

Boise National Forest Off-Highway Vehicle Travel Management Project Proposed Action Report

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1 Introduction

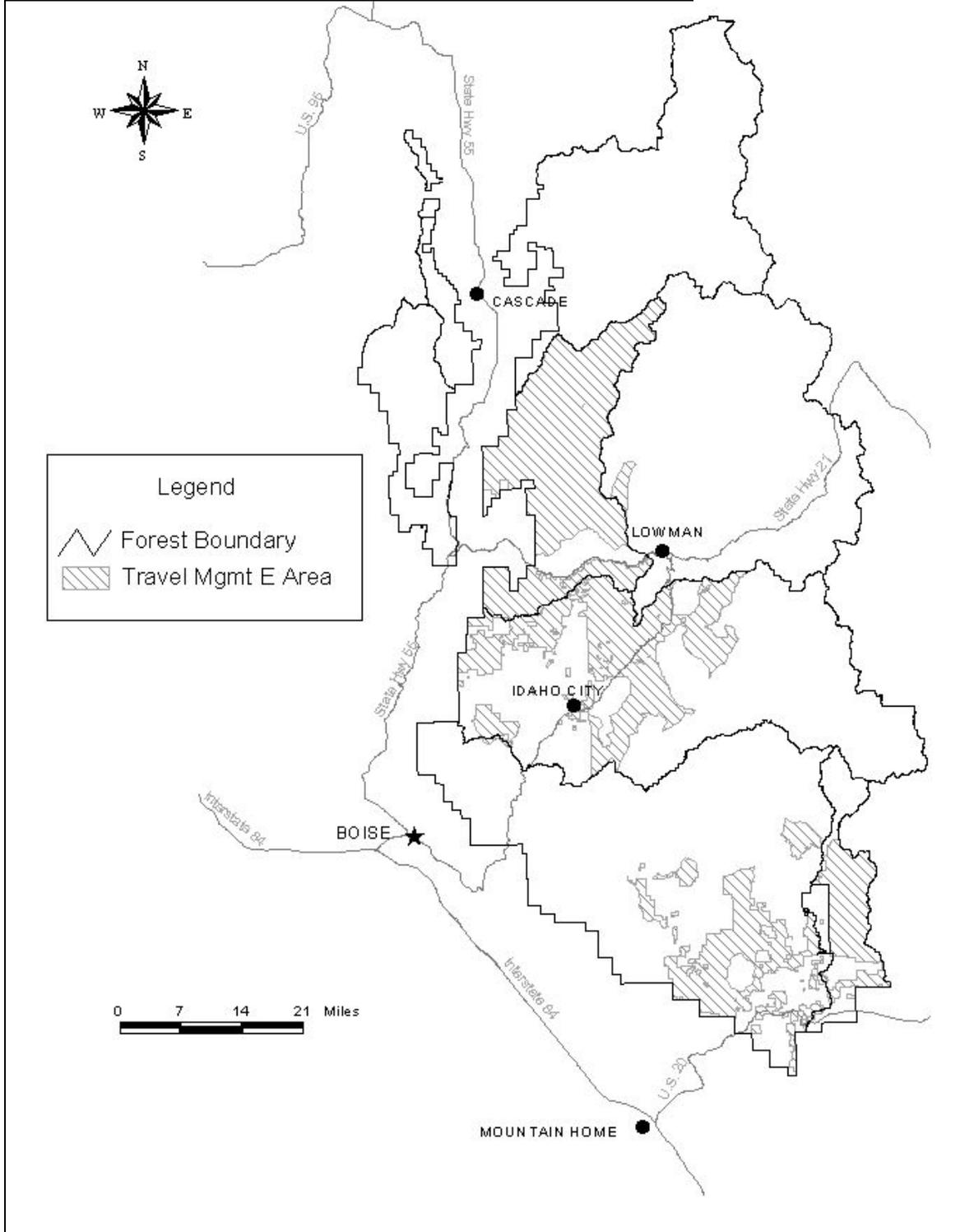
The USDA Forest Service is proposing to restrict indiscriminate motorized wheeled vehicle cross-country travel over 523,863 acres on the Boise National Forest. Motorized wheeled vehicle travel off designated roads and trails would be restricted to other existing established routes as an interim measure until subsequent site-specific planning designates roads and trails for motorized use. The Boise National Forest Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) Travel Management Project is located in the “E” Travel Management Areas scattered across the Boise National Forest, which is located in southwest Idaho (see Figure 1). The “E” Travel Management Areas occur on the Emmett (213,574 acres), Idaho City (159,039 acres), Mountain Home (145,799 acres) and Lowman (5,363 acres) Ranger Districts of the Boise National Forest.

2 Background Information

The current travel management strategy for the Boise National Forest was developed in the late 1980s and was incorporated into the 1990 Boise National Forest Plan. As part of this strategy, several areas on the Boise National Forest were designated to discourage, but not prohibit, motorized travel off designated roads and trails. These areas are designated as “E” Travel Management Areas on the current Boise National Forest Visitor/Travel Map. Prior to that time, motorized travel was unrestricted across the majority (80 to 90 percent) of the National Forest.

Discouraging cross-country travel without actually prohibiting it was deemed an appropriate travel management strategy for the number and type of off-road vehicles most prevalent 15 years ago, specifically 4-wheel drive trucks and off-highway motorcycles. Since that time, there has been a huge increase in OHV use. Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation data shows OHVs registered in Idaho increased from 14,383 in 1992 to 68,521 in 2002, an increase of 476 percent. The majority of this increase is due to the increase in the number of All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) registered. The use of ATVs is especially prevalent during big game hunting seasons. The growing widespread use of OHVs and the ever-increasing number and travel capabilities of ATVs have resulted in access to new areas and extensive networks of user-created travel ways in historically non-motorized areas.

Figure 1. Map of "E" Areas on the Boise National Forest



3 Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to avoid future resource impacts and social conflicts from the increasing use of OHVs in areas that are currently available to motorized wheeled cross-country travel. This would provide timely direction that would minimize further resource damage, user conflicts, and related problems associated with motorized wheeled vehicle cross-country travel, including new user-created routes, until subsequent site-specific planning is completed.



Figure 2. User-created routes on the Boise National Forest in varied trail condition and terrain

Increasing use of OHVs is resulting in expanded areas of concentrated, repeated, regular cross-country motorized use. Cross-country use can impact sensitive habitats, such as wetlands, meadows, and riparian areas. Cross-country travel can also result in user-created travel ways with adverse resource effects (Figure 2). When compared to a professionally designed and constructed trail, user-created travel ways are often poorly located, too steep, and lack adequate drainage. These travel ways tend to concentrate runoff resulting in soil surface erosion. The eroded soil can wash downhill into streams, impacting water quality and fish habitat. The existence of these travel ways can degrade visual quality and provide an effective conduit for the spread of noxious weeds.

Increasing numbers of OHVs and lack of restrictions on indiscriminate cross-country motorized use results in an ever-expanding network of user-created routes that extend deeper into areas that historically provided a non-motorized recreational experience. The Forest's relatively open finger-ridge terrain has the potential to become heavily trailed in this manner. The expansion of motorized access can cause conflicts between motorized-equipped and other recreationists. This conflict is currently most pronounced between OHV-equipped hunters and hunters that hike or ride horses. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game is also growing increasingly concerned that expanded motorized access into areas previously accessed by only a few foot and horse

hunters will increase big game harvest. This could ultimately result in reduced hunting opportunity for all in order to maintain healthy big game populations. The impacts to big game populations and hunting opportunities fuel conflicts between hunters using OHVs and those that hike or ride horses.

This project has two main objectives.

1. Slow or reverse the trend of OHV-caused resource damage to soil, water, fisheries, visual quality, and risk of spreading noxious weeds in the “E” areas of the Boise National Forest.
2. Slow the expansion of motorized access in the “E” areas of the Boise National Forest in order to slow or reverse the trend of OHV enthusiasts, most specifically big game hunters, encroaching further and further into historically non-motorized backcountry.

4 Proposed Action

The proposed action would prohibit indiscriminate cross-country travel and limit motorized wheeled travel in the “E” Travel Management Areas to established roads and trails with limited exemptions.

Off-highway wheeled vehicles would no longer be allowed to indiscriminately travel cross-country in the unrestricted “E” areas. Instead, OHVs would have to stay on existing routes wider than their vehicle. For example, motorcycles could travel on all established routes. All terrain vehicles could travel on a two-track route, but not a single-track route. A pickup truck would not be allowed to travel on a single-track route or a narrow two-track route. No motorized vehicles would be allowed to travel on undisturbed ground.

Specifically prohibited cross-country travel is when:

- The passage of motorized vehicles depresses undisturbed ground and crushes vegetation.
- The motorized vehicle maximum tire track width exceeds the road or trail profile.

Specifically allowed travel on established routes and trails is when:

- Travel takes place on designated roads and trails maintained by the Forest Service or other public agency currently open to motorized vehicle travel. These routes are generally constructed and characterized by a road or trail prism with cut and fill slopes and appropriately signed and numbered.
- Travel takes place on clearly evident two-track and single-track routes established with regular use and continuous passage of motorized vehicles over a period of years. Routes are considered clearly evident where perennial vegetation is devoid or scarce. Grassy, vegetated routes are considered clearly evident where wheeled tracks are continuous depressions in the ground evident to the casual observer.



Figure 3. Proposed allowed use



Figure 4. Proposed prohibited use

Routes must meet the above specifications for their continuous length. Routes newly created under wet conditions or in wetlands and riparian areas should be easily identified as not meeting the specifications because many portions of the route from its beginning to end would not show signs of regular and continuous passage and many areas would still be fully vegetated with no wheel depressions.

The proposed action would provide the following exemptions. Motorized wheeled cross-country travel would be allowed when necessary for the following purposes:

- Emergencies, such as fire suppression and search and rescue.
- Official Forest Service administrative or authorized activities.
- Access to dispersed campsites and firewood gathering areas within 300 feet of a designated National Forest System road or 100 feet of a designated National Forest System trail if open to motorized use.

Designated National Forest System (signed and numbered) roads and trails would continue to have all currently permitted uses and restrictions.

5 Forest Plan Direction

The Forest Plan contains goals, objectives, guidelines, and standards related to recreation access and motorized recreation. This project is designed move toward goals and objectives in the plan, follow guidelines, and meet all applicable standards.

The Forest Plan direction is intended to provide a variety of high quality recreation access while providing adequate protection of other resources. The proposed action attempts to balance recreation access and resource effects in the same fashion as the Forest Plan. The proposed action is designed to maintain a high degree of access and to lower the risk of future resource effects from user-created travel ways. The project objectives related to wildlife, soil, water quality, and user conflicts tie to goals, objectives, and guidelines for recreation access in the Forest Plan.

This proposal would not involve an amendment to the 2003 Revised Forest Plan because it is consistent with the goals, objectives, guidelines and standards in the plan.

6 Future Travel Management Projects

The proposed action to limit motorized wheeled travel in the “E” Travel Management Areas to established roads and trails is an important interim step in travel management planning. It does not replace the long-term need to complete the site-specific analyses necessary to develop quality networks of designated trails that provide for a range of safe motorized recreation opportunities while continuing to protect resource values.

Established roads and trails may be considered for designation as part of the National Forest system through future site-specific travel management planning. While the proposal allows continued use of existing established trails, it does not “adopt” any user-created trails as part of the Forest Service designated road and trail system. This project will not make any determinations on whether the user-created trails are suitable for designation. That suitability decision will be made during future site-specific travel management planning. With public involvement, the Forest Service will continue with ongoing travel management plans and develop new travel management plans for specific areas. Through this site-specific planning, currently non-designated roads and trails will be inventoried, mapped, and analyzed to the degree necessary to evaluate and designate the roads and trails as open, seasonally open, or closed.

7 Further Information

For further information on the proposal and how to submit comments, please contact Jane Beaulieu, Project Leader, or Larry Tripp, Mountain Home District Ranger at 208-587-7961 or email jbeaulieu@fs.fed.us or ltripp@fs.fed.us.