



March 17, 2009

Motorized travel banned in Badger-Two Medicine

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Citing the need to protect unspoiled wildlife habitat and lands with cultural significance to the Blackfoot Tribe, the U.S. Forest has banned motorized travel on almost 200 miles of trails in northcentral Montana's Badger-Two Medicine area.

The decision, announced Monday, is part of a travel plan for that section of Lewis and Clark National Forest.

Few places in the United States rival the solitude, wildlife viewing and hunting afforded by the 130,000-acre Badger-Two Medicine, which tipped the scale in favor of travel by foot, horse and bicycle, Forest Supervisor Spike Thompson said.

"When you talk about the Last Best Place," said Thompson, referring to the state's nickname, "the Rocky Mountain Front is it as far as I'm concerned."

Badger-Two Medicine is located along the Rocky Mountains, beginning at Birch Creek west of Dupuyer and stretching north to U.S. Highway 2.

The collision of mountain and prairie landscapes produces a diverse array of wildlife and stunning views.

"It'll take your breath away," said Kendall Flint, a physician from East Glacier and president of the Glacier-Two Medicine Alliance.

The alliance was among the conservation groups that praised the Forest Service's travel plan decision to restrict motorized use.

Flint said the decision would protect critical habitat for grizzly, wolves, lynx and wolverine, and it would prevent more scarring of the land by illegal cross-country travel, especially near Highway 2 and the area's western boundary.

"I would say it's highly likely we would appeal it," Russ Ehnes, vice president of the Montana Trail Vehicle Rider Association, said of the Badger-Two Medicine plan.

Problems caused by ATVs should be addressed by enforcing existing travel rules and education, not closing an entire area, he added.

Publishing of the decision this week will kick off a 45-day appeals period, Thompson said.

About 35,000 people submitted comments on the Forest Service plans during the public comment phase. "By far," most called for additional motorized use restrictions, Thompson said.

"There was a lot of social conflict between nonmotorized and motorized," said Mike Munoz, the district ranger for the Rocky Mountain Ranger District.

Under new travel plan, 186 miles of trail that had been open to motorcycles and ATVs will be closed,

open only to non-motorized users.

Nine of the 17 miles of road in the area will remain open to motorized users, allowing access to trailheads. But Thompson said those roads are located on the edges and don't access the interior of Badger-Two Medicine as the trails do so, in effect leaving a ban on motorized use.

Snowmobile travel will not be allowed on either roads or trails.

"It's a significant change, no doubt about that," Munoz said.

But Munoz added that the decision is consistent with two previous travel plans the Forest Service released late last year, one for the eastern mountain ranges and a second for the southern two-thirds of forestlands along the Front.

The plan for eastern portions of the forest allows more motorized travel, while the travel rules for the less-developed Front emphasize non-motorized uses.

Besides offering more protections for wildlife, a non-motorized emphasis makes sense because Badger-Two Medicine abuts Glacier National Park and wilderness areas, where motorized use also is banned, Thompson said.

Sites that are historically and culturally important to the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, which abuts Badger-Two Medicine, will be protected by the decision as well, he said.

"This is our homeland," said Keith Tatsey, chairman of the Natural Resource Department at the Blackfeet Community College in Browning.

The area continues to be of great importance to the tribe today, he said. Tribal members pray and gather medicinal roots there, Tatsey said.

The Forest Service made a "great decision" in the travel plan because it will protect areas for future generations, Tatsey said.

A portion of the Badger-Two Medicine is designated as a "traditional cultural district" and eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic places, he said. Last summer, researchers dated a buffalo jump as being 5,000 to 8,000 years old.

In an 1895 agreement with the federal government, the Blackfeet agreed to give up the Badger-Two Medicine area to the United States but what's less known is that the tribe retained rights to use the land for timber, religious purposes, hunting and gathering, Tatsey noted. The travel plan will not affect those treaty rights, the Forest Service said.
