

ISSUE 31: LAND VALUES

Changes from the Draft to the Final EIS

This section was edited slightly to improve clarity and accuracy.

Introduction

This section addresses the potential effects of the proposed Travel Plan alternatives on private land values. There are two facets to this issue. The first is what potential effect would the proposed goal and objective to acquire access rights across private land to National Forest System land (Goal B and associated direction) have on private land values. The second is what potential effect would traffic on Forest roads and trails have on adjacent or intermingled private land values.

Discussion

Private land values near the Gallatin National Forest are affected by several factors such as location, size of parcel, proximity to the National Forest, proximity to water, topography, remoteness, access to roads and utilities, and others. Some landowners and buyers consider having direct access to good roads to be a high value, while the remoteness of the land and lack of traffic would be of high value to others.

Many landowners adjacent to the National Forest would not favor additional Forest roads or trails on or near their private land unless they could realize some direct benefit from those roads or trails. The relevant factor in the issue of land values and the affect of access and travel planning is the location and type of access to the National Forest lands.

There are currently more than 100 road and trail access points to the Forest. The Gallatin Forest Plan (USDA 1987) identified 46 points where additional access was needed to meet the objectives of the plan. The Forest Service has acquired approximately half of those access rights to date. As one of its objectives, the Travel Plan has identified the remaining 26 points to acquire road or trail access across private land to allow or to improve public access to National Forest land. The objective for an area could be a road access or trail access depending upon the need. However, either of these objectives would typically require a road easement to the Forest boundary.

General Effects

All alternatives, except Alternative 1, would attempt to acquire the same general access rights, in the same general locations, over the next 15-20 years. The effects of acquiring these access rights on the value of the private lands the access routes would cross would vary depending on the situation. In many instances, the access need is at a place where ranch land borders the National Forest and there is one landowner. A road bisecting this land may have an adverse effect on the value of the private land. Ranchers and farmers generally view these kinds of access roads as detrimental to their operations because they have to deal with the public, which sometimes does not

respect the private land. These landowners are often reluctant to grant the Forest Service access across their land, especially for public use.

In some situations, having a Forest Service road or trail across private land may have a beneficial effect on the value of the affected private lands. In residential areas, for example, the market value of subdivided properties tends to increase when access to National Forest roads or trails is readily available.

Most of the access rights acquired by the Forest Service in the past 20 years have been from land purchases, land donations or from land-for-land exchanges, in which National Forest access needs are addressed as part of the overall transaction. In addition, access rights have been acquired through the use of “Reciprocity”, in which the Forest Service grants access rights across NFS land to private landowners, and, in turn, the Forest Service receives reciprocal access rights across the involved private lands.

The current land market value within and near the Gallatin National Forest is increasing significantly and rapidly. Rural land, especially land bordered by the National Forest, is especially valuable. Larger parcels of land that border several miles of National Forest land with no access road across them are the most valuable. It will likely continue to be very difficult to obtain public access rights to the National Forest lands across these private lands.

The effect of the Travel Plan alternatives on these land values would be small, based on the real estate market and on the increasing scarcity of these types of parcels, and will not change by alternative.

In all alternatives, all of the current Forest Service roads and trails that cross private lands to access the National Forest would be maintained. The Forest Service holds permanent easements for most of these roads and trails, or rights has been established by decades of historical use. Some access roads to the National Forest are county roads.

It is anticipated that that traffic on these roads and trails will continue to increase over time in all alternatives. More of the private land along these routes is being subdivided and houses are being built. The value of the land for subdivision is greater in many cases because of the proximity to the roads and trails. The volume of traffic does not seem to affect the value of these lands for subdivision as some of the most valuable parcels are located on highways. Locations bordering rivers and lakes have the highest value.

The variations among the Travel Plan alternatives would not change the volume of traffic on the Forest Service roads or trails except in alternatives where motorcycle and ATV use is prohibited at a trailhead at the end of a road. Future traffic might decrease on these roads.

Future possibilities for gaining more access to the National Forest for recreation or other needs will likely depend upon willing sellers, as it has in the past 20 years. A willing seller sees a value to himself in some form, not always monetarily. As opportunities arise, the Forest Service will continue to achieve the objective of providing reasonable access to the National Forest.

Consistency with Laws, Regulations, Policy, and Federal, Regional, State and Local Land Use Plans (including the Forest Plan)

For environmental impact statements, the National Environmental Policy Act requires a discussion of the effects of federal actions on private land values where it has been identified as an issue. This section meets those requirements.