

XI. RECREATION

1. Analysis Area

This analysis assesses the recreation resource within the Moose Post-Fire Project area, the entire Big Creek drainage and that portion of the North Fork of the Flathead Wild and Scenic River corridor within the project area. It includes the recreation activities likely to be affected by the proposed management actions. A wide variety of recreational activities occurred throughout the year in the project area before the Moose Fire (refer to Map 3-13). The fire affected all of these activities to some degree.

2. Affected Environment

Past management actions such as timber harvest, road construction and fire suppression as well as wildfires have shaped the recreation opportunities that exist in the project area today.

The Big Creek Campground is a popular developed recreation site that includes a picnic area, river launch site, group use area and 22 campsites. A concessionaire operates the facility. The normal operating season is from May 15 through September 30. During this time, the site receives moderate use. Some use also occurs outside the normal operating season in early spring and late fall. The campground received minor damage from the fire and is ready for normal operations during the 2002 season. The Moose Lake Campground contains four sites that receive light to moderate use during the summer season. The primary attractions are hiking and fishing. This site is outside the burned area.

Two popular dispersed camping sites existed in the project area before the Moose Fire. One was located west of the North Fork Road between Big Creek and the Big Creek Road. The other was located where Lookout Creek Road 803 crosses Big Creek. Several other less popular sites also existed in the project area. Most of these sites were severely damaged in the fire. Currently, snag hazards make them unsafe for public use.

Floating occurs on the North Fork of the Flathead Wild and Scenic River from early May through October with the heaviest use during July and August. Trips begin at several launch sites above the project area as well as at the undeveloped Coal Creek access and the developed site at Big Creek Campground. The Moose Fire did not directly affect launch sites or floating opportunities.

There are approximately 30 miles of system trail in the project area. They include: Demers Ridge Tr. 266 (7.2 Miles), Glacier View Mountain Tr. 381 (4.2 miles), Deadhorse Ridge – Moose Lake Tr. 194 (3.0 miles), Deadhorse – Elelehum Tr. 255 (2.8 miles), Du Hein Tr. 383 (1.9 miles) and Forks – Patrol Tr. 452 (7.8 miles). Before the fires, these trails varied in condition from well maintained to barely discernible. They received light use by hikers and hunters. In addition, Trails 194 and 255, which are open to motorized use, received low levels of motorcycle use. All of the trails had moderate to severe damage from the fire and are currently impassible. Long-term plans are to reopen these trails. The Smokey Range National Recreation Trail follows portions of the southern boundary of the project area. This trail was not damaged by the fire, nor would it be directly affected by the proposed project.

Before the fire, the project area received light to moderate hunting use by big game hunters and berry pickers. These activities would resume and may increase as the burn begins to recover. Big Creek and its tributaries are closed to fishing to protect bull trout populations. Fishing, however, is a popular activity in the North Fork Flathead River and at Moose Lake.

Several roads, including 316, 803, 5272, 5207, 5220, 317, 1693, 1657, 1692, 1655, 5261, 315, 316E, and 5284, are snowmobile travel routes to popular play areas both inside and outside the project area. Use levels range from heavy to light. There are approximately 12 miles of groomed snowmobile trail within the project area. They follow portions of Big Creek Road 316, Werner Divide Road 1658 and Lakalaho Road 1696 as well as cross-country routes. These trails receive heavy use. One snowmobile outfitter operates on and in the vicinity of the groomed trail system. A snowmobile warming / survival hut is located in Section 14, T32N, R22W on the Lakalaho Road 1696.

The facility is under Special Use Permit to the Flathead Snowmobile Association. A pit toilet is located at the site. A new vault toilet is planned in the near future. In addition to providing a rest area, the hut also provides emergency shelter for visitors who may become stranded in the area. With the exception of a few designated play areas, other portions of the project area are closed to snowmobile use as the result of a 2002 lawsuit settlement. A separate analysis is planned in the near future to examine the effects of snowmobile use in the project area as well as on other national forest system land in the North Fork of the Flathead.

Most roads in the project area are closed to wheeled vehicle use. Of those open, Road 316, Coal Creek Road 317 and the McGinnis Creek Road (Lookout) 803 are popular recreation travel routes that receive moderate to heavy use. Road 316 is particularly important because this road along with Road 1658 provides one of three driving routes in the North Fork across the Whitefish Divide. It is a heavily used scenic drive. Hallowat Creek Road 315 and Kletomus Creek Road (Moose Lake) 5207 provide the only access to the Moose Lake Campground and two trailheads. They receive light to moderate use. Deadhorse Creek Road 1693 provides access to two lightly used trailheads.

A portion of the Big Creek Road 316 is restricted yearlong to wheeled motorized use by a berm at the junction with Werner Divide Road 1658 and by a gate at the junction with Trumble Creek Road 9848. This part of the road is located on the “backside” of Big Mountain. This closure was authorized by the Record of Decision for the Big Mountain Ski Area Expansion Project. Most of the closure took place in the fall of 2000; the portion of the road between Trumble Creek Road and the Lakalaho Road 1696 was closed in the fall of 2001. Many members of the public have indicated (e.g. project record E-13) their concern about the effects of this closure on recreational pursuits such as huckleberry picking, driving for pleasure, and access for hiking.

Following the Moose Fire, hazard trees were cut and removed along open roads, making the area safer for Forest visitors. In addition, the Moose Fire area is currently restricted to firewood cutting (however, some slash piles have been made available). This restriction will be rescinded following completion of salvage operations.

Approximately one half of the Big Mountain Ski Area is located in the upper portions of the project area, but was not affected by the Moose Fire.

Glacier Institute provides a broad range of outdoor education programs both inside and outside the project area. The Institute utilizes the old Big Creek Ranger Station as a base of operations. Most classes leave the base area at some point in their stay. They provide services to approximately 2000 people a year.

RECREATION MAP 3-13

3. Environmental Consequences

Chapter 2 identified three significant issues related to recreation: Issue #9 regarding levels of motorized public access, Issue #10 related to motorized use restrictions on Road #316, and Issue #11 regarding changes to snowmobile access from road decommissioning. The Issue Indicators for these issues are *miles of road open to conventional motorized use (wheeled vehicles) yearlong*, *miles of road open to conventional motorized use seasonally*, and *miles of road decommissioned* for Issue #9; *change in restrictions of conventional motorized vehicle use on Road #316* for Issue #10, and *miles of road proposed for decommissioning on existing snowmobile routes* for Issue #11.

In addition, the following Effects Indicator was used to focus the analysis and disclose relevant environmental effects:

- Qualitative assessment of treatments in or near Glacier Institute and recreation sites.

Direct and Indirect Effects

Alternative 1

No management actions would occur in this alternative; therefore, there would be no effects on recreation resources or activities. The following discussion recognizes that current temporary road restrictions would expire in April 2003 (refer to description of current activities presented earlier in this chapter) and reflects conditions following expiration of the special order temporarily restricting these roads.

Under this alternative, 49 miles of Forest Service roads would remain open to motorized use yearlong and 7 miles of road would remain open to motorized use seasonally in the project area. Key recreational roads remain open yearlong for public use. They include:

- Big Creek Road 316 (to the junction with Road 1658)
- Coal Creek Road 317
- Deadhorse Creek Road 1693
- McGinnis Road (Lookout) 803
- Hallowat Creek Road 315 (to the Junction with Road 5207)
- Kletomus Creek Road 5207 (to Moose Lake)
- Werner Creek Road 5261 (to the Werner Creek crossing)
- Nicola Creek Road 1692 (south of the south junction with Road 1655 and north of the north junction with Road 1655)
- Upper Nicola Creek Road 1655

In addition the following roads are open seasonally to motorized use:

- Elelehum Creek Road 5272 (to the Elelehum trailhead)
- Werner Divide Road 1658

All of these roads provide general recreation opportunities, including driving for pleasure, access for hunting, hiking, gathering forest products, etc. All of them receive moderate to heavy use. The Big Creek – Werner Divide route is one of three crossing the Whitefish Divide. It is a very popular summer travel route. The Hallowat – Kletomus Loop route provides access to Moose Lake Campground and the Moose Peak and Moose Lake – Deadhorse trailheads. It receives moderate use. The Coal Creek – Deadhorse route provides access to the east end of the Moose Lake – Deadhorse Trail 194 and the north end of the Elelehum Trail 255. The Elelehum Creek Road provides access to the south end of the Elelehum Trail 255. These trails are three of the few trails open to low level motorized use on the Glacier View Ranger District.

The portion of the Big Creek Road 316 that is located behind Big Mountain would contain to remain restricted to wheeled motorized access under the no action alternative; hiking, mountain biking, and snowmobiling would continue.

Since there is no road decommissioning work proposed in this alternative, there would be no effect on existing snowmobile routes.

Under a previous decision, the Lakalaho Road 1696 would be closed yearlong with a berm eliminating access for summer maintenance work on the snowmobile warming / survival hut adjacent to the road. Without summer access for maintenance, the facility would likely be removed. Visitor safety could be compromised.

Direct and Indirect Effects Common to All Action Alternatives

None of the alternatives directly affect recreational use at developed recreation sites or on the North Fork Wild and Scenic River. All action alternatives may limit recreational access particularly along the lower portions of Big Creek Road 316 during active logging operations. All existing system trails would remain in place. Trails in harvest units would be protected and / or repaired following logging activities. All action alternatives would improve visitor safety at the popular dispersed recreation site west of the North Fork Road between the Big Creek Road and Big Creek by harvesting dead and dying trees in the area. None of the other popular dispersed recreation sites in the burn area would receive this treatment. A temporary closure order exists on 20.2 miles of system roads within the project area that are normally open to public use seasonally or yearlong. This order expires April 2003. The Alternative 2 road management strategy would implement these restrictions permanently.

Timber harvest and fuel treatment activities would have few long-term effects on recreation opportunities within the project area. These long-term effects are discussed in specific action alternatives. Short-term effects of harvest activities would include noise, increased traffic, temporary closures, dust, etc.

Insect control activities utilizing pheromone traps would have no effect on recreation activities.

Alternative 2

Salvage activities and fuels reduction treatments

The proposed fuel treatment project would reduce the potential of future fire damage at Big Creek Campground and at Glacier Institute. It would also enhance visitor experience at the campground by opening dense timber stands.

Road management activities

In this alternative, 31 miles of Forest Service roads would remain open to public wheeled motorized use yearlong and 4 miles of road would be available to wheeled motorized use on a seasonal basis.

Fifty-six miles of road would be decommissioned. Of the 56 miles of road to be decommissioned, approximately 51 miles are currently closed yearlong with gates or berms and are available for non-motorized use such as hiking, horseback riding, etc until these roads becomes re-vegetated making even this kind of access more difficult. Given the nature and intent of the decommissioning work, it is likely that non-motorized use of these routes would decline.

The Werner Divide Road and part of the upper Big Creek Road would be restricted yearlong with a gate to wheeled motorized use, eliminating the most popular of the three motorized routes crossing the Whitefish Divide.

The heavily used McGinnis – Lookout route (Road 803) would be restricted yearlong just south of the Big Creek Bridge to Lookout Divide to wheeled motorized use.

The Werner Creek Road, Nicola – Werner Road and Upper Nicola Connection Road would be closed yearlong with gates and / or berms. They would no longer be available for wheeled vehicle use.

Those roads where access management would remain unchanged are displayed in Chapter 2.

Under this alternative, proposed road decommissioning activities would affect some existing snowmobile routes for approximately 9 miles. These routes include: Nicola Creek Road 1692 (3.1 inventory miles), Werner Creek Road 5261 (1.1 inventory miles), Kletomus Creek Road 5207 (0.90 inventory miles), and Hallowat Creek Road 315 (3.8 inventory miles). On these routes, stream-aligned culverts would be removed and alternative safe snowmobile crossings, such as open bottom half culverts, would be installed. In locations where culverts are removed, the travel route would be graded to facilitate snowmobile travel within the limits of the surrounding terrain. Water bars would be designed to facilitate snowmobile use. Following decommissioning, the existing routes would be more difficult to travel but would safely accommodate snowmobile use.

As was specified in the Big Mountain decision, the portion of the Big Creek Road 316 that is located behind Big Mountain would contain to remain restricted to wheeled motorized access; hiking, mountain biking, and snowmobiling would still be allowed to continue. Likewise, to meet the intent of the Big Mountain decision, Lakalaho Road 1696 would be closed yearlong with a berm, eliminating access for summer maintenance work on the snowmobile / survival hut adjacent to the road. Without access for summer maintenance the facility would likely be removed. Visitor safety could be compromised.

Alternative 3

Salvage activities and fuel reduction treatments

The proposed fuel treatment project would reduce the potential of future fire damage at Big Creek Campground and at Glacier Institute. It would also enhance visitor experience at the campground by opening dense timber stands.

Road management activities

In this alternative, 26 miles of system road would remain open to public wheeled motorized use yearlong and 19 miles of road would be available to wheeled motorized use on a seasonal basis.

Those roads where access management would remain unchanged are displayed in Chapter 2.

Fifty-six miles of road would be decommissioned. Of the 56 miles of road to be decommissioned, approximately 51 miles are currently closed yearlong with gates or berms and are available for non-motorized use such as hiking, horseback riding, etc until these roads becomes re-vegetated making even this kind of access more difficult. Given the nature and intent of the decommissioning work, it is likely that non-motorized use of these routes would decline.

The Big Creek Road would remain open yearlong to the junction with the Werner Divide Road. The Werner Divide Road would be open seasonally (7/1-10/14), preserving the travel route across the Whitefish Divide. In addition, the Big Creek Road would be open seasonally (7/1-10/14) from the junction with the Whitefish Divide Road to the Big Creek- Canyon Creek divide, allowing recreational access to the upper portions of the Big Creek drainage. It would also restore motorized access to the west end of the Smoky Range National Recreation Trail. This access route was previously restricted to wheel motorized access via the Big Mountain decision.

The route to the Moose Lake Campground and associated trailheads would be open seasonally (7/1-3/31). This would reduce the season of use for the campground and trailheads approximately 2 weeks. Opportunities for spring bear hunting would be reduced.

The heavily used McGinnis – Lookout route would be closed yearlong from the Big Creek Bridge to the Lookout Divide. It would no longer be available for wheeled vehicle use.

The Werner Creek, Road, Nicola – Werner Road and Upper Nicola Connection Road would be closed yearlong with gates and / or berms. It would no longer be available for wheeled vehicle use.

Under this alternative, proposed road decommissioning activities would affect some existing snowmobile routes for approximately 9 miles. These routes include: Nicola Creek Road 1692 (3.1 inventory miles), Werner Creek Road 5261 (1.1 inventory miles), Kletomus Creek Road 5207 (0.90 inventory miles), and Hallowat Creek Road 315 (3.8 inventory miles). These routes would be converted to winter system snowmobile trails. Appropriately sized culverts and drainage structures would be left in place. The new trails would be maintained to established standards for un-groomed snowmobile trails. Previously decommissioned snowmobile routes would not be converted to winter system snowmobile trails under this decision. Existing snowmobile routes would more convenient and easier to use under this alternative.

The previous decision to close the Lakalaho Road 1696 with a berm would be modified to allow closure with a gate. This would allow access to the snowmobile/survival hut for summer maintenance work. The facility would remain to provide for visitor safety.

Alternative 4

Salvage activities and fuel reduction treatments

The proposed fuel treatment project would reduce the potential for future fire damage at Glacier Institute. A similar project that would have had the potential to reduce fire damage and enhance visitor experience at Big Creek Campground would be forgone in order to enhance wildlife winter habitat in the campground. The camp units will remain under a dark, dense canopy with a significant component of suppressed, dying and dead trees.

Road management activities

In this alternative, 8 miles of Forest Service road would remain open to public wheeled motorized use yearlong and 23 miles of road would be available to wheeled motorized use on a seasonal basis

Eighty-seven miles of road would be decommissioned. Of the 87 miles of road to be decommissioned, 65 miles are currently restricted yearlong with gates or berms and are available for non-motorized use. An additional 18 miles of roads that are open yearlong or seasonally for motorized use would be decommissioned and available for non-motorized use such as hiking, horseback riding, etc until these roads becomes re-vegetated making even this kind of access more difficult. Given the nature and intent of the decommissioning work, it is likely that non-motorized use of these routes would decline.

The Werner Divide Road and the upper portion of the Big Creek road would be restricted to wheeled motorized use yearlong with a gate, eliminating the most popular of the three routes crossing the Whitefish Divide.

The Big Creek Road would be open seasonally (6/1-3/30) from the McGinnis – Lookout Road to the junction with the Upper Nicola Creek Connection Road. This would eliminate motorized access to most of the Big Creek drainage during the spring bear hunting season. It would also reduce the season of use at the Moose Lake Campground and associated trailheads by approximately 2 weeks.

The route to the eastern Moose Lake – Deadhorse and north Elelehum trailheads would remain open yearlong.

The Elelehum Creek Road 5272 would be decommissioned, eliminating access to the south Elelehum trailhead. The decommissioned route would be converted to a system trail and a new trailhead would be constructed adjacent to the Big Creek Road. The trail would be approximately 2 miles longer.

The heavily used McGinnis – Lookout route (Road 803) would be decommissioned from just south of the Big Creek Bridge to the junction with Road 1656. It would no longer be available for wheeled vehicle use.

The Werner Creek Road 5261, Nicola Road 1692 and Upper Nicola Road 1655 would be decommissioned. It would no longer be available for wheeled vehicle use.

Under this alternative, proposed road decommissioning activities would affect some existing snowmobile routes for approximately 31 miles. These routes include: Nicola Creek Road 1692 (5.5 inventory miles), Werner Creek Road 5261 (3.7 inventory miles), Kletomus Creek Road 5207 (0.90 inventory miles), Hallowat Creek Road 315 (3.84 inventory miles), Upper Nicola Road 1655 (6.2 inventory miles), Elelehum Creek Road 5272 (approximately 8 miles), and McGinnis-Lookout Creek Road 803 (3.1 inventory miles). On these routes stream-aligned culverts would be removed and alternative safe snowmobile crossings, such as open bottom half culverts would be installed. In locations where culverts are removed, the travel route would be graded to facilitate snowmobile travel within the limits of the surrounding terrain. Waterbars would be designed to facilitate snowmobile use. Following decommissioning, the existing routes would be more difficult to travel but would safely accommodate snowmobile use.

As was specified in the Big Mountain decision, the portion of the Big Creek Road 316 that is located behind Big Mountain would contain to remain restricted to wheeled motorized access; hiking, mountain biking, and snowmobiling would still be allowed to continue. Likewise, to meet the intent of the Big Mountain decision, Lakalaho Road 1696 would be closed yearlong with a berm, eliminating access for summer maintenance work on the snowmobile / survival hut adjacent to the road. Without access for summer maintenance the facility would likely be removed. Visitor safety could be compromised.

Alternative 5

Salvage activities and fuel reduction treatments

The proposed fuel treatment project would reduce the potential of future fire damage at Big Creek Campground and at Glacier Institute. It would also enhance visitor experience at the campground by opening dense timber stands.

Road management activities

In this alternative, 22 miles of system road would remain open to public wheeled motorized use yearlong and 13 miles of road would be available to wheeled motorized use on a seasonal basis. Fifty-six miles of road would be decommissioned. Of the 56 miles of road to be decommissioned, approximately 51 miles are currently closed yearlong with gates or berms and are available for non-motorized use. Given the nature and intent of the decommissioning work, it is likely that non-motorized use of these routes would decline.

The effects of this alternative on access are the same as those described for Alternative 2 with the following exceptions:

- The Big Creek Road remains open yearlong to the junction with the Upper Nicola Creek Connection Road. The Whitefish Divide Road and the Big Creek Rd (from the junction of the Upper Nicola Connection Road to a point approximately 1 mile from the junction with Road 1696) would be open seasonally (7/1-10/14). This would allow travel across the Whitefish Divide. It would also provide recreational access to the upper portions of the Big Creek drainage. It would not restore motorized access to the west end of the Smoky Range National Recreation Trail. A new trailhead would be established near the gate on the Big Creek Road to provide parking for the National Recreation Trail. Other alternatives do not improve access to this end of the Smokey Range trail.
- The Hallowat Creek Road and the Kletomus Creek Road would be closed yearlong with gates and berms. This would eliminate access to the Moose Lake Campground and associated trailheads. The campground would be decommissioned and all improvements removed. This facility was completely rebuilt in 1997. The decommissioned roads would be converted to system trails and a new trailhead would be constructed adjacent to the Big Creek Road.

Under this alternative, proposed road decommissioning activities would affect some existing snowmobile routes for approximately 9 miles. These routes include: Nicola Creek Road 1692 (3.1 inventory miles), Werner Creek Road 5261 (1.1 inventory miles), Kletomus Creek Road 5207 (0.90 inventory miles), and Hallowat Creek Road 315 (3.8

inventory miles). On these routes, stream-aligned culverts would be removed and alternative safe snowmobile crossings, such as open bottom half culverts, would be installed. In locations where culverts are removed, the travel route would be graded to facilitate snowmobile travel within the limits of the surrounding terrain. Water bars would be designed to facilitate snowmobile use. Following decommissioning, the existing routes would be more difficult to travel but would safely accommodate snowmobile use.

The previous decision to close the Lakalaho Road 1696 with a berm would be modified to allow closure with a gate. This would allow occasional administrative access to the snowmobile warming / survival hut for summer maintenance work. The facility would remain to provide for visitor safety.

Cumulative Effects

Cumulative Effects of Alternative 1

Motorized recreational use would not decline. Visitors would not be displaced to other areas

Cumulative Effects of Alternatives 2, 3, 4 and 5

All action alternatives would continue the forest-wide trend of reducing motorized recreation opportunities as road restrictions and decommissioning work is implemented. Those seeking motorized opportunities, including off road vehicle use, would be displaced and, in many cases, concentrated in the remaining open areas. In the North Fork, some displaced users can be expected to move into the Wild and Scenic River corridor. Others may be displaced to unrestricted private, state or other federal lands. Action alternatives may also reduce access for some non-motorized users as gated and bermed roads are decommissioned and access for stock, mountain bikes etc. becomes more difficult as vegetation grows in.

Implementation of the existing Big Mountain decision would lead to decommissioning of the following roads or road segments which are also existing snowmobile routes or are included as part of a snowmobile use area: Lakalaho Road 1696 (2.7 inventory miles), Mid Big Mountain Road 10907 (1.3 inventory miles), and Mid Big Mountain Left Road 10908 (0.20 inventory miles). Cumulatively, road decommissioning activities would therefore affect 13 miles of existing snowmobile routes within the Big Creek drainage if Alternatives 2, 3, and 5 were implemented; and would affect 35 miles of existing snowmobile routes within the Big Creek drainage if Alternative 4 was implemented. As the quality of existing snowmobile routes declines due to road decommissioning work, some visitors would be displaced to other areas.

The continued Forest-wide trend of closing and decommissioning roads also reduces non-motorized recreation opportunities as access to hunting areas, berry picking areas, camping areas, etc. is reduced.

Fire suppression activities did not increase opportunities for off road vehicle use. All fire lines were blocked and rehabilitated.

Roads scheduled for decommissioning were already closed to motorized use. Decommissioning would not change opportunities for off road vehicle use.

Commercial mushroom harvest would be occurring in the fire area for the next one to two years. The influx of commercial harvesters may displace some recreational users into other areas.

4. Regulatory Framework and Consistency

Proposed management actions are compatible with management direction in the *Flathead Forest Land and Resources Management Plan*.