

**BITTERROOT NATIONAL FOREST
TRAVEL MANAGEMENT PLANNING
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
February 22, 2008**

The responses to questions 1 – 15 were documented in January, and answers were shared at the public meetings in January and early February. Questions 16 – 38 were more recently addressed in written form.

1. Question: Are we locked into the Jan. 31, 2008 date for comments?

Answer: The due date for comments has been extended to Feb. 29, 2008.

2. Question: What is the status of the Bitterroot Forest Plan revision?

Answer: The Forest Plan revision is on hold due to a court ruling. No decisions have been made regarding changes to the Forest Plan. The 1987 Forest Plan is the Plan in force right now.

3. Question: What happened to the input provided by the public during the recent Forest Plan revision meetings? How does travel management relate to that?

Answer: The comments and input provided by the public as part of the Forest Plan revision process were used in developing the proposed action for travel management. In particular, where the Forest Plan community groups identified some areas of common ground, many of those ideas were brought forward into the travel management proposal.

4. Question: What resource issues were considered when proposing changes in route designations?

Answer: The resources considered were:

- Cultural or heritage resources
- Water quality
- Soils
- Threatened, endangered or sensitive wildlife species
- Sensitive plants
- Invasive plants
- Recreation

5. Question: What is the 2001 Tri-State Off-Highway Vehicle Decision?

Answer: This decision, signed by the Regional Forester in January 2001, closed the Bitterroot N.F. (and other Forests) to cross-country travel by wheeled motorized vehicles. Existing user-created routes were left open, but no new user-created routes were legal after the decision was signed.

6. Question: Can we appeal the travel management decision?

Answer: Those who comment on the DEIS during the comment period may appeal the decision. The DEIS will be produced after gathering all the comments on the proposed action. The DEIS will include alternatives to the proposed action reflecting public concerns.

7. Question: Will the DEIS include the Forest's roads analysis?

Answer: Yes.

8. Question: Which groups did we meet with as part of developing the proposed action?

Answer: Backcountry Horsemen, Ridge Runners Snowmobile Club, Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association, Ravalli County Off-Road User Association, Quiet User Coalition, and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

9. Question: What is the definition of a trail?

Answer: (Road definition added for clarification –from the Travel Management Proposed Action Scoping Document)

Road – A motor vehicle route over 50 inches wide, **unless identified and managed as a trail.**

Trail – A route 50 inches or less in width or a route over 50 inches wide that is **identified and managed as a trail.**

Designated road, trail or area – A National Forest System road, a National Forest System trail, or an area on National Forest System lands that is designated for motor vehicle use pursuant to 36 CFR §212.51. A designation for a road or trail includes all terminal facilities, trailheads, parking lots, and turnouts associated with the designated road or trail. The designation also includes parking within one vehicle width from the edge of the road surface when it is safe to do so.

10. Question: Why are we considering any changes to our current travel management?

Answer: The last Forest-wide assessment of travel routes was completed in 1978. Since that time, the numbers of users and the patterns and types of uses have changed dramatically. Old roads have been closed, new roads have been built, trails that were once single-track trails are now two-track trails, and subdivisions near the Forest have led to a proliferation of new trails. Individual project decisions over time have affected individual road and trail management and use. Conflicts between motorized and non-motorized users have increased as the population has grown. Over the past 30 years we have developed a better understanding of the effects of different recreational pursuits on the environment. The public has asked for and deserves a system of well maintained roads and trails where it is clear what uses are allowed. For all of these reasons, the time is right to complete a comprehensive review of travel routes on the Bitterroot National Forest to determine which routes should be available for which types of uses.

11. Question: Is there an option to have no change from the current situation?

Answer: Yes. The no action alternative will be fully considered.

12. Question: What is a 303(d) listed stream?

Answer: Under Section 303(d) of the Clean Water Act, these are streams determined by the State, through a public process, to be impaired in some way, and not fully supporting a beneficial use such as aquatic life, full contact recreation, or a specific water quality standard, like metals. They are also called "water quality limited streams or waterbodies." Most 303(d) listed streams on the Forest are on the list due to road-related sediment issues.

13. Question: Will the Forest Service have enough funding to hire more OHV rangers and enforce the rules?

Answer: In order for a system of shared roads and trails to work, it will take more than just Forest Service enforcement. All users will need to assist the Forest Service in training and educating users and sharing information. In addition, patience and cooperation of users, peer pressure on rule-breakers, and, finally, enforcement of rules and regulations will help provide a quality experience for all users. The Forest Service will continue to place a priority on quality signing, maps, information, education, and enforcement.

14. Question: Who designates Wilderness?

Answer: Only Congress has the authority to designate Wilderness.

15. Question: How much of the Bitterroot N.F. is classified as Recommended Wilderness, and how does this classification affect travel management?

Answer:

- Under the current Forest Plan 76,805 acres are identified as Recommended Wilderness, and are currently **open** to motorized recreation on designated routes and areas.
- In the future, Recommended Wilderness will likely be managed similar to Congressionally-designated Wilderness in that motorized or mechanized recreation would not occur there. **HOWEVER**, Recommended Wilderness can not be closed to motorized use without a public process such as this travel management EIS.
- Recommended Wilderness can be changed through Forest Plan amendment or revision.
- Regardless of which areas are Recommended Wilderness, the Forest Supervisor has the authority to close certain parts of the Forest to motorized use through this public travel management process.

16. Question: Is the Forest proposing to eliminate camping outside designated campgrounds?

Answer: No. The Forest Service proposal is that people could still camp where they want, but that we would designate a route to each dispersed campsite so that people could legally drive motorized vehicles to that site. Under the national travel rule, a route or area must be designated for motorized access on the Motor Vehicle Use Map in order for a vehicle to legally travel there. The Forest is working to identify existing campsites and the routes that lead to them.

17. Question: Why are the opportunities for disabled hunting so limited?

Answer: The Forest provides two areas for disabled hunting – Gold Creek (8 miles of road) on the Stevensville Ranger District and Basin Creek (16 miles of road) on the West Fork District. These areas are for individuals with "Disabled/Hunt from Vehicle" on their state hunting licenses. Both areas are set up to allow two disabled hunters, with assistants, to drive the roads in the area each day. The limitation to two vehicles per day is intended to minimize vehicle traffic and disturbance to animals. Two to three years ago the State Fish & Game offices began handing out a list of areas that allow disabled hunting. Use of the Gold and Basin Creek areas has increased since then. In 2007, the Gold Creek area had 65 of the 72 spaces utilized (36 day season, two vehicles per day). The Basin Creek area had 48 of the 72 spaces utilized. Increasing

the opportunity for disabled hunting is appropriate to consider during this travel planning process.

18. Question: Why is the Forest Service closing State roads?

Answer: The Forest Service has not proposed closing any State roads, however some Forest Service roads leading to State lands are proposed for closure. The Forest Service coordinated with the Montana DNRC regarding the proposed action and any changes in motorized access to State lands. Where Forest and State roads are interconnected, the agencies will continue to work together, and with the public, to determine their appropriate travel status.

19. Question: Why are some roads and trails only open part of the year?

Answer: Most seasonal use restrictions include the period from October 15 to December 1. These types of restrictions help to reduce hunting pressure on big game animals during the general hunting season by effectively increasing the size of security areas. Road use restrictions that increase security areas allow Fish, Wildlife & Parks to maintain desired elk numbers and herd structure without imposing additional restrictions on hunters such as shorter seasons, antler-point restrictions, and limited licenses. Road use restrictions that continue beyond December 1 (usually until June 15) help to reduce disturbance to big game animals during the winter and/or calving seasons. Roads and trails with these longer restricted periods tend to be in the lower elevation areas that provide big game winter range.

20. Question: How many roads are proposed for closure because of private landowner concerns?

Answer: No road or trail closure was proposed as a result of landowner concerns. The reasons for each proposed new closure are presented in Appendix A of the scoping document. Although landowners have expressed concerns regarding public use of Robbins Gulch Road #446, that is not the reason the Forest Service proposed the closure. Road #446 was proposed for closure to reduce the water quality impacts associated with the road and its use.

21. Question: How many miles of road do we have funding to maintain? How much money is needed to complete the backlog of road maintenance?

Answer: Road maintenance is the ongoing upkeep of the road system and includes such activities as blading the road surface, cleaning culverts and ditches, clearing brush, and spot gravelling. The road maintenance budget, which varies from year to year, determines how much maintenance can be accomplished. From 2004 through 2006 the Forest maintained an average of about 400 miles of road annually (Forest Plan Monitoring Reports). For several years prior to 2004, average road maintenance was 470 miles per year based on annual budgets of about \$660,000. The annual budget needed to accomplish ongoing and backlog maintenance is about three million dollars. (Analysis of the Management Situation Draft, p. 4-2)

22. Question: What definitions are used for roads and trails?

Answer: Roads and trails have different standards. Route features like grading, width, culverts, vegetation, etc. do not necessarily determine whether it is a road or a trail. Road or trail designations are based on maintenance standards, level of use, and desired experience.

Road – A motor vehicle route over 50 inches wide, unless identified and managed as a trail.

Trail – A route 50 inches or less in width or a route over 50 inches wide that is identified and managed as a trail.

23. Question: What is fiscal impact of travel management changes to our communities?

Answer: This is an analysis that will be completed as part of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS).

24. Question: How do road closures affect fire suppression?

Answer: This is an analysis that will be completed as part of the DEIS.

25. Question: Does closing Forest roads reduce siltation?

Answer: This is an analysis that will be completed as part of the DEIS. The science related to this topic will be reviewed and referenced as part of that analysis.

26. Question: Has the Forest Service looked at alternatives other than closing routes?

Answer: The DEIS will consider alternatives to the proposed action, based on what we hear from the public during the comment period.

27. Question: Is the federal government willing to compensate outfitters, guides, loggers, and others to supplement loss of income related to these road closures?

Answer: Motorized access is commonly granted for permitted activities such as range allotments, outfitter and guide permits, or timber sales. This would not change with what is being proposed in the travel planning proposed action.

28. Question: What is meant by “user conflicts” and what sorts of conflict has the Forest Service seen?

Answer: We are referring to conflicts between various forest users. Conflicts occur when a user’s recreational experience is adversely affected by other uses occurring in the same area. Conflicts most often brought to our attention are between motorized users and non-motorized users. Conflicts may also occur between hikers and those hiking with unleashed dogs, between mountain bikers and horseback riders, or between ATVs and full-size vehicles both using the same open road. These are all very subjective and personal, but important to the quality of a person’s recreational experience. While eliminating conflicts will not be possible, identifying clearly where motorized use is allowed will help users know what kind of experience to expect.

29. Question: Does travel rule say the Forest has to shut down roads?

Answer: No. The travel rule says we must designate roads, trails, and areas that are open for wheeled motorized use on a motor vehicle use map. The rule provides no direction regarding how many roads or trails should be open or closed to wheeled motorized vehicles. It does, however, identify criteria by which roads and trails should be evaluated to determine whether or not motorized use will be allowed.

30. Question: Why make special motor vehicle use maps?

Answer: The 2005 Travel Management Rule requires that all roads, trails, and areas designated for motorized travel be identified on a motor vehicle use map. This map will show the class of vehicle allowed to travel on each route and the times of year for which travel is allowed. The map will be easier for the public to use because it will have standard symbols and features across all National Forests. The motor vehicle use map will be available at all Forest Service offices and on the web.

31. Question: How much of this proposal came from Washington vs. local folks (Bitterroot N.F.)?

Answer: The Bitterroot National Forest Travel Management Planning Proposed Action was developed locally after discussions with both motorized and non-motorized interests. The last comprehensive travel planning for the Bitterroot National Forest was done over thirty years ago. It is time to reassess motorized travel opportunities, especially given the changes in population and motor vehicle technology.

32. Question: How many roads will be rehabilitated?

Answer: The travel management decision will determine whether or not roads or trails will be open or closed to motorized use. For roads or trails that are closed to motorized use, an additional assessment of rehabilitation needs will be made at a later date.

33. Question: How many roads is the Forest Service proposing to close and which ones are they?

Answer: The roads that were proposed for access changes (including closure) are listed in Appendix A of the scoping document: "Appendix A - Details and Explanation of Changes Proposed to Wheeled-Motorized Use by Route and District." The changes are also color-coded on the associated proposed action maps. Summaries are available in "Bitterroot National Forest Travel Management Planning Proposed Action Scoping Document" and on the "Bitterroot National Forest Route Information" sheet. This information is available at Ranger District and Supervisor's Office locations, and also at local public libraries. The Bitterroot N.F. web site (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/bitterroot/projects/>) also provides this information.

34. Question: What is the problem with leaving these areas open for snowmobiles or opening new areas for snowmobiles?

Answer: The proposed action reflects areas closed in the past to snowmobiles for a variety of reasons, primarily big game winter range. The additional snowmobile closures were proposed in order to provide non-motorized winter experiences for users, to maintain the wilderness values these areas provide, and in some cases to protect wintering wildlife. Both the existing and the newly proposed closures can be reconsidered based on public comment.

35. Question: What will the Forest Service do with the comments from the public?

Answer: The Forest Service will use the public comments gathered from meetings, emails, letters, and phone calls to help create alternatives to the proposed action. The alternatives (including a no action alternative reflecting current management) would then be analyzed and released to the public in a DEIS. The public will have an opportunity to discuss and comment upon the DEIS and the alternatives. A Final EIS and decision will be issued near the end of 2009.

Travel management questions that arise during our discussions with the public will continue to be answered through personal communication, updates of this Q & A and other documents, and in the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statements.

36. Question: Why did the Forest Service leave a lot of the roads off these maps?

Answer: We have discovered a number of errors, including missing roads and trails, on the proposed action maps. We would appreciate folks letting us know in their comment letters when they come across an error or omission. On the other hand, there are numerous roads that exist on the ground but are not part of the transportation system, often because they are naturally revegetated or have been decommissioned in the past. These were purposely left off the map. If you know of routes that are not on the map but could provide a good motorized recreation opportunity, please include that information in your comments.

37. Question: Will there be any more closures in the future, above and beyond what is proposed during this travel management process and decision?

Answer: Road and trail systems have always been dynamic, with expansion and contraction. Certain situations may create the need to close motorized access in the future, or provide opportunities to create and maintain new routes. These situations include resource damage such as erosion or recreation experience problems such as trail crowding, and also maintenance or construction funding opportunities. Other than temporary emergency closures after natural disturbance (e.g. fires, landslides or floods), these changes would go through a public process such as this one.

38. Question: What are the breakdowns for miles of road and miles of trail open yearlong, open seasonally, and closed yearlong?

Answer: We are in the process of validating our data to answer these questions, and unfortunately can not provide the mileages with adequate confidence right now. As soon as the numbers are sorted out, we will post them on the Bitterroot N.F. website (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/bitterroot/projects/>). The information will also be presented for each alternative in the DEIS, including the no action (current condition) alternative.