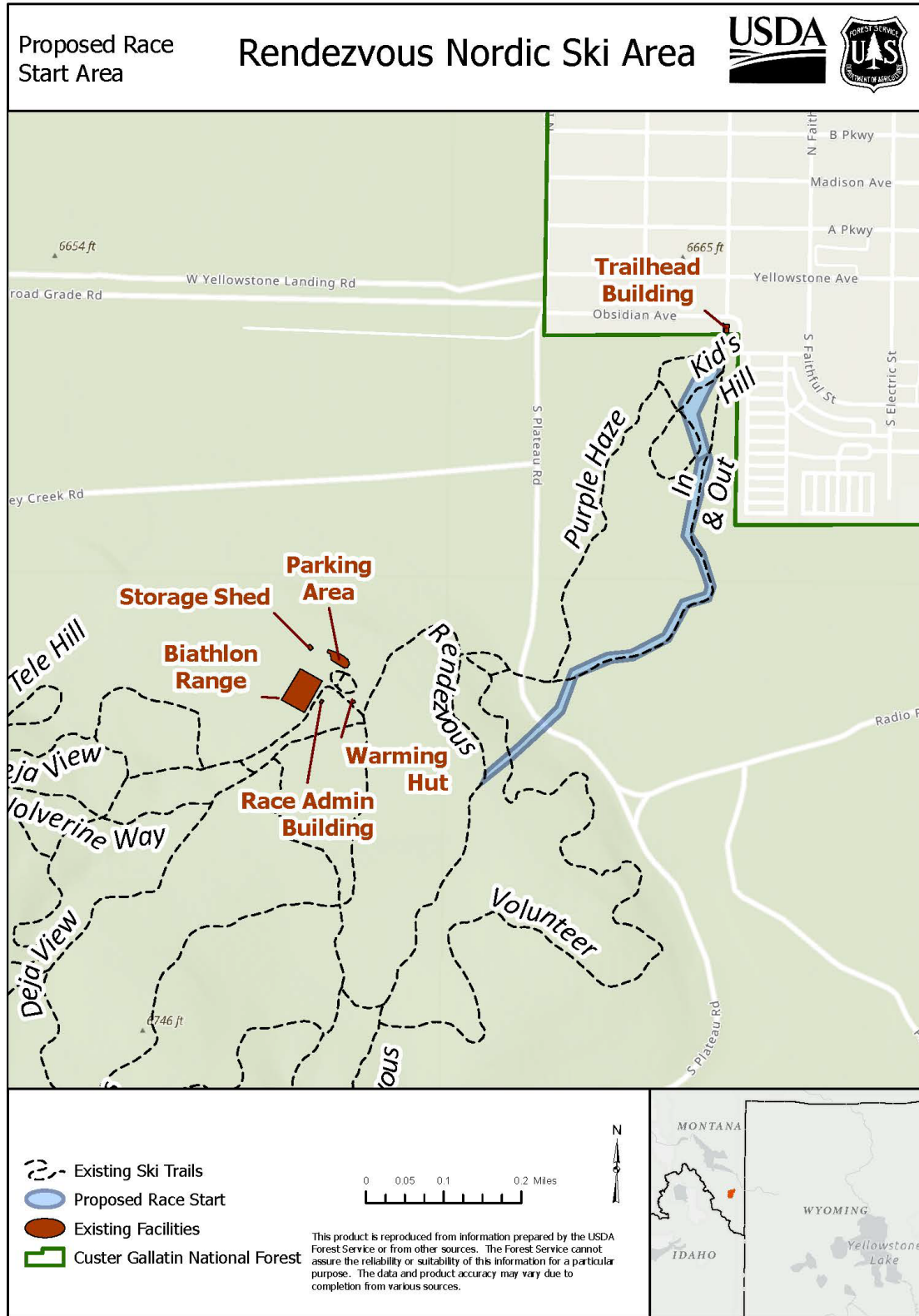


Figure 7. Map of proposed race start area

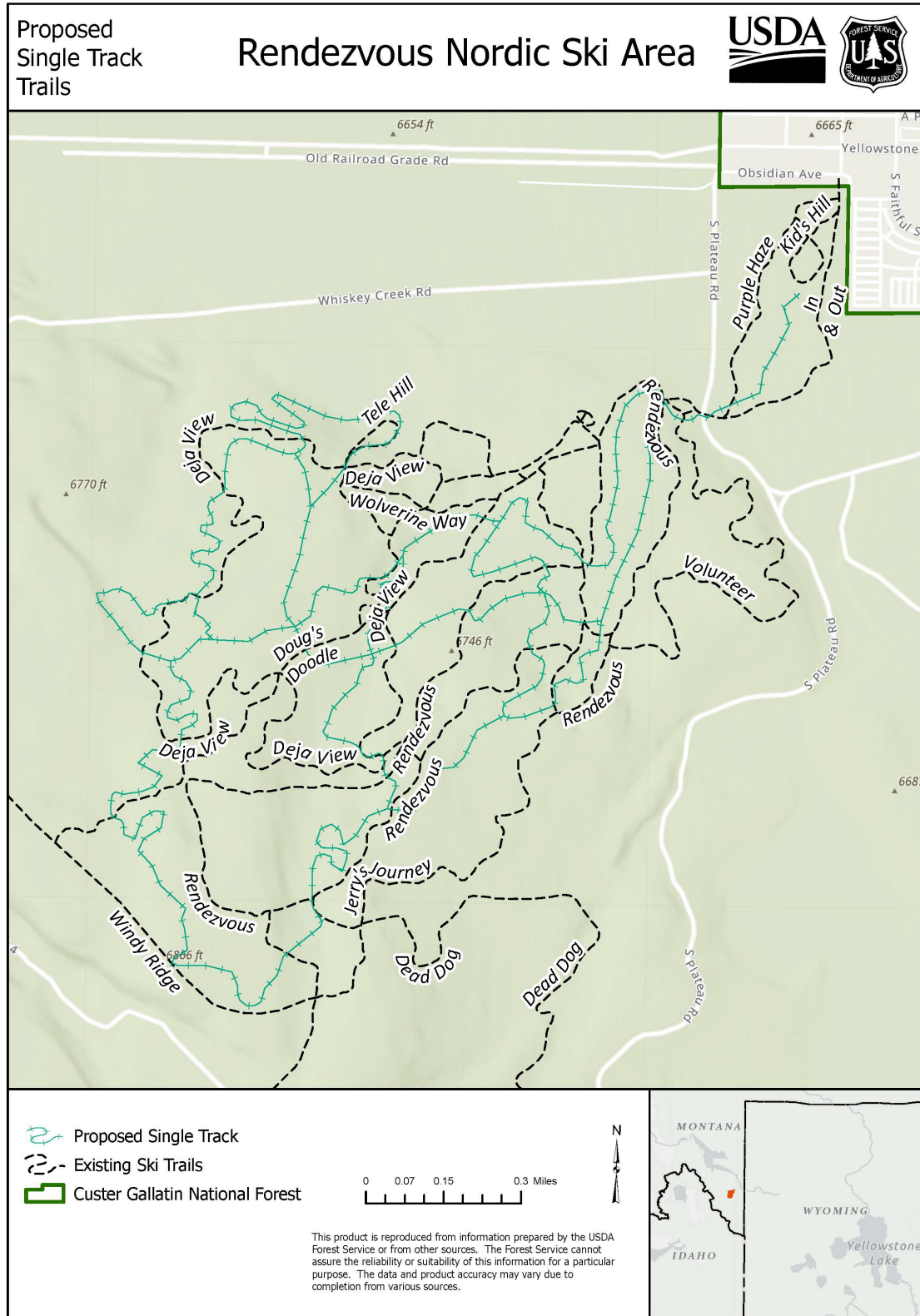


Figure 8. Map of proposed single track trails

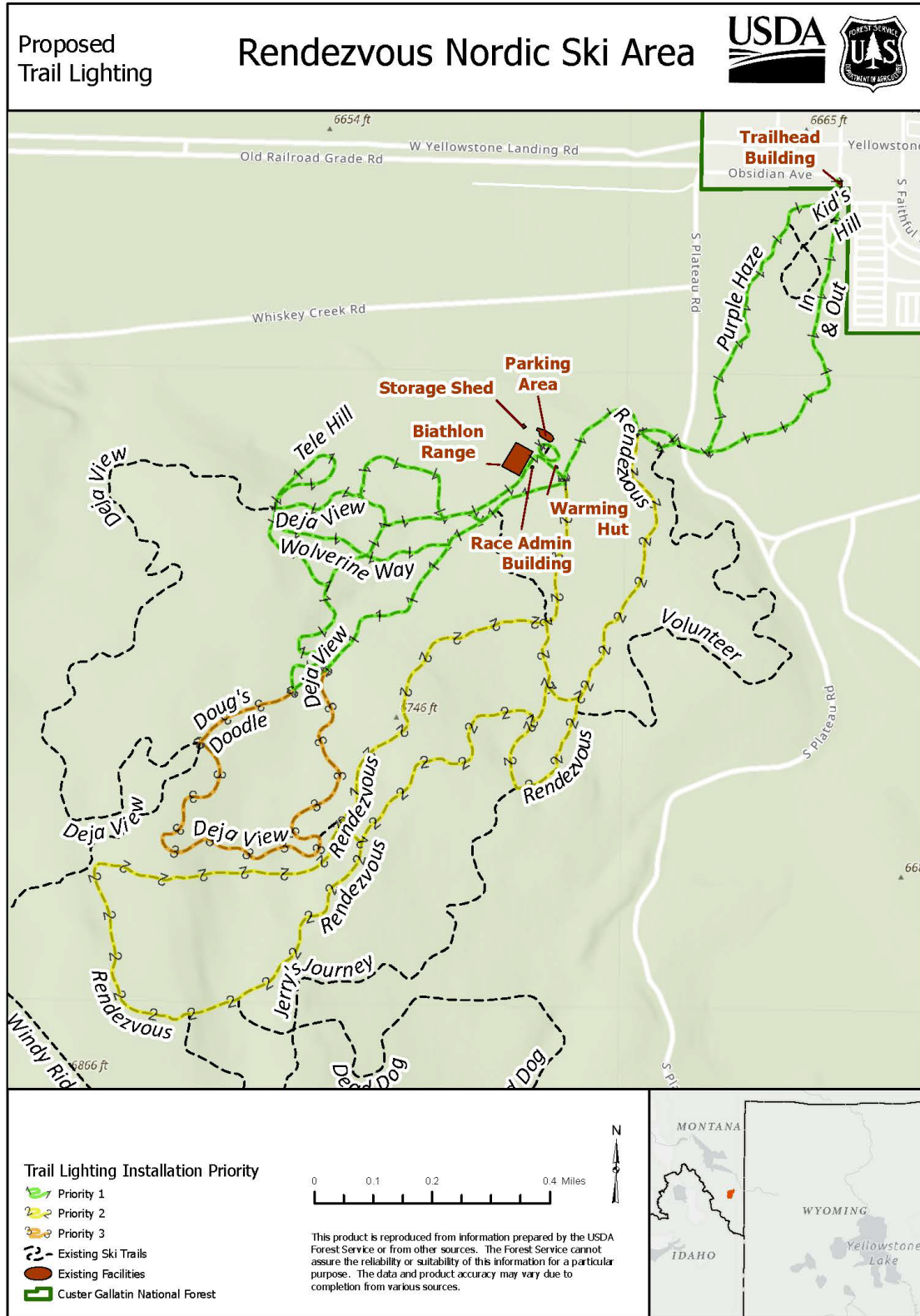


Figure 9. Map of proposed trail lighting