

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Lewis and Clark National Forest proposes to revise and update the current travel management plan for the Rocky Mountain Ranger District. 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 on the Rocky Mountain Ranger District has been managed for the past 18 years under regulations described on the 1988 Lewis and Clark Forest Travel Plan map for the Rocky Mountain 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 covers the entire non-wilderness portion of the Rocky Mountain Division of the Lewis and Clark National Forest. It encompasses approximately 391,700 acres of the 777,600 total acres that comprise the Rocky Mountain Ranger District.

Approximately 385,900 acres of designated Wilderness in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex (BMWC), which includes the Scapegoat and Bob Marshall Wilderness areas, will not be addressed in this environmental impact statement. Travel management in these two wilderness areas will continue to occur in accordance with the Wilderness Act of 1964, and the Recreation Management Direction for the Bob Marshall Complex (USDA, April 1987).

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 Rocky Mountain Ranger District.

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 and resource specialists, the Lewis and Clark National Forest felt that the 1988 Travel Plan made a logical starting point to determine “need for change”.

In 2002, an interdisciplinary team (IDT) of resource specialists developed a proposed action for the Rocky Mountain Ranger District based on “need for change” from the existing methods of travel allowed for specific areas, roads and trails. 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 was sent to the public for comment in August 2002. Based on field visits and better knowledge of on-site conditions acquired during 2002/2003, the Interdisciplinary Team modified the proposed action slightly to carry forward into detailed analysis as one alternative.

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 Rocky Mountain Ranger District. 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.

Treaties with the Blackfeet Nation, and government to government relationship with the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council were considered in the 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. Based on comments from the public, the Lewis and Clark Forest 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”.

A Notice of Intent (NOI) was published in the Federal Register in August 2002, beginning the formal process of public scoping on the proposed action. A 1-page letter, 14-page summary, and 5 maps outlining the proposed action were mailed to 464 people on August 22, 2002. In October the comment period was extended to December 13, 2002. A meeting was arranged with the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council and Cultural Committee, to schedule 3 open house meetings on the Blackfeet Reservation. Overall, public meetings were held in 7 locations.

A large number of people responded to the proposed action by the due date. Since the public meetings on the Blackfeet Reservation were held late in the comment period, the comment period was verbally extended to late January 2003. Comments kept trickling in throughout the month of February 2003, and were added to the public comment file for content analysis. Overall, the Forest Service received comments from 45 organizations and agencies, 1,519 individuals, 16 unknown persons, 18 form postcards, and about 6,291 e-mail form letters.

Starting in January 2003, all letters and e-mails with substantive comments were read by at least two people. Over the next several months the ID Team reviewed the substantive comments submitted by the public and developed issue statements to be analyzed. Comments from the public continued to trickle in throughout the analysis process. A total of 44 late letters and e-mails were read for any new issues.

Beginning in June 2005, a “draft” EIS was sent to 46 libraries, 23 organizations, and 52 individuals. Summaries of the DEIS were sent to another 2,098 people. Eight public meetings were held. Comment letters were received from 1,659 people and organizations, along with about 33,000 form letters. All letters were read for substantive comments.

SIGNIFICANT ISSUES, CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

Using the comments from the public, organizations, other agencies, and the Blackfeet Tribe, 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, as well as on most short spur roads (less than 300-feet long) leading to dispersed campsites.

Under all alternatives, cross-country travel on wheeled motorized vehicles would be prohibited in accordance with the 2001 OHV decision.

Under all alternatives, Benchmark Airstrip would continue to be managed as an open airfield.

ALTERNATIVE 1

Rationale: The No Action alternative provides a baseline for estimating the effects of other alternatives and therefore must be considered in detail. 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. 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.

Features: Under this Alternative the season and type of use currently allowed on existing roads, trails, and areas on the Rocky Mountain Ranger District (RMRD) would not change. Opportunities for motorized travel are widely dispersed throughout the non-wilderness portions of the RMRD and vary in type and season. Non-motorized trails are primarily those that access or adjoin Congressionally designated Wilderness Areas.

ALTERNATIVE 2

Rationale: In 2002, an interdisciplinary team (IDT) of resource specialists developed a proposal for travel management on the RMRD, based on the need for change identified through an early scoping effort conducted in late 2000 and through detailed review of all roads and non-wilderness trails on the RMRD. The IDT considered seven criteria on which to assess the need for change on roads and trails throughout the non-wilderness portion of the RMRD: wildlife and fish habitat protection, conflict between uses, erosion control, safety, facility/resource protection, wilderness protection, and noxious weed spread. The IDT also identified and proposed corrections to travel management restrictions and ownership that were shown erroneously on the existing 1988 Travel Plan Map.

Based on field visits during 2002/2003, the IDT determined that some modifications were needed to correct errors in and improve the Proposed Action. The majority of modifications were minor corrections or changes that did not alter the basic characteristics of the Proposed Action. The decision was made to carry the new, modified alternative forward for detailed analysis in place of the Proposed Action, and is now referred to only as Alternative 2.

Features: In general, Alternative 2 would continue to allow seasonal use of ATVs on some trails in the Badger-Two Medicine area and in a few areas elsewhere on the RMRD. This alternative would also allow seasonal motorcycle use on some trails in the Badger-Two Medicine, Birch-Teton, and Sun River areas. Alternative 2 would prohibit motorized use on most trails in the Dearborn-Elk Creek area. Snowmobile use would be restricted more than in the past, but would continue to be allowed seasonally in some portions of the Badger-Two Medicine, Birch-Teton, Sun River, and Dearborn-Elk Creek areas. Few non-system motorized trails temporarily authorized under the 2001 OHV Decision would be retained for motorized travel; most would be closed to motorized use. Opportunities for motorized travel would continue to be dispersed widely across the non-wilderness portion of the RMRD, although motorized travel by wheeled vehicles and by snowmobiles would be restricted more overall than under the 1988 Travel Plan. Alternative 2 features the greatest mileage of wheeled motorized trails and greatest acreage of snowmobile opportunity of the four action alternatives.

ALTERNATIVE 3

Rationale: Alternative 3 is based largely on comments submitted by the public requesting that travel management on the RMRD emphasize traditional foot and horse travel and eliminate motorized travel on trails.

Features: Key features of this alternative are that all system trails would be closed yearlong to all motorized travel, all non-system trails would be closed to all motorized travel, and cross-country (off-trail) snowmobiling would be prohibited yearlong in all areas. Under this alternative, existing main access roads to trailheads, developed campgrounds and other facilities, and recreational cabins would be kept open for wheeled motorized travel. Short spur roads (less than 300-feet long) that access dispersed campsites off main access roads would also continue to allow motorized travel. All other side roads would be closed yearlong to motorized travel. Snowmobiling would be allowed only on designated main access roads, such as the Benchmark Road and the North Fork Teton Road, to allow access to recreational cabins or other facilities. Mechanized travel, such as bicycles and game carts, would continue to be allowed on trails that are currently open to such use. Alternative 3 features the least mileage of motorized travel of the four action alternatives.

ALTERNATIVE 4

Rationale: Alternative 4 is based both on comments submitted by the public requesting greater separation of motorized and non-motorized travel, and on efforts by the IDT to identify areas in which to focus motorized loop opportunities and other areas in which to emphasize enhancement of other resources. In identifying areas in which to restrict motorized travel, the IDT attempted to choose areas in which more than one resource (e.g. wildlife habitat, wilderness/roadless characteristics, traditional travel, etc.) might benefit. In identifying areas in which to focus motorized loop opportunities, the IDT looked for areas in which the existing infrastructure could support a specific type of motorized use, in which loops existed or trail mileages were sufficient to create a reasonable motorized recreational opportunity, and in

which other resources could be appropriately protected or impacts of motorized travel mitigated. The IDT also attempted to provide a mix of recreational opportunities throughout various geographic areas of the RMRD.

Features: Under this alternative, a trail loop allowing ATV use would continue to be allowed in the Badger-Two Medicine area. This loop would be limited to a few main access trails. Limited ATV opportunities would continue to exist on a few other trails adjacent to main access roads elsewhere on the RMRD. Travel on trails by motorcycles would continue to be allowed on a few main access trails in the Badger-Two Medicine area (including trails open for ATV travel), south of the Sun Canyon area, and in the Benchmark area. Wheeled motorized access for disabled hunters would be allowed on specific roads in the Sun River and South Fork Teton areas. Cross-country snowmobiling would generally be restricted to the same areas where motorized access would be allowed during the summer. Areas for cross-country skiing and other non-motorized winter travel would coincide with the areas emphasized for non-motorized travel during the summer. This alternative emphasizes a large network of non-motorized trails in areas identified by the public and resource specialists. Alternative 4 features less mileage of motorized travel than Alternatives 1 and 2, and more mileage of motorized travel than Alternatives 3 and 5.

ALTERNATIVE 5

Rationale: Alternative 5 was developed by the IDT in response to consultation with the Blackfeet tribal government and to address cultural issues in the Badger-Two Medicine area. The National Forest and the Blackfeet Indian Reservation share a common boundary in this area, and the Blackfeet retain specific reserved rights in the area in accordance with the 1895-96 agreement with the U.S. Government. Approximately 70% of the Badger-Two Medicine area has been determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as a Traditional Cultural District.

Features: Under this alternative, motorized wheeled vehicles would not be allowed on any roads in the Badger-Two Medicine area, including the Pike Creek, Lubec Lake, Dog Gun Lake, Palookaville, and Mowitch Basin roads. The Theodore Roosevelt Memorial parking area and access to the Summit Campground and Summit trailhead would remain open to motorized vehicles. All system trails in the Badger-Two Medicine area would be closed yearlong to motorized travel. Most non-system trails would be closed to use, although a few would be adopted as non-motorized trails. Snowmobiling would be prohibited in all areas, including all roads. Mechanized modes of travel such as bicycles and game carts would be allowed on trails currently open to such use. In the area south of the Badger-Two Medicine area (i.e. south of North Fork Birch Creek) travel management would be the same as described under Alternative 4. Alternative 5 features fewer miles of motorized travel than any of the alternatives except Alternative 3. It provides for a limited amount of motorized recreation on a smaller system of motorized trails located in the southern two-thirds of the RMRD.

IDENTIFICATION OF PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The Lewis and Clark National Forest does not have a preferred alternative. All of the alternatives are viable and any one or combination thereof could be selected.