

CONSISTENCY WITH ADJACENT BLM MANAGEMENT OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL AREAS.

Some people believe that the proposed action is not consistent with management of adjacent Outstanding Natural Areas (ONAs) on BLM lands.

Maintaining consistency in management of wheeled vehicles and over-snow vehicles was a consideration in developing of alternatives. The analysis will compare proposed management under each alternative with management of adjacent ONAs.

1. EXISTING CONDITION

a. Natural Characteristics

There are four Bureau of Land Management outstanding natural areas (ONAs) totaling 13,087 acres located just east of the district boundary about 20 miles west of Choteau. They include Blind Horse, Ear Mountain, Chute Mountain, and Deep Creek-Battle Creek. These ONAs are characterized by massive limestone cliffs and geologic features that rise to 7,700 feet from the 5,000-foot plains. The ONAs are blanketed with conifers, deciduous trees, shrubs, and grasses.

Key resource values include but are not limited to scenery, wilderness character, non-motorized recreation; range, and wildlife.

The ONA's are bounded on the west by National Forest, and on the east by private and state lands. Map 19 shows the location of the four ONAs.

b. Past Events and Conditions

In 1984 the BLM's Headwaters Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement established broad management direction for these ONAs to: "protect the wildlife habitat, scenery and other surface resources from disturbance" and "to ensure they are managed essentially as wilderness."

In 1989 an Activity Plan for these ONAs was approved that gave management direction for all current and proposed actions in these areas, including recreation, wilderness character, motorized use, access, wildlife, noxious weeds, seismic activities, grazing, fire management and fire use.

As a result of this direction, the ONAs are managed as wilderness. No motorized use is allowed within the ONAs except by permit, or by the agency for its management purposes. Access points along the ONA boundaries were to be signed showing that the area is non-motorized. Trailheads were to be constructed allowing non-motorized access to the ONAs. Overnight camping was permitted, in general, but is closely monitored to avoid detrimental effects on grizzly bear and gray wolves.

c. Human Influence

Human activity that changes the desired non-motorized recreation setting of the ONA is very limited today. Motorized use by the public is restricted. Range permittees and BLM personnel are very limited in the use of vehicles on the ONAs. Permittees must have permits to use vehicles, and must, for the most part, stay on existing roads.

Adjacent roads and motorized trails on both the National Forest and private and state land can affect nearby recreation settings on the ONAs.

d. Future Trends

Increased population growth will likely continue to be slow for the surrounding counties, and recreation use in the ONAs will increase somewhat in proportion to that population growth, depending upon the activity. Management of National Forest lands outside the ONAs will continue to have the potential to affect them, just as increased use within the ONAs will affect resources there, if not adequately managed.

e. Desired Condition

Recreation settings and opportunities on the ONAs will meet direction contained in BLM management direction for the areas. Activities on adjacent NFS lands will not reduce the opportunities or negatively affect the desired settings in regards to wilderness recreation; motorized use; access to the ONAs; wildlife; and noxious weeds.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

a. Alternative 1 - No Action Alternative

1. Direct and Indirect Effects

Trail 128 down the South Fork of Deep Creek is open seasonally to motorcycle use that ends at the non-motorized Deep Creek ONA. Some motorized users may want to illegally continue across the ONA in an effort to get to a road, introducing motorized use into the ONA.

Trail 153 is also seasonally open to motorcycles. Its' motorized use ends at the west boundary of Blindhorse ONA near Blindhorse Creek. Some motorized users could be tempted to continue into the ONA on Trail 153, which runs north-south the length of the ONA.

Two motorized trails parallel the Blindhorse ONA. Trail 177 runs parallel for over three miles and is within one-half mile of the ONA boundary with no topographic screening from the ONA. Trail 153 also parallels the ONA for a lesser distance, before its motorized use ends at the ONA boundary.

Motorized use on all three trails could introduce the sound of motors into the ONA. There is no requirement for buffers along the edge of the ONAs, but these motorized trails, whether paralleling or ending at the ONA boundary, have direct impacts on the non-motorized setting of the ONA by introducing motor noise and visual presence into the ONA. Motorcycles entering the ONA illegally, as well as stock and hikers could also introduce noxious weeds into the area.

Snowmobile use is unrestricted on the National Forest along the entire west boundary of the four ONAs. While the area is not conducive to snowmobile use, if the activity was occurring adjacent to the ONAs, the sound of motors would likely be heard within the ONA, affecting its non-motorized recreation setting.

2. Cumulative Effects

Public access to the ONAs via road and trailhead is presently limited to the Ear Mountain Trailhead. The east edge of the ONAs border private land, which could eventually become more developed and motorized. The narrow (one and one-half to two miles) nature of the ONAs and their north-south orientation make them susceptible over time to the effects of private land development, subdivision, and the introduction of more roads. Nearby motorized

use on NFS lands to the west, combined with likely increased development on private lands, could cumulatively over time reduce the desired non-motorized recreation setting of the ONA.

b. Action Alternatives 2-5

1. Direct and Indirect Effects

Alternative 2 has the same potential motorcycle impacts as described in Alternative One. However, snowmobile use, unlike Alternative One, is restricted entirely along the western borders of the ONAs except along the Deep Creek/Battle Creek ONA and the southern half of the Chute Mountain ONA. As a result, half of the ONAs are not affected by potential snowmobile use along the areas west of their western boundaries.

In Alternatives 3, 4, and 5 there are no motorized trails or areas open to snowmobiling immediately to the west of the ONAs. As a result there are no effects from motorized use on these ONAs.

2. Cumulative Effects

Public access via road and trailhead to the ONAs is limited to the Ear Mountain Trailhead, presently. The east edge of the ONAs border private land, which could eventually become more developed and motorized. The narrow (one and one-half to two miles) nature of the ONAs and their north-south orientation make them susceptible over time to the effects of private land development, subdivision, and the introduction of more roads. For Alternative 2 nearby motorized use on NFS lands to the west, combined with likely increased development on private lands, could cumulatively over time reduce the desired non-motorized recreation setting of the ONA. For Alternatives 3, 4, and 5, lack of motorized use on trails and acres on NFS lands to the west, could reduce the impacts of likely increased development on private lands over time, helping maintain the desired non-motorized recreation setting of the ONA.

c. Effects Common To All Alternatives

1. Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Effects

There are no known direct, indirect, or cumulative effects common to all alternatives.

d. Effects Common To All Action Alternatives

1. Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Effects

There are no known direct, indirect, or cumulative effects common to all action alternatives.

