



Bitterroot National Forest

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News Release

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Bitterroot National Forest Releases Travel Plan Decision and Final EIS

Hamilton, Montana (May 11, 2016) – Following nine years of public input and a record 13,400 comments received, Forest Supervisor Julie King has decided how motorized use will be managed on the 1.6 million acre Bitterroot National Forest, as part of a nationwide effort by the Forest Service to address motorized recreation.

Today's release of the Travel Management Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement (Final EIS) and Record of Decision (ROD) is the culmination of a Forest-wide planning process that began back in 2007.

"Today's decision is well crafted and incorporates public comments received throughout the entire process," King stated. "This decision will provide quality recreation experiences for both motorized and non-motorized users, reduce conflicts, and protect the forest's natural resources and wildlife."

The new travel plan designates 2,246 miles of forest roads and trails open to motorized use, nearly the driving distance between Hamilton and New York City. It also permits motorized over-snow use (snowmobiles) on 543,840 acres, approximately one-third of the forest. These areas are designated on a new Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) and Over-Snow Vehicle Use Map (OSVUM) now available free of charge at all Bitterroot National Forest offices. The new maps identify which areas are open to motorized use, the types of vehicles allowed and any seasonal restrictions that apply.

"I urge all motorized users to obtain a free travel map from their local Forest Service office before going out so they know where they can ride," said King. "Riders are responsible to know which routes are open."

The MVUM and OSVUM provide limited geographic detail and should be used in combination with a Forest Visitor Map to more clearly locate and identify routes open to motorized travel. The single purpose of the travel maps is to show areas of the forest open to motor vehicles.

Today's decision:

- Permits motorized use on routes designated as open. This change is consistent with national direction and is a fundamental change from the current situation where travel is permitted except where specifically restricted.

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- Prohibits motorized travel and mechanical transport, including bicycles in Wilderness Study Areas and areas recommended as wilderness by the 1987 Forest Plan.
- Permits motorized over-snow use (snowmobiles) on 543,840 acres.
- Designates 30 miles of new system routes (roads & trails) to the Forest's travel map.
- Allows motorized access for dispersed camping within a 300 foot corridor of designated roads and trails.
- Proposes 10 miles of new trails, including connectors, open to vehicles 50" or less in width (ATV's).

Individuals who drive full-size vehicles will not notice much change from the current situation. Those who will experience the most change are bicyclists, snowmobilers, and summer motorized users who ride in recommended wilderness or in the Sapphire and Blue Joint WSAs. Following a court decision regarding motorized use in these areas, today's decision prohibits motorized/mechanical transport, including bicycles and snowmobiles in WSAs. This includes the closure of Trail #39 (Chain of Lakes) to motorized use.

The WSAs on the Bitterroot National Forest are located on the West Fork, Darby, and Sula Districts and total approximately 102,000 acres. They were designated by Congress and created by the Montana Wilderness Study Act of 1977 to be managed, "so as to maintain their existing wilderness character and potential for inclusion in the National Wilderness System."

Although the Decision and Final EIS are complete, all of the work is not done yet. The Forest is currently working on finalizing the implementation strategy which includes signing, trail improvements, and education and enforcement efforts. Implementation is scheduled to begin this spring and last into the summer.

During this first season, motorized users may discover instances where the MVUM and OSVUM do not match the new Travel Plan or the maps are incorrect. We want to know where these situations occur so they can be corrected for next year. Forms to help you record any errors are available at all Bitterroot NF offices. New travel maps will be printed annually to reflect these ongoing updates.

The ROD, FEIS, and accompanying maps are available electronically at www.fs.usda.gov/bitterroot. Copies are also available for review and on CD at all Bitterroot National Forest offices and at local libraries.

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