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**ASHLAND RANGER DISTRICT
TRAVEL MANAGEMENT
Final Environmental Impact Statement**

Custer National Forest - Ashland Ranger District

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Abstract: The Forest Service is proposing to designate routes for public motorized use within the Ashland Ranger District of the Custer National Forest. The new travel management decision would designate system roads and trails for public motorized uses and specify the type of vehicle and season of use for each route. Motorized off-route travel would be prohibited, except where designated for access to dispersed vehicle camping. Over-snow vehicle use is not part of the decision to be made in this analysis. The two action alternatives considered in this draft EIS represent a broad range of public sentiment regarding road and motorized trail management, and frame the significant issues related to the decision to be made. The alternative of taking no action is also considered in this EIS. The preferred alternative is Alternative B.

Reviewers should provide the Forest Service with their comments during the review period of the draft environmental impact statement. This will enable the Forest Service to analyze and respond to the comments at one time and to use information acquired in the preparation of the final environmental impact statement, thus avoiding undue delay in the decisionmaking process. Reviewers have an obligation to structure their participation in the National Environmental Policy Act process so that it is meaningful and alerts the agency to the reviewers' position and contentions. Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corp. v. NRDC, 435 U.S. 519, 553 (1978). Environmental objections that could have been raised at the draft stage may be waived if not raised until after completion of the final environmental impact statement. City of Angoon v. Hodel (9th Circuit, 1986) and Wisconsin Heritages, Inc. v. Harris, 490 F. Supp. 1334, 1338 (E.D. Wis. 1980). Comments on the draft environmental impact statement should be specific and should address the adequacy of the statement and the merits of the alternatives discussed (40 CFR 1503.3).

Written comments must be postmarked by the Postal Service, e-mailed, faxed, or otherwise submitted by 11:59 p.m. on the 45th calendar day following publication of the Notice of Availability (NOA) in the Federal Register. Hand delivered comments must be time and date imprinted at the Custer National Forest Supervisors Office by the close of business on the 45th calendar day following publication of the NOA in the Federal Register.

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Send Electronic Comments To: comments-northern-custer-ashland@fs.fed.us with subject line entitled: "Ashland DEIS Comments"

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Executive Summary

S.1 INTRODUCTION

This executive summary was written to provide an overview of the contents of the Ashland Ranger District Travel Management Planning Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The EIS discloses the potential environmental, cultural, social, and economic consequences of implementing alternatives to change travel management within the Ashland Ranger District (District), Custer National Forest (Forest), Montana. The consequences of taking no action are also disclosed. The EIS, in conjunction with public comments, legal requirements, and existing management direction, will be used to establish travel management direction for the District.

S.1.1 AGENCY TRAVEL MANAGEMENT PLANNING

Travel management planning, or management of roads and trails, has received increasing attention in the last decade within the Forest Service. This increased attention is largely the result of increased use of National Forests for recreation purposes. Increased forest visitation has led to concerns that much of this increased use is unmanaged and may be causing undesirable resource and social impacts.

One of the initial activities on the Custer National Forest (Forest) related to travel management was inventorying motorized and non-motorized routes. This inventory, conducted during 1999 and 2000, established a baseline for future analyses. This effort was specifically in preparation for the Northern Region (Region) of the Forest Service analysis of cross-country vehicle use. That analysis resulted in the Tri-State Off-Highway Vehicle Decision (2001 Tri-State OHV Decision) in 2001. The primary focus of the decision was restricting motorized vehicles to use of existing motorized routes.

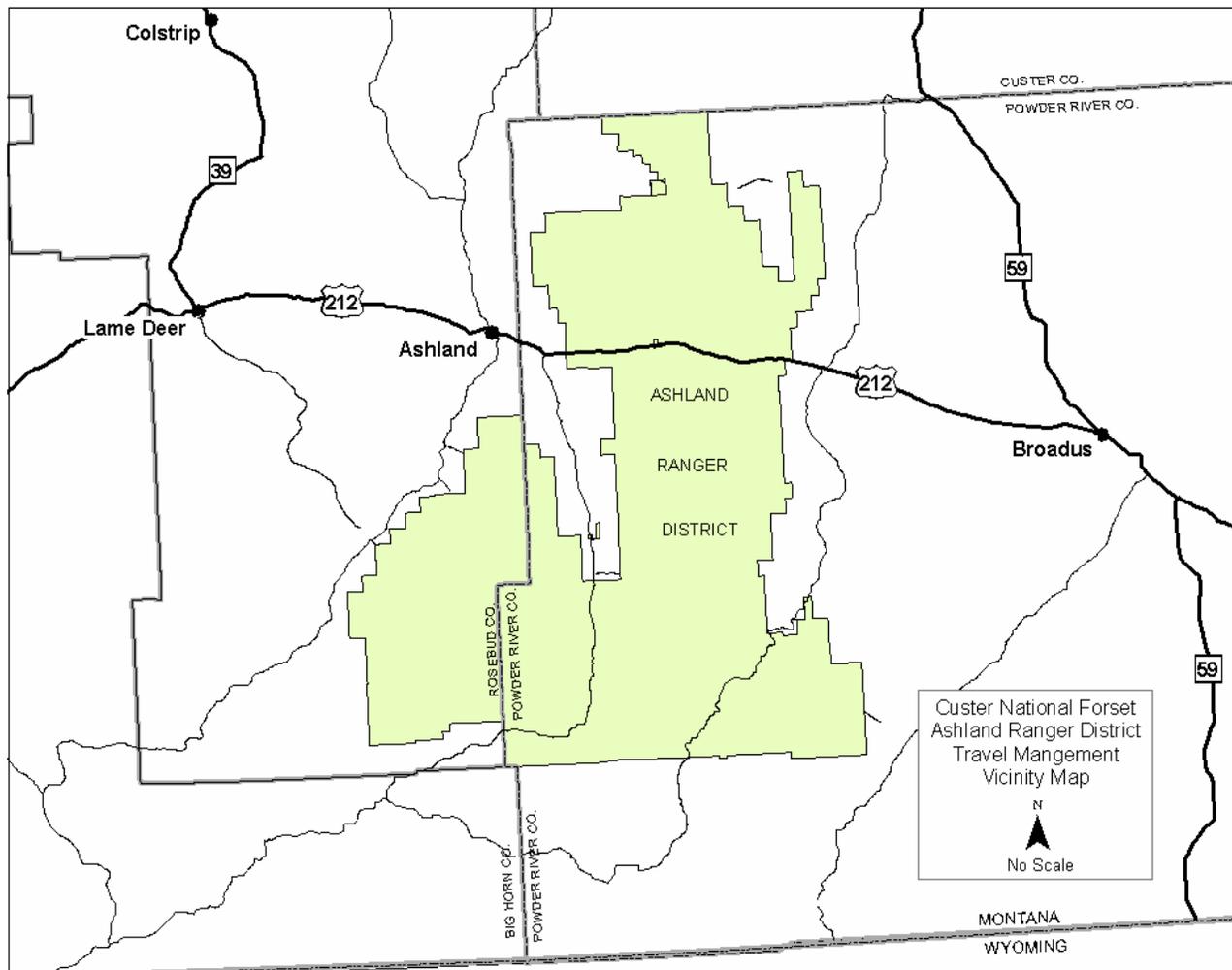
During this time, the Forest Service developed a national framework for conducting roads analyses. The Forest Scale Roads Analysis (Roads Analysis) for the Custer National Forest (see Project Record) was completed on the Forest in January, 2003 based on this framework. The report highlighted potential impacts of roads and/or motorized access on wildlife, water quality, cultural resources; right-of-way issues; and potential changes to road management objectives. The key findings in the Forest Scale Roads Analysis report were considered in the development of this proposal (see Roads Analysis section below).

In 2005, the Forest Service finalized the Motorized Travel Rule which outlined a process for motorized travel management planning to be used by all National Forests. The Rule requires distribution of a Motor Vehicle Use Map to the public for implementation of travel management decisions, which the Forest Service has committed to completing by the end of September 2009.

S.1.2 GENERAL LOCATION AND GEOGRAPHIC SETTING

The District, situated in southeast Montana, is composed of a single geographic unit, separate from any other National Forest System lands (see vicinity map below). The District consists of approximately 436,546 acres of National Forest System land.

Figure S.1 Vicinity Map



S.2 PURPOSE AND NEED

In December 2005, a new travel management rule took effect for all National Forest System lands (see Appendix A of the EIS). The new rule directs National Forests to designate roads, trails, and areas suitable for motorized travel. The actions described in this document are part of the planning process to select routes for designation under the new regulation. All National Forests are expected to complete the planning and designation process by the end of September 2009. This commitment is displayed in the Chief’s schedule for completion of travel management planning nationwide at <http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/ohv/summary07.pdf>. The Custer needs to complete travel management for the District to fulfill this commitment.

The purpose of travel management planning is to: 1) identify routes for public motorized use on the District, 2) provide for a variety of motorized and non-motorized opportunities, 3) minimize impacts on natural and cultural resources, and 4) have enforceable travel management guidelines. More detailed information about these events and the needs that stem from them is presented below.

S.3 PROPOSED ACTION

The Forest Service is proposing to designate the roads and trails available for public motorized use on the District in compliance with the 2005 Motorized Travel Rule. The existing *system* roads are considered the starting point for this analysis. Consequently, this proposal consists of the proposed changes to the system roads (also known as actions) that the Forest Service is considering. The proposal includes the following types of actions:

- Designate a system of roads and trails on the District for motorized public use.
- Designate the type of vehicle and season of use for each system road and motorized system trail.
- Change certain system roads to motorized trails or mixed motorized use roads.
- Change certain non-system routes to system roads or system trails.
- Identify those system roads and non-system routes to be used for administrative use only.
- Designate dispersed vehicle camping along motorized routes.
- Change system roads for which there is no identified administrative, utilization, or protection need to Maintenance Level 1 system roads available for potential decommissioning in the future.

S.4 SCOPE OF DECISION TO BE MADE

S.4.1 DECISIONS TO BE MADE

The decision to be made is to designate a system of roads and trails on the District for public motorized use. In addition, some unauthorized (non-system) routes could be converted to system roads and motorized trails, and some system roads may be changed to system motorized trails. The type of vehicle and season of use would also be designated for each system road and motorized system trail. Dispersed vehicle camping distances or site specific restrictions will also be determined.

Existing Forest Orders that are not consistent with the decision made in the ROD would be rescinded and any new ones that are necessary for implementation would be issued.

S.4.2 DECISIONS THAT WILL NOT BE MADE

There were several subjects that commenters thought should be decided through this process, including cross-country game retrieval, exemptions for accessibility, changes to rights of access, decommissioning or obliterating routes, construction of routes, and over-the-snow vehicle use. The Deciding Official has determined that these actions are outside the scope of the analysis for this process.

S.5 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SUMMARY

Chapter 2 of the EIS details the public participation to date. Scoping is a process used to help identify specific areas of concern related to the proposal during the early portion of the detailed environmental analysis. The initial scoping document (see Project Record) for this project was distributed on November 26, 2007 to approximately 237 individuals, government agencies, tribal governments, news media, businesses, and organizations that have shown interest in projects on the Custer National

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Forest, and in particular on the Ashland Ranger District. The scoping document provided information on the purpose and need for the project, described the proposed action, and asked for comments. A news release inviting comments was placed in the Billings Gazette (Billings, MT) on November 27, 2007. News releases were sent to local newspapers including, Miles City Star, Independent Press, Powder River Examiner, Yellowstone County and Outlook. These media efforts helped to publicize the proposal and comment period. Interested parties were asked to comment within 30 days. Due to technical issues that delayed placing the scoping document on the Forest's web page for several days, the comment period was extended and additional 15 days, which ended January 25, 2008. Public meetings were held in Ashland, Broadus, Miles City, and Billings, Montana in December 2007 to discuss the scoping document

In response to these efforts, just over 60 letters, personal comments, emails, or phone calls were received. The analysis of electronic, written, and verbal comments preliminarily identified several potential issues. Three of these issues were identified as significant and were used to formulate elements of the alternatives (see Issues section below).

S.6 SIGNIFICANT ISSUES

One purpose of scoping is to identify the significant issues that should be analyzed in depth within an EIS (40 CFR 1501.7). The significant issues become the focus of the analysis and guide alternative development. All public scoping comments were considered by the Responsible Official, and are documented in the project record. As a result of reviewing and analyzing agency and public responses, the following significant issues were identified. These were used to develop the range of alternatives and are analyzed in detail in Chapter 3 of the EIS.

S.6.1 RECREATION

Concern about motorized recreation opportunities. Reductions in the amount of routes available for motorized use could reduce the opportunities available for motorized recreation, diminish the ability to retrieve big game using motorized routes, and reduce dispersed camping opportunities. Alternative A was developed to respond to this issue.

Concern about non-motorized recreation opportunities. Increases in the amount of routes designated for motorized use could reduce the quality of non-motorized recreation experiences, reduce opportunities for non-motorized big game hunting opportunities, and reduce opportunities for solitude, away from noise generated by motorized vehicles. Elements of Alternative B were developed in response to this issue.

Concern about opportunities for off-highway vehicle operation. The use of unlicensed off-highway vehicles on roads is not consistent with State of Montana motor vehicle laws. Designating roads (as opposed to motorized mixed use roads or motorized trails) would limit opportunities for off-highway vehicle use. This issue was used in designing Alternatives A and B.

Concern about impacts on personal recreation experiences. The Forest Service and commenters recognized the potential for travel management changes to not only impact individual's personal experiences and connection to forest lands, but it also has the potential to increase or decrease conflict between forest users, particularly between motorized and non-motorized uses. Alternative B was developed in part to address concerns such as these.

S.6.2 CULTURAL RESOURCES

Concern about protection of archeological sites, traditional cultural properties, and traditional practices. Actions associated with designation, such as converting non-system routes to system routes, have the potential to adversely impact the scientific, traditional, cultural, and intrinsic values of archeological, cultural, and historic sites. In addition, proposed actions could have an adverse effect to certain areas of traditional importance to local tribes.

S.6.3 WILDLIFE

Concern about disturbance of wildlife and impacts to wildlife habitat. Human use associated with system and non-system road and trail designation has the potential to disturb wildlife through noise and visual effects. Human use can disrupt activities such as foraging habits, resting location selection and duration, nesting, and denning. In addition, changes in road densities can affect the quality of wildlife habitat. The Forest Service identified and analyzed the effects of travel management alternatives on federally threatened, Forest Service sensitive, big-game, and other wildlife species and their habitat.

S.7 OTHER ISSUES

The Council on Environmental Quality Regulations Implementing the National Environmental Policy Act states that agencies should discuss, “only briefly issues other than significant ones” (40 CFR 1500.4[c]). The following issues were determined to not be significant issues because they did not drive development of alternatives or major components of alternatives, there were no significant effects associated with the proposed actions, or both.

S.7.1 WATER QUALITY, FISHERIES, AND AQUATICS

The action of adding routes to the system has the potential to influence water quality indirectly through on-site erosion and sediment delivery to streams. Actions can also influence water quality and channel processes as a result of improper route location.

S.7.2 SOILS

Adding routes to the system on high and medium risk soils could increase the potential to compact, displace, or erode soils such that there is a loss of soil productivity.

S.7.3 VEGETATION

Concerns have been expressed about the effects of designating routes on native and rare vegetation found on the District. Designation of additional system roads and trails, along with the associated dispersed vehicle camping, has the potential to cause ground disturbance that could lead to noxious weed establishment and/or encouraging spreading.

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S.7.4 ECONOMICS

The functional economic area that surrounds the District consists of Rosebud County and Powder River counties in Montana and the immediate surrounding counties. For the two-county functional economic area evaluated, the total economic effects of recreation overall, and specifically recreation tied to motorized and non-motorized activities, are very small compared to the total economic activity in the area. Though changes in use attributable to the alternatives outlined in the economic report are difficult to estimate (see Project Record), the dominance of hunting as a recreation choice and the expectation that the number of hunters using the District is not expected to change as a result of the alternatives (see Chapter 3 Recreation) means that the proposed travel management changes would have little effect on the overall economy of the two-county area.

Given this information, no further discussion of this issue is included in the EIS.

S.7.5 AIR QUALITY

There is concern that the addition of routes to the transportation system may lead to an adverse impact on air quality. Encountering motorized use emissions and fugitive dust on Forest roads and trails could have an undesirable effect on the quality of a recreational experience. These effects are typically transitory in nature and not long lasting. There are typically good air dispersion characteristics and low inversion potential across the District. In addition, traffic is generally at lower speeds that result in less dust generation.

Air quality across the District is considered good to excellent. All areas within and immediately adjacent to the District currently meet all state and federal air quality standards (MTDEQ, 2008). The nearest Montana non-attainment area for particulate matter is Lame Deer, MT (approx. 30 miles west) and Laurel, MT (approx. 150 miles west) with sulfur dioxide concerns.

The Northern Cheyenne Reservation is a non-federal Class 1 Area under the 1977 Clean Air Act. This area is located west of the Ashland District and prevailing winds are from the southwest. The nearest areas of non-attainment are Lame Deer, MT for particulate matter (approximately 30 miles west) and Laurel, MT for sulfur dioxide levels (approx. 140 miles west). Implementation of any of the alternatives is expected to maintain air quality conditions due to 1) good dispersion characteristics across the District, 2) low inversion potential across the District, 3) low emissions from vehicles relative to other potential sources, and 4) reduced or equivalent route miles open to motorized vehicles under all alternatives compared to the existing condition. Compliance with State and Federal air quality standards would occur under all alternatives. Given this information, no further discussion of this issue is included in the EIS.

S.7.6 HIKING AND RIDING AREAS (MANAGEMENT AREA J)

A concern was identified regarding motorized recreation within the Hiking and Riding Areas (HRA) on the District and the potential that motorized activities have to diminish the characteristics of those areas. There are three HRAs on the District – the Cook Mountain, King Mountain, and Tongue River Breaks HRAs. There are currently 20.6 miles of system routes within the HRAs. The Forest Plan prohibits public motorized use of these areas, but allows some management activities including motorized vehicle use associated with grazing activities (USDA Forest Service 1987). The existing routes are used infrequently for administrative purposes.

Alternatives A and B would reduce the overall miles of motorized routes by 11.4 miles within HRAs, compared to the No Action Alternative. None of the alternatives would cause irreversible or irretrievable effects to the existing characteristics of the HRAs. All of the alternatives would comply with existing law, regulation, and policy. Since public motorized use is not currently allowed within the HRAs and the action alternatives would reduce the administrative routes by 11.4 miles, this issue was not analyzed further in the EIS.

S.7.7 ENFORCEMENT

Public comment related to law enforcement issues focused on enforcing regulations, providing more law enforcement presence, and providing the public with signing and education. These comments tended to concentrate on motorized activities on the forest, and were raised by both motorized and non-motorized recreationists. A number of comments highlighted impacts associated with the lack of enforcement, such as resource damage and diminished recreation experience for other forest visitors. Some comments suggested that there was a need for additional law enforcement personnel to handle the increase of motorized use on the forest.

In 2005, the Motorized Travel Rule changed the legal authority for regulating off-route travel of motor vehicles. The final rule modified regulations in 36 CFR 295 which historically governed the management of OHVs on National Forests. In addition, the rule changed the enforcement authority for motor vehicle restrictions from 36 CFR 261 Subpart B: Special Orders to the Subpart A: General Prohibitions section, making motor vehicle violations in the future a strict liability infraction. This change relieves the Agency of the posting and signing requirements of 36 CFR 261 Subpart B and authorizes map notification to be the enforcement tool in the future. The decision mandates that Districts and administrative units complete a travel management review with public involvement to designate motorized roads, trails, and areas and produce Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) that identifies these designations (36 CFR 212.56). Once this is completed, travel management restrictions may be enforced under Subpart A without being required to post and maintain prohibition signs in the field. This change is expected to improve enforceability of motor vehicle operation violations.

Changes in Forest priorities to increase law enforcement capability would most likely occur through two options. First, the Forest can determine which programs, such as developed recreation, travel management enforcement, wildlife, etc., should be emphasized and allocate the funds to accomplish objectives related to those priorities. Another method is to prioritize the work of existing permanent staff so that there is increased emphasis on enforcement of travel management violations.

Given this information and the fact that law enforcement is an administrative rather than biophysical aspect of travel management planning, no further discussion of this issue is included in the EIS.

S.8 ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

In response to agency and public issues, three action alternatives were developed. Alternatives A and B were analyzed in detail along with the No Action Alternative. A general description of each of the alternatives is provided below.

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S.8.1 ALTERNATIVE A (EXISTING CONDITION)

The Custer National Forest (Forest) developed Alternative A in response to multiple public comments expressing a desire to designate most or all of the motorized routes identified in the 1999-2000 inventory of the District for public motorized use. This alternative consists of routes identified during the 1999-2000 inventory, excluding:

1. Routes that have been decommissioned, obliterated, or are otherwise unavailable for public motorized use based on documented decisions since 2000.
2. Routes for which the Forest Service has no legal right-of-way for public use. This is necessary to be in compliance with the 2005 Motorized Travel Rule guidance and to make this alternative viable for implementation. These routes were either identified as candidates for decommissioning/obliteration or, if an administrative need was identified, they were proposed for administrative use only. This affects 74 miles of routes.
3. Existing administrative routes, which would remain administrative use only (61 miles).

Consequently, Alternative A includes designating the majority of both system and non-system on the District for public motorized use. Primary motorized travelways would either be designated as roads, or where appropriate, as mixed motorized use roads. For the most part, all other routes would be designated as motorized trails. To maximize motorized opportunities, no season of use would be designated on any routes, and motorized trails would be designated for use by all motor vehicles. This alternative approximates the existing condition (e.g. motorized use of existing system and non-system routes).

Designation of motorized trails under this alternative is intended to: 1) expand opportunities for motorized recreation opportunities, and 2) more accurately describe the characteristics and nature of these routes. In other words, routes proposed to be motorized trails do not display characteristics typically associated with roads, such as surfacing, engineering, and prescribed clearing widths. In many cases, the routes were not engineered, do not have any surfacing which has resulted in rutting and no defined drainage, and they may become impassable when wet.

This alternative includes the following types of actions (see Appendix C for route specific actions):

- Add non-system routes as system roads or motorized trails (126 miles – 123 miles for public motorized use and 3 miles for administrative use).
- Do not designate existing system roads for public motorized use or administrative due to no legal public right-of-way or within a Hiking and Riding Area (22 miles).
- Identify system roads for administrative use due to no legal public right-of-way (44 miles).
- Convert system roads to motorized trail (492 miles).
- Designate system roads for mixed motorized use (37 miles).

The 2001 Tri-State OHV Decision authorized dispersed vehicle camping within 300 feet of motorized routes on the District. During the past seven years, the District has not observed unacceptable adverse impacts from this activity that warrants proposing a change to this activity under this alternative.

This alternative largely reflects an alternative submitted by a combination of organizations that partnered together to develop the alternative. Some elements in the partnership's proposal were not included in Alternative A because they were not consistent with guidance related to the 2005 Motorized Travel Rule (e.g. designation of roads with no legal right-of-way).

The tables at the end of this section provide a summary of the actions associated with developing this alternative (Table ES-3) and a summary of alternative mileages (Tables ES-1 and ES-2). Appendix C provides a list of the route specific actions proposed under this alternative.

S.8.2 ALTERNATIVE B (PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE)

Alternative B consists of designating a system of motorized routes that provides the public with motorized recreation opportunities, while addressing resource concerns and recreation opportunity concerns. Primary travelways included in this alternative would be designated as roads, or where appropriate, as mixed motorized use roads, and, for the most part, all other routes would be designated as motorized trails. Designation of motorized trails under this alternative is intended to: 1) expand opportunities for motorized recreation opportunities, and 2) more accurately describe the characteristics and nature of these routes. In other words, routes proposed to be motorized trails do not display characteristics typically associated with roads, such as surfacing, engineering, and prescribed clearing widths. In many cases, the routes were not engineered, do not have any surfacing which has resulted in rutting and no defined drainage, and they may become impassable when wet.

The Forest Service followed this general screening process to develop this alternative:

1. System and non-system routes for which the Forest Service did not have a legal right-of-way for public motorized use were evaluated to determine if administrative use was needed. If needed, the routes were proposed for administrative use, if they were not needed they were identified as candidates for decommissioning or obliteration.
2. Recent decisions on actions within the District were reviewed to insure that any decisions about roads were incorporated.
3. The remaining system and non-system routes were evaluated to determine if there was an administrative, utilization (including recreation), resource, or protection need for the route. If a need existed, system routes were proposed for designation and non-system routes were proposed to be added to the system and designated. If no need was identified, system routes were identified as candidates for decommissioning and non-system routes were identified as candidates for obliteration.
4. At the same time, the Forest Service also assessed whether routes were parallel with each other, i.e. routes that were within ½ mile of each other. Where parallel routes existed, only one route was selected for public motorized designation.
5. Finally, based on public input, a season of use that limited motorized travel in key wildlife security habitat areas during big-game hunting seasons was developed. The purpose of this measure was to provide additional wildlife security and increase opportunities for non-motorized hunting. District personnel identified routes within Forest Plan Management Area D (wildlife emphasis areas) and proposed to enhance wildlife security and non-motorized hunting opportunities during Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks archery and rifle big-game hunting seasons – September 1 to November 30.

This alternative includes the following types of actions (see Appendix C for route specific actions):

- Add non-system routes as system roads or motorized trails (56 miles – 18 miles for public motorized use and 38 miles for administrative use).
- Do not designate existing system roads for public motorized use or administrative use (75 miles).
- Identify system roads for administrative use due to no legal public right-of-way (44 miles) or other resource or administrative concerns (47 miles).
- Convert system roads to motorized trail (392 miles).

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- Designate system roads for mixed motorized use (37 miles).
- Designate system motorized trails with a season of use (18 miles).

The 2001 Tri-State OHV Decision authorized dispersed vehicle camping within 300 feet of motorized routes on the District. During the past seven years, the District has not observed unacceptable adverse impacts from this activity that warrants proposing a change to this activity under this alternative.

Alternative B includes the designation of a combination of roads, mixed motorized use roads, and motorized trails. Because the biophysical effects of mixed motorized use roads and trails are identical, the mix of those types of routes in Alternative B could be changed in the Final EIS in response to public or internal comments related to social or management considerations without altering the biophysical effects, and as long as the overall miles are the same.

The tables at the end of this section provide a summary of the actions associated with developing this alternative (Table ES-3) and a summary of alternative mileages (Tables ES-1 and ES-2). Appendix C of the EIS provides a list of the route specific actions proposed under this alternative.

S.8.3 NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE

The No Action Alternative consists of designation of the existing system roads¹ on the District. This is different from Alternative A (existing condition) which proposes to designate both existing system and non-system routes. The No Action Alternative also includes the existing vehicle types and seasons of use currently in force on the District (see Table ES-2 for details).

Designation of the existing network of system roads would not require any further NEPA and represents the starting point for any proposed changes to the routes or areas available for public motorized use. Based on this information, no action was determined to be designation of the existing system roads and trails.

System roads that the Forest Service does not have legal right-of-way for public access to use will be included in this alternative, unlike the action alternatives. This is because not designating these system roads would constitute an action, which would be inconsistent with the premise of the No Action Alternative.

¹ The decision to use existing system roads as the foundation for no action stems from 2005 Motorized Travel Rule guidance, including the following:

- The *Travel Management: Designated Routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use* guide prepared by the Forest Service to aid in implementing the 2005 Motorized Travel Rule affirms that the starting point for travel analyses is the current network of system roads.
- The *Motor Vehicle Route and Area Designation Guide* (version 111705) states, “There is no need to initiate a NEPA process to designate those NFS roads, NFS trails, and areas on NFS lands that are already managed for motor vehicle use where that use will continue unchanged, or to retain existing restrictions on motor vehicle use.”

S.8.4 ELEMENTS COMMON TO ALL ALTERNATIVES

S.8.4.1 Administrative Exemptions

Exemptions to off road travel as described in 36 CFR 212.51(a) would be allowed. Exemptions include administrative activities such as law enforcement, fire, emergencies, military operations, noxious weed control, permit activities, and other official business purposes. All such use requires authorization from the appropriate Line Officer, detailing when, where, who, and under what circumstances motorized travel would be allowed.

S.8.4.2 Administrative Sites

System roads associated with administrative sites will not be designated for public motorized use, except those roads that provide access to visitor services.

S.8.4.3 System Roads with Forest Service Maintenance Obligations

System roads that the FS has a legal obligation to maintain will not be removed from the system, but may or may not be designated for public motorized use.

S.8.4.4 Roads Under Permit

In instances of special use permits for ingress/egress to private inholdings, a road will generally be designated for public motorized use when the Forest Service has road maintenance responsibilities. In instances of road use permits, a road may be closed to public use when the permit holder is assigned road maintenance responsibilities.

S.8.4.5 No Legal Right-of-Way for Public Access

Routes that the Forest Service has no legal right-of-way for public motorized access will not be designated for public motorized use.

S.8.4.6 Designated Routes Required to be Part of the National Forest System

In accordance with the 2005 Motorized Travel Rule, only system routes can be designated for public motorized use. If motorized routes that are currently non-system roads are desired for motorized use, an action is required to add them to National Forest transportation system.

S.8.4.7 Dispersed Vehicle Camping Authorized Only on National Forest System Lands

Under Alternatives that allow access for dispersed vehicle camping within 300 feet of a motorized route, access is only authorized on NFS lands, not on private, state, or other federal lands that may be within 300 feet of designated routes.

S.8.4.8 Implementation

In order to implement this project, the 2005 Motorized Travel Rule requires the Forest to make a Motor Vehicle Use Map available to the public, free of charge. The Forest also expects to install signs on all designated routes, undertake an estimated two year education campaign regarding new travel

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management direction and rules, and patrolling. These activities, other than publishing the MVUM, may vary in extent subject to the availability of funding.

Until the Record of Decision (ROD) for this project is implemented, the current decisions for the existing network of system roads remain in effect. The ROD and its implementation will supersede the existing network of motorized system roads when the Motor Vehicle Use Map is published and any associated orders are in place.

Sign purchase and installation is a one time cost, but the remaining costs such as patrolling and Motor Vehicle Use Map production would be incurred annually. Annual funding levels are subject to variation.

The following two tables summarizes miles of roads and motorized trails by alternative and season of use.

Table ES-1. Summary of miles² of roads and trails by alternative.

Route Designation		Alternative A	Alternative B	No Action	
National Forest System Roads and Trails	<i>Designated for public motorized use</i>	Road: All types allowed (motorized mixed use)	37	37	0
		Road: Highway legal vehicles	101	101	676
		Trail: All types allowed	612	405	0
	<i>Subtotal</i>		750	543	676
	<i>Administrative use only</i>		92	175	61
<i>Total Miles of System Routes</i>		842	718	737	
<i>Not designated</i>		22	75	0	
Non-System Routes	<i>Not converted to system roads or trails</i>		19	90	146
<i>Total Miles of Routes not designated</i>		41	165	146	
Total		883	883	883	

Table ES-2. Miles of system roads and trails designated for public motorized use by proposed season of use designation for each alternative.

Season of Use	Alternative A	Alternative B	No Action
Yearlong	750	525	676
December 1 – August 31 (Provide Non-Motorized Hunting)	0	18	0
<i>Total</i>	750	543	676

The following table summarizes the elements for each alternative.

² Comparison between tables may not be exact due to rounding error.

Table ES-3. Summary of Elements for Each Alternative

Element	Alternative A (Existing Condition)	Alternative B (Preferred Alternative)	No Action Alternative
Type of Vehicle Designations	<p>In general, primary travelways would be designated as system roads, which are only available for use by highway-legal vehicles.</p> <p>The majority of high clearance vehicle (Maintenance Level 2) roads would be converted to system trails open to all OHVs.</p> <p>A limited number of roads would be designated as mixed motorized use where connections between proposed motorized trails were important.</p> <p>The map package provides a display of the type of vehicle designation for each route.</p>	Same as Alternative A.	System roads would be designated for use by highway legal vehicles.
Season of Use Designations	Season of use for all designated routes is yearlong.	<p>Season of use for all designated routes is yearlong except for the following seasons of use.</p> <p>December 1-August 31 – Eighteen miles of routes in three locations would have this season of use to provide additional wildlife security and to increase opportunities for non-motorized hunting. See Appendix C and the map package for the specific routes involved.</p>	Same as Alternative A.
Dispersed Vehicle Camping Designations	Access for dispersed vehicle camping would be allowed within 300 feet of all designated system roads and motorized trails on the District.	Same as Alternative A.	Same as Alternative A.
Administrative Use	Roads identified for administrative use are not designated for public motorized use due to the lack of legal right-of-way for public access. Some existing administrative use roads exist at administrative sites and based on past decisions. Appendix C includes all non-system roads that would be converted to system roads and identified for administrative use, as well as any additional system roads that would be identified for administrative use.	Same as Alternative A.	Roads identified for administrative use are not designated for public motorized use based on policy (administrative sites) and past land management decisions. This alternative includes only those roads currently identified for administrative use.

S.9 ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT DROPPED FROM DETAILED ANALYSIS

Federal agencies are required by NEPA to rigorously explore and objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives and to briefly discuss the reasons for eliminating any alternatives that were not developed in detail (40 CFR 1502.14). Public comments received in response to the Proposed Action provided suggestions for alternative methods for achieving the purpose and need. Some of these alternatives may have been outside the scope of travel management, duplicative of the alternatives considered in detail, incorporated into alternatives considered in detail, determined to be components that would cause unnecessary environmental harm, or are already addressed by law, regulation or policy. Therefore, a number of alternatives were considered, but dismissed from detailed consideration for the reasons summarized below.

S.9.1 PARTNERSHIP ALTERNATIVE

This commentor-submitted alternative was intended to maximize motorized recreation opportunities on the District, and would have included designation of the majority of the routes in the District. Fourteen organizations partnered to develop this alternative. The organizations are:

Treasure State ATV	Great Falls Trail Bike Riders Association
Rimrock 4X4 Inc.	Park City Recreation Association
Treasure State Alliance	Montana Trail Vehicle Riders Association
Billings Motorcycle Club	Families For Outdoor Recreation
Laurel Rod and Gun Club	Magic City 4 Wheelers Inc.
Colstrip ATV Association	Great Falls Trail Bike Riders Association
Colstrip Gun Club	Park City Recreation Association
Citizens for Balanced Use	Montana Trail Vehicle Riders Association
Custer Rod and Gun Club	Families For Outdoor Recreation

Alternative A is similar to this alternative; however the alternative included designation of routes for which the Forest Service has no legal right-of-way for public access. Consequently, the alternative, as submitted, has been dropped since it does not comply with the 2005 Motorized Travel Rule guidance. Alternative A is intended to reflect the concerns identified in the submitted alternative while also complying with the 2005 Motorized Travel Rule guidance.

S.9.2 SEPARATE MOTORIZED AND NON-MOTORIZED USES

The public suggested separating or zoning motorized and non-motorized use on the District to reduce user conflicts. Zoning areas by type of use or similar management prescription is more appropriate for land management planning. This analysis is focused on the designation and use of motorized routes (roads and trails), rather than prescriptive land use direction that would require a significant amendment of current Forest Plan land use direction which is beyond the scope of this analysis.

S.9.3 ESTABLISH TRIGGERS FOR ROUTE CLOSURES

Commenters suggested that “triggers” and responses should be established “when user created routes are illegally established”, or if there are excessive resource impacts. First, the Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) establishes those routes available for public motorized use. Any use that is not in

compliance with the MVUM is illegal. No additional trigger is necessary to enforce public motorized use on the District.

The 2005 Motorized Travel Rule requires National Forests to monitor the effects of travel management decisions and use in accordance with Forest Plans where decisions are implemented. The Forest Plan for the Custer includes monitoring of travel management decisions. This travel management decision, whichever alternative is selected, would be implemented in compliance with the Forest Plan. This monitoring is intended to serve as the trigger for changing or modifying travel management decisions due to unacceptable resource impacts.

S.9.4 ADMINISTRATIVE ROUTES BE DESIGNATED FOR PUBLIC MOTORIZED USE

There are multiple reasons why routes are proposed for administrative use only. They include concerns such as vandalism of facilities or cultural resources and lack of a legal right-of-way for public use. However, there may be a need for occasional administrative use of the route for activities such as maintaining facilities. Maintaining these routes for administrative use is especially important where disposal of the route would then have required cross-country vehicle travel, a practice discouraged by the agency, to accomplish the administrative work.

It is neither practical or, in some cases, in compliance with agency guidance to allow public use on routes identified for administrative use.

S.9.5 DO NOT DESIGNATE ROAD #4797

One commenter indicated that road #4797 should not be designated because it goes through riparian areas and across a dam. Field observations indicate that the route does not go through any riparian areas. The route does cross a portion of the dam for the Three X Bar Reservoir. This route has gone over the dam for many years and there are no signs of rutting or other cause for concern based on field observations of both engineering and range staff on the Forest. Given this information and the importance of this route for access to the area, the Forest does not intend to modify or create an alternative based on this comment.

S.9.6 ROUTES SHOULD NOT BE DESIGNATED ON HIGHLY ERODIBLE SOILS, RIPARIAN AREAS, WETLANDS, WET MEADOWS, AND EPHEMERAL PONDS

There are bands of highly erodible soils throughout the District. Numerous routes intersect these bands for varied distances. It would not be practical to eliminate all routes or portions of routes on highly erodible soils, and have a functioning network of routes to adequately administer, utilize, and protect District lands and resources.

The District has attempted to avoid designating routes that may have adverse impacts on soil, hydrologic, or aquatic resources, although short portions of routes may traverse some of the features mentioned in the comment. In some cases, hardening, surfacing, or other measures are in place to minimize impacts. Locations of route segments that would be improved by implementing similar measures will be considered for addition to the list of opportunities contained in the appendix of the environmental document. Finally, the effects of route designation on the resources mentioned above will be evaluated and disclosed in the environmental document.

Rationale for dismissal is found in Chapter 2.

S.10 MONITORING

Monitoring and evaluation could be used to determine if the physical, biological, social, and economic effects of implementing any alternative occur as predicted. Monitoring may be conducted by sampling a range of projects from the entire Ashland Ranger District as outlined in the Forest Plan monitoring section. The following table outlines Forest Plan criteria for evaluating the effects of implementation.

Table ES-7. Forest Plan Monitoring Items Relevant for Travel Management

Monitoring Item	Data Source	Monitoring Objective	Variability Which Would Initiate Further Evaluation	Corrective Measures
Off-road-vehicle use and damage and Travel Plan effectiveness. (A-3).	Travel Plan violation and incident reports, number of variances granted.	To determine compliance with travel plan direction (and, therefore, effectiveness in achieving resource protection objectives). To assist in determination of effectiveness of restriction methods, public understanding of travel plan direction.	Conflicts with Forest Management Area goals.	Review situation for change in implementation techniques such as signing, barriers, public contacts, etc.

S.11 FOREST SERVICE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The Forest Service preferred alternative is Alternative B. Alternative B is the “preferred” alternative based on Responsible Official and interdisciplinary team deliberations. This alternative provides the road system necessary for the administration, utilization, and administration of the District. It also appears to respond best to the significant issue of providing a range of recreation opportunities, by providing more non-motorized hunting opportunities than Alternative A or the No Action Alternative while still maintaining ample opportunities for motorized recreation. Environmental impacts would also generally be reduced under Alternative B when compared to Alternative A and the No Action Alternative. The Responsible Official (the Custer Forest Supervisor) may select any combination of travel management actions as presented and analyzed within this document.

S.12 COMPARISON OF EFFECTS

The following tables provide a summary of the effects of implementing each alternative. Information is focused on activities and effects where different levels of effects or outputs can be distinguished quantitatively or qualitatively among alternatives. Detail effects analysis for each Alternative is found in Chapter 3 of the EIS.

Table ES-4. Comparison of Effects by Alternative

Feature	Alternative A	Alternative B	No Action Alternative
Recreation			
Motorized Recreation Opportunity			
Acres of Roaded Natural ROS (During SOU ³ /Outside SOU)	114,108/NA	114,027/114,027	116,928/NA
Acres of Semi-Primitive Motorized ROS (During SOU/Outside SOU)	353,204/NA	350,498/339,722	354,851/NA
Miles of motorized roads and trails (During SOU/Outside SOU)	750/NA	543/525	676/NA
Non-Motorized Recreation Opportunity			
Acres of Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized ROS (During SOU/Outside SOU)	34,947/NA	37,735/48,509	30,480/NA
Opportunity for Off-Highway Vehicle Operation			
Miles of Mixed Use System Roads	37	37	0
Miles of Motorized System Trails	612	405	0
Total Miles available for Off-Highway Vehicle Operation	649	442	0
Cultural Resources			
Number of Sites potentially affected (directly and indirectly)	178	113	N/A
Number of Cultural Landscapes potentially affected	0	0	N/A
Number of Traditional Cultural Properties – Culturally Sensitive potentially affected within the project area.	31	19	N/A
Wildlife			
Threatened or Endangered Wildlife Species			
Number of species with No Jeopardy	1	1	1
Number of species with potential to effect, but not likely to adversely affect.	1	1	1
Number of species with potential to effect, and likely to adversely affect	0	0	0
Sensitive Wildlife Species			
Number of Species with Beneficial Impact	0	0	0
Number of Species with No Impact	13	13	13
Number of Species with potential to effect individuals or Habitat but will not Likely Contribute to a trend towards Federal Listing or Loss of Viability to the Population or Species	9	9	9
Number of Species likely to result in a trend to Federal listing or loss of viability	0	0	0
Management Indicator Species			
Number of Species with Positive Effects	0	0	0
Number of Species with Neutral Effects	16	16	16
Number of Species with Negative Effects	0	0	0
Elk			
Motorized Route Density (miles per square mile) (SOU/Non-SOU)	1.09/NA	0.83/0.80	1.00/NA
Percent secure habitat within elk habitat	28.33/NA	36.25/37.69	24.90/NA
General Wildlife			
Percent of Land Unit that is core wildlife habitat (based on motorized routes)	22%	28%	18%
Water Quality, Fisheries, and Aquatics			
Miles of actions that reduce risks to water resources within the project area	552	593	0
Miles of actions that increase risks to water resources within the project area	121	17	0

³ SOU = Season of Use

Table ES-4. Comparison of Effects by Alternative

Feature	Alternative A	Alternative B	No Action Alternative
Sensitive Fish and Amphibian Species			
Number of Species with No Impact or Beneficial Impacts	3	5	3
Number of Species with potential to effect individuals or Habitat but will not Likely Contribute to a trend towards Federal Listing or Loss of Viability to the Population or Species	2	0	2
Number of Species likely to result in a trend to Federal listing or loss of viability	0	0	0
Recreational Fish Species and Rare Macroinvertebrates			
Number of Species with No Impact or Beneficial Impacts	0	2	0
Number of Species with potential to effect individuals or Habitat but will not Likely Contribute to a trend towards Federal Listing or Loss of Viability to the Population or Species	2	0	2
Soils			
High/Very High Erosion Hazard Rating			
Miles of Motorized Routes designated for public use	484	338	428
Medium Erosion Hazard Rating			
Miles of Motorized Routes designated for public use.	252	196	239
Vegetation			
Moderate Risk Areas - Motorized Routes			
Acres Potential Frequent Use Areas (% of Project Area)	20 (Trace)	10 (Trace)	20 (Trace)
Acres Potential Infrequent Use Areas (% of Project Area)	773 (Trace)	403 (Trace)	686 (Trace)
Miles in Moderate Risk Area	9	4	8
Weeds Susceptibility			
Weed Susceptible Acres within designated road corridor	62,717	46,665	57,606
Weed Infestation			
Total Infested Acres within Motorized Route potentially affected corridor	1869	1646	1811
Sensitive Plants			
Number of Species with No Impact	2	2	2
Number of Species with potential to effect individuals or Habitat but will not Likely Contribute to a trend towards Federal Listing or Loss of Viability to the Population or Species	1	1	1
Number of Species likely to result in a trend to Federal listing or loss of viability	0	0	0

The following table provides a summary of changes in effects for each action alternative *compared to the no action alternative*. Information in the table is focused on activities and effects where different levels of effects or outputs can be distinguished quantitatively or qualitatively among alternatives. Detailed effects analyses for each Alternative are found in Chapter 3 of the FEIS.

Table ES-5. Summary of Changes in Effects Compared to the No Action Alternative

Feature	Alternative A	Alternative B
Recreation		
Motorized Recreation Opportunity		
Acres of Roaded Natural ROS (During SOU ⁴ /Outside SOU)	Reduced by 2820 acres/ Reduced by 2820 acres	Reduced by 2901 acres/ Reduced by 2901 acres
Acres of Semi-Primitive Motorized ROS (During SOU/Outside SOU)	Increased by 1647 acres/ Increased by 1647 acres	Increased by 4353 acres/ Reduced by 15,129 acres
Miles of motorized roads and trails (During SOU/Outside SOU)	Increased by 74 miles/ Increased by 74 miles	Reduced by 133 miles/ Reduced by 151 miles
Non-Motorized Recreation Opportunity		
Acres of Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized ROS (During SOU/Outside SOU)	Increased by 4467/ Increased by 4467 acres	Increased by 7255/ Increased by 18,029 acres
Opportunity for Off-Highway Vehicle Operation		
Miles of Mixed Use System Roads	Increased by 37 miles	Increased by 37 miles
Miles of Motorized System Trails	Increased by 612 miles	Increased by 405 miles
Total Miles available for Off-Highway Vehicle Operation	Increased by 649 miles	Increased by 442 miles
Cultural Resources		
Number of Sites potentially affected (directly and indirectly)	Increase of 178 sites potentially affected	Increase of 113 sites potentially affected
Number of Cultural Landscapes potentially affected	None affected	None affected
Number of Traditional Cultural Properties potentially affected within the project area.	Increase of 31 properties potentially affected	Increase of 19 properties potentially affected
Wildlife		
Threatened or Endangered Wildlife Species		
Number of species with No Jeopardy	No change; no species jeopardized	
Number of species with potential to effect, but not likely to adversely affect.	No change; Actions are not likely to adversely affect the single species analyzed	
Sensitive Wildlife Species		
Change from the No Action Alternative	No Change; Actions are not likely to result in a trend to Federal listing or loss of viability	
Management Indicator Species		
Change from the No Action Alternative	No Change; Actions are not likely to negatively effect species	
Deer & Elk		
Motorized Route Density in miles per square mile (During SOU/Outside SOU)	Density increase by 9% / Density increase by 9%	Density decreases by 17% / Density decreases by 20%
Percent secure habitat within elk habitat (During SOU/Outside SOU)	Increase of 3% / Increase of 3%	Increase of 11% / Increase of 13%
General Wildlife		
Percent of District that is core wildlife habitat (based on motorized routes)	Increase of 4%	Increase of 10%
Water Quality, Fisheries, and Aquatics		
Water Quality		
Miles of actions that reduce risks on routes within the project area	59 miles of actions reducing risks	201 miles of actions reducing risks
Miles of actions that increase risks on routes within the project area	121 miles of actions increasing risks	17 miles of actions increasing risks
Sensitive Aquatic Species		
Change from No Action Alternative	No change	Changes two species from May Impact to No Impact

⁴ SOU = Season of Use

Table ES-5. Summary of Changes in Effects Compared to the *No Action Alternative*

Feature	Alternative A	Alternative B
Recreational Fish Species and Rare Macroinvertebrates		
Change from No Action Alternative	No change	Changes species from May Impact to No Impact
Soils		
High/Very High Erosion Hazard Rating		
Miles of Motorized Routes designated for public use	Increase of 56 miles	Decrease of 90 miles
Medium Erosion Hazard Rating		
Miles of Motorized Routes designated for public use.	Increase of 13 miles	Decrease of 43 miles
Vegetation		
Moderate Risk Areas - Motorized Routes		
Acres Potential Frequent Use Areas	No Change	Decrease of 10 acres
Acres Potential Infrequent Use Areas	Increase of 87 acres	Decrease of 283 acres
Miles in High Risk Area	Increase of 1 miles	Decrease of 4 miles
Weeds Susceptibility		
Weed Susceptible Acres within designated road corridor	Increase of 5111 acres	Decrease of 10,941 acres
Weed Infestation		
Total Infested Acres within Motorized Route potentially affected corridor	58 additional acres	165 fewer acres
Sensitive Plants		
Change from No Action Alternative	No change; ; Actions are not likely to result in a trend to Federal listing or loss of viability	

S.13 CONCLUSIONS

S.13.1 RECREATION

Concerns related to the loss of motorized recreation opportunities. Alternative A appears to best respond to concerns related to opportunities for motorized recreation and motorized hunting access, including providing the most miles of system road and motorized trails (750 miles) and nearly the same amount of acres in motorized ROS settings (467,312 acres) as the No Action Alternative. The remaining alternatives respond to this issue to lesser and varying degrees than Alternative A. The No Action Alternative, while providing roughly the same amount of motorized ROS settings, provides 74 fewer miles of motorized routes. Alternative B would provide both the fewest miles of motorized routes and acres in motorized ROS settings.

Concerns related to the loss of non-motorized opportunities. Alternative B best responds to concerns related to opportunities for non-motorized recreation, especially non-motorized hunting experiences. There would be 464,525 acres in non-motorized settings during the season of use and 543 miles of motorized routes. During the big-game hunting seasons, there would be an additional 10,776 non-motorized ROS setting acres and 18 fewer miles of roads and trails. The remaining alternatives respond to this issue to a lesser degree than Alternative B. Alternative A and the No Action Alternative respond to this concern about the same, although the No Action Alternative may be slightly better since there are fewer miles of system routes associated with this alternative.

Concerns related to opportunities for off-highway legal vehicle operation. Alternative A best responds to concerns related to opportunities for unlicensed off-highway vehicle operation, including providing the most miles of motorized mixed use roads and motorized trails. There would be 649 combined miles of motorized mixed use roads and motorized trails on the District.

The remaining alternatives respond to this issue to a lesser degree than Alternative A. In descending order of responsiveness, they are: Alternative B (424 to 442 miles, depending on the time of year), and No Action (0 miles).

The recreation goal in the Custer National Forest Management Plan is to “provide a broad spectrum of recreation experience opportunities”. All alternatives are consistent with the Custer National Forest Management Plan direction.

S.13.2 CULTURAL RESOURCES

In overall comparisons, Alternative A consists of the highest count of cultural resource sites and potential historic roads that could be affected due to the addition of, or conversion to, trails. Alternative B protects and preserves the highest number of known recorded sites, culturally sensitive sites, historic roads and CCC roads. Both Alternatives A and B would add to the knowledge base through additional inventory. The following table compares the action alternatives.

For all alternatives compliance with the NHPA through the MTPA is required. A monitoring program will be implemented that will address sites identified as at risk from the decision, and measures to reduce, remove, or mitigate these effects will be taken in consultation with the MTSHP.

S.13.3 WILDLIFE

Wildlife effects analysis was conducted based on regulatory framework for threatened, endangered, sensitive, management indicator, and other species of concern. Conservation strategy standards and guidelines and literature-based recommended guidelines were also considered. Analysis for black-footed ferret was based on motorized route density and potential effects on black-tailed prairie dog colonies. Analysis for elk was based on both motorized route density and secure habitat. Relative comparisons of available habitat and/or motorized route density were also conducted between alternatives for species and groups lacking conservation strategies, standards, or guidelines. The following outlines effects determinations for wildlife species.

S.13.4 WATER QUALITY, FISHERIES, AND AQUATICS

S.13.4.1 Water Quality

Currently, some routes have documented water quality impacts and therefore, may not comply with Forest Plan direction or state and federal water quality regulations. Compliance relative to the Decision to be made for this EIS, only pertains to those routes with a proposed action. These routes have actions proposed which are the first steps toward addressing water quality impacts. Additional activities, outside of this proposal, that would further reduce water quality impacts are identified in Appendix D - Opportunities. From a NEPA standpoint, routes with no proposed actions that have known water quality impacts are not a compliance issue relative to the Decision to be made, because this project is not the cause of those impacts (i.e. they are existing impacts). However, water quality impacts should still be addressed through measures outside this process and recommended actions for these routes are also identified in Appendix D - Opportunities. Full compliance with Forest Plan direction and state and federal water quality regulations under all alternatives would occur in the future as these actions or rehabilitation measures are implemented.

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S.13.4.2 Fisheries and Aquatics

Proposed actions with site specific effects that potentially increase risk of adverse impacts to aquatic habitat and species are negligible under Alternative B. Compliance relative to the Record of Decision for this DEIS, only pertains to those routes with proposed actions. Under Alternative B, actions related to moderate and high risk routes are expected to benefit or maintain aquatic habitats, and fish and amphibian species. Only minimal indirect effects to sensitive aquatic species are anticipated under Alternative A. Therefore, the Ashland District is anticipated to move towards compliance with Forest Plan standards and state and federal water quality regulations under either action alternative. However, Alternative B initiates the most rapid rate of recovery and compliance should be achieved in the shortest timeframe under this alternative.

Appendix D includes opportunities to reduce impacts to water quality, aquatic habitat and biota where there are: 1) site specific impacts from existing routes not associated with the proposed action, and 2) proposed actions with potential to improve conditions but do not eliminate impacts. However, construction, reconstruction, maintenance and decommissioning proposals will require future and separate NEPA decisions.

Relative to sensitive fish and amphibian species, none of the alternatives are likely to result in a trend to Federal listing or loss of viability. The following table summarizes the effects determinations for sensitive aquatic species and aquatic species of concern.

S.13.5 SOILS

Adding routes to the National Forest System and designating roads and trails for public or administrative use will have an impact on soil productivity, though regional soil quality standards do not apply to this project. Roads and trails impact and disrupt the natural function of the soil resource, and are long-term commitments to that specific use. Routes not commonly used will revegetate and eventually return to productivity. Alternative A would provide the greatest number of miles of routes available for public use and the least number of miles of routes to return to productive capability over time. Alternative B would provide an intermediate number of miles compared to Alternatives A and No Action. Alternative B would have fewer miles of routes available to the public for motorized use on landforms with high erosion hazard compared to Alternative A and the no-action alternative, though more miles of roads would be designated for administrative use.

S.13.6 VEGETATION

S.13.6.1 Vegetation

Because it is seldom possible to control or even document the past use or predict future use, estimates of the impacts caused by different use frequencies are imprecise. The ability to predict the effects of different intensities of various uses is low. It is recognized that not all estimated acreage will be affected and therefore results are on the conservative side.

Under all alternatives, when compared against similar vegetation types, potential impacts from *frequent* use within the 0 to 4% slopes of the route's corridor in moderate and low risk areas could occur in about one percent of the project area. Potential impacts from *infrequent* use within the route's corridor in moderate and low risk areas could occur in about 7% and 10% of the project area, respectively.

Moderate risk category potential impact ranges from 413 (Alternative B) to 793 acres (Alternative A). This is less than one percent of the project area. Low risk category potential impact ranges from 49,289 (Alternative B) to 36,397 acres (Alternative A). This is about 7 to 11% of the project area.

While impacts resulting from camping and vehicles can be locally very significant, the total area of impact is small when compared to various ecosystems of the project area. The level of acceptable impact over a given area is within the discretion of the deciding official for this project as outlined in the regulatory framework for this section. Selection of any alternative would be consistent with the regulatory framework relative to vegetation sustainability at the level of this project's scale.

S.13.6.2 Weeds

Since there is a high association with motorized routes and weed infestations, Alternatives A and No Action have a higher probability for weed spread than Alternative B.

Per existing policy, a noxious weed risk analysis will be done for each project and appropriate BMP measures (FSM 2080, R1 Supplement 2000-2001-1) included in each environmental analysis, permit, and contract and will help reduce cumulative effects. Each project and public use area will be monitored for noxious weeds and the implementation and effectiveness of BMP mitigation measures, prioritized by the degree of risk. The Forest Service will continue prevention, public education and appropriate weed treatment measures.

All action alternatives are consistent with the Laws, Regulations, Policy, and Federal, Regional, State, and Custer Forest Plan. Of these regulatory directions, only the FSM 2080 addresses travel management with respect to weed management. A weed risk assessment is part of this analysis and meets this policy.

S.13.6.3 Sensitive Plants

Under all alternatives, two of the three species assessed are anticipated to have no impact. Any alternative may impact individuals or habitat of one species but will not likely contribute to a trend towards Federal listing or loss of viability to the population or species. Selection of any alternative would be consistent with the regulatory framework relative to sensitive plants.

- End of Executive Summary -