

30 Day Opportunity To Comment on Proposed Action

USDA Forest Service, Sawtooth National Forest Fairfield, Ketchum and Minidoka Districts October 4, 2006

TRAVEL PLAN REVISION:

ELIMINATION OF MOTORIZED CROSS-COUNTRY TRAVEL AND MOTORIZED ROUTE DESIGNATION

Background

Most Sawtooth Forest visitors use motor vehicles to access the Forest, whether for recreational sightseeing; camping and hiking; hunting and fishing; commercial purposes such as logging, mining, and grazing; administration of utilities and other land uses; outfitting and guiding; or the many other multiple uses of the Sawtooth National Forest. For many visitors, motor vehicles also represent an integral part of their recreational experience. People come to the Sawtooth Forest to ride on roads and trails in pickup trucks, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), motorcycles, and a variety of other conveyances. Motor vehicles are a legitimate and appropriate way for people to enjoy their National Forests—in the right places, at the right time, and with proper management.

The Sawtooth National Forest “Visitor/Travel Plan” (Travel Plan) has been in place since 1989. The purpose of a Travel Plan is to show visitors the system of roads and trails they may use, as well as how and when they may use them. The Sawtooth Forest transportation system ranges from paved roads designed for passenger cars to single-track trails used by motorcycles. Many roads designed for high-clearance vehicles (such as a sport utility vehicle) also allow use by ATVs, and other off-highway vehicles (OHVs) not normally found on city streets. Almost all Sawtooth Forest trails serve non-motorized users, including hikers, bicyclists, and equestrians, alone or in combination with motorized users. Sawtooth Forest roads often accept non-motorized use as well.

In addition to this managed system of roads and trails, portions of the Sawtooth Forest contain a significant number of user-created roads and trails. These routes are concentrated in areas where cross-country travel by motor vehicles is currently allowed, and often include dense, braided networks of criss-crossing paths. It has been 17 years since the last comprehensive inventory of user-created routes on the Sawtooth Forest. Continued increases in such routes has made a definitive inventory difficult to document.

Consistent with the 2003 revised Sawtooth Forest Plan, the Forest has initiated phased site-specific travel management planning (REOB17). This first phase includes revising the current *summer* Sawtooth National Forest Visitor/Travel Plan (Travel Plan) to *eliminate all cross-country travel* on the Forest and *restrict motor vehicle use to designated roads and trails*. This analysis will focus on route designation in only those specific areas and is not intended to be a comprehensive Forest-wide travel management planning effort. The Forest will be prioritizing future travel management planning based on areas where the most significant user conflicts and resource concerns are occurring.

Proposed Action: What is being proposed?

Currently, there are areas of the Sawtooth National Forest that are open to cross country motorized travel. The Forest proposes to revise the current summer Sawtooth National Forest Visitor/Travel Plan (Travel Plan) to restrict motor vehicle use to designated roads and trails. Proposed revisions include:

1. Designation for use of certain existing roads and trails that physically exist on the ground, are receiving use, but are not currently on the Sawtooth Forest Transportation System of roads and trails. Proposed revision would add additional roads and trails to the transportation system.
2. Changes in type of use or season of use to the current Sawtooth Forest Transportation System of roads and trails.
3. Disclosing proposed trails or roads that are identified for future planning. No new trails or roads will be constructed under this proposed revision. Any new construction or minor reroutes required to bring trails up to standard will require site specific project level National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis before they can be added to the system.
4. Closure of a limited number of system trails and roads that are redundant, not needed for administration, or are causing resource impacts.
5. Designation of dispersed camping sites or corridors. Dispersed camping would be allowed within 300 feet of all designated roads or 100 feet of designated trails (see table B for exceptions).
6. Elimination of cross-country motorized travel throughout the entire area.
7. Disclosure that Big Game retrieval using motorized vehicles will not be authorized off of designated roads or trails.
8. Allowance for vehicles to park off a designated road one vehicle width for purposes other than camping.
9. Designation of some roads as “mixed use”; open to both highway legal vehicles and ATV’s.

Maps identifying the location of each proposal are currently available for review at the Fairfield, Ketchum, and Minidoka Ranger District offices and at the Sawtooth Forest Supervisor’s Office. In addition to displaying the proposed changes to the Travel Plan, the maps reflect the entire designated trail system within the Fairfield, Ketchum and Minidoka Ranger Districts. Refer to the attached Table A for a written explanation of each proposal. (Please see the Additional Information section below for directions to request copies of the maps.)

This proposal only applies to changes and additions to the current travel plan addressed in this document. Previous travel management decisions made through Forest Planning other NEPA decisions, or special orders will remain in effect until specifically analyzed or unless changes to them are being proposed.

Activities that are exempt from the Final Rule for Travel Plan Management include aircraft, watercraft, over-snow vehicles, limited administrative use, emergency and law enforcement response, national defense purposes and uses specifically authorized under a written authorization (e.g. firewood cutting permit, grazing permit, Special Use authorization).

Purpose and Need: Why Are We Proposing This Project?

The Sawtooth National Forest is proposing to revise the current summer Sawtooth National Forest Travel Plan to restrict motor vehicle use to designated roads and trails. This proposal was in part, generated in response to the Travel Management; Designated Routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use; Final Rule published November 9, 2005. This national final rule requires the Forest Service, with input from the public, to prepare a Motor Vehicle Use Map designating those roads, trails and areas that will be open to motorized travel. In addition, the 2003 revised Sawtooth Forest Plan includes direction to manage motorized and non-motorized travel to provide for public safety; meet resource objectives and access needs; mitigate road and trail damage; and minimize maintenance costs and user conflicts.

The purpose of this analysis is to revise portions of the current 1989 Sawtooth Forest Travel Plan by designating a system of roads and trails on portions of the Sawtooth National Forest that currently allow cross-country motorized travel. Cross-country motorized travel would no longer be allowed in these areas.

The Sawtooth Forest contains a significant number of user-created roads and trails. These routes are concentrated in areas where cross-country travel by motor vehicles is currently allowed, and often include dense, braided networks of criss-crossing paths. It has been 17 years since the last comprehensive inventory of user-created routes on the Sawtooth Forest. Continued increases in such routes has made a definitive inventory difficult to document. Idaho, and the counties surrounding the Sawtooth National Forest, has experienced significant increase in ATV registration. The Forest is receiving increased motorized use that has resulted in increased user conflicts, public safety concerns, resource damage, and wildlife related impacts.

The need for this action is to minimize damage to soil, water, wildlife, vegetation, and other forest resources in accordance with the 2003 Revised Sawtooth Forest Plan; to minimize conflicts between different types of users; and to implement 36 CFR Parts 212, 251, 261 and 295: Final Rule for Travel Management; Designated routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use. (11/9/2005). This final rule requires the elimination of cross-country motorized use on all National Forest System (NFS) lands.

Area to be Analyzed

The project area to be analyzed includes areas on the Travel Plan shown as “G” and “H” Areas on the Ketchum and on the Fairfield Ranger Districts, portions of Area “A” in and around Kelly Creek Flats, section 7, T3N, R13E and sec. 12, 13,14 T3N, R12E and areas shown as “K”, “L” and “Q” on the Cassia Division, the Albion Division, the Black Pine Division and the Sublett Division of the Minidoka Ranger District.

The Raft River Division of the Minidoka Ranger District is included in this analysis and was covered under a previous special order implementing Box Elder County ordinance 222.

Motorized use on the Sawtooth National Recreation Area, the northern two-thirds of the Ketchum Ranger District, and the northern half of the Fairfield Ranger District is already restricted to designated routes and therefore is not part of this analysis.

The Proposed Action and Alternatives

Alternative #1. No Action Alternative. The Forest Service would not restrict motor vehicle use to designated roads and trails (except in areas that are currently restricted) and would not add any new restrictions nor would any other changes in the forest transportation system be made at this time. Cross-country motor vehicle use would continue to be allowed. This alternative would not implement the new travel management rule or fulfill the purpose and need. We are required to analyze a “no-action” alternative, even if it does not fulfill the purpose and need for the project.

Alternative #2. Proposed Action Alternative. The Forest Service would restrict motor vehicle use to designated roads and trails, and changes would be made to the forest transportation system. Cross-country motor vehicle use would not continue to be allowed. This alternative would implement the Final Rule for Travel Plan Management and fulfill the purpose and need. See Tables A and B for more complete description of the Proposed Action.

Additional Alternatives may be developed and analyzed based on issues and concerns identified through the process.

Preliminary Issues Identified

Preliminary issues to consider include public health and safety; potential spread of noxious weeds; disturbance effects on wildlife; wildlife vulnerability; impacts on threatened, endangered, and sensitive species; soil erosion and compaction; user conflicts; effects to heritage resources; impacts to water quality and quantity; effects to inventories Roadless Areas; effects on recreation experiences; and costs to manage and maintain future designated system.

A Biological Assessment will evaluate if there are any effects from this proposal on threatened or endangered species that occur within the Sawtooth National Forest and a Biological Evaluation will determine what affect this proposal may have on sensitive plant, animal, and fish species the Intermountain Regional Forester has listed for the Sawtooth National Forest.

Compliance with the Sawtooth Forest Plan

Management direction contained in the 2003 Revisited Sawtooth Forest Plan will be incorporated into the design of the proposed action and all other action related alternatives. The project will also meet the direction stated in 36 CFR Parts 212, 251, 261 and 295: Final Rule for Travel Management; Designated routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use. (11/9/2005).

Environmental Review Process

Projects and activities designed for implementation under the revised 2003 Sawtooth Forest Plan are subject to environmental analysis to assure compliance with the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act. Public scrutiny, accurate scientific analysis, and expert agency comments are essential to implementing NEPA.

Step 1 - Scoping:

The Scoping Phase occurred during July and August, 2006. The initial public comment period is called “scoping”, as it helps us to identify the scope of the project analysis and related issues. This scoping notice is an initial step in conducting the environmental analysis under NEPA that is required prior to making decisions.

It should be noted that comments provided during this scoping period do **not** establish standing for appeal. Given the number of changes proposed in this process, the Forest wanted to give the public additional time to review the proposal during the summer season, prior to publication of the legal notice for public comment.

Step 2 – Formal 30-day Comment Period on Proposed Action:

This is the stage the process is at now. A legal notice announcing the formal 30-day comment period will be published and the Proposed Action will be circulated to those who have participated in the initial scoping in order to solicit comments to assist in preparation of an Environmental Assessment (EA). Only comments submitted in response to that legal notice establish standing to appeal.

Step 3 – Environmental Analysis Finalized and Decision Notice Issued:

Following receipt of comments received during the formal 30-day Comment Period on the Proposed Action, the EA will be finalized and a Decision Notice will be prepared that documents a decision whether, and under what terms and conditions, to revise the Forest Travel Plan. Those who have commented through out the process will receive a copy of the EA and Decision Notice. A legal notice is published starting the administrative appeal process.

Step 4– Motor Vehicle Use Map Printed:

A Motor Vehicle Use Map will be developed based on the selected alternative. This map will become the information and enforcement tool.

PUBLIC INPUT – How and When to Comment:

Submit written comments on issues related to the Proposed Action to:

USDA-Forest Service
Sawtooth National Forest
2647 Kimberly Road East
Twin Falls, ID 83301-7976
Attn: Travel Plan Revisions

Or submit comments via FAX at (208) 737-3236

Or submit comments via e-mail to: comments-intermtn-sawtooth@fs.fed.us

Or you may hand-deliver your comments to four locations during normal business hours from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays:

Sawtooth Forest Supervisor’s Office at the address above (208-737-3200),
Fairfield Ranger Station, located at 102 1st Street East, Fairfield (208-764-3202),
Minidoka Ranger Station located at 3650 South Overland Ave., Burley (2080-678-04340
Ketchum Ranger District, 206 Sun Valley Road, Ketchum (208-622-5371)

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR, Part 1, Subpart B, Section 1.27(d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the Requester of the agency’s decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied; the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within 10 days.

Additional Information

Maps showing the proposed travel system can be viewed at the following offices during normal working hours:

- Sawtooth National Forest Supervisor's Office, 2647 Kimberly Road East in Twin Falls (8 AM to 5 PM Monday –Friday)
- Minidoka Ranger District, 3650 South Overland in Burley (8 AM to 5 PM Monday-Friday)
- Ketchum Ranger District, 206 Sun Valley Road in Ketchum (8:30 AM to 12:00 PM and 1:00 PM to 4:30 PM Monday-Friday)
- Fairfield Ranger District, 102 1st Street East in Fairfield (8 AM to 5 PM Monday-Friday)
- Sawtooth National Recreation Area Headquarters, 5 North Fork Canyon Rd, eight miles north of Ketchum (8:30 AM to 5:00 PM Monday –Sunday)
- Stanley Ranger Station, HC 64 Box 9900, three miles south of Stanley (8:30 AM to 12:00 PM and 1:00 PM to 4:30 PM Monday-Friday)

World Wide Web – All public travel planning documents including maps will be posted on the Internet at:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r4/sawtooth/projects/>