



File Code: 1950/7730-1

Date: November 9, 2007

Dear Friend of the Ashley National Forest:

The Ashley National Forest is seeking your input on a proposal to implement new travel management designations for National Forest System (NFS) roads and motorized trail use on the Roosevelt/Duchesne and Flaming Gorge Ranger Districts.

This letter will provide you with information on the background of the project, the purpose and need, the proposed action, the nature of decision to be made, as well as a request for your comments.

LOCATION

The travel management designations will be district wide and encompass the entirety of the Roosevelt /Duchesne and Flaming Gorge Ranger Districts.

SUMMARY

The Forest Service will prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to disclose the effects of designating National Forest System (NFS) roads and trails available for public motorized use on the Roosevelt/Duchesne and Flaming Gorge Ranger Districts within the Ashley National Forest. The decision will be to: 1) determine whether to include routes that are not currently NFS roads or trails open for public motorized use; 2) establish a season of use and/or type of vehicle use for roads and trails; 3) prohibit wheeled motorized vehicle travel off designated NFS roads and trails by the public (except as allowed by permit or other authorization); and 4) change dispersed vehicle camping designations from allowing travel up to 300 feet off designated roads to 150 feet off designated roads. A National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) decision is not required to designate roads and trails for public motorized uses that are currently part of the National Forest System of roads and trails.

Once a decision is made, a Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) will be prepared, in compliance with the 2005 Forest Service Travel Management Rule (36 CFR Part 212). The MVUM will show all the routes that are designated for public motorized use on the Roosevelt/Duchesne and Flaming Gorge Ranger Districts. The MVUM will be the primary tool used to determine compliance and enforcement with motorized vehicle use designations on the Forest. Those existing routes and other non-system routes not designated open on the MVUM will be legally closed to motorized travel. The decisions on motorized travel will not affect motorized over-the-snow travel.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

There will be a concurrent Notice of Intent (NOI) and scoping for the Vernal Ranger District Travel Management Plan. The Vernal Ranger District is also located on the Ashley National Forest. However, because of differences in travel management within this District that currently allow motorized use on existing, non-designated routes in certain areas, and the large number of user-



created routes on this District, it is anticipated that the assessment for the EIS will take longer than for the Flaming Gorge and Roosevelt/Duchesne Ranger Districts. Therefore, the analysis will be completed separately and at a later date. Cumulative effects will be analyzed for both EIS's.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

Over the past few decades, the availability and capability of motorized vehicles, particularly off-highway vehicles (OHV's) and sport utility vehicles (SUV's) has increased tremendously. Nationally, the number of OHV users has climbed sevenfold in the past 30 years, from approximately 5 million in 1972 to 36 million in 2000. Utah is experiencing a high level of OHV use (196% increase in eight years), with an even greater increase in use in the Uintah Basin (360% increase in eight years). Unmanaged OHV use has resulted in unplanned roads and trails, erosion, watershed and habitat degradation, and impacts to cultural resource sites. Compaction and erosion are the primary effects of OHV use on soils. Riparian areas and aquatic dependent species are particularly vulnerable to OHV use. Unmanaged recreation, including impacts from OHV's, is one of "Four Key Threats Facing the Nation's Forests and Grasslands" (USDA Forest Service, June 2004).

The purpose of the proposal is to designate a system of roads and trails for motor vehicle use on the Roosevelt/Duchesne and Flaming Gorge Ranger Districts within the Ashley National Forest. The system of roads and trails to be designated will be consistent with the laws, regulations, and policies governing the management of National Forest System lands. Specifically, this includes the Forest Service 2005 Travel Management Rule (36 CFR Part 212) and the 1995 Roosevelt/Duchesne and Flaming Gorge Ranger Districts Travel Management Plans.

The following needs have been identified for this proposal:

1. There is a need for regulation of unmanaged, wheeled motorized vehicle travel by the public.

Currently, wheeled motorized vehicle travel by the public is not permitted off designated routes. However, in their enjoyment of the National Forest, motorized vehicle users have created numerous non-system routes that are sometimes difficult to distinguish from actual system routes. The number of such routes continues to grow each year with many routes having environmental impacts and safety concerns.

The current policy of "open unless signed or mapped closed" makes management of these roads difficult and often confusing. The Travel Management Rule, 36 CFR Part 212, provides policy for ending this trend of non-system route proliferation and managing the Forest transportation system by changing the policy to only those roads and trails shown on the map are designated as open.

2. There is a need for limited changes and additions to the existing transportation system to provide wheeled motorized access to dispersed recreation opportunities (camping, hunting, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, etc.) and to provide a diversity of wheeled motorized recreation opportunities (4X4 Vehicles, motorcycles, ATVs, passenger vehicles, etc.)

It is Forest Service policy to provide a diversity of sustainable road and trail opportunities for experiencing a variety of environments and modes of travel consistent with the National Forest recreation role and land capability (FSM 2353.03(2)). In meeting these needs, the proposed action must also achieve the following purposes:

- O. Avoid impacts to cultural resources.
- P. Provide for public safety.
- Q. Provide for a diversity of recreational opportunities.
- R. Assure adequate access to public and private lands.
- S. Provide for adequate maintenance and administration of designations based on availability of resources and funding to do so.
- T. Minimize damage to soil, vegetation and other Forest resources.
- U. Avoid harassment of wildlife and significant disruption of wildlife habitat.
- V. Minimize conflicts between wheeled motor vehicles and existing or proposed recreational uses of NFS lands.
- W. Minimize conflicts among different classes of wheeled motor vehicle uses of NFS lands or neighboring federal lands.
- X. Assure compatibility of wheeled motor vehicle use with existing conditions in populated areas, taking into account sound, emissions, etc.
- Y. Assure compatibility of motorized vehicle use within Inventoried Roadless Areas according to 3CFR294.12a.
- Z. Have valid existing rights of use and access (rights-of-way).
- AA. Provide consistency of use on roads that cross jurisdictional boundaries.
- BB. Include consideration for compatibility with existing Potential for Wilderness Evaluation studies.

PROPOSED ACTION

Note: A broad-scale written description of the proposed action is outlined below. However, maps and description tables of individual proposed changes that are referenced in this letter are available on the Internet at http://www.fs.fed.us/r4/ashley/projects/travel_management. In addition, these maps and tables are available for viewing at the following locations:

Ashley National Forest Supervisor's Office, 355 N. Vernal Ave., Vernal, UT 84078
Roosevelt Ranger District, 650 W. Highway 40 Roosevelt, UT 84066
Duchesne Ranger District, 85 W. Main Duchesne, UT 84021
Flaming Gorge Ranger District, Intersection of Highways 43 and 44, Manila, UT 84046

The proposed action was developed in order to meet the needs identified above and designates selected roads and trails that are open to public motorized travel and dispersed camping on the Roosevelt/Duchesne and Flaming Gorge Ranger Districts of the Ashley National Forest. The proposed travel plan was compared to the existing travel plans to identify changes from current

conditions. The proposed action identified the following changes to motorized travel; addition of non-system routes, closure of system routes, and identification of current system routes.

The designations will set specific seasons of use, where appropriate, and specify the type of use (e.g., street legal vehicle, OHV's, 4-wheel drives) for roads and trails. The Forest Service will produce a Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) depicting those routes that are open to the public for wheeled motorized use. A consequence of designating routes open for public motorized travel is that those existing routes not designated as open would not be available for public motorized travel.

Presently, it is often difficult to identify which routes are legal and which are not. With the current policy of "open unless posted closed" it is even more difficult to enforce. With the implementation of the MVUM, those roads not shown on the map will be closed to motorized travel. This will help remove the confusion to the traveler and assist in enforcement of the rule.

The final implementation of the MVUM will include consideration of any conflicts with special use permits, easements, or rights of use that may have been unknown or not identified at the time of the proposed action.

1. Changes in mileage to the National Forest Transportation System

The Ashley National Forest currently has numerous unauthorized motorized routes. Many of these routes are highly popular and may be short routes accessing locations for hunting, fishing, dispersed camping, or various other recreation activities. Other routes are longer and may create loops or opportunities for continuous OHV rides that access multiple sites. Many of the existing unauthorized routes are old roads utilized for timber harvest, grazing management, or created by OHV users during the era of allowed cross-country travel. However, other routes have been newly pioneered.

While traveling these numerous routes may be enjoyable to the OHV enthusiast, it is necessary for land managers to consider all recreational and other uses of the Forest, as well as the Forest desired condition. Rising popularity of OHV's has increased the use of existing routes and the demand for additional places to ride. However, this increase has also created concerns of damage to Forest resources and impacts to wildlife. Correspondingly, there is also an increased need for an assurance that there will be places to get away from the sounds and sights of OHV's.

It is our goal to create a travel plan that will include areas for the OHV enthusiast, as well as areas where it is possible to "get away from it all" while protecting our resources. This goal is in accordance to the Ashley National Forest Plan for Land and Resource Management, which states as its first goal for recreation, "*Provide a broad range of recreation opportunities within the land capabilities and according to recognized public need.*" The USDA Forest Service Strategic Plan also identifies these same needs with the planned outcome, "*Provide high-quality outdoor recreational opportunities ... while sustaining natural resources, to help meet the Nation's recreational demands.*"

Roosevelt/Duchesne Ranger District - The Roosevelt/Duchesne Ranger District currently manages and maintains approximately 539 miles of NFS roads and 41 miles of NFS motorized trails. Based on the stated purpose and need for action, the District proposes to add approximately 6 miles of existing non-system routes to the road system (Table 1) and 12 miles to the motorized trails system (Table 2). The District also proposes to restrict motorized travel on approximately 5 miles of NFS roads (Table 3), including the seasonal closure of 1 mile of NFS road, and 1 mile of NFS motorized trails (Table 4). These changes would bring the total NFS roads on the Roosevelt/Duchesne Ranger District to approximately 540 miles and the miles of the NFS motorized trails to 53.

Flaming Gorge Ranger District - Thousands of visitors enjoy the Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area (NRA) each year. Currently, there are hundreds of miles of unauthorized motorized routes that access the Flaming Gorge Reservoir. However, some of these routes are causing damage to natural resources. With thousands of visitors per year, the District recognizes the importance of designating routes that support dispersed recreational use while not increasing resource damage. In consideration of these issues, the District has identified routes most heavily used for reservoir access and that meet these requirements. The District is proposing to add approximately 53 miles of existing unauthorized motorized routes that directly access the reservoir. All of these proposed routes currently exist on the ground and are being used for motorized recreation purposes. The routes that are proposed would be added to the NFS roads and trails inventory and are generally short (averaging 0.5 miles). The majority provides direct access to the reservoir for fishing and dispersed camping.

The Flaming Gorge Ranger District currently manages and maintains approximately 434 miles of NFS roads and 21 miles of NFS motorized trails. Based on the stated purpose and need for action, the Flaming Gorge Ranger District proposes to add approximately 64 miles of existing non-system routes to its NFS roads (Table 5) and 9 miles to its NFS motorized trails (Table 6). Approximately 53 of the 64 miles are located within the Flaming Gorge Recreation Area as discussed in the preceding paragraph. The District also proposes to restrict motorized travel on approximately 0.3 miles of NFS roads (Table 7) and 4 miles of NFS motorized trails (Table 8). These changes would bring the total NFS roads on the Flaming Gorge Ranger District to approximately 498 miles and the NFS motorized trails to 26 miles.

2. Changes in Types of Vehicle Use on NFS Roads and Trails

The Ashley National Forest maintenance level 3, 4, and 5 roads are subject to State traffic laws (36 CFR 212.5 (a)(1)). Level 5 roads are open to highway legal vehicles only and are shown on the current travel maps as *Highway* and *Improved Paved Roads*. Maintenance level 3 and 4 roads are suitable for passenger cars and are shown on the current travel maps as *Improved Roads* that are gravel or native dirt. Maintenance level 2 roads include 4-wheel drive vehicles and are not suitable for passenger cars. These roads are shown on the current travel maps as *Unimproved Roads*. Both improved gravel or dirt and unimproved roads may be managed for street legal vehicles only, or a mix of street legal and non-street legal vehicles (OHV's). This is referred to as "mixed traffic".

The Roosevelt/Duchesne Ranger District proposes to add mixed traffic use to approximately 3 miles of road that are currently designated for street legal vehicles only (Table 9). The Roosevelt/Duchesne Ranger District proposes to change 0.15 miles of road currently designated

as mixed traffic use to allow only street legal vehicle use and allow mixed traffic on approximately 2 miles of motorized trail (Table 10).

The Flaming Gorge Ranger District proposes to add mixed traffic use to approximately 18 miles of road that is currently designated for street legal vehicles only (Table 11).

3. Allowing motorized access to NFS roads that are currently closed

The Roosevelt/Duchesne Ranger District is not proposing to open NFS roads that are currently closed to public motorized access. The Flaming Gorge Ranger District is proposing to open approximately 8 miles of NFS roads and 0.7 miles of motorized trail that is currently closed to public motorized access (Table 12). This includes the removal of a seasonal closure on 6 miles of NFS roads.

4. Change the allowable distance for motorized dispersed camping of a designated road or trail from 300 to 150 feet

The Ashley National Forest currently allows motorized dispersed camping up to 300 feet from a designated motorized route. In order to establish consistency with other National Forests in Utah, the allowable area for motorized dispersed camping will be reduced to 150 feet.

The Ashley National Forest recognizes its unique niche for dispersed camping and plans to continue to offer a multitude of dispersed camping opportunities where appropriate. With this in mind, the Roosevelt/Duchesne and Flaming Gorge Ranger Districts have closely examined routes that provide this opportunity. Some of these routes have been included in the proposals outlined in Item 1 above, and Tables 1 and 2.

In addition, the Roosevelt/Duchesne Ranger District has been inventorying numerous existing short routes that are appropriately used for dispersed camping, but are further than 150 feet from a designated motorized route. Those routes meeting an initial review are shown as "Potential Dispersed Camping Routes under Consideration" on the proposed action map. A determination of type of vehicle class for these routes will also be required. It is anticipated that most routes will be designated as mixed traffic use roads or motorized trails greater than 50 inches.

There are approximately 15 miles of Potential Dispersed Camping Routes under consideration.

Maps describing the existing transportation system and maps and tables describing the proposed action can be found at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r4/ashley/>. In addition, maps will be available for viewing at:

Ashley National Forest Supervisor's Office, 355 N. Vernal Ave., Vernal, UT 84078

Roosevelt Ranger District, 650 W. Highway 40 Roosevelt, UT 84066

Duchesne Ranger District, 85 W. Main Duchesne, UT 84021

Flaming Gorge Ranger District, Intersection of Highways 43 and 44, Manila, UT 84046

RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL

The Responsible Official is Kevin B. Elliott, Forest Supervisor, Ashley National Forest, 355 N. Vernal Ave., Vernal, UT 84078.

NATURE OF DECISION TO BE MADE

Based on the purpose and need for the proposed action, the Forest Supervisor will evaluate the Proposed Action and other alternatives in order to make the following decisions for the specific National Forest System lands:

4. Determine those non-system roads, trails, and areas that should be converted to system roads and trails, and designate as open to the public for motorized travel; and,
5. Determine the allowed season and/ or type of use for those routes open to motorized travel,
6. Determine if any changes in the extent and nature of dispersed vehicle camping are warranted,
4. Determine any restrictions on existing designated motorized routes or changes to non-motorized designation due to environmental or health and safety concerns.

Travel management direction for routes that will not have a change in travel management direction will be shown on the MVUM (pursuant to 36 CFR Part 212). Routes, for which travel management direction is being changed, will be analyzed in the EIS for the Roosevelt/Duchesne and Flaming Gorge Ranger Districts Travel Management Plan.

COMMENT REQUESTED

The public is invited to offer comment at this time. We are running our scoping and comment period concurrently. The comment period ends 45 days from the publication date of the Notice of Intent in the Federal Register. Comments received, including the names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project.

This comment period provides those interested in or affected by this proposal an opportunity to make their concerns known prior to a decision by the Responsible Official. Those who provide timely comments will be eligible to appeal the decision pursuant to 36 CFR part 215 regulations.

Comments should include the information required pursuant to 36 CFR 215.6(a)(3), as published in the Federal Register on July 1, 2007. Send your written comments to: *Kris Rutledge, Project Coordinator, 355 North Vernal Avenue, Vernal, Utah 84078*. Comments may also be hand delivered to the above address during regular business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday-Friday, excluding federal holidays. Hand delivered comments must be time and date stamped at the supervisor's office by close of business on the 30th calendar day following publication of the legal notice. Electronic comments may be e-mailed to comments-intermtn-ashley@fs.fed.us, and contain "Roosevelt/Duchesne and Flaming Gorge Ranger District Travel Management Plan" in the subject line, and must be submitted in MS Word (*.doc) or rich text format (*.rtf). Those using electronic means may submit a scanned signature. Otherwise, another means of verifying the identity of the individual or organizational representative may be necessary for electronically submitted comments or comments received by phone. This is pursuant to 36 CFR 215.6(a)(3)(b).

DATES

The comment period on the proposed action will extend 45 days from the publication date of the Notice of Intent in the Federal Register. The draft environmental impact statement is expected July 2008, and the final environmental impact statement is expected November 2008.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Kris Rutledge, Project Coordinator, (435) 781-5196, Ashley National Forest, 355 N. Vernal Ave., Vernal, UT 84078.

Thank you for your continuing interest and participation in the management of the Ashley National Forest.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Kevin B. Elliott".

KBE: KEVIN B. ELLIOTT
Forest Supervisor