

North Belts Travel Plan

U.S.D.A, Forest Service - Helena National Forest
Broadwater / Lewis & Clark/ Meagher Counties, Montana

DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

JULY 2003

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SUMMARY

Introduction

This project considers the effects of 5 alternatives pertaining to travel management on National Forest System (NFS) lands in the northern Big Belt Mountains and Dry Range. The effort to revise travel management in the North Belts and Dry Range was originally initiated in 1996. At that time, the project also included vegetation management and noxious weed control efforts analyzed in 5 different alternatives. Work on the travel plan was halted by the severe wildfire season of 2000, and the subsequent restoration activities.

Along with the Cave Gulch Fire of 2000, two other actions resulted in a 'changed condition' for the North Belts/Dry Range areas. First, new off-highway vehicle (OHV) regulations went into effect on NFS lands in Montana, North Dakota, and portions of South Dakota on July 1, 2001 and on June 27, 2003 for BLM lands. This decision applies to all lands, including the Big Belts and Dry Range, where site-specific Forest Travel Plan decisions have not been made. It restricts wheeled motorized travel to routes that were in existence prior to the OHV decision. This policy does not apply to snowmobiles.

Another change that occurred was the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listing of the Canada lynx as a threatened species. Lynx habitat extends across all the Northern Rocky Mountains including the North Belts project area. A conservation strategy has been developed for lynx. It includes guidance on travel management, primarily relating to winter travel routes.

Purpose and Need

The Forest started travel planning in the North Belts/Dry Range to provide for a variety of motorized and nonmotorized recreation opportunities while allowing access for administrative uses, permitted uses, and to private lands within the Forest Boundary. These opportunities and uses are to be provided while simultaneously meeting Forest Plan standards for fish and wildlife habitats, soil and watershed health, and prevention and control of noxious weed spread.

There is a need to reduce the complexity and enforcement difficulties associated with the current travel plan. There is also a need for a transportation system that can be properly maintained. This endeavor responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Forest Plan and helps move the Forest toward desired conditions described in the Plan.

Proposed Action

The original Proposed Action was modified based on the comments received to the public scoping and to correct some map and table errors in the February 2003 scoping. The modified proposed action for the North Big Belts and Dry Range is summarized in this section. The detailed proposed routes and map, closure methods, and erosion and drainage improvement projects are described

under Alternative 5 (Proposed Action) in Chapter 2 with additional information in the Appendices.

The following travel management features of the proposed action are:

- There would be only 2 dates for seasonal route restrictions. Other designated routes would be either open or closed to motorized vehicles yearlong. The restriction dates are:
 - October 15 – December 1 (big game security during hunting season)
 - December 2 – May 15 (winter range protection)

All other resource considerations or unique situations that generate the need for any additional seasonal closures or unique use of closed roads would utilize special orders, contract clauses, or other methods to respond to them. These situations include, but are not limited to, spring thaw, groomed snowmobile routes, game retrieval routes, and disabled access for non-ambulatory users.

- For the most part, big game winter range areas would not be open to snowmobile use. However, designated snowmobile routes through certain winter ranges would be identified. Areas that are open to snowmobiles would be from December 2 - May 15.
- New motorized trail construction (3.3 miles), new non-motorized trail construction (9.7 miles), new road construction (0.9 miles), trail and road reconstruction, and development of trailheads and information kiosks would occur. As part of the analysis process, users have been invited to help identify potential “corridors” where future construction could connect existing routes and provide specific kinds of recreational opportunities. The appropriate analysis and additional public involvement would be implemented at that time.
- Four route types have been identified:
 - Roads: open to vehicles that meet the requirements of state laws (licensing and licensed operator).
 - Motorized trails: open to vehicles 50 inches wide or less
 - Non-motorized trails: open to all types of nonmotorized uses (*note – mountain bikes and other mechanized uses are prohibited in wilderness)
 - Snowmobile Routes
- Specific road rehabilitation projects for proposed open and closed roads are included. A full suite of possible watershed improvement tools, such as culvert replacements/removals, correcting drainage problems, and localized road/trail relocations as well as others, are proposed.
- Vehicle access within 300 feet of an open, designated road would be allowed primarily to access dispersed camping sites, but also for other uses as long as it does not result in resource damage such as rutting,

fording of streams, crossing of wet meadows, new user-created routes/hill climbs, or noxious weed spread. To protect resources, the proposed action features the flexibility to restrict motorized use in the 300-foot zone in local situations.

- To comply with the Canada lynx conservation strategy, the proposed action would not result in a net increase in designated and/or groomed over-the-snow routes and snowmobile play areas in lynx habitat (generally higher elevation spruce/fir forest).
- To guide decisions about access to private lands that are located within the National Forest Boundary, the proposed action includes guidelines that consider private landowner needs as well as protection of resources on the NFS lands.

Project Scope

The geographic scope of the proposed action is limited to those portions of the Helena National Forest south of the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness and north of Boulder Baldy Mountain near Confederate Gulch. The scope also includes the Dry Range. The project area includes lands in Broadwater, Lewis and Clark, and Meagher Counties. The project area does not include Bureau of Land Management lands or private lands.

Decisions to be Made

The Forest Supervisor of the Helena National Forest is the deciding officer for this project. Given the purpose and need for this action, the Forest Supervisor will review the proposed action, other alternatives, anticipated effects, and public input in order to make the following decisions:

- Which areas, roads, and trails are appropriate for what types of public motorized and non-motorized travel?
- Which new travel corridors would be considered for future site-specific analysis?
- Which areas, roads, and trails would have seasonal restrictions to protect resource needs?
- What types of closure and/or rehabilitation methods should be used on yearlong restricted routes?
- What segments of new trail construction and new trailhead facilities are needed?
- Which road maintenance and repairs are needed to address watershed issues?
- What type of access is needed to lands held in private ownership that are located within the National Forest Boundary?
- Would a Forest Plan amendment(s) be required?

Public Participation

Public involvement in this project has been ongoing for several years. There have been numerous newspaper articles, working group meetings, open house meetings, user groups meetings, and field trips. The Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an EIS was published on February 14, 2003. One hundred thirty-nine letters were received in response to the February 2003 scoping. For more details, see Chapter 1.

Issues

Issues on this proposal include general concern about travel management and the proposed action, and concerns about effects the various activities in the project proposal will have on resources or attributes of the area. The Forest Service identified the following significant issues during scoping. These issues helped drive the development of alternatives:

- The need to provide a level of opportunity for motorized activities.
- The need to provide a level of opportunity for nonmotorized activities.
-
- The following issues are also addressed in this document:
- The need to improve facilities and the condition of roads, motorized trails, and non-motorized trails so as to improve recreational opportunities.
- The need to assess each proposed travel plan alternative as to its ultimate understandability, consistency with the balance of the Forest Travel Plan, and enforceability.
- The degree to which each alternative protects or improves watershed conditions and fisheries habitat quality.
- The manner in which the alternatives affect wildlife corridors and linkages.
- The potential for open routes to impact heritage resources.
- The degree to which alternatives provide for visitor safety.
- The potential for open routes to allow noxious weed spread.
- The degree to which travel plan alternatives affect roadless areas/character.
- The economics of travel plan implementation, including new construction, reconstruction, decommissioning of roads, and future maintenance costs.
- Displacement/loss of motorized opportunity to date by previous decisions since the Forest Plan was adopted

Alternatives and Alternative Development

Alternatives were developed based on the purpose and need and scope of the project. These alternatives were also developed by user groups through a series

of public meetings. In addition, issues generated from scoping and internal review contributed to the development of the alternatives. Resource specialists identified areas of concern as well as opportunities for mitigation of effects. Five alternatives were developed –including the No Action Alternative. Briefly, the premise for each alternative is described below. Further details can be found by reading each alternative description in Chapter 2. In addition, other alternatives were considered, but not analyzed in detail. The reasoning behind not considering them in detail can be found in Chapter 2 as well.

Alternative 1, No Action

Under this alternative, there would be not changes to current road and trail management. This alternative is also responsive to comments received stating support for leaving current road management more or less static. This alternative is developed as a basis for comparing other alternatives and is required by CEQ regulations.

Roads and trails available for public use would remain with current use designations as shown on the current Helena National Forest Travel Plan map (2001) and Forest Service roads and trails inventories.

Alternative 2

This alternative was developed to address issues provided by OHV and motorcycle enthusiasts and includes specific routes identified by local motorized user organizations. The overriding strategy of this alternative is to provide designated routes for specific vehicle types, based on terrain and other factors, and, connectedness of routes so that a comprehensive trail riding system would be available.

Alternative 3

This alternative was developed to address issues identified by four-wheel-drive enthusiasts. The overriding strategy of this alternative is to provide designated routes - with an emphasis on maximizing roads for four-wheel driving. Game retrieval routes are also featured.

Alternative 4

This alternative was developed to address issues identified by quiet trails enthusiasts and emphasizes non-motorized uses. The overriding philosophy of this alternative is that forest development roads should be for motorized vehicles and all other roads and trails for non-motorized users. The emphasis of this alternative is to provide access to non-motorized trails via major forest roads.

Alternative 5 – Proposed Action

This alternative was developed by the Forest Service in response to public comment on the 1999 DEIS, the findings of the Roads Analysis which was conducted by the Helena Forest (Draft, October 2002), and in recognition that the number of seasonal restrictions and special routes have led to a complex travel plan that is hard to understand and enforce. It has been modified slightly since the scoping of the project in February 2003 due to errors on the map and tables,

and feasibility concerns with a specific route.

The focus of the proposed action is to provide access for a variety of motorized and non-motorized recreation opportunities as well as access for permitted and administrative uses while maintaining and improving resource conditions.

Comparison of the Alternatives

This section presents a comparison of the alternatives. It provides a comparative summary of how the alternatives respond to the purpose and need for action, how they respond to the significant issues, and displays the projected outputs and other environmental effects that may influence alternative selection. Based on this discussion, the deciding officer and the public should be able to see why some alternatives affect resources/issues differently than others, and what the trade-offs are between alternatives. That is, it should provide "a clear basis for choice among options by the decision maker and the public".

The three tables on the following pages display; design features by alternative; roads, trails, and off-route use by alternative, and then compares the effects by alternative to the issues.

Summary Comparison of Roads, Trails, Off-route Use by Alternative

FEATURE	Alt. 1	Alt. 2	Alt. 3	Alt. 4	Alt. 5
Miles of system roads (including new construction) open yearlong	242 ¹	98 ¹	97	97	176
Miles of system roads (including new construction) open seasonally	136	22	23	40	67
Miles of motorized trail open yearlong to OHVs and motorcycles ² The portion of the trail miles that is motorcycle only is shown in parenthesis.	34 (1.8)	70 (13)	40 (3.6)	0 (0)	13 (0)
Miles of motorized trail open seasonally to OHVs and motorcycles.	22	45	24	0	44
Miles of dual use ³ system roads open yearlong or seasonally	0 (See Ch.3 Recreation)	209	281	0	0
Miles of motorized routes open in Roadless Areas, miles (yearlong or seasonally)	129	134	132	13	63
Miles of nonmotorized system trails ⁴	90	97	90	202	131
Acres of snowmobile areas	114,149	63,519	63,519	8,538	63,519

¹ - Roads open to full size vehicles and OHVs meeting State licensing requirements.

² - Vehicles/riders not necessary to meet state licensing. Motorcycle miles are totaled and include yearlong and with seasonal restrictions

³ - Dual Use roads include those available for full size and off-highway vehicles. Not necessary to meet State licensing requirements.

⁴ - Includes new construction and/or conversion from other route types. Nonmotorized trails open to all forms of nonmotorized use, including bicycles (except in wilderness).

Summary Comparison of Features of the Alternatives

FEATURE	Alt. 1	Alt. 2	Alt. 3	Alt. 4	Alt. 5
Area Closure with designated routes	Yes	Yes, with 425 acre exception	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of different seasonal closure dates	10 (4/15-5/31) (10/15-5/15) (9/1-12/1) (12/1-5/15) (12/2-5/15) (2/1-8/30) (5/16-12/1) (10/15-6/30) (10/15-12/1) (10/15-12/31)	3 (12/2-5/15) (10/15-5/15) (10/15-12/1)	4 (12/2-5/15) (10/15-5/15) (10/15-12/1) (9/1-12/1)	3 (4/15-5/31) (9/1-5/15) (12/2-5/15)	2 (10/15-12/1) (12/2-5/15)
Number of different motorized vehicle/route type designations	5 types	5 types	5 types	1 type	3 types
Provides system roads (dual use) for unlicensed OHV vehicles and riders	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Designated motorcycle routes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Snowmobile use period designated	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
300 feet – Off route use next to open system route	Yes – For camping only, roads and trails	Yes, for roads, trails, camping, woodcutting, and retrieval	Yes-Same as Alt 2	No	Yes for all recreational activities
Watershed improvement projects, trailhead projects	No	No	No	No	Yes
Game Retrieval	No	Yes, 68 miles	Yes, 130 miles	No	No
Year long road closure method and miles	Various 82 miles	Emphasis on rip/seed, some gates, 121 miles	Emphasis on gates only, 86 miles	Gate, rip-seed, recontour, specified by routes, 327 mi.	Gate, rip-seed, recontour, specified by route, 224 mi.
Reopen some currently closed routes, miles	No	Yes, 7.8 miles	Yes, 9.4 miles	No	Yes, 0.7 miles
Dry Range roads	All open yearlong	Same as Alt.1	Same as Alt.1	Designated routes only, restricted 12/2-5/15	Same as Alt.4

Comparison of Effects Table

ISSUES	ALT. 1	ALT. 2	ALT. 3	ALT. 4	ALT. 5
TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM/ECONOMICS					
Safety Concerns ¹	Moderate	High	High	Low	Moderate
COSTS					
Roads					
New Construction (roads)	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$25,000
New Construction (dual use) also includes conversion of other routes to dual use	\$0	\$20,000	\$110,000	\$0	\$0
Decommission	\$0	\$207,000	\$43,000	\$1,816,000	\$378,500
Maintenance	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000
Trails					
New Construction (motorized and nonmotorized, includes conversions)	\$0	\$828,000	\$339,000	\$1,066,000	\$636,000
Decommission	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$93,000	\$0
Maintenance-annual	\$14,100	\$19,800	\$16,000	\$22,000	\$19,000
Signs	\$0	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$20,000	\$40,000
TOTAL COSTS	\$64,100	\$1,199,800	\$633,000	\$3,625,000	\$1,148,500

ISSUES	ALT. 1	ALT. 2	ALT. 3	ALT. 4	ALT. 5
Costs to bring routes to standard ²					
Roads	\$5.3 million	\$4.3 million	\$5.2 million	\$1.75 million	\$3.1 million
Trails	\$0.9 million	\$1.5 million	\$1.1 million	\$1.6 million	\$1.3 million

¹ Safety factors considered include whether or not unlicensed vehicles/drivers are permitted on roads, whether dual use routes are a feature of the alternative, and miles of motorized trail . Safety is compared relatively where high indicates higher potential for injury-causing accident with motorized vehicles

² Costs to bring open routes to national Forest Service standards

RECREATION

Snowmobiles	114,149 acres	63,519 acres (decrease of 50,630 ac.)	63,519 acres (decrease of 50,630 ac.)	8,538 acres (decrease of 105,611 ac.)	63,519 acres (decrease of 50,630 ac.)
Trails:					
Nonmotorized	90 miles	97 miles (increase of 7 mi.)	90 miles (same as Alt. 1)	202 miles (increase of 112mi.)	131 miles (increase of 41 mi.)
Motorized, including (motorcycle)	56 miles (0 miles)	122 miles (increase of 66 mi.) (13 miles)	80 miles (increase of 24 mi.) (3.6 miles)	0 miles (decrease of 56 mi.) (0 miles)	57 miles (increase of 1 mi.) (0 miles)
Dual Use roads	0	209 miles (increase of 209 mi)	281 miles (increase of 281 mi)	0 miles	0 miles
Open OHV area	0 acres	425 ac. available	0 acres	0 acres	0 acres
Off route travel	300 ft. off rds/trails, for camping only	300 ft. off rds/trails, for camping and firewood retrieval	300 ft. off rds/trails, for camping and firewood retrieval	None	300 ft. off roads for all recreational activities
Displacement Motorized Nonmotorized	No No	No Minor	No Minor	Yes – all OHV's	Yes – dual use
Plan Complexity ¹	Most Complex	Complex	Most complex	Least complex	Moderately complex

¹- Complexity is based on closures and vehicle types

ROADLESS AREAS

Change in road, dual use road and motorized trail miles in roadless areas	No change (129 miles)	134 miles (increase of 5 mi.)	132 miles (increase of 3 mi.)	13 miles (decrease of 116mi.)	63 miles (decrease of 66 mi.)
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HERITAGE

Amount of ground disturbance ¹	Lowest	Low	Low	Highest	Low
Public Access	Highest	High	High	Lowest	Moderate

¹-By road obliteration, new route construction, trail conversion, & trailhead and watershed restoration improvement projects.

ISSUES	ALT. 1	ALT. 2	ALT. 3	ALT. 4	ALT. 5
LANDS/SPECIAL USES					
Miles of road on FS land available by vehicle to special use permit holders and not to public	36 miles	42 miles	42miles	36 miles	31 miles
FIRE MANAGEMENT					
* High, moderate, and low ratings are in comparison to each other.					
Risk of human-caused fire starts	High	High	High	Low	Moderate
Access for suppression response and fuels mgt.	High	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate
FOREST RESOURCES					
% and acres of suitable timber lands accessible by motorized vehicle for management	50-55% (26,500 ac.)	Same as Alt. 1 (26,500 ac.)	Same as Alt. 1 (26,500 ac.)	30-35% (16,200 ac.)	45-50% (24,300 ac.)
Miles available for firewood/forest products	410 miles (includes unclassified routes) motorized route open-No motorized opportunity to leave road	330 miles motorized route open – motorized use within 300 feet of roads permitted.	400 miles motorized route open – motorized use within 300 feet of roads permitted.	136 miles motorized route open - No motorized opportunity to leave road with motorized vehicle	242 miles motorized route open – motorized use within 300 feet of roads permitted
SOIL AND WATERSHED					
Road sediment reduction resulting from road decomm. (long term)	0	24-60 tons/yr	0	135-342 tons/yr	20-51 tons/yr
Road/stream interactions reclaimed ¹	0	66	0	354	53
Miles of road or trail reclaimed in sensitive soils and riparian habitat conservation areas	0	24	0	87	29
Overall Watershed Improvement Rating	Low	Moderate	Low	High	Moderate
¹ - road stream interactions include sedimentation, road proximity, and stream crossing factors					
FISHERIES					
Miles of High/Moderate risk roads in fishbearing watersheds	107 miles	105 miles	108 miles	72 miles	94 miles

ISSUES	ALT. 1	ALT. 2	ALT. 3	ALT. 4	ALT. 5
Number of stream-route interactions in fishbearing watersheds ¹	484	516	487	266	383
Trend of condition of fish bearing watersheds	downward	downward	downward	upward	upward
¹ - road stream interactions include sedimentation, road proximity, and stream crossing factors					
RANGE					
Accessibility rating for grazing mgt. and based on relative cost to permittees and government	Low	Moderate	Low	High	Low-Moderate
Potential for increased vandalism to range improvements and trespass on adjacent private lands	High	Low	Moderate	Low	Low-Moderate
NOXIOUS WEEDS					
Acres of new disturbance (through new construction/ decommission) – potential for weed establishment	0 acres	626 acres (includes 425 acres of off route use area)	46 acres	1,122 acres	271 acres
Miles of motorized route available for weed treatment (open plus closed but still drivable)	510 miles	451 miles	475 miles	136 miles	490 miles
WILDLIFE HABITAT					
# of Elk Analysis Areas that meet elk security method of assessing elk vulnerability	7 out of 11	7 out of 11	5 out of 11	10 out of 11	9 out of 11
# of Elk Analysis Areas meeting Forest Plan Hiding Cover standard	6 out of 11	6 out of 11	7 out of 11	7 out of 11	7 out of 11
% of Wolverine natal denning habitat protected	70%	74%	74%	95%	74%
% of Lynx habitat open to snowmobile use (doesn't reflect mi. of groomed/ designated)	35%	29%	29%	5%	29%

ISSUES	ALT. 1	ALT. 2	ALT. 3	ALT. 4	ALT. 5
Travel Corridors	No change	Route decommission improves corridor potential. May be negated by miles of open motorized route.	Open motorized routes, has potential to disrupt corridors	Has greatest potential to benefit corridors due to miles of closure of motorized route	Has some potential to benefit corridors due to miles of closure, although fewer than Alternative 4

CHAPTER 1 – PURPOSE AND NEED

Introduction

The Helena National Forest is proposing to update the Travel Plan in the North Big Belts area and the Dry Range. The current effort is expected to lead to a Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) by spring of 2004.

Background

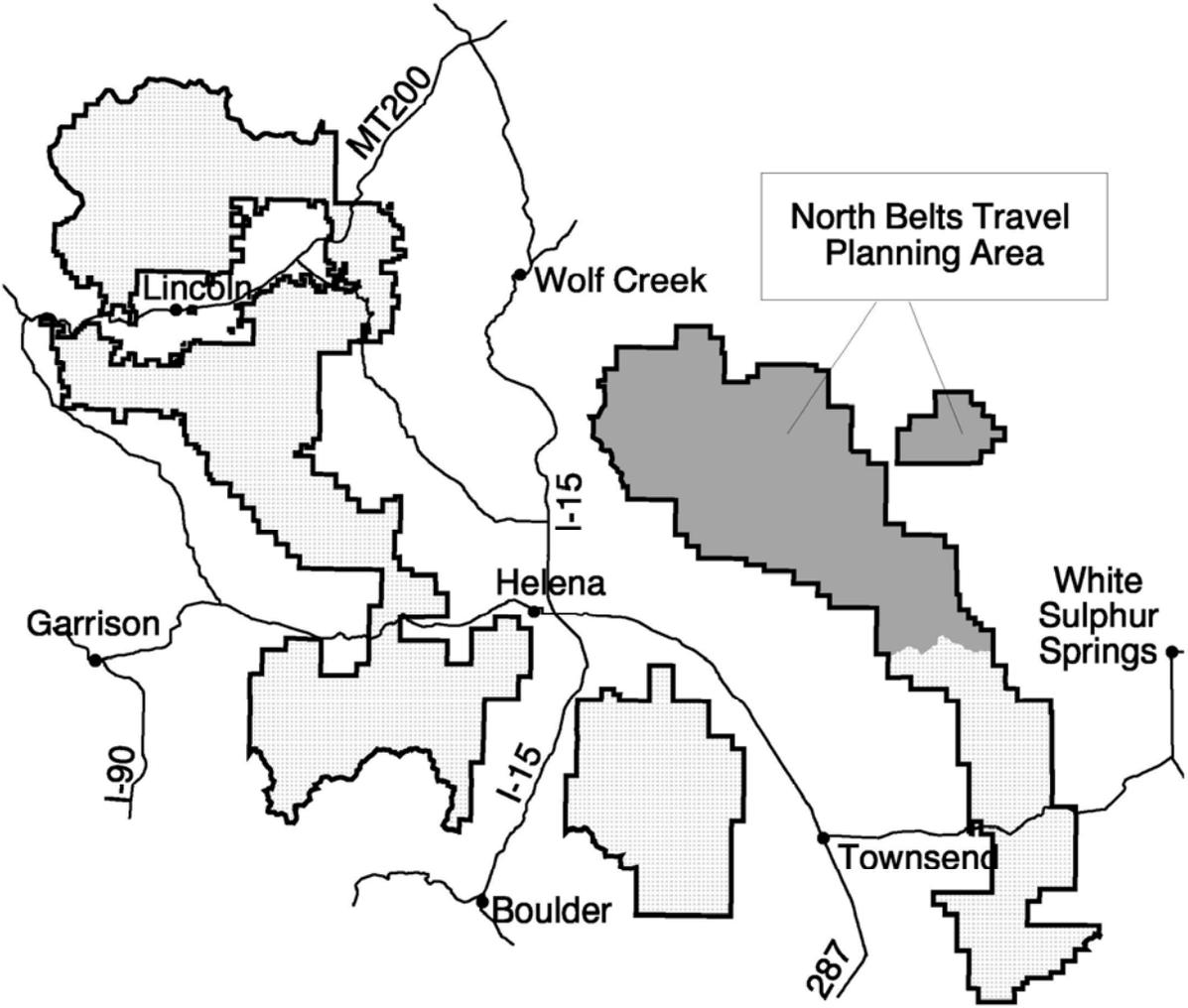
The effort to revise travel management in the North Belts and Dry Range was originally initiated in 1996. At that time, the project also included vegetation management and noxious weed control alternatives. Travel planning on Bureau of Land Management lands in the vicinity of the North Belts and Spokane Hills was also included in that analysis. A series of public meetings regarding that combined proposal was held in 1997 and a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) called the North Belts Travel Plan/Magpie-Confederate Vegetation Restoration Project was issued in March 1999. The DEIS included five travel alternatives, including the existing or no action, the proposed action, and three additional action alternatives submitted by the Frontier Four-Wheelers, Capital Trail Vehicle Riders Association, and the Wild Divide Chapter of the Montana Wilderness Association. Nearly 300 public comments were received in response to the DEIS.

Work on the travel plan was halted by the severe wildfire season of 2000. Wildfires burned about 29,000 acres in the greater Cave, Magpie and Hellgate Gulch areas within the North Belts, as well as tens of thousands of acres in other areas on the Helena National Forest. The effects of the Cave Gulch Fire necessitated that travel, vegetation, and noxious weed planning be reconsidered and evaluated under separate analyses. Efforts to continue with travel planning for the North Belts were delayed during post-fire area restoration activities and burned timber salvage analyses.

Along with the Cave Gulch fire of 2000, two other actions have resulted in a 'changed condition' for the North Belts/Dry Range areas. Effective July 1, 2001, new off-highway vehicle regulations went into effect on National Forest and BLM lands in Montana, North Dakota, and portions of South Dakota. This decision applies to all lands, including the Big Belts and Dry Range, where site-specific Forest Travel Plan decisions have not been made and restricts wheeled motorized travel to routes that were in existence prior to the OHV decision. This policy does not apply to snowmobiles.

Another change that has occurred is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listing of the Canada lynx as a threatened species. Lynx habitat extends across all the Northern Rocky Mountains including the North Belts project area. A conservation strategy has been developed for lynx. It includes guidance on travel management, primarily relating to winter travel routes.

Vicinity Map



■ North Belts Travel Plan Area
▨ Helena National Forest



Proposed Action

The following travel management features of the proposed action are:

- There would be only 2 dates for seasonal route restrictions. Other designated routes would be either open or closed to motorized vehicles yearlong. The restriction dates are:
 - October 15 – December 1 (big game security during hunting season)
 - December 2 – May 15 (winter range protection)
- All other resource considerations or unique situations that generate the need for any additional seasonal closures or unique use of closed roads would utilize special orders, contract clauses, or other methods to respond to them. These situations include, but are not limited to, spring thaw, groomed snowmobile routes, game retrieval routes, and disabled access for non-ambulatory users.
- For the most part, big game winter range areas would not be open to snowmobile use. However, designated snowmobile routes through certain winter ranges would be identified. Areas that are open to snowmobiles would be from December 2 - May 15.
- New motorized trail construction (3.3 miles), new non-motorized trail construction (9.7 miles), new road construction (0.9 miles), trail and road reconstruction, and development of trailheads and information kiosks would occur. As part of the analysis process, users have been invited to help identify potential “corridors” where future construction could connect existing routes and provide specific kinds of recreational opportunities. The appropriate analysis and additional public involvement would be implemented at that time.
- Four route types have been identified:
 - Roads: open to vehicles that meet the requirements of state laws.
 - Motorized trails: open to vehicles 50 inches wide or less
 - Non-motorized trails: open to all types of nonmotorized uses (note – mountain bikes and other mechanized uses are prohibited in wilderness).
 - Snowmobile Routes
- Specific road rehabilitation projects for proposed open and closed roads are included. A full suite of possible watershed improvement tools, such as culvert replacements/removals, correcting drainage problems, and localized road relocations as well as others, are proposed.
- Vehicle access within 300 feet of an open, designated road would be allowed primarily to access dispersed camping sites, but also for other uses as long as it does not result in resource damage such as rutting, fording of streams, crossing of wet meadows, new user-created routes/hill climbs, or noxious weed spread. To protect resources, the proposed action features the flexibility to restrict motorized use in the 300-foot zone in local situations.

- To comply with the Canada lynx conservation strategy, the proposed action does not result in a net increase in designated and/or groomed over-the-snow routes and snowmobile play areas in lynx habitat (generally higher elevation spruce/fir forest).
- To guide decisions about access to private lands that are located within the National Forest Boundary, the proposed action includes guidelines that consider private landowner needs as well as protection of resources on the National Forest System lands.

The original Proposed Action was modified based on the comments received to the scoping and to correct some map and table errors in the February 2003 scoping. The modified proposed action for the North Big Belts and Dry Range is summarized in this section. The detailed proposed routes and map, closure methods, and erosion and drainage improvement projects are described under Alternative 5 (proposed action) in Chapter 2 with additional information in the Appendices

Purpose and Need

Purpose

The initial reasons that the Forest started travel planning in the North Belts/Dry Range are still valid today: to provide for a variety of motorized and nonmotorized recreation opportunities while allowing access for administrative uses, permitted uses, and to private lands within the Forest Boundary. These opportunities and uses are to be provided while simultaneously meeting Forest Plan standards for fish and wildlife habitats, soil and watershed health, and prevention and control of noxious weed spread. This endeavor responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Forest Plan and helps move the Forest toward desired conditions described in the Plan. The Forests have also been directed to utilize the Roads Analysis Planning process to determine the appropriate level of forest roads based on analysis of values and concerns for individual roads. A draft Roads Analysis Plan for the Helena National Forest was completed in October, 2002.

Needs

The Helena Forest Plan was completed in 1986. Since that time, use of forest roads and trails has increased as the popularity and capability of ATV's and snowmobiles has increased. In the intervening time period, off-road travel and user-created routes occurred at higher levels than anticipated in the Plan until the 2001 OHV decision prohibited cross-country motorized travel. There is a need to identify the portions of the existing road and trail network that can be brought up to established maintenance standards to accommodate these uses safely while addressing resource concerns.

The current Helena National Forest visitor map displays 23 different types of travel restrictions. This makes understanding, implementing, and enforcing the travel plan complex both for the users and the Forest Service. There is a need for a more clear, simplified travel plan that is easier to understand and enforce.

Project Scope

The geographic scope of the proposed action is limited to those portions of the Helena National Forest south of the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness and north of Boulder Baldy Mountain near Confederate Gulch. The scope also includes the Dry Range (see attached Vicinity Map). The project area includes lands in Broadwater, Lewis and Clark, and Meagher Counties. The project area does not include Bureau of Land Management lands or private lands.

The administrative scope of the proposed action is described below under "Decisions to be Made". Exceptions to motorized use of roads not available to the general public may be authorized for activities such as search and rescue, noxious weed control, wildland fire response, and access to private property.

Previous travel decisions regarding the Whites Gulch road, the Jimmy's Gulch area, and Trout Creek Canyon Trail-Figure 8 road, will not be re-visited in this analysis. This plan will include the long-term proposal for the roads and trails in the Cave Gulch fire area. The project decision will supercede the temporary, emergency closure orders for the Cave Gulch fire area that are currently in effect.

This travel plan decision will serve as the site-specific analysis needed to supercede the Region-wide OHV decision of July 2001. This analysis will also utilize the data in the Roads Analysis (Draft, October 2002) for the Helena National Forest.

Rights of way needed to implement a selected alternative are identified as part of the analysis, however, acquiring any right of way is considered a separate action outside of the scope of this project because it is, in part, based on the willingness of a private landowner to work with the Forest Service.

Decisions to be Made

The Forest Supervisor of the Helena National Forest is the deciding officer for this project. Given the purpose and need for this action, the Forest Supervisor will review the proposed action, other alternatives, anticipated effects, and public input in order to make the following decisions:

- Which areas, roads, and trails are appropriate for what types of public motorized and non-motorized travel?
- Which new travel corridors would be considered for future site-specific analysis?
- Which areas, roads, and trails would have seasonal restrictions to protect resource needs?
- What types of closure and/or rehabilitation methods should be used on yearlong restricted routes?
- What segments of new trail construction and new trailhead facilities are needed?
- Which road maintenance and repairs are needed to address watershed issues?

- What type of access is needed to lands held in private ownership that are located within the National Forest Boundary?
- Would a Forest Plan amendment(s) be required?

Management Direction

Forest Plan

Management Direction for the project area is found in the Helena Forest Plan (USFS, 1986). The Forest Plan divides the Forest into management areas - each with different goals, resource potentials, and limitations. Management areas are not single, contiguous units; they consist of many individual pieces, each classified with one of the specific management area prescriptions.

The decision for this project must be consistent with the Forest Plan. If the analysis demonstrates that an alternative is inconsistent in some manner with the Forest Plan, two courses of action are available. The alternative can be modified so as to make it fully consistent, or the decision-maker can consider providing an amendment to the Forest Plan to allow the action to occur. The decision-maker is required to provide rationale as to why the amendment is desirable.

Forest-wide goals, objectives, and standards are found in Chapter II of the Forest Plan (pp. II-1 to II-36). In addition to establishing Forest-wide goals, the Plan also provides goals for each of 25 Management Areas (MAs). These MAs are described in Chapter III of the Forest Plan.

The management areas from the Forest Plan included within the project area are: L1, L2, M1, P1, R1, T1, T3, T4, T5, W1, and W2.

Public Involvement

Formal public involvement for the original EIS began with the publication of the Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an Environment Impact Statement in the Federal Register on February 25, 1998. The NOI presented a summary of the proposed action, the purpose and need for the action, environmental issues and other supplementary information.

Public involvement in this project has been ongoing for several years. During the Lower Coxcy Fire in 1996 an introduction presentation was given to members of the Canyon Ferry Homeowners Association on this project. Signs were put up in October 1996 on all major portals in this project area to inform forest users of the upcoming analysis and where to obtain additional information.

An article appeared in the Helena Independent Record on April 1, 1997 inviting people to attend a public meeting to discuss travel management in the Big Belts in Helena on April 2, 1997. A series of articles appeared in local newspapers as follows: Helena Independent Record 9/25/97; Helena National Forest Update 1997; Helena Independent Record 2/21/98; Townsend Star 3/12/98; Townsend Star 3/19/98; Helena Independent Record 3/20/98.

A working group of interested citizens met in eleven public meetings from April 1997 through September 1997 to discuss and develop the proposed action for travel management. In addition, the Forest Service developed three alternatives with information from the Frontier Four-Wheelers, Capital Trail Vehicle Riders Association and the Wild Divide Chapter of the Montana Wilderness Association. These groups submitted proposals and the Forest Service translated those proposals to the alternatives identified in this chapter.

An article appeared in the Helena Independent Record and the Townsend Star newspapers on April 1, 1998 inviting people to attend additional meetings on the project. Open house meetings were held in White Sulphur Springs on 3/16/98, Townsend on 3/18/98 and Helena on 3/19/98. Two people attended the White Sulphur Springs meeting, seven attended the Townsend meeting, and 49 attended the Helena meeting. The project was also briefly discussed with 15 York residents on 3/17/98.

On September 2, 1998, the Broadwater and Lewis & Clark County Commissioners participated in a field trip to review this proposal.

The Forest received 78 letters or telephone calls in response to the first scoping notice, news release and public meetings. All these comments are available for review in the project file. All comments were used to help identify issues for the Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

A Draft Environment Impact Statement was released for public comment in March of 1999. Approximately 600 copies (summary or DEIS) were sent out for public review; copies were posted in area libraries. 301 letters were received in response to the document. Travel related comments have been carried forward in to the new North Belts Travel Project.

A new Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare a 2003 Environment Impact Statement was published in the Federal Register on February 14, 2003. A scoping letter that presented the proposed action was distributed to 616 people on February 14, 2003. The letter also explained that the current scope of the project is exclusively focused on road and trail management. Copies were made of people's previous comments to the project and these were mailed back to them with the scoping document for their convenience. A press release was issued on February 18, 2003 explaining the nature of the project. One hundred thirty-nine letters were received in response to the scoping.

A newspaper article was published in the Helena Independent Record and Townsend Star on February 27, 2003. On February 20, 2003, an article was published in the Meagher County News.

The Forest Service and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) met to discuss travel planning, closure dates, and wildlife issues on March 26, 2003. MFWP representatives from Regions 2, 3, and 4 were in attendance including game wardens, biologists and recreation site managers. Other discussions with MFWP biologists and wardens have occurred during the process.

A presentation was given to Capital Trail Vehicle Association on February 25, 2003 at the Helena Forest's Supervisors Office and 47 people were at the meeting. Duane Harp and Chuck Neal, both with the Helena National Forest, met with representatives of the Montana Wilderness Association in Helena on March 5, 2003. A presentation and discussion session was held on March 3, 2003 at the York Community Hall and 11 people attended. On March 8, 2003 a presentation was given at a Montanan's for Multiple Use meeting where 9 people were in attendance. On March 12, 2003 a presentation was given to the Helena Snowdrifters and 11 people attended the meeting. A North Belts livestock permittee meeting was held on March 5, 2003 to discuss any questions on the travel plan. Six people were in attendance. On March 10, 2003, a North Belts livestock permittee meeting was held to answer any questions regarding the travel plan. Three people attended the meeting.

Numerous discussions between individuals, groups, and Helena Forest staff working on the travel plan have also occurred. Information from these discussions is also found in the project file.

Issues

Section 102(2)(e) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) states that all Federal agencies shall "study, develop, and describe appropriate alternatives to recommended courses of action in any proposal which involves unresolved conflicts concerning alternative use of available resources." These unresolved conflicts, identified by the Forest Service and the public, are the environmental issues related to the Proposed Action.

All public comments were read for content to identify issues and concerns. All issues from the letters were catalogued by subject and a determination made as to how the issues would be addressed.

The Forest Service separated the issues into two groups: significant and non-significant issues. Significant issues were defined as those directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action. Non-significant issues were identified as those: 1) outside the scope of the proposed action; 2) already decided by law; 3) irrelevant to the decision being made; or 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) NEPA regulations explain this delineation in Sec. 1501.7, "...identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not significant or which have been covered by prior environmental review (Sec.1506.3)..."

Significant Issues

The Forest Service identified the following significant issues during scoping. These issues helped drive the development of alternatives:

Issue 1: The need to provide a level of opportunity for motorized activities.

Indicators:

- Miles of road open to wheeled motorized vehicles yearlong or open seasonally

- Miles of motorized trail open yearlong or open seasonally
- Acres open to snowmobile use seasonally
- Miles of designated snowmobile routes
- Loop route opportunities
- Concentration of use caused by displacement from closed routes
- (high-med-low)

Issue 2: The need to provide a level of opportunity for nonmotorized activities.

Indicators:

- Miles of nonmotorized trail available yearlong or available
- Acreage available for nonmotorized recreation that is further than one-half mile from wheeled motorized routes, both yearlong and seasonally
- Acres closed to snowmobile use

Other Issues

The following issues will also be addressed in the EIS. The information gathered regarding these issues will be considered by the decision maker.

- The need to improve facilities and the condition of roads, motorized trails, and non-motorized trails so as to optimize recreational opportunities
- The need to assess each proposed travel plan alternative as to its ultimate understandability, consistency with the balance of the Forest Travel Plan, and enforceability
- The degree to which each alternative protects or improves watershed conditions and fisheries habitat quality
- The manner in which the alternatives affect wildlife corridors and linkages
- The potential for open routes and road obliteration to impact heritage resources
- The degree to which alternatives provide for visitor safety
- The potential for open routes to allow noxious weed spread
- The degree to which travel plan alternatives affect roadless character
- The economics of travel plan implementation, including new construction, reconstruction, decommissioning of roads, and future maintenance costs
- Displacement/loss of motorized opportunity to date by previous decisions since the Forest Plan was adopted.

Tiered and Referenced Documents

This DEIS hereby incorporates by reference the Project Record (40 CFR 1502.21). The Project Record contains Specialist Reports and other technical documentation used to support the analysis and conclusions in this DEIS. Relying on Specialist Reports and the Project Record helps implement the CEQ Regulations' provision that agencies should reduce NEPA paperwork (40CFR 1500.4), that EIS's shall be analytic rather than encyclopedic, and that the EISs shall be kept concise and no longer than absolutely necessary (40 CFR 1502.2). The objective is to furnish enough site-specific information to demonstrate a reasoned consideration of the environmental impacts of the alternatives and how these impacts can be mitigated, without repeating detailed analysis and background information available elsewhere.

Other projects have been analyzed in the North Belts area. NEPA encourages agencies to tier their environmental impact statements to eliminate repetitive discussions of the same issues and to focus on the actual issues ripe for decision. Agencies are also directed to incorporate by reference material when the effect will be to cut down the bulk without impeding the agency and public review of the action. The following documents support this analysis:

- Forest Plan, Helena National Forest
- Forest Plan, Helena National Forest EIS
- Cave Gulch Post-Fire Salvage Sale EIS and ROD
- Roads Analysis Plan (Helena National Forest, October, 2002)

CHAPTER 2 – THE ALTERNATIVES

Introduction

As was noted in the “Background” section of Chapter 1, this effort to revise travel management in the North Belts and Dry Range was originally initiated in 1996.

Alternative Development

Alternatives were developed based on the purpose and need and scope of the project. In addition, issues generated from both prior and current scoping and internal review contributed to the development of the alternatives. Interdisciplinary team members and other resource specialists identified areas of concern as well as opportunities for mitigation of effects.

Alternatives Not Considered in Detail

Watershed Health Emphasis

This alternative entails relocating all roads in valley bottoms that are causing excessive sedimentation and altering floodplain action. This alternative is responsive to public comments regarding watershed impairments that are the result of poor road locations or roads located in shale-type bedrock, such as the Big Belts. Roads or portions of roads that would be considered for relocating in this alternative include Hellgate, Whites, Avalanche, portions of Magpie, Beaver Creek, Confederate-Benton, Trout Creek, and others.

This alternative is not being considered in detail for the following reasons:

- It would entail relocating many of the primary forest access roads. The specifics and complexity of relocating these routes is outside of the scope of this project, including design specifics, acquisition of easements, etc. Note that portions of this issue are addressed in the proposed action with watershed improvement projects and the watershed impacts are addressed in the analysis.
- Relocating these roads could result in loss of access to dispersed camp areas and changes to the connections between trails. Thus, it would not meet another part of the purpose and need for the project.
- Access to private property

Wildlife Alternative

This alternative would entail closing most of the major and secondary forest routes to fully restore maximum habitat for various species of wildlife.

This alternative is not being considered in detail for the following reasons:

- Not responsive to the purpose and need for the project to provide for motorized and non-motorized opportunities in the analysis area.
- Alternative 4 addresses these concepts.

1986 Level of Open Forest Roads Alternative

This alternative includes identification and analysis of an alternative that includes all of the motorized and non-motorized routes that existed at the time the Forest Plan was adopted, 1986. This alternative was identified through review of the public comments generated by scoping. It is not being considered in detail for the following reasons:

Given the information contained in the Forest Roads Analysis planning process, reduced trail and road maintenance budget, and the need to provide a motorized travel system that meets standards while protecting resources, it is not reasonable to fully address this alternative. Also, the previous decisions that have closed roads and trails are considered in the cumulative effects section(s) where applicable. Even though this alternative is not being considered in detail, the changes in availability of motorized routes since 1986 are presented in the Recreation section of Chapter 4, Cumulative Effects.

Alternatives Considered in Detail

The effects analysis discloses the possible negative and beneficial effects from implementing the actions proposed under each alternative. Design features and mitigations have been incorporated into the alternatives to reduce impacts on the area's resources. The following feature and mitigations are an integral part of these alternatives.

Features Common to All Action Alternatives

For purposes of this project, roads are defined as routes that are available to motorized vehicles consistent with state laws. Motorized trails are routes that are available for vehicles 50 inches or less in width, and non-motorized trails are unavailable for motorized users.

Roads are open to vehicles consistent with State Motor Vehicle laws, i.e. licensed vehicle/licensed driver. Some alternatives would also designate certain roads and trails for dual use, which would remove the requirement for licensed vehicle/licensed driver. If included in the decision, dual use designation on Forest Service roads and trails is consistent with State law.

Trails identified as non-motorized are available to persons on foot, horseback or other non-motorized method of travel, including mountain bikes (except bikes are not allowed in wilderness areas).

All action alternatives have as a premise that wheeled motorized use is restricted to designated routes which are open either yearlong or seasonally—the balance of the area is closed to all wheeled motorized use. (Also referred to as area closure with designated routes.) The one exception is that Alternative 2 has an

approximate 425-acre area that would be available for off-route wheeled vehicle use (OHV's).

Designated areas are available for off-route travel for snowmobiles. Areas designated as open to snowmobile use are available 12/2-5/15.

Non-system routes not identified as part of any alternative would be closed with the decision on this project.

All seasonal road restrictions would include some type of barrier to help enforce the closure.

Over time, the agency objective would be to reconstruct and/or maintain all designated open roads and trails to Forest Service standards if they don't currently meet today's standards. These standards are variable depending on intended use. They allow for a range of route conditions from primitive to high standard. Much of the improvement associated with bringing individual roads or trails up to standard falls within the category of light reconstruction/routine maintenance and would proceed as funding is secured. However, portions of some roads and trails would require relocation in order to meet standards. Authorization of some of the actual road or trail relocation work is beyond the scope of this decision and will require a subsequent NEPA decision.

New road and trail construction is considered with this decision and varies by alternative. Most of the new construction would consist of "connector" segments which would tie existing roads or trails together. There are six categories of roads and trails:

- Roads constructed to accommodate licensed vehicles;
- Dual use roads for all types of vehicles (dual use allows use by unlicensed drivers/unlicensed vehicles);
- Motorized trails suitable for vehicles 50" or less;
- Trails designated for motorcycle use only;
- Trails otherwise designated for non-motorized use but which also allow snowmobile use; and,
- Non-motorized trails.

Please note that each individual alternative does not include proposals for all six categories. Construction specifications associated with the road and trail categories are detailed in Appendix D of this EIS.

The Gates of the Mountains Wilderness Area would remain closed to all forms of mechanized vehicles, including non-motorized vehicles (bicycles, carts).

Groomed snowmobile routes are closed to wheeled vehicles over 50 inches wide.

When needed, administrative uses such as noxious weed spraying and other permitted uses such as search and rescue, law enforcement, private land access, etc would continue to occur on closed routes.

Decommissioning of yearlong restricted routes is considered with this decision and varies by alternative.

Mitigation for All Alternatives

Best Management Practices (BMP's) addressing soil, water, and noxious weeds will be applied to all new construction, reconstruction or maintenance of roads and trails. The BMP's are incorporated as a reference item.

In regards to heritage resources, the impacts of road and trail obliteration could be partly mitigated through project redesign. Rather than ripping up the roadbed where heritage sites are now exposed, the FS could place filter fabric atop them, then cover and contour the road prism with gravel and soil. Likewise, new trails and watershed improvements could be re-routed around significant heritage sites. Alternatively, data recovery could precede road obliteration whereby archaeological materials in harm's way would be systematically collected through conventional archaeological methods. These mitigation measures would require review by the Montana SHPO and Tribal historic preservation officers, and would have an attached cost, with mitigation through data recovery being the most expensive.

An inventory of all ground-disturbing projects in the selected alternative would be completed according to the HNF Site Identification Strategy. Affected sites would be evaluated to determine their archaeological or historic value, and National Register of Historic Places-significance. Based on this assessment, site-specific mitigation plans could be developed in consultation with the State and Tribal Historic Preservation Officers.

Mitigation for Alternatives which Allow for Motorized Use within 300 foot Buffers

Alternatives 1, 2, 3, and 5 allow for limited motorized use within 300 feet of a designated open road. In addition, Alternatives 2 and 3 allow for limited motorized use within 300 feet of trails. This provides flexibility in identifying site-specific areas within this 300 foot buffer where motorized use could be restricted or prohibited, depending on resource protection needs. Examples of such resource damage are rutting, fording of streams, crossing of wet meadows, new user created routes, noxious weed spread, or similar resource concerns

Alternative Descriptions

The narrative descriptions which follow are intended to convey the intent that led to the development of the alternatives and the major features of the alternatives. Also, please refer to the alternative comparison tables at the end of this chapter and the alternative maps located in the map packet at the end of the document.

Alternative 1 – No Action

Under this alternative, no new actions stated in the Proposed Action would take place. This alternative is also responsive to comments received stating support for leaving current road management more or less static. This alternative is developed as a basis for comparing other alternatives and is required by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations.

Roads and trails available for public use would remain with current use designations as shown on the current Helena National Forest Travel Plan map (2001), subsequent decisions, and Forest Service roads and trails inventories. Additional closure methods such as new gates could be installed to help fully implement the current travel plan. The current level of snowmobiling opportunity would also remain unchanged. This alternative includes all previous open/closed/new route decisions made within the North Belts area. It does not include the temporary emergency orders placed on the Cave Gulch Fire area.

The existing condition includes the July 1, 2001 Statewide Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) decision which restricted wheeled motorized vehicles to existing roads and trails. The OHV decision also provides for motorized travel up to 300 feet off designated routes to reach dispersed campsites.

Alternative 2

This alternative was developed addressing issues provided by OHV and motorcycle enthusiasts and includes specific routes provided by local motorized user organizations. Features of Alternative 2 include:

The overriding strategy of this alternative is designated routes for specific vehicle types based on terrain and other factors, and, connectedness of routes so that a comprehensive trail riding system is available, primarily between Trout Creek and Avalanche Creeks. Thus, about 27 miles of new motorized trails are proposed, together with one mile of new dual use road. Many of the roads and trails available for motorized use would allow for dual use. About 5 miles of non-motorized trail would be constructed, and 2 miles of existing road would be converted to use as a non-motorized trail. The conversion would not involve any ground disturbance; rather, the roadbed would be allowed to revegetate over time. About 48 miles of road would be converted to motorized trails. This conversion would entail narrowing the tread to 60" in width with about ½ of the existing prism recontoured on sideslopes or ripped/seeded if on flat ground. Approximately 6 miles of existing closed road that is currently revegetated is proposed for motorized use. This will require removal of the vegetation on these roads.

Seasonal restrictions are also adopted with this alternative, including a 10/15 – 12/1 big game security restriction and a 12/2 – 5/15 big game winter range restriction. Designation of routes for specific types of vehicles, such as ATV only, motorcycle only, mixed use on roads and trails (eg., ATV/motorcycle), and four-by-four routes, is another feature of this alternative. A unique feature of this alternative is the identification of an approximately 425-acre area northeast of Canyon Ferry Dam that would be available for off-route vehicle use.

The snowmobile areas and designated snowmobile routes are the same as the proposed action, Alternative 5.

Approximately 68 miles of game retrieval and disabled hunter access routes are also identified. Some retrieval routes would only be in place during the 10/15 to 12/1 big game rifle season. Other roads would allow retrieval from 10/15 to 5/15, which would accommodate big game rifle hunters and winter-time lion hunters.

Travel up to 300 feet off of a designated route, both roads and trails, would be allowed for retrieval, woodcutting and to reach dispersed campsites uses as long as it does not result in resource damage such as rutting, fording of streams, crossing of wet meadows, new user created routes, noxious weed spread or similar resource concerns.

Approximately 6.3 miles of motorcycle only trail open yearlong are identified. In addition, 6.7 miles are open with seasonal restrictions.

For routes closed yearlong, this alternative specifies that if the road has an existing gate in place or if the route is currently revegetated, no other action would be taken. For roads without a gate/not revegetated, yearlong restrictions would be made effective by means of a rip-seed-slash closure method. The ripping and seeding are designed to help restore the roadbed (provide for vegetative cover and water infiltration) and spot slashing near access points is designed to help enforce the closure. About 70 miles of existing road and trails would be decommissioned by means of rip-seed-slash.

Alternative 3

This alternative was developed to address issues identified by four-wheel-drive enthusiasts. Features of Alternative 3 include:

The overriding strategy of this alternative is designated routes with an emphasis on maximizing roads for four-wheel driving. Vehicle-specific routes, such as ATV only, motorcycle only, and mixed use on roads and trails are also included with the four-by-four routes. Many of the existing roads and trails available for motorized use would also allow for dual use. Allowance of dual use on existing roads would not entail any changes to the road beds.

About 13 miles of new motorized trails are proposed, together with 5 miles of new dual use road. A number of currently closed routes are proposed for re-opening. Non-motorized trails are the same as the existing condition, Alternative 1. About 2 miles of existing motorized trail would be converted to allow for dual use, and this would involve some widening of the existing tread. About 21 miles of road would be converted to motorized trails. This conversion would entail narrowing the tread to 60" in width with about ½ of the existing prism recontoured on sideslopes or ripped/seeded if on flat ground. Portions of approximately 11 miles of existing closed road have revegetated, but are proposed for motorized use. This would require removal of the vegetation on these roads.

Seasonal restrictions with this alternative include a 9/1 – 12/1 big game restriction, a 10/15 – 12/1 big game security restriction, and a 12/2 – 5/15 big

game winter range restriction. A number of additional game retrieval opportunities would be provided during various seasons. The 9/1 to 12/1 retrieval date accommodates the entire big game hunting season, including bow season. Some retrieval routes would only be in place during the 10/15 to 12/1 rifle season. Other roads would allow retrieval from 10/15 to 5/15 which would accommodate big game rifle hunters and winter-time lion hunters. The final retrieval date would be from 12/2 to 5/15, again for lion hunting.

Approximately 2.2 miles of motorcycle only trail open yearlong are identified. Another 1.4 miles are open with seasonal restrictions.

The snowmobile areas and designated routes are the same as the proposed action, Alternative 5.

Travel up to 300 feet off of designated routes, both roads and trails, would be allowed for retrieval, woodcutting and to reach dispersed campsites uses as long as it does not result in resource damage such as rutting, fording of streams, crossing of wet meadows, new user created routes, noxious weed spread or similar resource concerns.

The closure method identified in this alternative for the year-long restricted roads is gates, signs or other barriers. No roads decommissioning actions would be undertaken in order that roads restricted year-long would not be rendered unusable for consideration for future use.

Alternative 4

This alternative was developed to address issues identified by quiet trails enthusiasts and emphasizes non-motorized uses. The overriding philosophy of this alternative is that system roads should be for motorized vehicles and all other roads and trails for non-motorized users. The emphasis of this alternative is to provide access to non-motorized trails via major forest roads. About 22 miles of new non-motorized trails are proposed with this alternative and about 91 miles of existing roads and trails would be converted to non-motorized trails. Conversion would entail recontouring or reshaping the road prism on slopes to eliminate all but a single tread. On gentle terrain, the excess tread would be ripped and seeded.

Licensed vehicle and driver for all motorized routes is a requirement with this alternative. Seasonal restrictions include big game hunting and winter security (9/1 to 5/15), winter security (12/2 – 5/15), and spring security (4/15 to 5/31).

This alternative includes snowmobile routes which access two discrete areas for off-route snowmobile use. Snowmobiles would also be allowed from 12/2 to 5/15 on snow-covered roads open year-long for motorized vehicles.

No game retrieval routes are proposed.

In contrast to the other alternatives, this alternative would eliminate motorized travel altogether within the 300 foot corridors from designated routes.

Routes closed yearlong have a variety of closure methods ranging from gates, to

ripping and seeding, to a full re-contour. These are specified by route in Appendix A. About 287 miles of existing roads and trails would be decommissioned by closure methods other than gates. This would include rip/seed/slash to full recontour.

Alternative 5 – Proposed Action

This alternative was developed by the Forest Service in response to public comment on the 1999 DEIS, the findings of the Roads Analysis which was conducted by the Helena Forest (Draft, October 2002), and in recognition that the number of seasonal restrictions and special routes have led to a complex travel plan that is hard to understand and enforce. It has been modified slightly since the scoping of the project in March 2003 due to errors on the map and tables and feasibility concerns with specific routes.

The focus of the proposed action is to provide access for a variety of motorized and non-motorized recreation opportunities as well as access for permitted and administrative uses while maintaining and improving resource conditions. New construction of about 3 miles of motorized trails, 1 mile of new road suitable for passenger vehicles, and 10 miles of new non-motorized trails are proposed with this alternative. About 21 miles of existing motorized trail and 7 miles of existing road would be converted to non-motorized trails. Conversion would entail recontouring or reshaping the road prism on slopes to eliminate all but a single tread. On gentle terrain, the excess tread would be ripped and seeded. About 30 miles of existing road would be converted to motorized trail. This type of conversion would generally involve recontouring about ½ of the existing road prism. Portions of approximately 7 miles of existing road that are currently closed and revegetated are proposed for motorized use. This will require removal of the vegetation on these roads.

Seasonal restrictions are also adopted with this alternative, including a 10/15 – 12/1 big game security restriction and a 12/2 – 5/15 big game winter range restriction. Other designated routes are either open or closed to motorized vehicles yearlong.

Generally, big game winter ranges (based primarily on elevation) are not open to snowmobiles though limited designated routes through winter range are provided in some instances. With this alternative, 16.75 miles of nonmotorized trail would be open to snowmobiles. Other closure periods have either been grafted into these dates or the Forest is proposing to address them as unique situations and utilize special orders or other methods to respond to them. These situations include, but are not limited to spring thaw, groomed ski trails, game retrieval routes, and disabled access.

Motorized vehicle use within 300 feet of an open designated road is permitted, primarily to access dispersed campsites but also for other uses as long as it does not result in resource damage such as rutting, fording of streams, crossing of wet meadows, new user created routes, noxious weed spread or similar resource concerns. Such use within 300 feet of an open designated trail would not be permitted under Alternative 5.

Several areas would be subject to special restrictions within the 300 foot buffer for designated roads. One such area is the meadowland south of the Beaver Creek road for 1.7 miles above the mouth of Beaver Creek. In Magpie Creek, the sensitive reach is located from Coxey Gulch upstream to Sheriff Gulch with about 5.3 miles of road affected by the special restriction. In Avalanche Creek, the sensitive reach is located between Doolittle Gulch and Cooney Gulch with about 7.5 miles of road affected by the special restriction. The special restriction would limit motorized use on the streamside of the 300 foot zone to already established roads and dispersed campsites. Again, fording of streams would only be allowed if the ford is part of a designated route.

About 63 miles of existing roads proposed for yearlong restriction would be decommissioned (rip/seed or obliterate) under this alternative. Please refer to Appendix A for specifics. Other yearlong and all seasonal restrictions would be enforced by means of gates and would remain available on a case-by-case basis for administrative uses.

Other Features of Alternative 5

The following trail and watershed improvement projects are associated with Alternative 5. However, it would be feasible to implement most or all of these projects under the other action alternatives as well. If the decision ultimately is to select a different alternative, the decision-maker has the discretion to incorporate selected features of another alternative such as these watershed and trail improvement projects as long as the decision-maker is well informed and understands the anticipated effects.

Mapping and additional specificity regarding proposed trailhead and watershed improvements is available in the project record.

Trailheads

Trailhead improvements consisting of graveled parking areas for 4 to 6 vehicles would be established at the following trailhead locations: Blacktail (Trail 118); White's Gulch; Springs Gulch; Kentucky Gulch; Wagner Gulch; NaryTime (Trail 234); Timber Gulch (Trail 232); Thompson Gulch (Trail 264); Magpie Meadows (Trail 248); Hellgate Gulch (Trail 264); Camas Ridge (Trail 140); and Brown's Gulch.

One to two-panel interpretive kiosk-style signs describing local features of interest would be installed at the following trailhead locations: Confederate Gulch; Whites Gulch; Benton Gulch; Avalanche Gulch; Hellgate Gulch; Magpie Gulch; and Beaver Creek. Graveled parking areas for 4 vehicles would also be developed at these locations.

A graveled parking area for 6 vehicles, a post/pole perimeter fence, picnic tables, and a toilet facility would be established at Neversweat Gulch (Trail 241).

A graveled parking area for 10 vehicles and a post/pole perimeter fence would be established at the Cave Ridge trailhead (Trail 243).

None of the parking areas exceed 1/2 acre in extent. All but the Blacktail

Trailhead #142, which is being relocated, are existing use areas currently serving as unimproved parking areas. The parking improvements would consist of some leveling of the sites and surfacing with native material to harden the sites.

Geographic name and trail number signs would be installed at all trailheads.

Road and Trail Improvement Projects

North of Trout Creek

Replace the existing culvert on un-named tributary to Indian Cr. on Road No. 138 in Section 17, T12N R1E with a culvert that will pass the 100-year flood in order to protect watershed values.

Replace two existing culverts on Hidden Valley Road No. 4119 in Sections 7 and 18, T12N R1E with culverts that will pass the 100-year flood in order to protect watershed values.

Install a culvert on Beaver Creek Road No. 138 that will pass the 100-year flood where Pikes Gulch enters Beaver Creek in section 27, T13N R1E.

Re-route a total of one-half a mile of the Yellowstone Pipeline maintenance road in Beaver Creek section 32, T13N R1E to eliminate six existing fords.

Watershed Improvement Projects

Trout Creek to Avalanche Watershed Improvement Projects

There are three sediment delivery sites on the Magpie Road No. 425 that would be reconstructed to minimize sediment washing from the road into the creek. In section 31, T11N, R1E, the road drainage would be modified to refocus run-off into vegetation filter strips. In section 34, T12N, R1E, the road template would be reshaped and drainage modified as above.

The Harris Gulch Road is an unclassified road that provides access to a private land inholding. Under the proposed action, the road would be closed to the public, but open to the private landowner. Washed out portions of this road would be repaired, including constructing 200 yards of 8 to 10 foot high retaining walls. Five culverts that are not functioning properly would be pulled and the crossings armored with gabions. All work is located in section 27, T11N, R1E.

A swale in Harris Gulch, section 23 T11N, R1E would be armored with rock to prevent erosion.

Hellgate Trail No. 264— Relocate the trail to the east side of the creek from the parking area to Carpenter Gulch, this is a total distance of one mile. About half of this mile will be new trail and the other half will be on the existing trail location and this will eliminate two existing fords. Construct two trail bridges in this section at the two remaining stream crossings. Above Carpenter Gulch in section 14, T11N, R1E an existing ford will be hardened and two 150-foot sections of the trail would be relocated in the places where it is too close to the stream.

Avalanche Road No. 239 – Raise the roadbed 3 feet in elevation for a distance of 300 feet in the area in section 11, T11N, R1E where beaver activity has caused the creek to flow onto the road.

Thompson Gulch Trail No. 264 - The lower one-quarter of a mile of this trail would be relocated out of the creek bottom where possible. This work will be done in the summer of 2003. The upper portion of the trail would have drainage dips and other drainage structures added where necessary.

Avalanche Gulch Road No. 359 – the road crosses the main creek 17 times and many of these crossings are sediment delivery sites and/or fish passage barriers. Problems at seven of the crossings have been effectively addressed. The remaining ten crossings need work to reduce sedimentation and to provide fish passage. There are also ten places where side drainages cross the road and at each of these sites work will be done to reduce sedimentation or the risk of culvert failure in a flood event.

South of Avalanche Watershed Improvement Projects

Springs Gulch Road No. 1020 - Reduce the sediment delivery from this road by reducing the road width, installing culverts and drive through dips, out sloping, and re-vegetating the cut and fill slopes

Harden the ford in section 15, T10N, R2E across Whites Gulch Creek to the camping area in Millers' Gulch by installing a concrete plank crossing capable of passing a 100-year flood event.

On the Whites Gulch Road No. 587 improve the road surface drainage in seven locations to prevent material from the road surface getting into the stream. This would be accomplished by reshaping the road to inslope it and by constructing a ditch, as well as installation of drain dips. Also replace four culverts that carry the streams on the north side of the drainage under the road. This would include Number Sixteen, No. 2, Upper No. 2, and Horse Gulches.

East of the Divide Watershed Improvement Projects

The Ridge Road, No. 4161 – do surface drainage improvement work on five 500-foot sections of this road. The steep sections erode during wet weather and conveyor belt water bars would be installed every 100' to keep the water from running down the road.

Again, mapping and additional specificity regarding proposed trailhead and watershed improvements is available in the project record.

Comparison of Alternatives

This section presents a comparison of the alternatives. It provides a comparative summary of how the alternatives respond to the purpose and need for action, how they respond to the significant issues, and displays the projected outputs and other environmental effects that may influence alternative selection. Based on this discussion, the deciding officer and the public should be able to see why some alternatives affect resources/issues differently than others, and what the

trade-offs are between alternatives; that is, provide "a clear basis for choice among options by the decision maker and the public".

The tables on the following pages compare design features by alternative, roads, trails, and off-route uses by alternative, and compare the effects by alternative to the issues in a summary form. Chapter 3 provides considerable detail of the effects of alternative implementation, Appendix A provides considerable more detail as to route by route information.

Summary Comparison of Roads, Trails, Off-route Use by Alternative

FEATURE	Alt. 1	Alt. 2	Alt. 3	Alt. 4	Alt. 5
Miles of system roads (including new construction) open yearlong	242 ¹	98 ¹	97	97	176
Miles of system roads (including new construction) open seasonally	136	22	23	40	67
Miles of motorized trail open yearlong to OHVs and motorcycles. ² The portion of the trail miles that is motorcycle only is shown in parenthesis.	34 (1.8)	70 (13)	40 (3.6)	0 (0)	13 (0)
Miles of motorized trail open seasonally to OHVs and motorcycles	22	45	24	0	44
Miles of dual use ³ system roads open yearlong or seasonally (miles)	0 (See Ch.3 Recreation)	209	281	0	0
Miles of motorized routes open in Roadless Areas (yearlong or seasonally)	129	134	132	13	63
Miles of nonmotorized system trails ⁴	90	97	90	202	131
Acres of snowmobile areas	114,149	63,519	63,519	8,538	63,519

¹ - Roads open to full size vehicles and OHVs meeting State licensing requirements.

² - Vehicles/riders not necessary to meet state licensing. Motorcycle miles are totaled and include yearlong and with seasonal restrictions

³ - Dual Use roads include those available for full size and off-highway vehicles. Not necessary to meet State licensing requirements.

⁴ - Includes new construction and/or conversion from other route types. Nonmotorized trails open to all forms of nonmotorized use, including bicycles (except in wilderness).

Summary Comparison of Features of the Alternatives

FEATURE	Alt. 1	Alt. 2	Alt. 3	Alt. 4	Alt. 5
Area Closure with designated routes	Yes	Yes, with 425 acre exception	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of different seasonal closure dates	10 (4/15-5/31) (10/15-5/15) (9/1-12/1) (12/1-5/15) (12/2-5/15) (2/1-8/30) (5/16-12/1) (10/15-6/30) (10/15-12/1) (10/15-12/31)	3 (12/2-5/15) (10/15-5/15) (10/15-12/1)	4 (12/2-5/15) (10/15-5/15) (10/15-12/1) (9/1-12/1)	3 (4/15-5/31) (9/1-5/15) (12/2-5/15)	2 (10/15-12/1) (12/2-5/15)
Number of different motorized vehicle/route type designations	5 types	5 types	5 types	1 type	3 types
Provides system roads (dual use) for unlicensed OHV vehicles and riders	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Designated motorcycle routes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Snowmobile use period designated	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
300 feet – Off route use next to open system route	Yes – For camping only, roads and trails	Yes, for roads, trails, camping, woodcutting, and retrieval	Yes-Same as Alt 2	No	Yes for all recreational activities
Watershed improvement projects, trailhead projects	No	No	No	No	Yes
Game Retrieval	No	Yes, 68 miles	Yes, 130 miles	No	No
Year long road closure method and miles	Various 82 miles	Emphasis on rip/seed, some gates, 121 miles	Emphasis on gates only, 86 miles	Gate, rip-seed, recontour, specified by routes, 327 mi.	Gate, rip-seed, recontour, specified by route, 224 mi.
Reopen some currently closed routes, miles	No	Yes, 7.8 miles	Yes, 9.4 miles	No	Yes, 0.7 miles
Dry Range roads	All open yearlong	Same as Alt. 1	Same as Alt. 1	Designated routes only, restricted 12/2-5/15	Same as Alt. 4

Comparison of Effects Table

ISSUES	ALT. 1	ALT. 2	ALT. 3	ALT. 4	ALT. 5
TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM/ECONOMICS					
Safety Concerns ¹	Moderate	High	High	Low	Moderate
COSTS					
Roads					
New Construction (roads)	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$25,000
New Construction (dual use) also includes conversion of other routes to dual use	\$0	\$20,000	\$110,000	\$0	\$0
Decommission	\$0	\$207,000	\$43,000	\$1,816,000	\$378,500
Maintenance	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000
Trails					
New Construction (motorized and nonmotorized, includes conversions)	\$0	\$828,000	\$339,000	\$1,066,000	\$636,000
Decommission	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$93,000	\$0
Maintenance-annual	\$14,100	\$19,800	\$16,000	\$22,000	\$19,000
Signs	\$0	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$20,000	\$40,000
TOTAL COSTS	\$64,100	\$1,199,800	\$633,000	\$3,625,000	\$1,148,500

ISSUES	ALT. 1	ALT. 2	ALT. 3	ALT. 4	ALT. 5
Costs to bring routes to standard ²					
Roads	\$5.3 million	\$4.3 million	\$5.2 million	\$1.75 million	\$3.1 million
Trails	\$0.9 million	\$1.5 million	\$1.1 million	\$1.6 million	\$1.3 million

¹ Safety factors considered include whether or not unlicensed vehicles/drivers are permitted on roads, whether dual use routes are a feature of the alternative, and miles of motorized trail . Safety is compared relatively where high indicates higher potential for injury-causing accident with motorized vehicles

² Costs to bring open routes to national Forest Service standards

RECREATION

Snowmobiles	114,149 acres	63,519 acres (decrease of 50,630 ac.)	63,519 acres (decrease of 50,630 ac.)	8,538 acres (decrease of 105,611 ac.)	63,519 acres (decrease of 50,630 ac.)
Trails:					
Nonmotorized	90 miles	97 miles (increase of 7 mi.)	90 miles (same as Alt. 1)	202 miles (increase of 112mi.)	131 miles (increase of 41 mi.)
Motorized, including (motorcycle)	56 miles (0 miles)	122 miles (increase of 66 mi.) (13 miles)	80 miles (increase of 24 mi.) (3.6 miles)	0 miles (decrease of 56 mi.) (0 miles)	57 miles (increase of 1 mi.) (0 miles)
Dual Use roads	0	209 miles (increase of 209 mi)	281 miles (increase of 281 mi)	0 miles	0 miles
Open OHV area	0 acres	425 ac. available	0 acres	0 acres	0 acres
Off route travel	300 ft. off rds/trails, for camping only	300 ft. off rds/trails, for camping and firewood retrieval	300 ft. off rds/trails, for camping and firewood retrieval	None	300 ft. off roads for all recreational activities
Displacement Motorized Nonmotorized	No No	No Minor	No Minor	Yes – all OHV's	Yes – dual use
Plan Complexity ¹	Most Complex	Complex	Most complex	Least complex	Moderately complex

¹- Complexity is based on closures and vehicle types

ROADLESS AREAS

Change in road, dual use road and motorized trail miles in roadless areas	No change (129 miles)	134 miles (increase of 5 mi.)	132 miles (increase of 3 mi.)	13 miles (decrease of 116mi.)	63 miles (decrease of 66 mi.)
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HERITAGE

Amount of ground disturbance ¹	Lowest	Low	Low	Highest	Low
Public Access	Highest	High	High	Lowest	Moderate

¹-By road obliteration, new route construction, trail conversion, & trailhead and watershed restoration improvement projects.

ISSUES	ALT. 1	ALT. 2	ALT. 3	ALT. 4	ALT. 5
LANDS/SPECIAL USES					
Miles of road on FS land available by vehicle to special use permit holders and not to public	36 miles	42 miles	42miles	36 miles	31 miles
FIRE MANAGEMENT					
* High, moderate, and low ratings are in comparison to each other.					
Risk of human-caused fire starts	High	High	High	Low	Moderate
Access for suppression response and fuels mgt.	High	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate
FOREST RESOURCES					
% and acres of suitable timber lands accessible by motorized vehicle for management	50-55% (26,500 ac.)	Same as Alt. 1 (26,500 ac.)	Same as Alt. 1 (26,500 ac.)	30-35% (16,200 ac.)	45-50% (24,300 ac.)
Miles available for firewood/forest products	410 miles (includes unclassified routes) motorized route open-No motorized opportunity to leave road	330 miles motorized route open – motorized use within 300 feet of roads permitted.	400 miles motorized route open – motorized use within 300 feet of roads permitted.	136 miles motorized route open - No motorized opportunity to leave road with motorized vehicle	242 miles motorized route open – motorized use within 300 feet of roads permitted
SOIL AND WATERSHED					
Road sediment reduction resulting from road decomm. (long term)	0	24-60 tons/yr	0	135-342 tons/yr	20-51 tons/yr
Road/stream interactions reclaimed ¹	0	66	0	354	53
Miles of road or trail reclaimed in sensitive soils and riparian habitat conservation areas	0	24	0	87	29
Overall Watershed Improvement Rating	Low	Moderate	Low	High	Moderate
¹ - road stream interactions include sedimentation, road proximity, and stream crossing factors					
FISHERIES					
Miles of High/Moderate risk roads in fishbearing watersheds	107 miles	105 miles	108 miles	72 miles	94 miles

ISSUES	ALT. 1	ALT. 2	ALT. 3	ALT. 4	ALT. 5
Number of stream-route interactions in fishbearing watersheds ¹	484	516	487	266	383
Trend of condition of fish bearing watersheds	downward	downward	downward	upward	upward
¹ - road stream interactions include sedimentation, road proximity, and stream crossing factors					
RANGE					
Accessibility rating for grazing mgt. and based on relative cost to permittees and government	Low	Moderate	Low	High	Low-Moderate
Potential for increased vandalism to range improvements and trespass on adjacent private lands	High	Low	Moderate	Low	Low-Moderate
NOXIOUS WEEDS					
Acres of new disturbance (through new construction/ decommission) – potential for weed establishment	0 acres	626 acres (includes 425 acres of off route use area)	46 acres	1,122 acres	271 acres
Miles of motorized route available for weed treatment (open plus closed but still drivable)	510 miles	451 miles	475 miles	136 miles	490 miles
WILDLIFE HABITAT					
# of Elk Analysis Areas that meet elk security method of assessing elk vulnerability	7 out of 11	7 out of 11	5 out of 11	10 out of 11	9 out of 11
# of Elk Analysis Areas meeting Forest Plan Hiding Cover standard	6 out of 11	6 out of 11	7 out of 11	7 out of 11	7 out of 11
% of Wolverine natal denning habitat protected	70%	74%	74%	95%	74%
% of Lynx habitat open to snowmobile use (doesn't reflect mi. of groomed/ designated)	35%	29%	29%	5%	29%

ISSUES	ALT. 1	ALT. 2	ALT. 3	ALT. 4	ALT. 5
Travel Corridors	No change	Route decommission improves corridor potential. May be negated by miles of open motorized route.	Open motorized routes, has potential to disrupt corridors	Has greatest potential to benefit corridors due to miles of closure of motorized route	Has some potential to benefit corridors due to miles of closure, although fewer than Alternative 4