

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Lewis and Clark National Forest proposes to revise and update the current travel management plan for the Little Belt, Castle, and north half Crazy Mountains. In doing so, the Lewis and Clark National Forest would designate those roads, trails, and airfields that would be recognized as system routes for management as part of the Forest transportation system.

Motorized and non-motorized travel in these three mountain ranges has been managed for the past 17 years under regulations described on the 1988 Lewis and Clark Forest Travel Plan map for the Jefferson Division. The 1988 Travel Plan may no longer provide the types of recreation opportunity desired by the public and may not be compatible with other resources. It is timely to address these concerns before problems cause resource damage or confuse visitors.

The project area includes all National Forest System lands within the Little Belt Mountains (900,310 acres), Castle Mountains (79,820 acres), and north half of the Crazy Mountains (69,980 acres) on the Lewis and Clark National Forest. Four ranger districts are involved with management. The 1,050,110 acres encompassed by the analysis comprise about 86% of the lands within the Jefferson Division of the Lewis and Clark National Forest, or 53% of the entire area managed by the Lewis and Clark National Forest.

PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

The purpose of travel management is to provide the public with opportunities to use both non-motorized and motorized modes of transportation to access public lands and travel on National Forest System (NFS) lands, roads, and trails. This environmental analysis is needed to evaluate the year-round impacts of both non-motorized and motorized travel on existing roads, trails, and areas managed by the Belt Creek, Judith, Musselshell, and White Sulphur Springs Ranger Districts within three mountain ranges.

PROPOSED ACTION

In 2000, the Lewis and Clark National Forest asked the public about the need to update and revise travel management restrictions across the entire Forest. Based on comments from the public, the agency came to the conclusion that most people had a good understanding of the 1988 Travel Plan that had been in place for many years, and that the 1988 Travel Plan made a logical starting point to determine “need for change”.

In 2005, an interdisciplinary team (IDT) of resource specialists developed a proposed action for the Little Belt, Castle, and north half Crazy Mountains based on “need for change” from the existing methods of travel allowed. To ensure long-term protection of various natural resources and also provide for recreational enjoyment of the area, the IDT considered seven evaluation criteria for wildlife and fish habitat protection, erosion control, safety, user conflict, and protection of other resources. The “proposed action” developed by the IDT consisted of one map for management of motorized wheeled vehicles and a data table containing information on how each road, trail, and area would be managed for motorized and non-motorized travel. For management of winter travel, the IDT selected the “winter

resolution” agreed to by a coalition of special interest groups for the Little Belt Mountains. The IDT then developed and included restrictions for winter travel in the Castle and north half Crazy Mountains. Color coded maps of the summer and winter travel proposals were sent to the public in September 2005.

DECISION FRAMEWORK

Given the purpose and need, the deciding official would review the existing condition, modified proposed action, the other alternatives, and the environmental consequences in order to make the following decision(s):

Restrictions on types of travel and/or seasons of travel.

Identify areas, roads and trails that are appropriate for various motorized modes of travel, and identify areas, roads, and trails that are appropriate for various non-motorized modes of travel. Impose seasonal or yearlong restrictions on any particular mode of travel based on considerations of safety, administration, public access, handicap access, recreational use, conflicts between uses, water quality, soil erosion, noxious weeds, wildlife and fisheries habitat, cultural resources and law enforcement.

Roads, trails, and airfields to be part of the designated transportation system.

Designate roads, trails, and airfields that would be recognized as system routes for management as part of the Forest transportation system.

RELATIONSHIP TO FOREST PLAN

The 1986 Lewis and Clark National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan for short) directs management of all Federal lands within the project area. The Forest Plan establishes goals and objectives for the multiple uses of renewable resources, and standards and guidelines to assure sustained productivity of the land and protection of the environment. In short, the Forest Plan goals and objectives identify the types of goods and services to be provided, while the standards and guidelines set the environmental sideboards within which activities are to be carried out.

TRAVEL MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES FOR PROJECT AREA

Based on Forest Plan direction, the 3-State OHV Decision summarized above, and Forest Service recreation policy (FSM-2350), the following objectives and goals were used to guide project design.

- Provide trail-related recreation opportunities that serve public needs and meet land management and recreation policy objectives (FSM-2353.02)
- Provide OHV recreation opportunities that are in concert with the environmental setting, minimize effects on the land and resources, promote public safety, and control conflicts with other uses of NFS lands (FSM-2355.02).
- Provide a diversity of trail opportunities and modes of travel consistent with land capability (FSM-2353.03)
- Develop trails that are suited to a variety of modes of travel. (FSM-2353.2).

- Provide a balance of opportunities for people to access and enjoy the outdoors.
- Manage roads and trails to provide safe public access to a variety of recreational settings while minimizing environmental impacts and conflicts with other uses.
- Manage OHVs in accordance with Forest Plan direction to protect resources, minimize conflict between users, and provide for safety of all users of NFS lands.

CONFORMANCE WITH LAWS, POLICY, AND REGULATIONS

Laws, policies, directives, strategies, and agendas establish many of the parameters for the environmental analysis of travel management on the Belt Creek, Judith, Musselshell, and White Sulphur Springs Ranger Districts. The project file contains a list of the principal federal laws, executive orders, policies, national strategies, national agendas, treaties, and state laws used to guide the analysis. Other laws, regulations, and policy not specifically listed in the project file also were taken into account by the various resource specialists during analysis.

SCOPING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

In 2000, the Lewis and Clark National Forest asked the public about the need to update and revise travel management restrictions across the entire Forest. A total of 211 people attended the public meetings, and 90 letters were submitted.

A Notice of Intent (NOI) was published in the Federal Register on September 23, 2005, beginning the formal process of public scoping. A one-page letter and 2 maps displaying the proposed action were mailed to 678 people on September 20, 2005. Additional copies of the proposed action were mailed or handed to several hundred people requesting them. A letter was mailed in October 2005 to 1,010 people stating that the comment period was extended to November 25, 2005. Public meetings were held in 9 locations, and attended by over 650 people. To expedite communication with interested organizations, Forest Service employees met 15 times with various organizations to explain the proposed action and answer questions.

A large number of people responded to the proposed action by the November 25, 2005, due date. A few comments kept trickling in throughout the winter, and were added to the public comment file for content analysis. A total of about 2,255 comments were received.

Starting in December 2005, all letters and e-mails with substantive comments were read by at least two people. In January 2006, the ID Team reviewed a summary of public comments and developed issue statements to be addressed by this analysis.

Beginning in July 2006, a “draft” EIS was sent to 61 libraries, 28 organizations, and 15 individuals. Compact discs (CDs) of the DEIS were sent to another 1,936 people. Nine public meetings were held. Comment letters were received from 747 people and organizations, along with about 1,036 form letters. All letters were read for substantive comments.

SIGNIFICANT ISSUES, CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

Using the comments from the public, organizations, and other agencies, the interdisciplinary team developed a list of issues to address. Significant issues were defined as those directly or

indirectly caused by implementing any of the alternatives. Issues were deemed significant because of the extent of their geographic distribution, the duration of their effects, or the intensity of interest or resource conflict.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

Actions Common to All Alternatives

Under all alternatives, certain types of travel may be authorized for specific purposes. Motorized travel on roads, trails or areas closed to motorized use may be allowed for administrative purposes such as law enforcement, fire, emergencies, military operations, noxious weed control and other official business purposes. Motorized travel on roads, trails or areas closed to motorized use may also be authorized for carrying out the provisions of certain special use permits or other activities such as administration of grazing allotments. All such use would require specific authorization from the appropriate Line Officer, detailing when, where, who, and under what circumstances motorized travel would be allowed.

Under all alternatives, wheeled motorized travel would continue to be allowed for at least part of the year on existing main access roads to trailheads, developed campgrounds, recreational cabins, and other facilities.

Under all alternatives, implementation of a new travel plan would occur under the new Federal regulations that were issued in December 2005.

Mitigation measures developed by the IDT would be carried out under all alternatives. These measures are listed in Appendix D to the FEIS. The Best Management Practices listed in Appendix G to the FEIS would be applied under all alternatives, and would help mitigate potential impacts of any alternative chosen.

SUMMER - ALTERNATIVE 1

Rationale: The No Action alternative provides a baseline for estimating the effects of other alternatives and therefore must be considered in detail (FSH 1909.15, part 14.1; 40 CFR 1502.14(d)). In cases such as this, where ongoing programs or management described within an existing plan continue as new plans are being developed, the No Action alternative means no change from current management direction (FSH 1909.15, part 14.1; CEQ's 40 Most Asked Questions, section 65.12, question 3). The 1988 Travel Plan and the 2001 Three-State OHV Decision define travel management that is currently enforced on the ground. This is the existing condition, and it would be carried forward if there were no decision made to change travel management. Therefore it is appropriately considered the No Action alternative. Analysis of current travel management also fulfills a 1989 directive by the Regional Forester to complete additional analysis of the 1988 Travel Plan.

Features: Under this alternative the season and type of use currently allowed on existing roads, trails, and areas in the Little Belt, Castle, and north half Crazy Mountains would not change. Opportunities for motorized wheeled vehicle travel are widely dispersed throughout the three mountain ranges and vary in type and season.

WINTER - ALTERNATIVE 1.

Rationale: The 1988 Travel Plan defines over-snow travel management that is currently enforced on the ground. This is the existing condition that most people are familiar with, and establishes a basis to compare the effects of other alternatives.

Features: Under this alternative the season and type of use currently allowed during the winter months in the Little Belt, Castle, and north half Crazy Mountains would not change. Opportunities for motorized over-snow travel are widely dispersed throughout the three mountain ranges and vary in type and season.

We deliberately skipped Summer – Alternative 2, because it will not be analyzed in detail. Summer – Alt. 2 was the “proposed action” released in September 2005 for public comment. Refer to “alternatives considered but eliminated from detailed study” for rationale/discussion.

SUMMER - ALTERNATIVE 3

Rationale: This alternative was developed by a coalition of organizations representing motorized travel including aircraft.

Features: This alternative features a network of single-track loop trails for motorcycles, and loop trails for ATVs in all three mountain ranges. Non-motorized foot and horse travel is accommodated in the upper Tenderfoot Creek, Hoover Creek, Sawmill-Wagner Gulch, Lost Fork Judith River, Steiner Creek, and Yogo Creek areas of the Little Belt Mountains. Four airstrips are also proposed in the Little Belt Mountains.

SUMMER - ALTERNATIVE 4.

Rationale: This alternative promotes non-motorized recreation in areas identified by the Montana Wilderness Association. It incorporates features of Summer – Alt. 2 for areas that would be open to motorized recreational travel during the spring, summer, and fall.

Features: This alternative features large blocks of “quiet” non-motorized areas in the Middle Fork Judith Wilderness Study Area, Tenderfoot-Deep Creek, Eagle Creek, Pilgrim Creek, Hoover-Big Baldy, Daisy Dean-Nevada Creek, Haymaker Creek, and East Fork Spring Creek areas in the Little Belt Mountains. It also features large non-motorized blocks in the west half of the Castle Mountains, and north half of the Crazy Mountains. Single-track loop trails for motorcycles, and loop trails for ATVs are accommodated in the Calf Creek, Jumping Creek, Jefferson Creek, Smoky Mountain, Dry Wolf Creek, South Fork Judith River, Spring Creek, and eastern portion of the Little Belt Mountains. No airstrips are proposed.

SUMMER - ALTERNATIVE 5.

Rationale: This alternative attempts to blend public preferences with resource concerns for all three mountain ranges. It includes actions not directly considered in Alternatives 1, 3, or 4 to help display and compare the effects of options to address some specific issues.

Features: This alternative features a network of single-track loop trails for motorcycles, and loop trails for ATVs in the Little Belt Mountains. The Castle Mountains accommodates one ATV loop trail in the west half, and a network of roads in the east half. One loop ATV trail in conjunction with the Gallatin National Forest is provided in the Crazy Mountains. Non-motorized foot and horse travel is promoted in large blocks of quiet areas along the Smith

River, upper Tenderfoot Creek, Pilgrim Creek, Lost Fork Judith, and South Fork Judith river in the Little Belt Mountains. In the Castle Mountains there would be large quiet areas in the Beartrap Peak-Woodchuck Mountain area, and the Castle Mountain area; and the north half of the Crazy Mountains is predominantly a large area for non-motorized travel. Two airstrips are proposed in the Little Belt Mountains.

WINTER - ALTERNATIVE 2.

Rationale: This alternative depicts an agreement between the Montana Snowmobile Association, Montana Wilderness Association, and other organizations for management of winter recreation in the Little Belt Mountains. Forest Service managers developed the “proposed winter recreation action” for the Castle and north half Crazy Mountains. This alternative is the “proposed action” for winter over-snow travel management that was released in September 2005 for public comment.

Features: This alternative features maintenance of the existing groomed and designated snowmobile trail system in the Little Belt Mountains, and provides for open snowmobiling in about half of the Little Belt Mountains. Similarly, about two-thirds of the Castle Mountains, and half of the Crazy Mountains would remain open to snowmobiling. Developed cross-country ski areas would be promoted in the Mizpah, Deadman, O’Brien Park, and Jefferson Creek areas. Big-game winter ranges currently closed to snowmobiling would continue to be restricted. Large blocks of non-motorized quiet areas would be provided in the Middle Fork Judith WSA, Tenderfoot-Deep Creek-Pilgrim Creek-Dry Wolf area, and northeast end of the Little Belt Mountains. The east one-third of the Castle Mountains, and the east half of the Crazy Mountains would also provide quiet areas.

WINTER - ALTERNATIVE 3.

Rationale: This alternative was developed by Forest Service managers and resource specialists for all three mountain ranges to protect big-game winter ranges, wolverine denning habitat, and cross-country ski areas. It includes actions not directly considered in Winter Alt. 1 or 2 to help display and compare the effects of options to address some specific issues.

Features: This alternative features maintenance of the existing groomed and designated snowmobile trail system in the Little Belt Mountains, and provides for open snowmobiling in about two-thirds of the Little Belt Mountains. Similarly, about two-thirds of the Castle Mountains, and one-third of the Crazy Mountains would remain open to snowmobiling. Developed cross-country ski areas would be promoted in the Mizpah, Deadman, O’Brien Park, and Jefferson Creek areas. Large blocks of non-motorized quiet areas would be provided in the Smith River-Deep Creek area, Thunder Mountain, Barker Mountain, Peterson Mountain, Big Baldy Mountain, Kelly Mountain, Bluff Mountain, and northeast end of the Little Belt Mountains. The Four Mile Creek area and east one-third of the Castle Mountains; and the northwest corner and east half of the Crazy Mountains would also be quiet areas.

IDENTIFICATION OF PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The Forest Service has not identified a preferred alternative. All of the alternatives are viable options for management of motorized and non-motorized travel in the project area. Any combination of the Summer and Winter alternatives could be selected.