



Process begins to alter Bitterroot travel rules

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By *PERRY BACKUS* of the Missoulian

If you like to walk, ride or drive on the Bitterroot National Forest, it's time to pay attention.

Over the next couple of years, Bitterroot forest officials will decide where people will be able to drive their vehicles and where others can go to find a quiet spot.

Late last week, U.S. Forest Service officials released the first official document offering the public a chance to see where they're headed in managing motorized recreation on the 1.6 million-acre national forest. The document is called a "proposed action." It's essentially the starting point in updating the Bitterroot forest's travel management plan.

The public now has an opportunity to weigh in.

Plans call for offering some public hearings in November before the end of the official comment period on Nov. 23.

A draft environmental impact statement should be available for review next August. The process is scheduled to be complete by May 2009.

That's if it doesn't hit any major bumps along the way.

Travel planning has become one of the most contentious issues facing managers of public lands.

The last time the Bitterroot National Forest completed a forestwide update of its travel management plan was 1978. There have been incremental adjustments along the way since then.

"Our goal is to develop a mix of motorized and nonmotorized opportunities that provide quality experiences and protect natural resources, then clearly illustrate those opportunities on a map that is easy to understand and use," said Bitterroot National Forest supervisor Dave Bull.

The initial proposal suggests some changes for both summer and winter use on roads, trails and areas.

Specifically, it calls for closing 364 miles of roads and trails to motorized travel.

Most of those closures would occur on user-created trails and routes that are now open to motorcycles, but rarely used by them, said Sandy Mack, the Forest Service's project team leader.

"The visitor map shows that some of these trails are open to motorcycles even though they are only a short distance to the edge of a designated wilderness area," she said. "A lot of these trails aren't even used by motorcycles."

The current proposal includes opening some additional links between trails now open for motorized travel in an effort to add some more loop-trail opportunities, she said.

“We're looking for an appropriate mix of recreational use, both motorized and nonmotorized,” she said.

Stevensville District Ranger Dan Ritter is leading the effort.

He wants people to realize this is just the starting point of the process and encourages people to get involved.

“We've worked with several groups throughout the past year or two who have expressed concerns about some aspect of motorized use, and we want to continue this dialogue with our users as we move forward in this project,” Ritter said.

A coalition of Bitterroot hikers, horseback riders, homeowners and conservationists wants the agency to secure opportunities for quiet recreation.

“We believe that everyone can enjoy the Bitterroot National Forest through responsible recreation, but that no one has the right to abuse the forest or ruin other people's experiences,” said Kathy Hundley, member of the Selway-Pintler Wilderness Backcountry Horsemen and the Bitterroot Quiet Use Coalition.

“We all know that the Bitterroot Valley is growing, and with growth comes change,” she said. “The coalition formed to protect our quiet, natural places from growing crowds and noise.”

“Everyone knows that it's no fun to hike or horseback ride where off-road vehicles go,” said Adam Rissien of Wildlands CPR. “In essence, allowing off-road vehicles in a particular area largely precludes quiet uses and excellent fish and wildlife habitat. The Forest Service should deliberately plan for traditional access and activities, motorized recreation, quality habitat and clean water simultaneously.”

Dan Thompson of the Ravalli County Off-Road Users Association said that group hopes the agency will put together a plan that will end the proliferation of user-created routes on the Bitterroot Forest.

To make that happen, Thompson said there has to be enough routes set aside for motorized travel to give the estimated 2,500 motorized recreation users in Ravalli County some options.

Thompson said there may already be enough motorcycle trails open to meet that need, but there aren't enough designated all-terrain vehicle trails.

“There are only 28 miles of officially designated ATV trails on the forest,” he said. “That's why there are a lot of user-created trails. Supply hasn't met demand.”

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