

Recreation, Wilderness, Special Uses, and Range

Introduction

The Porter Mount Project Area is comprised primarily of roaded timber lands with relatively light public recreational uses, a small number of access related special use authorizations and portions of two grazing allotments. There is no Congressionally designated Wilderness, proposed Wilderness, or NFS trails in the project area. There is also no Inventoried Roadless Areas in the project area.

Analysis Area

Spatial Bounds

The analysis area for determining direct, indirect, and cumulative effects for Recreation Resource will be the Island Unit Geographic Area of the Swan Lake Ranger District. The Special Uses cumulative effects boundary are the lands within the Porter Mount Management Project Area boundary. It is on these lands that all proposed activities would take place, and where effects to these resources, if any, would most likely occur.

The bounds of analysis for the Range Resources discussion will consider the entire Browns Meadow and Wild Bill Allotments; however the analysis will primarily focus on those portions of the allotments that fall within the project area boundary.

Temporal Bounds

The effects are limited to the operational period of the proposed action, including any post activity treatments.

Affected Environment

Recreation

The lands within the Porter Mount Analysis Area boundary are perhaps best characterized making use of the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS). The lands can be considered roaded, natural in appearance, and provide both motorized and non-motorized recreational opportunities.

Developed Sites

With the exception of the Blacktail Mountain Ski Area, there are no other developed recreation sites within the analysis area, but future sites are proposed. In the near future, the Swan Lake Ranger District will be proposing major additions to the Blacktail Wild Bill OHV Trail System creating ATV trails to link segments of existing roads into loop ATV routes. To the east of the analysis area, the Swan Lake Ranger District will also be proposing the construction of a snowmobile trail from the Blacktail Ski Area to the Wild Bill OHV National Recreation Trailhead. This would provide a winter motorized trail to the public and reduce illegal snowmobile use on the Blacktail Road. Trailheads for the Blacktail Wild Bill Off-Highway Vehicle Trail (within 1 mile) and the Blacktail Mountain Ski Area (within 4 miles) lie within the general vicinity of the Porter Mount Management Project Area.

Dispersed Use

The analysis area contains several Forest Development Roads (FDRs), which recreationists use for dispersed activities year round, such as camping, driving for pleasure, wildlife watching, picnicking, huckleberry picking, firewood gathering, hunting, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, or just the opportunity to be outdoors.

Access Management

1. Roads

In general, driving for pleasure is one of the most popular recreation activities. Wheeled motorized access on forest roads also provides users access for hiking, firewood gathering, hunting, fishing, camping, huckleberry picking, ATV/motorcycle riding, wildlife viewing, stock use, and just appreciating their National Forests from a vehicle.

Within the analysis area, there are approximately 36 miles of open yearlong road available to wheeled motorized use. In addition, 58 miles of closed yearlong forest roads are found in the analysis area and are occasionally used by the general public for non-motorized recreation activities such as hiking and hunting.

2. Trails

The Blacktail Wild Bill National Recreation OHV Trail provides motorized and non-motorized recreational opportunities in three segments. This trail generally follows ridgelines in the central part of the Island Unit. For the most part, jeeps and ATVs use the trail, while it is open to all motor vehicles and all non-motorized uses all year.

In the past year, two volunteer groups (the Polson-based Skyliners 4 X 4 Club and the Kalispell-based Rocky Mountain OHV Club) have partnered with the Swan Lake Ranger District to reconstruct the trail. The volunteers have been improving drainage, constructing challenge features to enhance riding opportunities, cutting brush, and improving signing.

In the northwest corner of the analysis area, there is a small area of non-system, user-created trails. These trails were likely developed by horse riders from adjacent properties or by local mountain bikers. The trails are steep in nature, and observations indicate that the primary use is by downhill, "freeride" mountain bikers. In this style of biking, riders are dropped off at the top of a trail (in this case off FDR # 5373) and then ride down the steep, winding trail, over natural and constructed obstacles to a lower road. They then shuttle back up by car. The construction of these trails and associated obstacles and challenge features was not authorized by the Forest Service. Trail construction without authorization is contrary to regulations.

3. Winter Motorized Use

The Flathead National Forest Winter Motorized Recreation Plan Record of Decision (signed November 17, 2006) designates winter-motorized routes, play areas, and seasons for snowmobile recreation throughout the Flathead National Forest depicted on the Over the Snow Motor Vehicle Use Map, March 2007 (Project File Exhibit M-2). Snowmobiling in the analysis area is generally permitted when snow conditions allow. Snowmobiling is prohibited on a number of roads between October 15 and November 30 yearly, as designated on the Over the Snow Motor Vehicle Use Map.

Special Uses

There are four Special Use Permits and three easements in the Porter Mount Area that provide access to privately-owned lands. These authorizations are detailed below:

1. Private Road Special Use Permit – Two permits have been issued on two roads to provide access to privately-owned parcels adjacent to or surrounded by NFS lands. Both are located in Section 5, T26N, R22W. One road leaves Section 5 in the NW¼ of the NW¼ to access lands in Section 32, and the other is located in the SW¼ of the NW¼ of Section 5. Both are short segments.
2. Forest Road Special Use Permit – Two permits have been issued to a private timber company to access their lands adjacent to or surrounded by NFS lands. One permit uses the same road alignments of the Private Road Special Use Permit that accesses Section 32. The other is located in the NE¼ of the SW¼ of Section 6, T26N, R22W to access a parcel in Section 6.
3. FRTA Road Easement – Three easements have been issued to Flathead County and a private timber company to allow access over FDR's in the Porter Mount Area. These easements are located Sections 28, 36, 35, T27N R23W.

Range

Portions of the Browns Meadow and Wild Bill Range Allotments lie within the boundaries of the Porter Mount Project Area. The Potter Allotment has been vacant in recent years. The Forest Service is in the process of terminating this allotment; it will not be grazed in the future. Both active allotments are described in detail in the Island Unit Grazing Allotments Environmental Assessment and Decision Notice of 2002 (Project File Exhibit Q-2). Existing conditions have not changed substantially since that 2002 analysis. Table 3-44 details those grazing allotments.

**TABLE 3-44
 GRAZING ALLOTMENTS WITHIN THE PORTER MOUNT PROJECT AREA**

Allotment	Permitted Numbers Animal Use Months (AUMs)	On-Off Dates	Total Acres	Acres within Project Area
Browns Meadow	32 Cow/Calf Pairs, 128 AUMs	June 1- Sept. 30	3940	1876
Wild Bill	118 Cow/Calf Pairs, 457 AUMs	June 1 – Sept. 30	9,060	2597
Potter (Inactive)	15 Cow/Calf Pairs, 60 AUMs	June 1 – Sept. 30	4510	4169

Environmental Consequences

Alternative A – No Action Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Effects

Recreation

Under this alternative, no new management actions would occur. The analysis area is used for year round motorized and non-motorized recreation such as driving for pleasure, huckleberry picking, camping, hiking, firewood gathering, and just enjoying the natural environment. In general, recreation would continue as it is now under current management direction. The small area of non-system user created trails would continue to be used by horse riders from adjacent properties or by local mountain bikers. Any additional trail construction by the public would be unauthorized. There would be no changes to the existing access management to trailheads, wheeled motorized use, and snowmobile

seasons, including the Blacktail Wild Bill National Recreation OHV Trail. The Blacktail Mountain Ski Area would also be unaffected by the No Action Alternative.

Harvest, fuel reduction treatments, and ecosystem burning would not take place thereby resulting in no affect to recreationists in the short term.

Range

The management of the Browns Meadow and Wild Bill Range Allotments would continue as authorized in the in the Island Unit Grazing Allotments Environmental Assessment and Decision Notice of 2002. No timber harvest would occur with this alternative so existing cattle access would be unaffected. Forage production within the project area would not be improved through vegetation management activities. The exclusion of fire would increase the risk of stand-replacement fire within the project area. A major fire within the allotments could, in the short term, affect the availability of the allotments to be used by cattle. However, in the long term, a major fire would improve the availability of transitory range.

Special Uses

No Special Use Authorizations would be significantly affected by the Alternative A. Permit and easement holders would not experience increased road traffic on adjacent Forest Development Roads for the short duration of the project's implementation as in the action alternatives.

Alternatives B and C Direct and Indirect Effects

Recreation

None of the alternatives would significantly affect recreation opportunities in the Porter Mount Project Area. The general nature of effects to recreational opportunities can be characterized as short-term disturbance that is limited in scope. Logging or burning operations may displace recreationists, whether hunters, hikers, or recreational road users, during operational periods. The indirect effects of increased traffic from timber management operations, including road maintenance such as BMPs on roads due to the proposed activities would be short-term.

It is likely that the proposed Commercial Thinning treatment in Unit 2 would affect the user-created trail system found there. Tractor and skyline yarding may damage or destroy sections of trail tread and structures constructed by trail users. Protection of these unauthorized improvements is not necessary.

There are no new system roads proposed in the action alternatives. The existing roads providing access to private land and to the general forest area would not change. Firewood and other forest products gathering opportunities would remain the same in both alternatives. There would be a small amount of new temporary road constructed for timber removal; however, these would be immediately reclaimed and would not create a noticeable change in access.

There would be no changes to the existing access management to trailheads, wheeled motorized use, and snowmobile seasons, including the Blacktail Wild Bill National Recreation OHV Trail. The Blacktail Mountain Ski Area would also be unaffected by the action alternatives.

Range

Range Resources would generally benefit from this project. The purpose of the Porter Mount Project is to improve forest health, reduce insect and disease threats, reduce hazardous fuel loading and generate wood products for local economies. These actions would be accomplished largely through

the thinning of stands and removal of trees. Implementing this project would allow more sunlight to reach the ground, which could increase the amount of forage available to cattle. Generally, increased sunlight favors additional growth of grasses and forbs and shrubs. In addition, cattle would have better access to some sites that are now too thick for them to enter. Overall, cattle forage would increase.

Special Uses

Special Use Authorizations and their holders would be largely unaffected by the action alternatives. None of the four private road segments authorized under permit would be used by project activities. National Forest System roads on which access easements have been granted would be used for project activities. This use is consistent with the easement grant. Permit and easement holders could experience increased road traffic on forest development roads for the short duration of the project's implementation.

Alternatives B and C Cumulative Effects

The Cumulative Effects Worksheet (Project File Exhibit M-3) considers and describes proposed activities in addition to the past, current, and foreseeable activities listed in this chapter. Those activities that cumulatively affect Recreation, Range, and Special Uses will be discussed below.

Recreation

Road maintenance and management associated with this project and foreseeable activities would cumulatively affect the Recreation Resource both negatively and positively depending upon the user and the recreational activity.

The Flathead Valley's local and visiting populations are growing. Their desire for recreation activities such as camping, hunting, fishing, huckleberry picking, firewood gathering, hiking, biking, ATV and motorcycle trails, is also increasing. The collective effect of these activities can result in overlapping the recreationists onto the same areas, trails, and roads. The cumulative results are increased maintenance and repairs on the facilities, roads, and trails, providing for health and safety issues, and overall people management.

In the near future, the Swan Lake Ranger District will be proposing major additions to the Blacktail Wild Bill OHV Trail system. The District is currently accessing the feasibility of expanding motorized recreational opportunities on the Island Unit. Possible additions to the existing trail system would largely use existing closed roads, which would be opened seasonally to wheeled motor vehicle use. Some new trail construction would likely occur to connect existing roads and create loop riding opportunities. It is expected that the environmental analysis to authorize this project would occur in 2008 or 2009. This project would create an increase in opportunities in recreational motorized use in the Porter Mount and surrounding area.

Another project the District will be proposing is the construction of a snowmobile trail from the Blacktail Ski Area to the Wild Bill OHV National Recreation Trailhead. This would provide a winter motorized trail to the public and reduce illegal snowmobile use on the Blacktail Road. It is expected that the environmental analysis to authorize this project would occur in October 2007. This project would create an increase in opportunities for winter motorized use in the Porter Mount and surrounding area. Currently snowmobile use is light to moderate in the general area of the Island Unit. Improved access and access to the amenities at the Blacktail Mountain Ski Area are likely to increase use moderately as it would still not be a destination area and would not improve groomed routes.

Range

Past road construction, tree harvest, prescribed burning and fire suppression, and natural events have created the existing vegetative conditions for the Range Resource. Past timber sales within the project area are providing much of the existing forage for cattle that are permitted on the allotments. Timber stands that have been regenerated are currently providing transitory range. Current and reasonably foreseeable activities include vegetation management on private lands consisting of pre-commercial thinning, regeneration harvest, and new road construction. It is expected that these activities would cumulatively contribute increases in the availability and quality of forage for cattle.

Special Uses

With the trend in development of subdivision of lands and an increase in people moving into the area, the need for more Special Use Permits regarding the non-federal land base is bound to increase. This would naturally increase the need for access and utilities. There would be an increase in demand for infrastructure and services such as fire protection, power lines, water diversions, water and sewer lines, and communication sites.

Regulatory Framework and Consistency

This analysis tiers to the Forest Plan, Forest Plan EIS, and ROD, as amended. Chapter 2 of the Forest Plan establishes forest-wide recreation, wilderness, and range goals and standards. This project is consistent with Forest Plan direction for management of recreation, wilderness, and range resources.