

## RECREATION OUTDOORS COALITION

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*Commentary:* The recent editorial in the Record Searchlight presented a good snapshot of the Forest Service travel management planning process on the Shasta-Trinity National Forests and the other 18 national forests in California. The face of motorized recreation as we know it today will change dramatically next year unless the counties and public demand full participation and consideration in the planning process. The reduction of OHV recreation opportunities (especially for non-highway legal vehicles) is significant. The blogs following the article online reflect the public's passion for recreation as well as environmental protection of the national forests.

Travel management planning began in earnest in California's national forests with the implementation of the Forest Service's Travel Management Rule in 2005. The Rule requires the agency to designate roads, trails and areas that are open for motor vehicle use. Travel off designated routes and areas is prohibited to protect natural and cultural resource values. The Chief of the Forest Service desired all forest travel management plans to be completed within four years. The Chief, the Rule, and Forest Service policy all emphasize the need for public involvement and collaboration during the entire planning process, including coordination with local counties.

The first part of the planning process identified all non-system or unauthorized routes (routes the Forest Service had not previously designated or officially added to their system of maintained roads and trails). In general, the public supported route designation and understood the environmental reasons to prohibit cross-country motor vehicle travel. They felt well-designed, sustainable road and trail systems would provide access to high quality OHV opportunities while protecting forest resources. During the inventory phase, the public was asked to submit any unauthorized routes that the agency has missed. This information was provided with the understanding the next step was the design of a comprehensive travel management plan. The plan would include integration with other road managers (State, counties and private landowners) and adjacent land management agencies. Over 1,200 miles of unauthorized routes were inventoried on the Lassen National Forest. The Shasta-Trinity National Forest inventoried 1,252 miles.

The California Off-highway Motor Vehicle Recreation (OHMVR) Division, to date, has contributed over \$12,500,000 in OHV grants to fund travel management planning in the State's national forests. A total of 10,257 miles of unauthorized routes were inventoried in California. However, very few of these miles are now proposed for designation. This was certainly not the Division's intent or expectation when they awarded these grants.

In our area of northeastern California, the Lassen National Forest (LNF) proposes to designate a maximum of 53 miles (or 4.8 percent) of their unauthorized routes in their Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS); the Shasta-Trinity National Forest (STNF) proposes to designate a maximum of 106 miles (or 8.4 percent) of their unauthorized routes in their DEIS. During the design phase, the public requested hundreds of miles of these routes be designated. So far, very few are proposed. The vast majority of all unauthorized routes will be closed to motor vehicle travel when Final Environmental Impact Statements are issued.

Other big changes in motor vehicle use on the national forests include the prohibition of cross-

country travel. This affects over 1 million acres on the Lassen and Shasta-Trinity National Forests. All small OHV riding areas on the Lassen National Forest will also be closed pending future environmental analysis. (The Shasta-Trinity allows highway legal vehicle access below the high water mark at Shasta and Trinity Lakes, and the Iron Canyon Reservoir, which is appropriate.)

Hundreds of miles of unpaved, "passenger car" roads with long-standing OHV use will be closed to non-highway legal vehicles on both forests. The Forest Service in Region 5 (California) cites the California Vehicle Code (CVC) and concern about public safety as the reasons for prohibiting non-highway legal vehicles on their unpaved "passenger car" roads. However, the California Highway Patrol (CHP) does not agree with the agency's interpretation of the CVC. These unpaved roads are not "highways" under Section 38001 CVC. Region 6 (Oregon/Washington) and the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest (RR-SNF) have the opposite interpretation of the CVC than Region 5. Region 6's interpretation is consistent with the CHP's December 19, 2007 letter to the Forest Service. The RR-SNF proposes to designate their forest roads in California for mixed use. Region 5 should comply with CHP's interpretation.

The Forest Service's concern for public safety cannot be validated either. In the past 15 years, there has never been a mixed use accident on the Lassen or Shasta-Trinity National Forests according to Region 5's own accident data.

The Lassen National Forest proposes to allow mixed use on 130 miles of unpaved "passenger car" roads (18.7 percent of 693 miles). The Shasta-Trinity proposes mixed use on 30.4 miles of "passenger car" roads (2.7 percent of 1,113 miles). All segments must be three miles or less in conformance with the CVC. The STNF's maps shows sections of roads closed to mixed use, then short sections open to mixed use, and then other sections of closed road. The lack of connectivity leaves major gaps in the road system for OHV enthusiasts. Even with a map, the proposed travel plan is going to be very confusing to the public and will create a law enforcement challenge.

Motor vehicle access to dispersed recreation sites will also be significantly reduced. The Lassen proposes to designate motor vehicle access to 41.2 percent of their dispersed recreation sites (211 sites out of 504); the Shasta-Trinity proposes just 4 percent (223 sites out of 5,219). While walk-in access to these sites is still available, this is a major change in historical use for motorized recreation. Vehicle parking off designated routes is limited to one vehicle length from the side of the road. If you walk into sites some distance from your parked vehicle, your vehicle is a target for thieves and vandals. There is minimal law enforcement presence in dispersed areas on the national forests. You are on your own. No one feels secure parking their vehicle out of sight of their dispersed camp. If the Forest Service is concerned about public safety, they should look at their "one vehicle length parking" policy. The agency is out of touch with reality and how people feel about their own personal safety in remote forest areas.

Driving on national forest roads and motorized trails is a popular and wonderful form of recreation for individuals and families. Motorized recreation is also a huge revenue generator for Shasta County. With the tough economic times we are facing, we need to support and encourage the creation of a well managed, sustainable recreation program on our national forests. This goal should be embraced by all. When timber sales revenues declined, the Forest Service assured the public and counties that recreation opportunities would increase to replace some of those losses. We do not want to see a \$12,500,000+ planning process result in hundreds of miles of closed roads and OHV areas. We have asked the Forest Service to provide a better balance between public access and environmental stewardship as they prepare

their Final Environmental Impact Statements. These important goals are not mutually exclusive.

The agency’s desire to complete all travel management plans by the end of 2009 is unpopular with the public and does not provide enough time to prepare a good product. The planning process, to date, in California has been a failure. It is a process that promised much, but delivered little. The Forest Service seems to think “it’s too late to do the right thing now.” Region 5 leadership assumes they “own” the national forests. They dictate how the forests will be used with policies that defy logic and common sense (e.g. mixed use, parking, etc.). In fact, the public owns the national forests and the Forest Service is the people’s “manager” of these lands.

Those who live within or near the national forests have the most to lose. The Forest Service has not been a good neighbor in this planning effort. Proposed travel management plans disregard long established patterns of traditional use. The Forest Service has frittered away a lot of time and money in this effort. They are unable or unwilling to collaborate, especially with local communities and counties. The agency should step back, start over, and take the time needed to develop truly collaborative travel management plans. Otherwise, the Forest Service’s already diminished credibility will vanish entirely.

The tables below are a snapshot of the proposed changes from the existing condition on the Lassen and Shasta-Trinity National Forests. In both forest DEISs, Alternative 5 proposes the most opportunities for motorized recreation. They are, in fact, “minimalist” alternatives.

| <b>Lassen National Forest</b>   | <i>Alt. 1 – No Action<br/>(or Current Status<br/>Quo)</i>       | <i>Alt. 5 – Improved<br/>Access and<br/>Motorized<br/>Recreation<br/>Opportunities</i> | <i>Alt 5 - Percent of<br/>Forest Total</i> |
|---|---|--|--|
| Acres available for cross-country travel  | 1,072,500   | 0  | 0%   |
| Acres of open riding areas  | 26  | 0  | 0%   |
| Miles of unauthorized roads and trails added to the national forest transportation system | 1,089   | 53   | 4.8%                                       |
| Number of dispersed recreation sites with motor vehicle access                            | 504   | 211  | 41.2%                                      |
| Miles of ML 3-4 roads proposed for mixed use (all vehicles)                               | Mixed use currently occurs on most 693 miles of ML 3-4 roads 1/ | 51   | 7.3%                                       |
| Miles of ML 3-4 roads converted to high clearance roads to allow mixed use (all vehicles) | Mixed use currently occurs on most 693 miles of ML 3-4 roads    | 79   | 11.4%                                      |

1/ Maintenance level (ML) 3, 4, and 5 roads are called “passenger car” roads or “highways” by Region 5 Forest Service leadership. Therefore, the agency says these roads are subject to the CVC. The public would not refer to unpaved national forest roads as “highways” and most prudent drivers in standard passenger cars with P-rated tires almost always stay on paved roads. Even Forest Service employees do not refer to unpaved national forest roads as “highways.”

| <b>Shasta-Trinity National Forest</b>   | <i>Alt. 1 – No Action (or Current Status Quo)</i>                 | <i>Alt. 5 – Improved Access and Motorized Recreation Opportunities</i> | <i>Alt 5 - Percent of Forest Total</i> |
|---|---|--|--|
| Acres available for cross-country travel  | 1,599,062   | 43,702   | 27.3%                                  |
| Acres of open riding areas  | unknown   | 0  | 0%                                     |
| Miles of unauthorized roads and trails added to the national forest transportation system | 1,252   | 106  | 8.4%                                   |
| Number of dispersed recreation sites with motor vehicle access                            | 5,219   | 223  | 4.2%                                   |
| Miles of ML 3-4 roads proposed for mixed use (all vehicles)                               | Mixed use currently occurs on most 1,113 miles of ML 3-4 roads 1/ | 30.4   | 2.7%                                   |
| Miles of ML 3-4 roads converted to high clearance roads to allow mixed use (all vehicles) | 0   | 0  | 0%                                     |

Sincerely,

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