

Road Maintenance and Costs

In some cases vehicle travel can lead to greatly increased road maintenance costs. Funding to adequately maintain roads to full standards is always in short supply. Year-long and seasonal closures are often used to lower maintenance costs. If roads are "open", they need to be maintained at a higher standard for public safety. If the roads involved do not need to be used for a period of time, significant cost savings can be made by storing them in a closed condition or by removing the road if there is no foreseeable long-term need. In some situations, modern logging systems have removed the need for more closely spaced roads that were developed before modern cable, helicopter, and more sophisticated ground based tractor systems were developed. When the forest can be managed without additional roads, it is often both financially and environmentally beneficial to close or remove those no longer needed.

The Future

The Flathead National Forest will continue to balance the needs for road access with resource needs and the available budget to manage the road system. Every decision to close a road or trail is an important one. When such decisions are made, social, economic, and environmental factors must be balanced. Road closures will continue to be a valuable tool of balanced forest management.

Allowable Uses On Closed Roads

Most closed roads are still open to non-motorized use at any time and many are open for snowmobile use in the winter. Many hunters find that walking a closed road increases their chances of seeing animals. In some situations, roads do not need to be closed year round and can provide both recreational and management access for a portion of the year, while balancing a resource benefit during the portion of a year the road is closed. For example, a particular place with a road through it may be very good for elk calving. If the road is closed during the calving season, elk may be more successful in reproducing. After the calving season, the road might be again available for public use, with little affect to the elk during that time of the year.



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WHY ARE SOME ROADS CLOSED?



Roads provide for important management and recreation access of the forest. Access must be balanced with the costs of road maintenance and the environmental effects the roads bring. At times, it is necessary to close roads in order to manage a variety of natural resources, including wildlife, water quality, fish, and noxious weeds as well as to reduce maintenance costs.



**Flathead
National Forest**

Grizzly Bears

Grizzly bears are a threatened species in the lower 48 states. These great bears are a unique and important component of the forest's ecosystem. Due to their threatened status, grizzly bears are protected under the Endangered Species Act. Research on the Flathead National Forest has demonstrated that grizzly bear mortality is directly influenced by road access. In addition, when total road density (the number of miles of road within a square mile) in an area reaches high levels, grizzly bear use significantly declines. Research has also shown that female grizzly bears are most successful rearing cubs in areas away from high numbers of roads with motorized activity. In some areas important to grizzly bears, gates or berms are used to establish year-long closures that create more secure grizzly bear habitat. Road reclamation (returning the road to near natural conditions) may be used to lower the total road density and create long-term secure grizzly bear habitat in some situations.



Big Game

Research throughout the West has shown that many big game species are affected by roads. Road closures may be used to provide suitable security for birthing and rearing of young, winter range, a variety of hunting experiences, and manage the rate of harvest of big game.

Fish

Roads can affect fish and fish habitat when sediment from the road and ditch is washed into streams, when culverts block fish passage, or when culverts alter the stream hydrology. Closing a road with gates or earth berms may be used to reduce sediment created by vehicle traffic that can affect fish. At times, culvert removal may be the appropriate way to reduce long-term effects and cumulative effects from large numbers of stream crossings in a watershed that is important to fish.



Water Quality

Water quality is reduced when sediment enters streams from roads and ditches. Vehicle travel on wet roads can increase sediment production. For example, in spring, roads may be very susceptible to rutting as the winter's ice and snow begin to melt. Road closures can prevent rutting from occurring by keeping vehicles off extremely wet road beds. Prevention of this type of rutting reduces the cost of road maintenance and can keep mud out of streams. At times, on roads that are not frequently used, removal of culverts can reduce the chance that the culverts become blocked with debris which can then cause washouts. In such situations, closure of the road, removal of culverts to "store" the road, or decommissioning of the road may be necessary to maintain water quality.



Weeds

Forest managers may close roads in certain areas to prevent the spread of noxious weeds by vehicles, particularly in areas where concentrations of weeds are known to exist.