

PUBLIC SCOPING INFORMATION–TRAVEL MANAGEMENT PLAN
for the
SOUTH BELTS, DIVIDE and BLACKFOOT PROJECT AREAS
April 24, 2003

This scoping letter describes the Forest Service proposal to revise the existing travel management on National Forest System lands in the South Belts, Divide, and Blackfoot project areas (see enclosed vicinity map). This scoping letter also describes the reasons (purpose and need) for travel management, the proposed action (how to meet the purpose and need), the decisions that will be made, parameters of the decision to be made, some background information, the project schedule, and how you can participate in the process.

PURPOSE FOR THIS TRAVEL PLAN

The purpose for initiating this proposal is to have a network of open roads and trails that addresses the need for a variety of uses while meeting goals, objectives, and standards for the multiple resources present within the project areas.

NEEDS FOR REVISING THE TRAVEL PLAN

The Helena Forest Plan, signed in 1986, did not fully anticipate the growing popularity of ATV's and snowmobiles. Subsequently, off-road travel and user-created routes were increasing until the 2001 OHV decision prohibited cross-country motorized travel in Montana, North Dakota, and portions of South Dakota. The decision amended the Helena Forest Plan to eliminate this activity and further directed the Forests to prioritize areas for subsequent site-specific travel planning. Therefore, *there is a need to update the Forest Travel Plan to address both motorized and non-motorized uses.*

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

PROPOSED ACTION

The Helena National Forest proposes to implement a travel plan for the South Belts, Divide, and Blackfoot project areas that provides motorized and non-motorized opportunities for both roads and trails. Forest Plan goals, objectives, and standards for other resources were key to the development of this proposed action such as providing adequate seasonal habitat for wildlife and maintaining water quality.

Site-specific, route-by-route detail for each project area is available upon request. The proposed action includes the following elements:

1. Motorized and non-motorized roads and trails are identified and include the following five route types:
 - Roads open to vehicles that meet the requirements of state laws,
 - Motorized trails open to vehicles 50 inches wide or less,
 - Non-motorized trails,
 - Snowmobile routes, and
 - Dual use routes (typically short segments).
2. Potential “connector” local road or trail locations are identified for possible future decisions.
3. Open and restricted routes and areas for snowmobiles are delineated. Big game winter range areas are not open to snowmobile use; however, designated snowmobile routes through winter range are identified.
4. Vehicle access within 300 feet of an open, designated road is allowed primarily to access dispersed camping sites and other uses as long it does not result in unacceptable resource damage such as rutting, crossing of wet meadows, stream fording, or notable noxious weed spread.

To protect resources, the proposed action features the flexibility to restrict motorized use in the 300-foot zone in local situations if unacceptable resource damage occurs.
5. Restricted routes for motorized use fall into one of the following three categories:
 - October 15 – December 1 (big game security),
 - December 2 – May 15 (winter range protection), and
 - Yearlong.

Unique situations generating a need to temporarily modify the travel plan will use special orders or other method on a case-by-case basis. These may include but are not limited to spring thaw, game retrieval, Grizzly Bear emergence, wildlife calving areas, firewood gathering, and non-ambulatory disabled access.
6. Off-route travel with respect to wheeled motorized vehicles is restricted per the 2001 State-wide OHV decision effecting Montana, North Dakota, and portions of South Dakota or as otherwise described in this proposed action.
7. Canada lynx conservation strategy has been applied resulting in no net increase in designated and/or groomed over-the-snow routes and snowmobile play areas in lynx habitat (generally higher elevation spruce/fir forest).
8. Routes that are open for motorized use, restricted yearlong, or restricted seasonally will be signed accordingly. Sites that have unique concerns or high resource values at risk will be gated to increase closure effectiveness. Existing gates will continue to be used where appropriate.
9. 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.

This proposal may not meet all Forest Plan standards such as wildlife security direction. These potential concerns will be fully analyzed in the EIS. If not fully compliant with the Forest Plan, appropriate actions will be taken; e.g. modify the alternative or propose site-specific Forest Plan amendments.

SOME RESOURCE NEEDS AFFECTING PROPOSAL DESIGN

Grizzly bear/lynx habitat – These routes are proposed for increased restrictions due to their location within grizzly bear and lynx habitat. Grizzly bear and lynx are endangered species and further restrictions are necessary to comply with habitat requirements for their recovery.

Increased motorized access – These are routes that were restricted seasonally and proposed for staying open for a longer period of time, particularly after hunting season. One example of increasing access is on the Keep Cool road #1821 which is fairly low elevation and doesn't receive heavy snow accumulations and can be available for firewood gathering into late fall in a normal to low snow year.

Economics – These routes systems have either already vegetated in or has begun to naturally vegetate where motorized is limited or very difficult. The roads and trails do not meet Forest Service standards and the interdisciplinary team has proposed that no additional money be spent for maintenance. These road systems do not provide critical routes to locations that other road systems, of better quality and location provide.

Roadless – These roads/motorized trails were proposed for Restricted Yearlong closure to motorized travel because they lie within an inventoried roadless area. Closure of these roads is necessary to ensure or enhance the roadless character of these landscapes.

Winter range – Routes located within elk winter range are proposed for seasonal restrictions for both motorized and snowmobile use to both meet the Forest Plan standards for winter range, but also to better protect these animals during this period of time.

Wildlife Security – Seasonal closure for the purpose of security is proposed on routes to limit motorized and snowmobile travel during hunting season.

Public access - These routes are means of access to sites that are considered public and opening roads either year-round or seasonally as the weather allows, will allow for better overall access.

Snowmobile Access – In some areas, snowmobiles will be permitted on routes restricted to other motorized use in order to access areas open to snowmobiling.

Hunter access – These routes are currently not open during hunting season and are proposed to increase access into areas for hunters during the general rifle season.

Watershed, Fish, & Soils – These routes have been determined to be the source of sediment contributing to streams that support populations of native fish, particularly bull trout, which is a threatened species and westslope cutthroat which is considered a sensitive species. Roads that include soils as a reason for a proposed restriction are located on sensitive soils that are prone to landslides.

PROJECT AREA DESCRIPTIONS

South Belts: The South Belts project area includes about 82,500 acres of federal land administered by the USDA Forest Service from Mt. Boulder-Baldy near Confederate Gulch south to the Dry Creek watershed, west to the Forest boundary to other ownership and east to the Forest boundary to other ownership (see enclosed vicinity map for additional information.)

Divide: The Divide project area includes about 155,300 acres of federal lands administered by the USDA Forest Service. It includes those National Forest system lands within the 10-Mile Creek drainage and the Little Blackfoot River drainage. Also included are those federal lands that lie north of US Highway 12 to the Helena Ranger District-Lincoln Ranger District boundary near Nevada Mountain. The portion of the Helena Ranger District that lies within the Little Prickly Pear drainage is excluded from this analysis (see enclosed vicinity map for additional information.)

Blackfoot: The Blackfoot project area includes about 321,500 acres of federal land administered by the USDA Forest Service. It includes the Helena National Forest Boundary north of the Scapegoat Wilderness, south to the Lincoln and Helena Ranger District boundary near Nevada Mountain, west to the Lolo National Forest boundary and east over the Continental Divide (see enclosed vicinity map for additional information.)

The following tables are a summary of the miles available or restricted for all three-project areas in the proposed action as compared to the existing condition.

Table 1: Summary Table for South Belts

FEATURE DESCRIPTION	EXISTING CONDITION	PROPOSED ACTION
Roads – Motorized Wheeled Vehicles		
Miles of road open yearlong to motorized wheeled vehicle use	11 miles	58 miles
Miles of road with seasonal restrictions on motorized wheeled vehicle use	136 miles	45 miles
Miles of road with yearlong restrictions on motorized wheeled vehicle use	104 miles	137 miles
Roads and Area – Snowmobiles		
Miles of road available for snowmobile use either yearlong or with seasonal restrictions	122 miles	122 miles
Miles of road with yearlong restrictions on snowmobile use	118 miles	118 miles
Acres available for snowmobile use	15,034 acres	15,034 acres
Roads – Summary for motorized use		
Miles of road open yearlong to motorized use	11 miles	58 miles
Miles of road with yearlong restriction on motorized use	75 miles	90 miles
Trails		
Miles of motorized trail open yearlong or with seasonal restrictions	3 miles	8 miles
Miles of trail with yearlong restrictions on motorized use	53 miles	60 miles

Table 2: Summary Table for Divide

FEATURE DESCRIPTION	EXISTING CONDITION	PROPOSED ACTION
Roads – Motorized Wheeled Vehicles		
Miles of road open yearlong to motorized wheeled vehicle use	337 miles	211 miles
Miles of road with seasonal restrictions on motorized wheeled vehicle use	22 miles	54 miles
Miles of road with yearlong restrictions on motorized wheeled vehicle use	185 miles	265 miles
Roads and Area – Snowmobiles		
Miles of road available for snowmobile use either yearlong or with seasonal restrictions	356 miles	477 miles
Miles of road with yearlong restrictions on snowmobile use	188 miles	53 miles
Acres available for snowmobile use	128,448 acres	100,441 acres
Roads – Summary for motorized use		
Miles of road open yearlong to motorized use	337 miles	211 miles
Miles of road with yearlong restriction on motorized use	80 miles	50 miles
Trails		
Miles of motorized trail open yearlong or with seasonal restrictions	7 miles	0 miles
Miles of trail with yearlong restrictions on motorized use	20 miles	41 miles

Table 3: Summary Table for Blackfoot

FEATURE DESCRIPTION	EXISTING CONDITION	PROPOSED ACTION
Roads – Motorized Wheeled Vehicles		
Miles of road open yearlong to motorized wheeled vehicle use	305 miles	225 miles
Miles of road with seasonal restrictions on motorized wheeled vehicle use	137 miles	118 miles
Miles of road with yearlong restrictions on motorized wheeled vehicle use	114 miles	213 miles
Roads and Area – Snowmobiles		
Miles of road available for snowmobile use either yearlong or with seasonal restrictions	507 miles	414 miles
Miles of road with yearlong restrictions on snowmobile use	49 miles	142 miles
Acres available for snowmobile use	179,933 acres	127,950 acres
Roads – Summary for motorized use		
Miles of road open yearlong to motorized use	304 miles	225 miles
Miles of road with yearlong restriction on motorized use	36 miles	93 miles
Trails		
Miles of motorized trail open yearlong or with seasonal restrictions	66 miles	46 miles
Miles of trail with yearlong restrictions on motorized use	155 miles	175 miles

DECISIONS TO BE MADE

Incorporated in the following decisions is Forest Plan direction in providing a range of quality recreation. This includes motorized and non-motorized opportunities, while implementing multiple Forest land and resource objectives.. The key decision points will include:

1. Which routes and areas are appropriate for which types of public motorized and non-motorized use?
2. Which routes and areas would have seasonal restrictions to protect area resources?
3. Whether or not a Forest Plan amendment(s) would be required?

The identified travel corridor connectors for local route systems will be evaluated and analyzed in future site-specific decisions.

The decision maker for this project is the Forest Supervisor for the Helena National Forest.

SCOPE OF THE DECISION

The geographic scope of the proposed action is limited to those portions of the Helena National Forest delineated as the South Belts, Divide, and Blackfoot project areas (see enclosed vicinity map). These project areas do not include Bureau of Land Management lands.

The administrative scope of the proposed action is described above in “Decisions to be Made”. Exceptions to restricted motorized use may be authorized such as for administrative activities or for private land access, etc.

Since the year 2000 there have been a number of projects that included travel planning. For instance, the “Poorman” and “Nevada-Dalton” areas on the Lincoln Ranger District all have had varying levels of analysis completed in respect to travel management but have not received a decision. These project areas are now a part of this current Forest-wide travel planning effort.

Recent decisions such as “Soundwood” and all the federal lands in the Elkhorn Mountains have comprehensive travel plans that are not part of this Forest-wide travel plan process.

The “North Belts Travel Plan” and “Clancy-Unionville Vegetation Manipulation and Travel Management” projects, which includes travel management within the scope of its decision, will not be included in this Forest-wide travel effort.

There are a number of evaluation criteria that are important to the decision process that are used in comparing the range of alternatives but not used in developing alternatives. For example, some criteria include but are not limited to: 1) The degree to which the action may or may not adversely affect items listed in the National Register of Historic Places..., 2) The degree to which the action may or may not adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat..., 3) The amount of transportation system proposed to be left open and the expected maintenance cost of that system, etc. These items are important in having an informed decision and may become an alternative driver as analysis is conducted and as public input is received.

This travel plan decision will serve as the site-specific analysis needed to replace the Montana, North Dakota, and portions of South Dakota OHV decision of July 2001 and incorporates the data and results of the Helena Forest Roads Analysis.

BACKGROUND

Forest wide travel management planning for these areas was originally proposed in November 2000. Formal public involvement for that planning effort began with the publication of the Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement in the Federal Register in December of 2000. A scoping letter describing that proposal was mailed to over 1,300 individuals and groups, and public meetings were held in the communities of Lincoln, Townsend, and Helena in December 2000.

In response to that NOI and scoping effort many letters, postcards, emails, petitions, and maps were received commenting on the proposal. A private contractor conducted a content analysis to identify the issues and concerns and grouped them into main categories. This content analysis was completed in March 2001.

In 2001, a number of factors influenced the Helena National Forest to set aside the 2000 Forest wide travel planning effort. These factors included the requirements to complete a Forest Roads Analysis and the need to place priority on restoration and timber salvage in response to the severe fires of 2000.

An additional change that influenced the complexity of the 2000 Forest wide travel planning effort was the July 2001 off-highway vehicle regulations affecting National Forests and BLM lands in Montana, North Dakota, and portions of South Dakota. This direction applies to all government lands where a site-specific travel plan has not been implemented and restricts wheeled motorized travel to roads and trails where evidence of motorized use exists.

SCHEDULE

- April 2003 – Scoping document out for public review
- June 2003 – Public comments due
- July 2003 – Draft EIS Forest Travel Plan completed
- July 2003 – Public meetings on draft EIS
- September 2003 – Comments on Draft EIS due
- April 2004 – Issue Final EIS and Record of Decision
- Summer 2004 – Begin Implementation

HOW YOU CAN PARTICIPATE AND COMMENT

We want your written comments on the Proposed Action. The detailed open or restricted routes and area closures to this proposed action are shown on the attached maps. There are several options for you and/or your organization to make comments and participate in the process.

1. If you submitted written comments during scoping of the previous travel plan efforts, your comments have been retained in our files and were considered in the development of this proposed action. The attached comment sheet gives you options for adding to these comments. If you want us to use your previous comments, please indicate this on the comment form included with this mailing.
2. If you have substantive comments to the proposed action, please fill out the attached Comment Sheet and return it to us. Your substantive comment must be specific to this proposed action to be helpful in this process. If possible, typed comments are most readily scanned for content identification purposes and comments can also be e-mailed, using the same general outline as the comment sheet, to: r1_helena_webmaster@fs.fed.us. In the subject line at this site, please include the following: *Attention Public Affairs Officer*.

3. Information about the Forest Travel Plan, including this scoping statement and the comment sheet, will be posted on the Helena National Forest Website at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/helena/projects>.
4. A number of unclassified roads and trails have been identified. However, due to the enormous task and expense of identifying all of them, they will not be recognized unless you bring them to our attention including their type of use and location.
5. If after reviewing the proposal, you have questions and would like to meet with a real person or have someone come to your group meeting, please contact the individual Travel Team Leader listed on the next page for a time and date.

Your substantive response will be included in this analysis process. Your response should be specific and include reasons why you feel it should be considered. The key or significant responses will be used to formulate alternatives, prescribe mitigation measures, or be analyzed in environmental effects.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For those who have been identified as being interested in all or just certain project areas, maps for the appropriate area(s) are included. All others receiving this mailing will receive a vicinity map showing the project areas in comparison to the Helena National Forest and area communities. If you are interested in a more detailed map showing travel routes in a given project area please contact one of the following people for additional information.

<p>FOREST WIDE TRAVEL PLAN COORDINATOR Chuck Neal, Travel Planner Coordinator (406) 449-5201 ex. 277 Helena Forest Supervisors Office 2880 Skyway Dr. Helena, MT 59602</p>	<p>DIVIDE TEAM LEADER Duane Harp, District Ranger or Kurt Cuneo, Divide Team Leader (406) 449-5490 Helena Ranger District 2001 Poplar Street Helena, MT 59601</p>
<p>SOUTH BELTS TEAM LEADER Mike Cole, District Ranger or Beth Ihle, South Belts Team Leader (406) 266-3425 Townsend Ranger District 415 South Front St. Townsend, MT 59644</p>	<p>BLACKFOOT TEAM LEADER Amber Kamps, District Ranger or Martie Schramm, Blackfoot Team Leader (406) 362-4265 Lincoln Ranger District 1569 Highway 200 Lincoln, MT 59639</p>