



Montana Wildlife Federation

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Rocky Mountain Front Travel Plan

by Scott Chehock

The Lewis and Clark National Forest is moving slowly but surely toward unveiling a new travel plan for the Rocky Mountain Front. Rocky Mountain District Ranger, Mike Munoz, stated that the travel plan will be presented "sometime this summer," probably June or July. After considerable analysis, public comments, and input from numerous conservation and recreational groups, District Ranger Munoz expressed that the Lewis and Clark National Forest has created a travel plan which he believes "provides a solid combination of three of the proposed travel plan alternatives." With no single alternative as a template for the proposal, the travel plan committee feels they have tapped into the various concerns, and have addressed a majority of the travel issues. The Rocky Mountain Front Travel Plan will be submitted at the same time as the travel plan for the North half of the Crazy Mountains, the Highwood Mountains north of the Little Belts, and the Castle Range. This will be a hot topic this summer, so here are some points to consider.

MWF is deeply concerned that in America, wild lands are steadily becoming more fragmented, more developed and less wild. There is a steady whittling away from the pool of unspoiled, fish and wildlife sustaining lands, and the integrity of functional ecosystems is increasingly threatened as a result.

Roads and off-road vehicle activity impacts, depending on the amount of activity, wildlife and wildlife habitat through fragmentation, direct collision, noise, increased stress, and habitat loss. It has been well documented that there are higher elk mortality rates in areas of high road density than areas with few roads. A sample of 78 radio-collared elk illustrated that closed roads in elk security areas increased the age structure to include more mature bull elk. It was also found that closed roads double the sex ratio to 20 bulls per 100 cows; in roadless areas, it was shown that there were up to 35 bulls per 100 cows.

This is not saying that all roads or motorized travel on our public lands should be closed. Montana Wildlife Federation has maintained a position that a thoughtful, carefully planned, and well-managed travel network on public lands is necessary in order to ensure fish and wildlife and protect habitat resources. However, travel plans must sustain optimum, quality hunting, fishing and other recreational opportunities, ensure reasonable and appropriate public access, and minimize conflicts among the

varied users of public lands. With this in mind as a springboard for wildlife and hunting concerns, a priority for MWF in advising forest travel planning is that landscape management must be consistent with the carrying capacity of the landscape itself. More importantly, the planning process should look clearly at how 'users' will interface while ensuring that there will be no lasting negative impacts upon our wildlife. For MWF, the ultimate goal is to maintain the conservation of wildlife habitat and security, the promotion of ethical, fair-chase hunting, and the preservation of hunter/fisher opportunity for this and future generations.

Montana includes a complex variety of habitat types and fish and wildlife communities, and a population of public land users with diverse desires and values. Travel planning can and must accommodate these factors without subordinating the habitat needs of fish and wildlife. While guidelines are intended to address travel management on public lands, MWF reaffirms our longstanding advocacy for access to public lands so that the general public may enter upon our publicly-owned lands for enjoyment and recreational purposes. MWF believes that quality hunter opportunity for this and future generations are dependent upon secure wildlife habitat and sustainable biologically healthy and diverse game populations in any general area. To this end, the MWF holds that travel management policies must ensure sustainability of the wildlife resource in a general area as a prerequisite.

Five travel plan alternatives were developed for the Rocky Mountain Ranger District affecting the Rocky Mountain Front. Fortunately, none of the alternatives closed any existing access to public land, and under all alternatives motorized travel would continue to be allowed for at least part of the year on existing main access roads to trailheads, developed campgrounds, recreational cabins, and other facilities.

MWF supported the proposed management scheme of Alternative 3 with all system trails closed yearlong to all motorized travel. We also supported snowmobiling activities on main access roads in order to allow ingress and egress to recreational cabins or other facilities but opposed open cross-country snowmobiling in all areas. Remember, this area supports one of the largest concentrations of elk in North America and the winter range is critical to sustaining these herds. Likewise, we supported game retrieval cart use on trails currently open to this kind of activity, as well as all wheeled motorized travel continuing to be allowed on existing main access roads to trailheads, developed campgrounds, recreational cabins, and other facilities; this would include most short spur roads leading to dispersed campsites. In a nutshell, MWF believes that Alternative 3 does a good job of solidifying the current dominant use of horse and foot travel. It also protects and enhances the Front's core value of being secure, critical winter range and spring habitat that sustains the great diversity of wildlife thriving in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem.

