

Clearwater National Forest Travel Planning Environmental Impact Statement Proposed Action

INTRODUCTION

The Forest Service published the final Travel Management Rule in the Federal Register on November 9, 2005. The Rule requires each National Forest to formally designate those roads, trails, and areas where motorized travel will be permitted, and to display them on a Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM). The Clearwater National Forest intends to complete a Final EIS for Travel Planning and Record of Decision by January 2009 and produce a MVUM for the summer of 2009. Once the MVUM is published, summer motor vehicle use on the Clearwater National Forest will be allowed only on designated routes or areas displayed on the map. The MVUM will show routes designated for non-winter motorized travel, along with permitted vehicles and use seasons. A Winter Use Map will also be developed to show routes and areas where oversnow vehicles are permitted and restricted.

The Travel Planning Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will address travel management and Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) use Forest-wide. However, in 2005 the “Upper Palouse ATV Project Environmental Assessment” was completed for most of the Palouse District, with the exception of the Elk Creek drainage. That previous analysis meets the requirements of the Travel Management Rule. Accordingly, for the Palouse District, the Forest-wide travel planning process and EIS will focus primarily on the Elk Creek area with only minor restriction date adjustments proposed in areas previously analyzed.

The attached map shows the project area (the Clearwater National Forest), along with existing direction and proposed changes that affect broad areas. More detailed maps that show the proposed action for both winter and summer seasons are available on the Clearwater NF web site at:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/clearwater/projects/TravPlan/ClwTravel.htm>. The maps on the web site currently show the proposed action as described in this scoping notice, but maps of alternatives to the proposed action will be posted there as they are developed.

Travel Planning, and the analysis required for the Clearwater National Forest to implement the Travel Management Rule, could have been approached on each ranger district individually. Instead, the responsible official chose a comprehensive approach that will address most of the Forest in a single analysis. This was done in an effort to provide the best consideration of motorized and non-motorized uses Forest-wide.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

Need For Action

The detrimental effects of indiscriminate off-road travel are nationally recognized. The Chief of the Forest Service identified unmanaged recreation, including OHV use, as one of the four greatest threats to forests of all kinds in the United States. This prompted the proposal for a national “OHV Rule” that was eventually adopted in November 2005 (36 CFR Parts 212, 251, 261, 295 “*Travel management; Designated Routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use; Final Rule*” (Federal Register 2005: 70FR68264)). The Travel Management Rule requires a local NEPA analysis before the Rule can be implemented on a National Forest. The Rule also requires designation of a system of roads, trails, and areas that are open to motor vehicle use, and prohibits the operation of motor vehicles off of the designated system.

Motorized recreationists currently use some roads and trails that are not restricted to motorized travel, but are not part of the official Clearwater National Forest transportation system. There is a need to identify and evaluate these routes, and consider them for possible adoption into the designated motorized system. On the other hand, some other routes are currently part of the official transportation system, but are not travelable with vehicles due to vegetation growth or loss of the road or trail template. Routes that are not travelable in their current condition would not be designated for motorized travel.

The final rule does not require that oversnow vehicles such as snowmobiles be limited to designated routes, but does provide that they may be allowed, restricted or prohibited. The responsible official has elected to include oversnow vehicles in this analysis so that suitable areas, routes, and seasons for their operation can be provided as envisioned in the Clearwater Forest Plan.

Current and anticipated funding levels for road and trail maintenance are not sufficient to fully maintain existing roads and trails. The costs of managing road and trail use are also increasing. Maintenance costs will be one of the factors considered in determining which routes should be designated.

The 1987 Clearwater National Forest Plan was prepared when motorized use levels were considerably lower than they are today. The spectrum of motorized and non-motorized recreation opportunities was not explored in depth, since user conflicts and resource issues were few. There was little distinct land area allocation between motorized and non-motorized uses, other than for designated Wilderness. A regulatory structure that required analysis, formal decisions, and Forest Supervisor’s orders to implement restrictions on motorized travel, coupled with a management approach that lagged far behind the increase in motorized use, over time led to the establishment of motorized use in many areas on the forest where it was not specifically restricted. In the current climate, and with an eye toward the future of the forest, its resources, and its users, there is a need to identify routes suitable for motorized, non-motorized, and non-mechanized travel.

Vehicle travel, and motorized travel in particular, is known to affect a variety of resources. While the scale of effects can vary substantially, known resource concerns include soil disturbance and erosion, effects on water quality and aquatic organisms, effects on wildlife, vegetation removal or damage, visual quality degradation, and conflicts between forest users.

The existing restrictions to motorized travel on the Clearwater National Forest were largely developed as part of individual project analyses. As a result, on routes where motorized travel is restricted seasonally, there is considerable variation in the exact season of restriction. This situation is most acute on roads, and is considerably less complicated for trails. In similar locations, with similar goals and concerns, restriction periods can vary from a difference of a few days to several weeks. Reducing the number of restriction periods by adjusting and combining similar restrictions would substantially increase the clarity of the MVUM.

Purpose of Proposed Action

- Implement national OHV Rule direction
- Limit indiscriminate cross-country motorized travel
- Designate selected roads and trails for motorized travel
- Designate appropriate areas or routes for travel with oversnow vehicles
- Balance travel opportunities with maintenance and management capability including costs
- Provide for a better spectrum of motorized, non-motorized, and non-mechanized travel opportunities across the forest in recognition of the need to retain the character of lands recommended for Wilderness designation and the National Forest's ability to provide for non-motorized recreation opportunities that are not available on other land ownerships.
- Manage impacts to forest resources
- Improve clarity and consistency of existing travel restrictions
- Amend the 1987 Forest Plan as necessary to accomplish the actions described above

PROPOSED ACTION

Roads and Trails

The proposed action would designate motorized routes for summer travel on the Clearwater National Forest. Table 1 summarizes the mileage for the existing condition along with the mileage proposed for designation in the proposed action as well as the change that would result from implementation of the proposed action for each category of routes.

In Table 1, "Existing Condition" includes roads and trails identified as open to motorized travel in the 2005 Travel Guide, plus any error corrections or project NEPA decisions made since then. "Change" indicates the change from existing conditions that would

occur if the proposed action were implemented. Generally, for roads (OYA, OYS, OSA and OSS), the changes would result from road to trail conversions, designating some roads previously not thought to be travelable, and not designating some roads that were previously thought to be travelable.

Table 1: Designated Motorized Road and Trail Mileages

| Route Description | Existing Condition (miles) ③ | Proposed Designation (miles)③ | Change (miles) |
|--|------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Roads Open Yearlong to All① vehicles (OYA) | 1,615 | 1,623 | +8 |
| Roads Open Yearlong to Small② vehicles (OYS) | 500 | 509 | +9 |
| Roads Open Seasonally to All vehicles (OSA) | 676 | 663 | -13 |
| Roads Open Seasonally to Small vehicles (OSS) | 152 | 151 | -1 |
| Trails Open Yearlong to Small vehicles (OYS) | 93 | 93 | 0 |
| Trails Open Yearlong to Motorcycles (OYM) | 404 | 226 | -178 |
| Trails Open Seasonally to Small vehicles (OSS) | 73 | 75 | +2 |
| Trails Open Seasonally to Motorcycles (OSM) | 93 | 93 | 0 |

- ① On roads open to highway vehicles, “All” means any vehicle that can be legally operated on that class of road per the State of Idaho Code.
- ② “Small” vehicles are ATV’s and Motorcycles but not UTV’s.
- ③ Mileages do not reflect road and trail development decisions already made in project-level NEPA decisions unless the road or trail has been already constructed. These routes will be designated with no further analysis as they are constructed or in some cases reconstructed.

For trails (OYS, OYM, OSS, and OSM), the proposed action would provide a better spectrum of trail opportunities, reduce wildlife disturbance in key areas, and protect the character of areas recommended for Wilderness designation. Generally this would be accomplished by restricting motorcycle use on some backcountry trails. This would affect trails where motorized travel is not currently restricted but does not occur (about 36 miles) or occurs at very low levels (45 miles) due to trail conditions as well as other trails that currently receive motorcycle use to varying degrees.

The proposed action also modifies the dates of some seasonal restrictions for roads and trails to reduce the variety of restricted periods and ultimately improve the clarity of the Motor Vehicle Use Map. Tables on the Clearwater National Forest website highlight all proposed restriction changes to roads and trails and maps available there show the proposed action for roads and trails in more detail.

Motorized travel up to 300 feet off of designated routes to access established campsites would be permitted in most areas but subject to some conditions designed to minimize resource impacts. In certain areas (within 100 feet of the North Fork Clearwater River, Kelly Creek, Middle Fork Clearwater River, Lochsa River, and Elk Creek north of Elk River) off-route travel would be permitted only to access specifically designated campsites.

Bicycles

Existing restrictions on all but one road would be eliminated. Bicycle restrictions on roads would drop from a total of 10 miles currently to only 1 mile, which would be entirely within the Clearwater National Forest Seed Orchard. Areas recommended for wilderness by the Clearwater National Forest Plan would become off limits to bicycles. These areas are shown on the proposed winter use / bicycle map which is attached. This would reduce the system trail mileage available to bicycles from 811 miles currently to 730 miles. Tables on the Clearwater National Forest website show the currently maintained trails that would be affected.

Oversnow Vehicles - Snowmobiles

The proposed action would restrict oversnow vehicle use in areas recommended for Wilderness by the Forest Plan. This includes the Great Burn, Mallard Larkins, and some additions to the existing Selway Bitterroot Wilderness. The proposed winter use map shows the areas where oversnow vehicles like snowmobiles would be generally permitted and where they would be prohibited. Within the generally permitted area there would continue to be some specific routes where oversnow vehicles are restricted, primarily to eliminate conflicts with ski routes and to reduce disturbance to wildlife on certain areas of winter range. Maps that show the restricted and open areas and routes in more detail are available on the Clearwater NF web site.

Instead of road by road restrictions during the primary hunting season, snowmobile use would be prohibited forest-wide from October 1st to November 4th. The proposed action would remove some snowmobile restrictions that are not considered necessary for wildlife protection.

Tables on the Clearwater National Forest website show the proposed changes and maps available there show proposed winter uses in more detail.

The opportunities for oversnow vehicle use during the winter season would include:

- 364 miles of groomed snowmobile routes – no change from the current situation.
- 1,322,943 acres generally open to over-snow vehicle use except for certain restricted routes.
- 3,476 miles of roads where over-snow vehicle use would be permitted during the winter season (11/5 until snowmelt in spring) as compared to 3174 miles available now.
- 503,057 acres closed to over-snow vehicle use as compared to 302,856 acres currently.

The numbers above are only approximate at this time. Refinement of the proposed action will be ongoing during early development of the Draft EIS. Current information will be available on the Clearwater National Forest's Travel Planning website, <http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/clearwater/Projects/TravPlan/ClwTravel.htm>.

Forest Plan Amendment

The Clearwater National Forest Plan was completed in 1987, at a time when trail vehicles were few and the travel planning focus was almost completely on roads and highway vehicles. Since then, motorized vehicle use has grown dramatically. Modern vehicles such as snowmobiles, ATV's and even motorcycles have capabilities that could not have been envisioned in 1987. The Forest Plan also contains some conflicting information regarding the intent for management of certain areas, particularly those that were roadless at the time of the plan adoption and remain so today. In order to implement a travel plan for today and for the future the Forest Plan will need to be amended. Anticipated changes are likely to include:

- Better coordination between the level of motorized travel and the focus of certain management areas, primarily those in roadless areas.
- Addition of or changes to forest plan standards to permit implementation of the national Travel Management Rule. This would include the requirement that motor vehicles other than oversnow vehicles travel only on designated routes (cross-country travel prohibited).
- Changes to specific forest plan standards. An example is the elk habitat effectiveness standard applicable to most roadless management areas. The current standard of 100% could not be achieved even if habitat conditions were absolutely optimized and all motorized traffic was excluded owing to the effect of important and necessary roads that bound the management area.
- Other goals, objectives and standards affecting travel management that do not practically address current and anticipated travel management and related resource issues.