



Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDT) Vegetation Treatments- Best Practices



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Purpose: This document provides recommended best practices for units to employ when planning for and implementing vegetation treatments within the CDT corridor so the nationally significant scenic values are conserved, enhanced, or restored, consistent with law and policy.² This is a living document, to be updated as lessons are learned from implementation.

Applicable Law & Policy

- ✓ The CDT was established under the National Trails System Act of 1968 (16 U.S.C. 1241-1251) as amended by the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978 (Pub. L. No. 95-625). It is accordingly a Congressionally-designated area and requires that projects be implemented in a way that is sensitive to the values for which the trail was established.
- ✓ National Scenic Trails are to be “so located as to provide for maximum outdoor recreation potential and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, or cultural qualities of the areas through which such trails may pass.” (National Trails System Act, Sec. 3(a)(2)).
- ✓ The nature and purposes of the CDT are to provide for high-quality scenic, primitive hiking and horseback riding opportunities and to conserve the natural, historic, and cultural resources along the CDT corridor (2009 CDT Comprehensive Plan, Sec. II A.).
- ✓ Uses and management activities are allowed in designated areas to the extent that these uses are in harmony with the purposes for which the area was designated. (FSH 1909.12 Sec. 24.2 (1.b.)).
- ✓ Administer National Scenic and Historic Trails to be compatible with the nature and purposes of the corresponding trail. (FSM 2353.42)
- ✓ The CDT is a **concern level 1 travel route. The scenic integrity objective (SIO)** is to be **high or very high depending on the CDT segment**. (2009 CDT Comprehensive Plan, Sec. IV.C(1)).
- ✓ Management activities in areas where the trail is proposed for construction or realignment are to be consistent with CDT policy (2009 CDT Comprehensive Plan, Sec. IV.C(1)).

¹ Edited SIO language in Law & Policy section; edited second bullet in Planning & Design section.

² This direction may apply to other National Scenic and Historic Trails. If others are within the proposed project area, please check with the applicable Trail Administrator.

Vegetation Management Within the CDT Corridor

When vegetation treatment is deemed necessary within the CDT corridor, projects should be implemented through careful project design and silvicultural prescriptions to conserve, enhance or restore high scenic integrity, high quality recreational opportunities, and conserve the nationally significant cultural, historic and natural resources within the trail corridor. Project purpose and need statements should reflect desired conditions within the National Scenic Trail corridor.

CDT Corridor: A spatially identifiable area wide enough to encompass the significant scenic, historic, cultural and natural features that contribute to the trail's setting and significance as a National Scenic Trail (FSH 1909.12, Sec. 24.43(2)(f)). If a corridor has not been identified in the Forest Plan, the one-half mile foreground viewed from either side of the CDT travel route should be the primary consideration in determining corridor width. (FSM 2353.44b(7)).

Planning and Design

- Vegetation treatments should be designed to conserve and enhance the desired scenic character of landscapes through which the CDT passes while ensuring healthy and resilient vegetation conditions that are within the Natural Range of Variability (NRV). Vegetation treatments may be used to maintain and/or create natural appearing vegetation patterns containing species, age class, and composition diversity.
- The CDT should be identified as a Concern Level 1 travel route when considering scenic resource management. Viewpoints along the CDT route should be managed similarly to other linear resources designated for scenic values, such as Wild and Scenic Rivers and Scenic Byways.
 - Views from the entire CDT route should be managed for high or very high scenic integrity within foreground, and, where feasible, middle ground and background.
- If the current forest plan does not identify the CDT as High Scenic Integrity Objective or Retention Visual Quality Objective, consider a minor amendment to align forest plan scenic resource management with the CDT Comprehensive Plan.
- The CDT should be identified on all project proposal/scoping maps if the project area is within 4 miles of the trail (or within the middle ground viewshed).
- When analyzing effects, include:
 - How will the proposed action and alternatives impact the scenic character? Discuss both short-term and long-term effects. Consider effects to scenic character for projects implemented within foreground and middle ground views from the trail.
 - How long will the impacts change the experience for trail users?
 - Will popular camping sites be disrupted or lost for extended periods of time?
 - Cumulative effects, how many similar projects will long-distance trail users encounter in your area? Likewise, how many similar projects have occurred on your unit that may affect scenic character within foreground, middle ground and background views from the trail?
- Always include trail partners and stakeholders in scoping efforts. These should include Continental Divide Trail Coalition (info@continentaldividetrail.org) and Continental Divide Trail Society (mail@cdtsociety.org) as well as other national, regional and local entities.

Project Design Features and Mitigation Measures³

1. Project Design, Layout and Implementation:

- A. Create irregular edges for treatment units visible from the CDT to mimic natural vegetation patterns. “Feather” vegetation treatment unit edges by leaving trees in irregular edge alignments and of various heights and sizes.



Rationale: Establishment of irregularly shaped treatment areas and edges reduces visual contrast with surrounding landscape scenic character and mixed severity fire regimes.

- B. Consider the use of low intensity prescribed fire as a preferred method of fuels treatment and forest regeneration. Avoid scorching of tree canopy. Fire scarring on tree trunks is an acceptable outcome. Fire lines within 300' must be restored following burning operations.



Rationale: Results of low intensity fire are generally within the landscape's natural range of variability (except for Lodgepole Pine and Engelmann Spruce) and are consistent with overall scenic character.

³ These Design Features and Mitigation Measures apply to the existing CDT corridor and any proposed re-routes.

- C. Maintain a minimum of 30% canopy cover, where feasible. It is best to maintain a 50% canopy cover if possible. Retain some irregularly scattered larger diameter surface material to add visual diversity.



Rationale: Where canopy cover is considered a desired condition it adds to scenic character. Treatment designs in collaboration with interdisciplinary teams can accomplish project objectives while retaining valued scenic attributes.

- D. Minimize impacts from mechanized and hand treatments within 300 feet of the trail in order to promote a naturally appearing setting.



Rationale: Areas within immediate foreground views of the trail affect trail user experience and are sensitive to visual disturbance which can result from mechanized and/or hand treatments.

- E. Mark only take trees, and put the mark on the unseen side of the tree within 300 feet of the trail.



Rationale: Visible post-project paint on trees detracts from the naturally-appearing landscape character.

- F. Limit stump heights within 300 feet of the trail to a maximum of 6" on the uphill side. Cut stumps should be covered with duff, dirt or debris to hide or stain the newly exposed cut trunks. For large diameter trees, consider grinding stumps if the 6" maximum height cannot be reached.



Rationale: Cutting stumps as low to the ground as practical reduces visual evidence of management activity. Horizontally cut stumps have less visual impact than those cut at angles.

- G. Retain healthy, large diameter or character trees in a manner that results in stable, wind-firm residuals that are seen within ¼ mile of the CDT.



Rationale: Large trees and character trees provide benefit to scenic character and to trail user experience.

- H. Felling practices that leave whole trees in areas that won't be burned, removed or chipped: Trees should be felled in different random patterns in foreground and middle ground viewsheds on slopes greater than 20%.



Rationale: If felled trees must be left, felling them in random patterns promotes a more natural-appearing setting.

- I. Burn piles: Hand pile and burn is generally fairly benign for scenic quality. Build piles 100' or more from the trail (especially if behind natural screening where available). If steep slopes make this unfeasible, strive to build piles at least 50' from the trail and, where possible, behind natural screening. If the burn pile is made from dead wood, strive to burn that season.



2. Temporary Roads, Landings and Skid Trails:

- A. **Do not use the CDT as a temporary road or as a route for skidding.**
- B. Minimize skid trails across the route. If necessary, skid trails that are perpendicular to the trail are preferable to parallel skid trails.



Rationale: Skid trails can create lasting visual impacts inconsistent with the area's scenic character and can negatively affect the sustainability of the trail tread.

- C. Restore skid trails and roads within the ¼ mile of the trail immediately following conclusion of treatment activity.



Rationale: Skid trails can create lasting visual impacts inconsistent with the area's scenic character.

- D. Locate landings outside of foreground (up to ¼ mile from the trail) unless no other options are available.



Rationale: Landings can create lasting landscape features that are inconsistent with valued scenic character and trail user expectations.

3. Post Treatment:

- A. Clean up most slash after implementation for those units within 300' of the trail. After burning piles, if piles do not burn cleanly, return and rake out piles within 300' of the trail.

Rationale: Removal of post-treatment slash supports a naturally appearing landscape character.

4. Visitor Use Management:

- A. Notify the CDT Administrator (brenda.yankoviak@usda.gov) and trail partners of vegetation projects well in advance of implementation of those projects. For example, if a project will occur in summer, notify the parties as early in the year as possible, then provide updates and maps as details become available closer to implementation date.

- i. Continental Divide Trail Coalition can be a resource to help share information with trail users before, during and after the project via their website and social media. Consider which local partners may also be willing to assist with messaging.
- ii. Provide information regarding planned treatment locations, timeframe for implementation, access limitations, and project rationale.
- iii. Post warning/notification signs on the trail and trail access points and contact local media when the project begins and ends. Remove signs following implementation activities.

Rationale: Providing advance information to trail users helps manage expectations, and demonstrates agency value of trail user access and experience. This is also an opportunity to communicate the benefits of project activity to the public.

- B. Manage trail user access during treatment activity to both protect users from safety concerns and to facilitate use. Coordinate treatment timing to minimize conflicts with recreation use, where feasible. When timber harvest activities preclude use of the CDT: a) notify the public; b) provide a detour; and; c) consider identifying timeframes for safe travel on the trail. Users may be required to wait for short durations until trail use is safe, and may require escort through areas of treatment operation.

Rationale: Due to the national prominence of the trail, the trail should remain passable or alternate routes provided to allow for continued public access during treatment activities.

Definitions:⁴

- **Background:** The distant part of a landscape, 4+ miles from the viewer.
- **Concern Level:** The degree to which scenery must be taken into account in project planning based on people's expectations of scenic quality (for example, there is a high expectation of high quality scenery along a National Scenic Trail) and use levels of an area.
- **Corridor:** A spatially identifiable area wide enough to encompass the significant scenic, historic, cultural and natural features that contribute to the trail's setting and significance as a National Scenic Trail. If a corridor has not been identified in the Forest Plan, the one-half mile foreground

⁴ All definitions (besides "corridor") derived from FS Landscape Aesthetics Handbook and April 2016 IPNF Implementation Guide for Scenery Management.

viewed from either side of the CDT travel route should be the primary consideration in determining corridor width. (FSM 2353.44b(7)).

- Foreground: Up to ½ mile either side of the trail, except where limited by topography. For purposes of this document, we consider ¼ mile to be a reasonable distance for mitigating visual impacts directly adjacent to the trail.
- Immediate foreground: Up to 300 feet either side of trail centerline, except where limited by topography.
- Landscape Character: Particular attributes, qualities and traits of a landscape that give it an image and make it identifiable or unique. Socially valued landscape character is the essential scenic resource to be protected and sustained.
- Middle ground: The area located ½ mile to 4 miles from the observer.
- Natural-appearing landscape character: Landscape character which has resulted from human activities, yet appears natural as a result of reforestation activities or natural regeneration.
- Scenic: Of or relating to landscape scenery; pertaining to natural or natural appearing scenery; affording pleasant views of natural landscape attributes or positive cultural elements.
- Scenic Integrity: The state of naturalness, or conversely, the state of disturbance created by human activities. High scenic integrity means positive attributes of landscape character *appear* intact. Very high scenic integrity means positive attributes defined in the Landscape Character description *are* intact.
- Scenic Integrity Objective: The desired outcome for the scenic resources upon completion of an action. SIOs do not dictate whether management activities can occur or prescribe what tools and treatments are, or are not, appropriate. How the management tool is used and what is left behind, as opposed to which tool is used and what is taken, becomes the focus.

Note: This is a living doc, to be updated as we learn lessons from implementation. The most current version will always be posted on the CDT Manager's Toolbox webpage:

<https://www.fs.fed.us/managing-land/trails/cdt/management>