

North Belts Travel Plan

U.S.D.A, Forest Service - Helena National Forest
Broadwater / Lewis & Clark/ Meagher Counties, Montana

SUMMARY OF FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

JANUARY 2005

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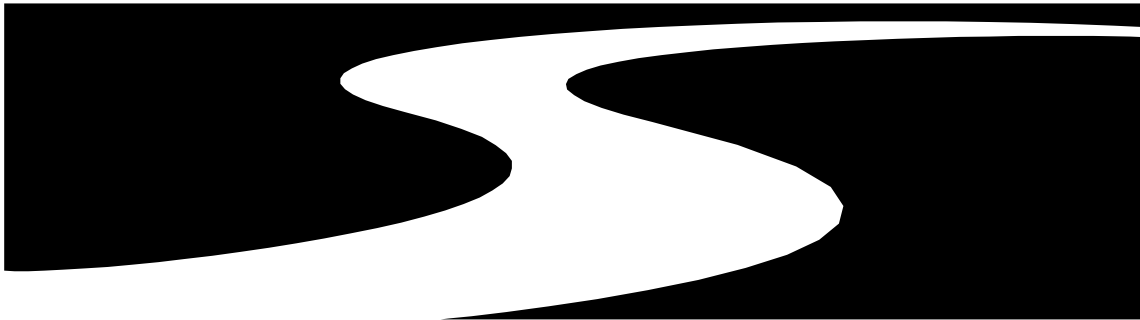


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This analysis considers the effects of six travel planning alternative options for this area of the Helena National Forest. Design features and mitigation have been incorporated into the alternatives to reduce impacts on the area's resources. The alternatives were analyzed for effectiveness in resolving the agency, public and cooperators' planning issues, for avoidance of unnecessary impacts to resources and the human environment, for responsiveness to public concerns and for compliance with the Forest Plan, statutes and regulations.



The purpose of this travel planning analysis is to determine the future motorized road and trail system, the nonmotorized trail system, and snowmobile use areas in the North Belts and Dry Range areas, including potential new routes. It will also determine the closure methods that would be applied for routes closed year long, the trailheads that would be needed, and road or trail related watershed improvement projects.

The deciding officer for this project is Jane Kollmeyer, Acting Forest Supervisor of the Helena National Forest. For more information, please contact Beth Ihle of the Townsend Ranger District at 406-266-3425.

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SUMMARY

Introduction

The North Belts and Dry Range Travel Plan project considers the effects of six travel planning alternative options for this area of the Helena National Forest. The planning area lies within Broadwater, Lewis and Clark, and Meagher Counties, Montana and is approximately 250,000 acres in size. The purpose of this travel planning analysis is to determine the future motorized road and trail system, the nonmotorized trail system, and snowmobile use areas in the North Belts and Dry Range areas, including potential new routes. It will also determine the closure methods that would be applied for routes closed year long, the trailheads that would be needed, and road or trail related watershed improvement projects. The project area includes National Forest System lands (NFS) in the northern Big Belt Mountain Range from the north end of the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness south to the Boulder Creek tributary of Confederate Gulch. The analysis area also includes the NFS lands in the Dry Range which lies east of the Big Belts bordering the Smith River.

The effort to revise travel management in the North Belts and Dry Range was initiated in 1996. At that time, the project also included vegetation management and noxious weed control alternatives. A Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) called the North Belts Travel Plan/Magpie-Confederate Vegetation Restoration Project was issued in March 1999. The DEIS included five travel alternatives, including the existing or no action, the proposed action, and three additional action alternatives submitted by the Frontier Four-Wheelers, Capital Trail Vehicle Riders Association, and the Wild Divide Chapter of the Montana Wilderness Association. Work on the DEIS was halted by the severe wildfire season of 2000. Wildfires burned about 29,000 acres in the greater Cave, Magpie, and Hellgate Gulch areas within the North Belts. The effects of the Cave Gulch fire necessitated that travel, vegetation, and noxious weed planning be reconsidered and evaluated under separate analyses.

Purpose and Need

Purpose

The initial reason that the Forest started travel planning in the North Belts/Dry Range in 1996 is still valid today: to provide for a variety of motorized and nonmotorized recreation opportunities while allowing access for administrative uses, permitted uses, and for private landowners within the Forest Boundary. These opportunities and uses are to be provided while simultaneously meeting Forest Plan standards for fish and wildlife habitats, soil and watershed health, and prevention and control of noxious weed spread. This project responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Forest Plan and helps move the Forest toward the desired conditions described in the Plan (pgs. II-1, 2-10, 11). This project also responds to the Big Belts Integrated Resource Analysis (11/94) and the update (6/98). In addition, the Forest utilized information (values and concerns) that was developed in the 2002 - 2004 Roads Analysis – as it pertains to individual classified roads in the project area.

Needs

The Helena Forest Plan was completed in 1986. Since that time, several conditions related to the Forest road and trail transportation system in the North Big Belts and Dry Range have changed:

1. Use of Forest Roads and Trails: Urban growth in the greater Helena area and the increasing popularity of ATV-type vehicles and snowmobiles have resulted in an increase in use and more requests for expanded ATV trail and snowmobiling options in the North Belts area. There is a need to identify a planned system of safe roads, trails, and trailheads for this travel area for the future. There is also a need to provide a safe system of non-motorized trails that allows access for many nonmotorized recreation activities and to provide reasonable and well-defined parking at trailheads to reduce resource damage.

2. Proliferation of Unclassified/User Created Routes: For the purposes of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), the term 'user-created routes' refers to the development of two-track routes created from repeated cross country travel. These routes have not been planned for, but have appeared, for the most part, in recent years. We use this term because it is familiar to the public. 'Unclassified' is the term used by the Forest Service when mapping these routes.

Field review of the North Belts travel area in 2003 resulted in the identification of almost 49 miles of unclassified routes. While some of these are believed to have been in existence for quite some time, others have been created on the landscape in recent years. Combined, they have not been accounted for in road inventories. Conversely, the field review identified that nearly 20 miles of inventoried (classified) roads did not exist and have been removed from the road inventory. Thus, the field review resulted in a net increase of about 30 miles of new routes used by the public in the North Belts travel area. Therefore, there is a need to identify the routes and trail systems that are to be used as the baseline layer of information for the classified road and trail systems.

In addition, This project is also validating which existing routes, as defined in the 2001 OHV decision, will be part of the long term transportation system and which will not.

3. Difficult Maps and Signs: The current Helena National Forest visitor map displays 23 different types of travel restrictions. This makes understanding, implementing, and enforcing the travel plan complex both for the users and the Forest Service. There is a need for a less complex travel plan that is easier to understand and enforce, as well as clearer signing and more obvious identification of road and trail access portals.

4. Maintenance and Resource Management: There is a need to reduce the classified road system to meet expected future maintenance funding levels, while retaining sufficient access for resource management and public use and enjoyment. There is also the need to address the transportation systems related resource concerns such as watershed health and noxious weeds.

Proposed Action

The following travel management features summarize the proposed action:

There would be only 2 dates for seasonal route restrictions. Other designated routes would be either open or closed to motorized vehicles yearlong. The restriction dates include:

- October 15 – December 1 (big game security during hunting season)

- December 2 – May 15 (winter range protection)

For the most part, big game winter range areas would not be open to snowmobile use. However, designated snowmobile routes through certain winter ranges would be identified. Areas that are open to snowmobiles would be from December 2 - May 15.

New motorized trail construction, new non-motorized trail construction, new road construction, and development of trailheads and information kiosks would occur. A full suite of possible watershed improvement tools such as culvert replacements/removals, drainage corrections, etc. were also identified. Decommissioning methods would be applied on some routes closed year long and include erosion controls, seeding, ripping, and recontouring.

Four route types were identified:

- Roads: open to vehicles that meet the requirements of state laws.
- Motorized trails: open to vehicles 50 inches wide or less
- Non-motorized trails: open to all types of nonmotorized uses (note – mountain bikes and other mechanized uses are prohibited in wilderness).
- Snowmobile Routes

Vehicle access within 300 feet of an open, designated road would be allowed primarily to access dispersed camping sites, but also for other uses as long as it does not result in resource damage such as rutting, fording of streams, crossing of wet meadows, new user-created routes/hill climbs, or noxious weed spread. To protect resources, the proposed action features the flexibility to restrict motorized use in the 300-foot zone in local situations.

To guide decisions about access to private lands that are located within the National Forest Boundary, the proposed action includes *draft* guidelines that consider private landowner needs as well as protection of resources on the National Forest System lands.

To comply with the Canada lynx conservation strategy, the proposed action does not result in a net increase in designated and/or groomed over-the-snow routes and snowmobile play areas in lynx habitat (generally higher elevation spruce/fir forest).

In July 2003, a DEIS was issued which included five travel alternatives. The original Proposed Action was modified due to comments received and to correct map and table errors in the February 2003 scoping. The resulting alternative generated from the Proposed Action was Alternative 5 in the DEIS. Three alternatives similar to the 1999 DEIS were carried forward because they had been developed by user groups and were still applicable to the project. These were Alternatives 2, 3, and 4. Alternative 1 was the existing condition or No Action alternative.

Following issuance of the DEIS in July, 2003, the interdisciplinary team (ID Team) conducted additional team field trips, public field trips, and public/user group meetings to gain commentary on the DEIS. These field trips and meetings resulted in the development of a 6th alternative (Alternative 6) that is presented in the FEIS. **Alternative 6 is the preferred alternative.**

Project Scope

The geographic scope of the proposed action is limited to those portions of the Helena National Forest from the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness south to Boulder Baldy Mountain near Confederate Gulch. The scope also includes NFS lands in the Dry Range (see previous map). The project area includes lands in Broadwater, Lewis and Clark, and

Meagher Counties. The project area does not include Bureau of Land Management lands or private lands.

Several projects that included transportation decisions have been reevaluated as part of this project, including the Wagner Atlanta Vegetation Treatment project decision (1997). This decision was made at a more localized scale while the North Belts Travel project scale includes areas directly adjacent and interconnected to this area. The North Belts Travel Plan analysis is a more comprehensive evaluation. Additionally, the Wagner-Atlanta project decision incorporates a bow-hunting seasonal closure on several routes that would start September 1, as well as general rifle season closures that start on October 15. Simplifying the closure dates and route restrictions across the forest was identified as a key public issue during initial development of the travel planning process and the October 15 date is more consistent across the forest. Thus, the areas that included the September 1 closure date are included for analysis in this project.

Previous travel decisions regarding the Whites Gulch Road, the Jimmy's Gulch area, and Trout Creek Canyon Trail-Figure 8 Road, will not be re-visited in this analysis. This plan will not include the long-term disposition for the road in Cave Gulch. That project will be pursued and analyzed at the initiative of the private landowner through the Special Use road process. This project decision will supercede any temporary, emergency closure orders for the Cave Gulch fire area that are currently in effect.

The administrative scope includes analysis of existing designated roads and trails, routes included as part of the Helena National Forest Roads Analysis that may have been previously closed but were not specifically excluded from the scope, former routes no longer maintained, and unclassified/user created routes. The administrative scope also includes new construction of roads and trails (including just portions of roads and trails), closure methods for roads closed year long, proposed trailheads, and watershed improvement projects. Specifics of the administrative scope of the proposed action are described below under "Decisions to be Made".

This travel plan analysis will serve as the site-specific analysis needed to supercede the Helena National Forest Roads Analysis.

The travel plan alternatives and maps include routes that are county jurisdiction as well as a few routes crossing private land. These routes have been included in the alternatives to show how the routes are connected to each other and, in the big picture, how the transportation system would work. Full implementation of a selected action alternative would not occur until proper right-of-ways are secured. Depending on the success of obtaining these right-of-ways, other options may need to be explored. Right-of-ways would be pursued following the Record of Decision (ROD).

Dual-use routes are included in the analysis, though not in all alternatives. Dual-use routes are those that are available for unlicensed vehicles and drivers. They are lower maintenance routes where slow speeds are intrinsic to them. Dual-use routes would not be officially available for dual-use until an individual route analysis and determination of safety has been completed, consistent with Forest Service Handbook 7709.59-99-1.

Decisions to be Made

The Forest Supervisor of the Helena National Forest is the deciding officer for this project. Given the purpose and need for this action, the Forest Supervisor will review the proposed action, other alternatives, anticipated effects, and public input and determine whether or not to make the following decisions:

- Which areas, roads, and trails would be open or closed in the analysis area, and for what types of public - motorized and non-motorized travel?
- Which areas, roads, and trails would have seasonal restrictions to protect resource needs?
- What types of closure and/or rehabilitation methods should be used on yearlong restricted routes?
- What new travel routes or relocation of existing routes should be implemented?
- What new trailhead facilities should be implemented?
- Which road maintenance and repairs are needed to address watershed issues?
- What type of access is needed for lands held in private ownership and are located within the National Forest Boundary?
- Is a Forest Plan amendment necessary?

Public Participation

Public involvement in this project has been ongoing since 1996. Public input from a series of meetings in 1997 and other scoping responses resulted in development of three user group alternatives for the North Belts Travel Plan. The Forest Service developed three alternatives with information from the Frontier Four-Wheelers, Capital Trail Vehicle Riders Association, and the Wild Divide Chapter of the Montana Wilderness Association.

A No Action alternative and an agency alternative were also included in the initial DEIS along with vegetation and weeds treatment projects. Approximately 600 copies (summary or DEIS) were sent out for public review, which resulted in 301 letters of response and comment. The comments on the Travel Plan portion of the 1999 DEIS have been carried forward into the new North Belts Travel Project that was restarted in February 2003.

To restart the project in 2003, a new Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an EIS was published in the Federal Register on February 14, 2003. A scoping letter that presented the proposed action was distributed to 616 people on February 14, 2003. The letter also explained that the current project scope includes only the travel planning portion of the 1999 project. Copies were made of people's previous comments on the 1999 DEIS and these were mailed back to them with the scoping document for their convenience. A press release was also issued on February 18, 2003 explaining the nature of the project. One hundred thirty-nine letters were received in response to the scoping.

The DEIS was released in July 2003 and 129 written comments were received during the extended scoping period. In addition to more group/public meetings, a small multidisciplinary working group was formed and led by private citizens to identify areas of common ground in travel planning. This group met five times and provided a summary (October 23, 2003) of their efforts, which included a matrix that identified issues where there was potential for agreement between ideologically different users, as well as other information. Four public field tours were also hosted. Tours included various areas in the North Belts and a total of 41 public participants attended. As a result of the scoping/public involvement activities after the release of the DEIS, a 6th alternative was developed. For specific details regarding scoping activities since the inception of the project, refer to the project file.

Issues

Public comments on the original proposed action were read for content to identify issues and concerns. All issues from the letters were catalogued by subject and a determination

made as to how the issues would be addressed. Public comments on the DEIS and from public meetings and field trips were also evaluated to determine whether there were any new issues. The responses to the substantive comments are found in Appendix F of the FEIS.

Based on the external and internal comments, the Forest Service separated the issues into two groups: significant and other issues. Significant issues were defined as those directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action. Other issues are also important in the analysis of the area, but did not drive the development of alternatives. These are also analyzed by alternative. Other issues were identified as those:

- outside the scope of the proposed action;
- already decided by law;
- irrelevant to the decision being made; or
- conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence.

Significant Issues

The Forest Service identified the following significant issues during initial scoping and subsequent comments on the DEIS. These issues helped drive the development of the DEIS alternatives and led to the development of a new alternative in the FEIS:

Issue 1: The need to provide opportunities for motorized activities including recreation, resource management, and private land access.

Indicators:

- Miles of road open to wheeled motorized vehicles yearlong or seasonally
- Miles of motorized trail open yearlong or seasonally
- Miles of designated motorcycle trail open yearlong or seasonally
- Miles of dual use routes open yearlong or seasonally
- Acres open to snowmobile use seasonally
- Availability of areas within 300 feet of motorized route for dispersed uses

Issue 2: The need to provide opportunities for nonmotorized activities.

Indicators:

- Miles of nonmotorized trail available yearlong
- Change in road miles in Inventoried Roadless Areas

Other Issues

The following issues are also addressed in the FEIS. The information gathered regarding these issues will be considered by the decision maker.

- The need to improve trailhead facilities and the condition of roads, motorized trails, and non-motorized trails so as to optimize recreational opportunities and safety.
- The complexity of each proposed travel plan alternative, consistency with the other geographic areas of the Helena Forest Travel Plan, and enforceability.

- The degree to which each alternative protects or improves watershed conditions and fisheries habitat quality.
- The manner in which the alternatives affect wildlife corridors and linkages, and elk and lynx habitat.
- The potential for open routes, new routes and road obliteration to impact heritage resources.
- The degree to which alternatives provide for visitor safety.
- The degree to which alternatives provide for access to timber, firewood, and other forest products.
- The potential for open routes to allow noxious weed spread and the ability to treat noxious weed infestations on closed routes.
- The potential for open routes to lead to increased wildfire starts and the ability to respond to wildfire starts on closed roads.
- The degree to which travel plan alternatives affect roadless areas.
- The economics of travel plan implementation, including new construction, reconstruction, decommissioning of roads, and future maintenance costs.
- Displacement/loss of motorized opportunity to date by previous decisions since the Forest Plan was adopted.
- Location and type of authorized off route travel.

Changes between Draft and Final EIS

Several changes have been made between the DEIS and FEIS. These changes include items that affect each action alternative. Changes for individual resources are discussed in Chapter 3, Affected Environment by resource. The changes between the DEIS and FEIS are as follows:

1. Unclassified routes were added to or removed from Alternative 1 due to field reviews and in public comment letters, as noted above. These routes were incorporated or closed variously in the other alternatives.
2. Alternative 6 was added.
3. Watershed improvement projects are included in all the action alternatives, instead of just Alternative 5.
4. Trailheads/kiosks are included in all of the alternatives, instead of just Alternative 5.
5. Some proposed new routes in the DEIS were discarded from consideration in the FEIS in Alternatives 2-5 following field reviews. See Recreation in Chapter 3 or the alternative maps for specific routes.

Alternatives and Alternative Development

This section describes the No Action Alternative (Alternative 1) and five other alternatives for travel planning in the North Belts and Dry Range area. All alternatives are subject to compliance with all valid statutes on NFS lands. Impacts of all resources are considered through utilization of the processes identified in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969.

A description of each route and its status by alternative is included in Appendix A of the EIS. This appendix also identifies the decommissioning method, if any, for routes closed yearlong and a description of decommissioning methods.

The alternative descriptions summarize the road and trail mileages by category of access and use. *It is important to note that road and trail mileages listed in each of the resource sections may be summarized in different ways for the purpose of addressing or analyzing various resource effects.*

Features Common to All Alternatives, Including Mitigation

The following management guidance will continue, regardless of which alternative is selected, and is common to all alternatives.

All alternatives have as a premise that wheeled motorized use is restricted to designated routes which are open either yearlong or seasonally—the balance of the area is closed to all wheeled motorized use. Routes and off route use would be closed unless designated open. The one exception is that Alternative 2 has an approximate 425-acre area that would be available for off-route wheeled vehicle use (OHV's). This is described and analyzed in Chapter 3 of the EIS.

Disabled access is provided per the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Under the Act, an individual with a disability will not, solely by reason of disability, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity conducted by the Forest Service. Motorized wheelchairs are not considered OHV's and therefore are not restricted by any of the alternatives.

Motorized use of roads closed to the general public will continue to occur and includes such uses as Forest Service permitted uses, resource management activities such as weed spraying, emergency response activities such as wildland fire response and search and rescue, etc., and access to private property.

Motorized, wheeled cross country travel will continue to occur on a limited basis for administrative activities such as noxious weed spraying, emergency response such as wildfire, and lessee or permitted activities such as livestock allotment administration. Such uses would be limited to the terms of the lease or permit, and may require specific authorization.

Motorized trails, dual use roads, and roads are also available to all non-motorized uses.

Areas designated for snowmobile use also include any routes, open or closed to wheeled vehicles, that occur within them.

Maintenance of roads and trails will occur to meet National Forest standards and management objectives. Resource effects that may occur, based on the type and amount of use, will be greatly minimized through professional trail design and routine maintenance.

Best Management Practices (BMP's) addressing soil, water, and noxious weeds will be applied to all reconstruction or maintenance of roads and trails.

In regards to heritage resources, the impacts of road and trail obliteration would be mitigated through project redesign. Rather than ripping up the roadbed where heritage sites are now exposed, the Forest Service could place filter fabric atop them, then cover and contour the road prism with gravel and soil. Likewise, new trails and watershed improvements could be

re-routed around significant heritage sites. Alternatively, data recovery could precede road obliteration whereby archaeological materials in harm's way would be systematically collected through conventional archaeological methods. These mitigation measures would require review by the Montana State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and Tribal historic preservation officers, and would have an attached cost, with mitigation through data recovery being the most expensive.

An inventory of all ground-disturbing projects in the selected alternative would be completed according to the Helena Forest Site Identification Strategy. Affected sites would be evaluated to determine their archaeological or historic value, and National Register of Historic Places-significance. Based on this assessment, site-specific mitigation plans could be developed in consultation with the State and Tribal Historic Preservation Officers.

Trailheads

Trailhead improvement projects are identified for all of the alternatives, instead of just Alternative 5 as was proposed in the DEIS. Improvements can include one or more of the following: kiosk signs, fences, parking area, toilets, and other signs. None of the parking areas exceed 1/2 acre in size, except Neversweat – which may be about one acre. Most are existing sites currently serving as unimproved parking areas. The parking improvements would consist of some leveling of the sites and surfacing to harden the sites, as well as sign installation.

One to two-panel interpretive kiosk-style signs describing local features of interest would also be installed at the following main forest portal/entrances.

Mitigation for Alternatives Which Allow for Motorized Use Within 300 Foot Buffers

The 2001 OHV decision provided for some motorized uses within 300 feet of a road or trail in recognition that forest users want some allowance to get away from the dust and noise generated on open routes. The expectation with this permissive use was that agency specialists' expected relatively few new sites to be exploited within the 300 foot area, as most good camping/parking areas already have a road to them. Indeed this expectation is believed to be mostly accurate in the North Belts Travel Plan area as this area has a legacy of dispersed use. Many areas within 300 feet of an open route are already unsuitable for use due to terrain or vegetation limitations.

The ID Team was also concerned that closure of traditionally popular dispersed sites and areas would lead to concentration of use in the remaining available areas - leading to potential adverse impacts. However, the agency currently has authority to temporarily or permanently remove a site or area from use should unacceptable resource impacts be identified.

Alternatives 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 allow for limited motorized use within 300 feet of a designated open road (see Alternative Descriptions, below). In addition, Alternatives 1, 2, 3, and 6 allow for limited motorized use within 300 feet of motorized trails. Limitations in motorized use within 300 feet of roads or trails for these alternatives are based on identification of agency resource concerns such as rutting, fording of streams, crossing of wet meadows, new unclassified routes extending from sites or connecting sites, noxious weed spread, or similar problems.

Features Common to All Action Alternatives, Including Mitigation

The words “system” and “nonsystem” (or “user created”) have been used in the past (informally by the agency and the public) to describe roads and trails. However, the official nomenclature is “classified” and “unclassified”. As we transition to the official nomenclature, the words may be used interchangeably within this document (classified/system and unclassified/nonsystem/user created).

Designated trails would not be designed or maintained to provide a sustained high level of challenge. Motorized and non-motorized trails would be managed to provide opportunities that could be classified as easy to moderate.

Designated areas would be available for off-route travel for snowmobiles. Areas designated as open to snowmobile use would be available 12/2-5/15. Groomed snowmobile routes are closed to wheeled vehicles over 50 inches wide.

Unclassified routes would be closed with the decision on this project, if they are not identified as part of any alternative.

All seasonal road restrictions would include some type of sign and/or barrier to help enforce the closure.

Road and trail standards would be variable, depending on intended use. They would allow for a range of route conditions from primitive to high standard. Much of the improvement associated with bringing individual roads or trails up to standard falls within the category of light reconstruction/routine maintenance and would proceed as funding is secured. However, portions of some roads and trails would require relocation in order to meet standards. Authorization of some of the actual road or trail relocation work may be beyond the scope of this decision and would require a subsequent NEPA decision.

New road and trail construction would be considered with this decision and varies by alternative. Most of the new construction would consist of “connector” segments, which would tie existing roads or trails together. Construction specifications associated with the road and trail categories are detailed in Appendix D of the EIS.

The Gates of the Mountains Wilderness Area would remain closed to all forms of mechanized vehicles, including non-motorized vehicles (bicycles, carts).

Road Closure/Decommissioning

Closure methods and/or decommissioning of yearlong restricted routes is considered with this decision and varies by alternative. Some of the types of closure would continue to provide motorized access by permit or other authorization such as emergency response. There are 6 types of decommissioning and closure methods for yearlong restricted routes. These also vary by alternative and include:

- erosion control measures,
- ripping all of the road prism and seeding,
- ripping a portion of the prism and seeding,
- restoring prism to natural contour,
- gates or barriers.

- and converting road prisms to trails.

Combinations of closure and decommissioning options would also be used. The closure and decommissioning methods are described by alternative below. Decommissioning methods are included in Appendix A of the EIS by route and by alternative.

Wildlife Mitigation

The following items would apply:

- Any new roads would have appropriate seasonal closures
- Firewood retrieval would be addressed via the permit process, and
- Road closure effectiveness would be monitored as described in the Record of Decision (ROD) monitoring plan
- Construction of new trailheads would be designed to avoid removal of lynx habitat
- Construction of new roads and trails would not reduce suitable lynx habitat in LAU's bb-02 and bb-03 that now have more than 30% habitat currently in an unsuitable condition

Watershed Improvement Projects

Watershed improvement projects were originally included in only Alternative 5 in the DEIS. Based on public and agency comments, the ID Team decided to include watershed improvement projects, as applicable, to all of the action alternatives. Some watershed improvements apply to both motorized and nonmotorized routes but would be modified based on which route type is in the alternative. There are fifteen watershed improvement projects.

Alternative 1 – No Action

Under this alternative, no new actions stated in the Proposed Action would take place other than items identified as common to all alternatives, including mitigation. This alternative is responsive to comments received stating support for leaving current road and trail management more or less static, including the unclassified routes identified in 2003. This alternative is developed as a basis for comparing other alternatives and is required by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations.

Roads and trails available for public use would remain with current use designations as shown on the current Helena National Forest Travel Plan map (2001), subsequent decisions, and Forest Service roads and trails inventories. Additional closure methods such as new gates could be installed to help fully implement the current travel plan as well as installation of new trailhead facilities. The current level of snowmobiling opportunity would also remain unchanged. This alternative includes all previous open/closed/new route decisions made within the North Belts area. It does not include any remaining temporary emergency orders placed on the Cave Gulch Fire area.

The existing condition includes the July 1, 2001 Statewide Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) decision which restricted wheeled motorized vehicles to existing roads and trails. The OHV decision also provides for motorized travel up to 300 feet off designated routes to reach dispersed campsites.

Seasonal Restrictions

Current seasonal restrictions on roads and motorized trails with this alternative include a bow season big game hunting restriction (9/1-12/1), a combined hunting and winter

restriction (10/15 – 5/15), a springtime restriction (4/15-5/31), and a winter range restriction (12/2-5/15).

300 feet use

Motorized wheeled cross-country travel to a campsite is permissible within 300 feet of roads and trails. Site selection must be completed by non-motorized means and accessed by the most direct route causing the least damage.

Unclassified routes

Alternative 1 has 47.8 miles of unclassified routes that were identified during 2003. These routes include about 27 miles open yearlong, 19 miles open seasonally, and about 2 miles closed yearlong. See the table in the Transportation section of Chapter 3 for tabular display of how unclassified routes are dealt with by alternative. Also, see Appendix G of the FEIS.

Decommissioning

There would be no decommissioning of any routes, including unclassified routes, in Alternative 1.

Alternative 2

This alternative was developed to address issues provided by OHV and motorcycle enthusiasts and includes specific routes provided by local motorized user organizations. The overriding strategy of this alternative is designated routes for specific vehicle types based on terrain and other factors, and, connectedness of routes so that a comprehensive trail riding system is available, primarily between Trout Creek and Avalanche Creeks.

Alternative 2 includes an emphasis on ATV and motorcycle routes while slightly increasing the number of miles of nonmotorized routes, loops, dual use, and some game retrieval, as well as a 425 acre off route use area. The snowmobile areas and designated snowmobile routes are the same as the proposed action, Alternative 5.

Seasonal Restrictions and Retrieval

Seasonal restrictions on roads and motorized trails would also be adopted with this alternative, including a 10/15 – 12/1 big game security restriction and a 12/2 – 5/15 big game winter range restriction.

Approximately 59 miles of game retrieval and disabled hunter access routes are also identified. Some retrieval routes would only be in place during the 10/15 to 12/1 big game rifle season. Other roads would allow retrieval from 10/15 to 5/15, which would accommodate big game rifle hunters and winter-time lion hunters.

300 feet use

Travel up to 300 feet off of a designated route, both roads and trails, would be allowed for retrieval, woodcutting, and to reach dispersed campsites as long as it does not result in resource damage such as rutting, fording of streams, crossing of wet meadows, new unclassified routes, noxious weed spread or similar resource concerns.

Unclassified routes

Alternative 1 has 47.8 miles of unclassified routes that were identified during 2003. Under Alternative 2, these routes would become 1.2 miles open for licensed vehicles, 16.5 miles

open for dual use either yearlong or seasonally, 6.6 miles closed yearlong, about 17 miles motorized trail open yearlong or seasonally, and about 7 miles of motorcycle trail open seasonally. See the table in the Transportation section of Chapter 3 for tabular display of how unclassified routes are dealt with by alternative. Also, see Appendix G of the FEIS.

Decommissioning

The decommissioning methods incorporated in Alternative 2 focus on making the closed routes unavailable for motorized use. This would ensure compliance with the travel plan, while still providing the prism of the closed route for future activity. Therefore, the closure method utilized most extensively would be ripping a portion (first 100 feet or so) of the closed route and applying seed and slash. There would be about 68.2 miles closed by this ripping method. There would be about 1.5 miles closed with a new gate. The remaining miles of closed road are already closed by another method. Some of these closed routes would become part of the motorized trail system and would be converted to a trail width. Decommissioning methods for specific routes are found in Appendix A of the FEIS.

Alternative 3

This alternative was developed to address issues identified by four-wheel-drive enthusiasts and to provide opportunities for their use. The overriding strategy of this alternative is designated routes with an emphasis on maximizing roads for four-wheel driving, retaining closed road prisms for future use, and providing for game retrieval. Vehicle-specific routes, such as ATV only, motorcycle only, and mixed use on roads and trails are also included with the four-by-four routes. Many of the existing roads and trails available for motorized use would also allow for dual use. Allowance of dual use on existing roads would not entail any changes to the road beds.

Seasonal Restrictions and Retrieval

Seasonal restrictions on roads and motorized trails would occur with this alternative, including a 9/1 – 12/1 big game restriction, a 10/15 – 12/1 big game security restriction, and a 12/2 – 5/15 big game winter range restriction. A number of additional game retrieval opportunities would be provided during various seasons. The 9/1 to 12/1 retrieval date accommodates the entire big game hunting season, including bow season. Some retrieval routes would only be in place during the 10/15 to 12/1 rifle season. Other roads would allow retrieval from 10/15 to 5/15 which would accommodate big game rifle hunters and winter-time lion hunters. The final retrieval date would be from 12/2 to 5/15, again for lion hunting.

300 feet use

Same as Alternative 2

Unclassified routes

Alternative 1 has 47.8 miles of unclassified routes that were identified during 2003. Under Alternative 3, these routes would become 1.2 miles open for licensed vehicles, 20.4 miles open for dual use either yearlong or seasonally, 3.2 miles closed yearlong, about 18.5 miles motorized trail open yearlong or seasonally and about 4.5 miles of motorcycle trail open seasonally. Also, see Appendix G of the FEIS.

Decommissioning

The decommissioning methods incorporated in Alternative 3 focus on making the closed routes unavailable for motorized use. At the same time, the prism of the closed route would be left intact for future activity. Thus, the closure method proposed most extensively is

gates – approximately 27.5 miles. Some would have signs only - about 5.3 miles. The remaining routes are either currently closed by another method or no closure method would be used. Decommissioning methods for specific routes are found in Appendix A of the FEIS. See the table in the Transportation section of Chapter 3 of the FEIS for tabular display of how unclassified routes are dealt with by alternative.

Alternative 4

This alternative was developed to address issues identified by quiet trails enthusiasts and emphasizes non-motorized uses. The overriding philosophy of this alternative is that classified roads should be for motorized vehicles. All other routes are trails for non-motorized users. Licensed vehicle and driver for all motorized routes is a requirement with this alternative. The emphasis of this alternative is to provide access to non-motorized trails via major forest roads. This alternative includes snowmobile routes which access two areas for off-route snowmobile use. No game retrieval routes are proposed.

Seasonal Restrictions

Seasonal restrictions on roads occur with this alternative and include a bow season, big game hunting through winter range restriction (9/1 to 5/15), a winter range restriction (12/2 – 5/15), and a spring restriction (4/15 to 5/31).

300 feet use

Vehicle use off of designated roads and trails is prohibited.

Unclassified routes

Alternative 1 has 47.8 miles of unclassified routes that were identified during 2003. Under Alternative 4, these routes would become 0.4 miles open for licensed vehicles, 41.2 miles closed yearlong and 6.2 miles converted to nonmotorized trail. See the table in the Transportation section of Chapter 3 of the FEIS for tabular display of how unclassified routes are dealt with by alternative. Also, see Appendix G of the FEIS.

Decommissioning

Decommissioning methods on roads closed yearlong in Alternative 4 focus on making closed routes unavailable for motorized use and restoring long-term watershed function. Thus, the closure method proposed most extensively is ripping or recontouring the entire closed route. About 195.8 miles would be ripped and about 70 miles would be recontoured. Both methods would include slash and seed. Some closed routes would have gates and/or signs where permitted or private land access is needed. About 5 miles of road would be converted to nonmotorized trail. These are specified by route in Appendix A of the FEIS.

Alternative 5 – Proposed Action

This alternative was developed by the Forest Service in response to public comment on the 1999 DEIS, the findings of the Roads Analysis Report Helena National Forest (2002 – 2004), and the purpose and need as described in Chapter 1 of the FEIS. Alternative 5 was modified between initial scoping in February 2003 and issuance of the DEIS in July 2003. It has been modified from the DEIS to the FEIS only to the extent of responding to the unclassified routes added in Alternative 1, which are described below.

Generally, big game winter ranges (based primarily on elevation) are not open to snowmobiles, though limited designated routes through winter range are provided in some instances. Other closure periods have either been grafted into these dates or the Forest is

proposing to address them as unique situations and utilize special orders or other methods to respond to them. These situations include, but are not limited to spring thaw, groomed ski trails, game retrieval routes, and disabled access.

Seasonal Restrictions

Seasonal restrictions on roads and motorized trails are part of this alternative, including a 10/15 – 12/1 big game security restriction and a 12/2 – 5/15 big game winter range restriction. Other designated routes are either open or closed to motorized vehicles yearlong.

300 feet use

Motorized vehicle use within 300 feet of an open designated road is permitted, primarily to access dispersed campsites. It is also permitted for other uses as long as they do not result in resource damage (i.e. rutting, fording of streams, crossing of wet meadows, new unclassified routes, noxious weed spread, or similar resource concerns). Such use within 300 feet of an open designated trail would not be permitted under Alternative 5.

Several areas would be subject to special restrictions within the 300-foot buffer for designated roads. One such area is the meadowland south of the Beaver Creek road for 1.7 miles above the mouth of Beaver Creek. In Magpie Creek, the sensitive reach is located from Coxey Gulch upstream to Sheriff Gulch with about 5.3 miles of road affected by the special restriction. In Avalanche Creek, the sensitive reach is located between Doolittle Gulch and Cooney Gulch with about 7.5 miles of road affected by the special restriction. The special restriction would limit motorized use on the streamside of the 300-foot zone to already established roads and dispersed campsites. Again, fording of streams would only be allowed if the ford is part of a designated route.

Unclassified routes

Alternative 1 has 47.8 miles of unclassified routes that were identified during 2003. Under Alternative 5, these routes would become 4.0 miles open for licensed vehicles, 0.0 miles open for dual use, 32.2 miles closed yearlong, 10.1 miles motorized trail open yearlong or seasonally, and about 1.4 miles of nonmotorized trail. See the table in the Transportation section of Chapter 3 of the FEIS for tabular display of how unclassified routes are dealt with by alternative. Also, see Appendix G of the FEIS.

Decommissioning

There is not a specific emphasis on the type of decommissioning methods used in Alternative 5. Closure methods were developed to respond to administrative access needs, private land access needs, making routes unavailable for motorized use while still providing the prism of the closed route for future actions, and decommissioning roads in drainages or on soil types where watershed issues occur.

Thus, Alternative 5 has a mix of closure methods proposed. These closure methods include gates (24 new) and barriers other than a gate such as boulders (9 new) where the prism of the road would be available for motorized use, 5.7 miles of route with erosion controls and drainage improvements, as well as seed and slash, 76 miles of route that would be ripped, seeded and slashed along the entire length, 8.3 miles of route that would be recontoured, and 3.1 miles that would be converted to nonmotorized trail. Decommissioning methods for specific routes are found in Appendix A of the FEIS.

Alternative 6

Alternative 6 was developed between the draft and final EIS because the Proposed Action did not include; designated motorcycle routes, dual use designation for routes to make connections between roads and motorized trails, camping off of a motorized trail, access to areas of interest to disabled and older hunters, and moving irregular winter use boundaries to make identification on the ground easier. Alternative 6 also responds to resource concerns - including the potential for increased recreation impacts on resources due to the closure of other routes that have up to now helped to disperse users, the need for additional wildlife security in the Devils' Tower area, and the need for long term administrative access on closed road prisms.

In addition, Alternative 6 proposes some new motorized and non-motorized route segments that would result in better connected routes, increased safety for ATV users, and complete loops.

Seasonal Restrictions

Seasonal restrictions on roads and motorized trails are part of this alternative and include a 10/15-12/1 big game security restriction and a 12/2-5/15 winter range restriction. Some routes include both restrictions. Several routes/areas have been identified to have routes *open* 10/15-12/1 to provide for hunting opportunity for disabled and older people. These areas were identified through public involvement and include a route in the Cochran Gulch area, routes open in the Hidden Valley area and a route open between Vermont Gulch and Lambing Camp gulches. These routes are closed the remainder of the year.

300 feet use

In an area where developed parking sites are not provided, and not otherwise prohibited, direct access to suitable parking within 300 feet of a road or trail designated for motorized use is authorized. Travel under this exception must not cause resource damage. Examples of resource damage associated with the exception include any fording of streams, rutting, travel on wet meadows, or hill-climbs. Authorization for travel within 300 feet off routes for firewood cutting would be addressed in the firewood cutting permit. It may be allowed in some cases and not in others, depending upon resource concerns.

Unclassified routes

Alternative 1 has 47.8 miles of unclassified routes that were identified during 2003. Under Alternative 6, these routes would become 1.0 mile open for licensed vehicles, 8.6 miles open for dual use, 24.9 miles closed yearlong, 8.8 miles motorized trail open yearlong or seasonally and about 1.4 miles of nonmotorized trail. See the table in the Transportation section of Chapter 3 of the FEIS for tabular display of how unclassified routes are dealt with by alternative. Also, see Appendix G of the FEIS.

Decommissioning

The types of decommissioning methods used in Alternative 6 are in response to the following; administrative access needs, private land access needs, making routes unavailable for motorized use while still providing the prism of the closed route for future actions, reducing costs, and decommissioning roads in drainages or on soil types where watershed issues occur. To reduce costs, some routes that would otherwise have a standard Forest Service gate are being proposed for a less expensive, removable barrier type closure method. These types of closures were recommended particularly in areas where frequent lightening and wildfire response occurs, such as the Devils' Tower area.

Thus, Alternative 6 has a mix of closure methods proposed. These closure methods include gates (14 new) and barriers other than a gate (12 new) where the prism of the road would be available for motorized use, 33.9 miles of route with erosion controls and drainage improvements, as well as seed and possibly slash, 60.1 miles of route that would be ripped, seeded and slashed along the entire length, 13.0 miles of route that would be recontoured, and 1.5 miles that would be converted to nonmotorized trail. Decommissioning methods for specific routes are found in Appendix A of the FEIS.

Comparison of the Alternatives

The tables on the following pages compare design features by alternative, roads, trails, and off-route uses by alternative, and compare the effects by alternative to the issues in a summary form. Chapter 3 of the FEIS provides considerable detail of the effects of alternative implementation; Appendix A of the FEIS and the Alternative Maps provide considerable more detail as to route-by-route information.

Summary Comparison of Roads, Trails, Off-route Use by Alternative

FEATURE	Alt. 1	Alt. 2	Alt. 3	Alt. 4	Alt. 5	Alt. 6
Miles of classified roads (including new construction) open yearlong and seasonally for licensed vehicles ¹	370.4	122.7	118.0	142.7	241.4	164.9
Unclassified routes open year long, seasonally, or closed	47.8	0	0	0	0	0
Miles of dual use ² roads open yearlong or seasonally (miles)	0	232.8	290.3	0	0	119.1
Miles of road closed yearlong	100.8	119.9	85.7	330.1	240.2	202.7
Miles of motorized trail open yearlong and seasonally to OHVs. ³	40	92.5	68.9	0	57.4	45.9
Miles of motorcycle trail open yearlong or seasonally	1.9	13.3	9.2	0	0	13.6
Miles of motorized routes on NFS lands in Roadless Areas (yearlong or seasonally)	129.8	141.5	140.3	13.7	61.8	75.8
Miles of nonmotorized classified trails ⁴	90	97.3	90	198.6	124.9	111.0
Acres of snowmobile areas	113,548	63,519	63,519	8,538	63,519	63,686

¹ - Roads open to full size vehicles and OHVs meeting State licensing requirements. Includes proposed new routes.

² - Dual Use roads include those available for full size and off-highway vehicles. Not necessary to meet State licensing requirements.

³ - Vehicles/riders not necessary to meet state licensing. Motorcycle miles are totaled and include yearlong and with seasonal restrictions

⁴ - Includes new construction and/or conversion from other route types. Nonmotorized trails open to all forms of nonmotorized use, including bicycles (except in wilderness).

Summary Comparison of Features of the Alternatives

FEATURE	Alt. 1	Alt. 2	Alt. 3	Alt. 4	Alt. 5	Alt. 6
Area Closure with designated routes	Yes	Yes, with 425 acre exception	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of different seasonal closure dates. Includes open date in Alt 6 of 10/15-12/1	10 (4/15-5/31) (10/15-5/15) (9/1-12/1) (12/1-5/15) (12/2-5/15) (2/1-8/30) (5/16-12/1) (10/15-6/30) (10/15-12/1) (10/15-12/31)	3 (12/2-5/15) (10/15- 5/15) (10/15-12/1)	4 (12/2-5/15) (10/15-5/15) (10/15-12/1) (9/1-12/1)	3 (4/15-5/31) (9/1-5/15) (12/2-5/15)	2 (10/15-12/1) (12/2-5/15)	2 (10/15-12/1) (12/2-5/15)
Types of vehicle/route designations	Licensed vehicles Vehicles less than 50 inches wide Motorcycles Snowmobiles	Licensed vehicles All Vehicles Vehicles less than 50 inches wide Motorcycles Snowmobiles	Licensed vehicles All Vehicles Vehicles less than 50 inches wide Motorcycles Snowmobiles	Licensed vehicles Snowmobiles	Licensed vehicles Vehicles less than 50 inches wide Snowmobiles	Licensed vehicles All Vehicles Vehicles less than 50 inches wide Motorcycles Snowmobiles
Provides roads (dual use) for unlicensed OHV vehicles and riders	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Designated motorcycle routes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Designated snowmobile period	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
300 feet – Off route use next to open classified route	Yes – For roads and trails, for camping only	Yes, for roads and trails, camping, woodcutting, and retrieval	Yes-Same as Alt 2	No	Yes for roads to access dispersed rec opportunities	Yes, for roads and trails to park
Watershed improvement projects/Trailhead Projects	No/Yes	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes
Game Retrieval	No	Yes, 53.2 miles	Yes, 114.2 miles	No	No	No. However 3 roads open for hunting season
Year long road closure miles and closure/decommission method emphasis	100.8 miles; gate emphasis	119.9 miles; partial rip emphasis to prevent unauthorized use	85.7 miles; gate only emphasis	330.1 miles; rip all of prism and recontour emphasis	240.2 miles; mixture of gates, rip all of prism and some recontour	202.7 miles; mixture of gates, other barriers, erosion control methods, rip all of prism, and recontour
Dry Range routes and winter use	All open yearlong	Same as Alt.1	Same as Alt.1	Designated routes only, no snowmobile areas	Routes same as Alt.4, snowmobile use restricted on mapped winter range 12/2-5/15	Routes same as Alt 4, winter motorized use restricted on most winter range 12/2-5/15

Comparison of Effects Table

ISSUES	ALT. 1	ALT. 2	ALT. 3	ALT. 4	ALT. 5	ALT. 6
TRANSPORTATION/ECONOMICS						
Road Closures and Decommissioning	\$0	\$11,700	\$28,150	\$1,828,500	\$414,000	\$492,150
New Road Construction	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$22,500	\$0
New Dual-Use Road Construction	\$0	\$20,000	\$100,000	\$0	\$0	\$44,000
Convert Mot. Trail to Dual-Use Road	\$0	\$0	\$4,800	\$0	\$0	\$6,000
Motorized Trail New Construction (1)	\$0	\$396,000	\$198,000	\$0	\$81,000	\$72,000
Non-motorized Trail New Construction (1)	\$0	\$90,000	\$0	\$378,000	\$174,600	\$28,800
Motorized Trail Reconstruction(2)	\$252,000	\$504,000	\$402,000	\$0	\$318,000	\$336,000
Non-motorized Trail Reconstruction (2)	\$540,000	\$552,000	\$540,000	\$1,068,000	\$690,000	\$660,000
Signs	\$0	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$20,000	\$40,000	\$40,000
Trailheads/Portals	\$102,000	\$127,000	\$122,000	\$117,000	\$149,500	\$142,000
Watershed Improvement Projects	NA	\$231,000	\$231,000	\$176,000	\$231,000	\$231,000
Total Costs for Implementation	\$894,000	\$2,006,700	\$1,700,950	\$3,587,500	\$2,120,600	\$2,051,950
<p>(1) New trail construction costs are estimated at \$18,000 per mile</p> <p>(2) Reconstruction costs are estimated at \$12,000 per mile. Includes costs to improve all designated trails to Forest Service standards. Also includes the cost of converting unclassified routes to trails.</p>						
RECREATION						
Snowmobile Opportunity	113,548 acres	63,519 acres	63,519 acres	8,538 acres	63,519 acres	63,686 acres
Trails Opportunity:						
Nonmotorized	90 miles	97.3 miles	90 mi. – same as Alt.1	198.6 miles	124.9 miles	111 miles
Motorized, (including motorcycle in parenthesis)	41.9 miles (1.9 miles)	105.8 miles (13.3 miles)	78.1 miles (9.2 miles)	0 miles (0 miles)	57.4 miles (0 miles)	59.5 miles (13.6 miles)
Dual Use Opportunity	0	232.8 miles	290.3 miles	0	0	119.1 miles
Open OHV Area – acres	0	425 ac available	0	0	0	0
Opportunity for Off Route Travel within 300 feet of an open designated route	300 ft off rds/trails, for camping only	300 ft off rds/trails, for camping, firewood and retrieval	300 ft off rds/trails, for camping, firewood and retrieval	No off route travel adjacent to open routes	300 ft. off roads for all recreational activities	300 ft. off roads and trails to park
Displacement of recreationists						
Motorized	No	No	No	Yes, all OHV's	Yes, dual use	No

ISSUES	ALT. 1	ALT. 2	ALT. 3	ALT. 4	ALT. 5	ALT. 6
Nonmotorized	No	Minor	Minor	No	Minor	Minor
Plan Complexity – based on closures and vehicle types	Most Complex	Complex	Most Complex	Least Complex	Moderately Complex	Moderately Complex
ROADLESS AREAS						
Miles of road and motorized trail in roadless areas	129.8 miles	141.5 miles	140.3 miles	13.7 miles	61.8 miles	75.8 miles
LANDS/SPECIAL USES						
Miles of rd. on FS land available to special use permit holders and not to public	31.9	32.4	32.4	35.1	26.5	18.8
FIRE MANAGEMENT						
% Change (from existing condition) in Access for Fire and Fuels Mgt.	No Change	14% decrease	7% increase	63% decrease	16% decrease	13% decrease
% Change (from existing condition) in Public Access and Associated Risk of Fire Starts	No Change	4% decrease	11% increase	61% decrease	35% decrease	23% decrease
FOREST RESOURCES						
% and acres of suitable timber lands accessible by motorized vehicle for mgt.	50-55% 26,500 ac	50-55% 26,500 ac	50-55% 26,500 ac	30-35% 16,200 ac	45-50% 24,300 ac	45-50% 24,300 ac
Miles of motorized route open and opportunity for firewood/forest products	416– includes unclassified routes – no motorized use within 300 ft for firewood	355 – motorized use within 300 feet of road/trail permitted	408– motorized use within 300 feet of road/trail permitted	143 – no motorized use within 300 feet	241 – motorized use within 300 feet of road permitted	284 - motorized use within 300 feet of road/trail for firewood handled in firewood permit
SOIL & WATERSHED						
Road sediment reduction resulting from rd. decomm. (long-term) in tons per year	Some reduction due to BMP's applied during maintenance	20-40 tons/yr	Same as Alt 1 as well as bringing routes to standard	260-340 tons/yr	80-110 tons/yr	80-120 tons/yr
Road/stream interactions reclaimed – includes sedimentation, rd. proximity, & stream crossing factors (see Ch.3 for more detail)	0	31	0	190	65	72
Miles of road or trail reclaimed in sensitive soils and RHCA's	0	11	0	61	21	27
Overall watershed improvement rating (further defined in Ch. 3)	Low	Moderate	Low	Very High	High	High

ISSUES	ALT. 1	ALT. 2	ALT. 3	ALT. 4	ALT. 5	ALT. 6
FISHERIES						
Miles of high/moderate risk roads in fish bearing watersheds	115	120	118.1	74	99	100.2
Number of stream/route interactions in fish bearing watersheds - includes sedimentation, rd. proximity, & stream crossing factors (see Ch.3 for more detail)	610	562	579	300	437	504
Trend of condition of fish bearing streams (further defined in Ch. 3)	Downward	Downward	Downward	Upward	Upward	Upward
RANGE						
Permittee and FS access by motorized vehicle for Allotment Administration, % change from existing condition	No Change	No Change	16% Increase	58% Decrease	4% Increase	5% Increase
Road & motorized trail open year long or seasonally to the public, % change in potential for vandalism from existing condition	No Change	No Change	6% Increase	69% Decrease	35% Decrease	25% Decrease
NOXIOUS WEEDS						
% change from existing condition in miles available to FS for weed mgt. (See Ch 3 for more detail)	No Change	1% Increase	14% Increase	64% Decrease	4% Increase	4% Increase
% change from existing condition in miles of motorized route open year long or seasonally to the public (potential for weed spread)	No Change	No Change	6% Increase	68% Decrease	35% Decrease	23% Increase
Acres of New Disturbance	0	650	35	825	303	373
WILDLIFE HABITAT						
# of elk analysis areas that meet elk security method (see Ch.3) of assessing elk vulnerability	6 out of 11	4 out of 11	3 out of 11	9 out of 11	8 out of 11	7 out of 11
# of elk analysis areas meeting Forest Plan hiding cover standard	6 out of 11	7 out of 11	7 out of 11	9 out of 11	8 out of 11	7 out of 11
% of Lynx habitat open to snowmobile use –	63%	52%	52%	10%	52%	51%

ISSUES	ALT. 1	ALT. 2	ALT. 3	ALT. 4	ALT. 5	ALT. 6
doesn't reflect mi. of groomed/designated						
Miles of groomed and/or designated routes in lynx habitat and total miles open to use in habitat	6.8 mi groomed 56.9 miles open in lynx habitat	6.8 mi groomed 58.6 miles open in lynx habitat	6.8 mi groomed 53.7 miles open in lynx habitat	6.8 mi groomed 8.9 miles open in lynx habitat	6.8 mi groomed 33.4 miles open in lynx habitat	6.8 mi groomed 31.4 miles open in lynx habitat
% of wolverine natal denning habitat protected	70	74	74	95	74	76
Travel corridors*, # of patches, and size of patch sizes (see Ch.3 for more detail - ac means acres)	12<100 ac 1 at 100-250 ac 11> 250 ac	15< 100 ac 4 at 100-250 ac 12 > 250 ac	11< 100 ac 3 at 100-250 ac 12> 250 ac	5< 100 ac 0 at 100-250 ac 6> 250 ac	9< 100 ac 4 at 100-250 ac 10>250 ac	11< 100 ac 3 at 100-250 ac 10>250 ac

*evaluated by number and size of patches – by size category

Identification of the Preferred Alternative

The alternatives were analyzed for effectiveness in resolving the agency, public and cooperators' planning issues, for avoidance of unnecessary impacts to resources and the human environment, for responsiveness to public concerns and for compliance with the Forest Plan, statutes and regulations. Based on the analyses, Alternative 6 is identified as the Preferred Alternative.

Alternative 6 was identified because it provides for a planned system of motorized and non-motorized routes that are most responsive to the purpose and need as identified in Chapter 1. A variety of opportunities is met in Alternative 6 by inclusion of motorized route types, including ATV, dual use, motorcycle, and passenger vehicle, as well as a large number of nonmotorized trails. Variety is also provided in the availability of motorized trails for nonmotorized uses and the availability of non-motorized trails outside of the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness to mountain bikes. Alternative 6 provides a variety and an appropriate amount of non-motorized trails in areas that have been traditionally non-motorized. Alternative 6 considers new trail construction that provides for connectedness and is responsive while considering construction feasibility, costs, and impacts.

Alternative 6 is responsive to the Roads Analysis Plan emphasis of reducing the overall transportation system route miles and maintenance costs by identifying routes needed through an integrated resource methodology, closing yearlong routes not needed, and removing unclassified routes that are not part of a planned route system.

Alternative 6 meets or moves toward Forest Plan standards for fish and wildlife habitats, soil and watershed health, and prevention and control of noxious weed spread. Alternative 6 does not result in degradation of Inventories Roadless Areas. Alternative 6 would provide for designated classified routes and removal of unclassified routes.

Alternative 6 would allow for dispersed use within 300 feet of a road or trail to allow people to move away from the dust and noise generated along roads. Helena Forest recreation specialists do not anticipate widespread creation of additional new routes as most good dispersed sites already have a road accessing them.

Alternative 6 is highly responsive to the need for a travel plan to be less confusing with route types and closure dates. This alternative reduces the amount of possible seasonal restriction dates, removes off route travel periods, and defines the snowmobile use period.

Alternative 6 provides for a planned system of ATV and designated motorcycle trails without introducing motorized uses into currently non-motorized areas.

Alternative 6 is responsive to the needs of disabled and elderly by providing for several roads to be opened only during hunting season, as well as retaining open routes in areas that they have identified as having gentler terrain such as the area between Hellgate and Magpie Creeks. It also provides motorized access for disabled individuals to dispersed recreation sites.

Alternative 6 is responsive to the agency need for administrative access on some closed roads for fire suppression, weed control, or future timber management, as well as decommissioning routes that would no longer be needed for anticipated future management.

Alternative 6 provides snowmobile use areas that do not compromise winter ranges, while also having boundaries that are more easily understood on the ground.

