

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Background

The forest transportation system within the Ely Ranger District (District) includes 212 National Forest System (NFS) roads totaling 600 miles, and 68 NFS trails totaling 221.8 miles. Nine of the NFS trails are open for motorized use on 30.1 miles. Some of the NFS roads are the primary access routes that lead into and across the District. All other NFS roads on the District are managed to provide access for high-clearance vehicles into the backcountry of the District. All of these roads provide access for anglers, hunters, other recreation users, and permittees. They are access routes for people who want to enjoy the Forest. They provide opportunities for off-highway vehicle (OHV) drivers to explore the District and drive on challenging high-clearance four-wheel drive roads. Most areas on the District, except for Wilderness, can be accessed by this forest transportation system.

Outside the Wilderness, Duck Creek Basin, and the Murry Watershed, the District is open to cross-country motor vehicle use. As a result, informal, user-created routes have developed. These user-created routes have never been formally evaluated, adopted, or managed as a part of the forest transportation system. However, some user-created routes are well situated and provide access into areas of the District that are not accessible from NFS routes. These user-created routes also provide access to campsites and other recreation sites. Altogether, there may be as many as 1,000 user-created routes on the District. Most of these are less than half a mile in length.

While developing the proposed action, the District considered the forest transportation system along with the user-created routes and determined that some user-created routes could be added to the forest transportation system to facilitate recreation access or resource management. The District also determined that many of the user-created routes did not contribute to the forest transportation system needs on the District. These routes are not proposed for inclusion in the forest transportation system, and would therefore be closed to motor vehicle use. All routes considered in this EA are on the set of 19 maps included on the attached CD.

Proposed Action

The proposed action restricts motor vehicle use to designated roads and trails in accordance with 36 CFR 261.13. The restriction on motor vehicle use includes the following exemptions as detailed in 36 CFR 212.51(a)

- Aircraft;
- Watercraft;
- Over-snow vehicles;
- Limited administrative use by the Forest Service;

- Use of any fire, military, emergency, or law enforcement vehicle for emergency purposes;
- Authorized use of any combat or combat-support vehicle for national defense purposes;
- Law enforcement response to violations of law, including pursuit; and
- Motor vehicle use that is specifically authorized under a written authorization issued under Federal law or regulation (e.g., woodcutting permits, term grazing permits, approved plans of operations) (36 CFR 212.51a).

The Proposed Action would prohibit over-snow vehicles in the Murry Watershed.

Motor vehicle use in Duck Creek Basin has been restricted to designated routes since 2004, and the District is not revisiting that decision. The miles of designated road and trails in the Duck Creek Basin are included so the alternatives can disclose the projected total miles of the forest transportation system on the District.

The proposed action also adds 210 user-created routes (250.5 miles) to the forest transportation system as NFS roads and NFS trails. Along with these additions, the District would reclassify four NFS roads as trails, and open two non-motorized NFS trails to motorized vehicle use. Upon completion of the NEPA process all motorized routes would be identified on a motor vehicle use map.

See the discussion on the Proposed Action Alternative on page 8 for a complete description.

Purpose and Need for Action

The number of user-created routes across the District has increased over the last several years. Some of these routes were established where there is potential for resource damage. Prohibiting motor vehicles from traveling off designated roads and trails would reduce the effects to natural resources caused by cross-country travel. This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Humboldt Forest Plan (USFS 1986), and helps move the project area towards desired conditions described in the Plan by allowing motor vehicle use where it will not unacceptably impact forest resources or unnecessarily impact other forest users.

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to provide motor vehicle access to meet recreation and management objectives while limiting environmental impacts and ensuring a sustainable transportation system across the District.

Management Direction

This proposal implements the Travel Management Rule (36 CFR part 212, subpart B) as published on November 9, 2005 in the Federal Register (“Travel Management; Designated Routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use”). This rule requires designation of those roads, trails, and areas open to motor vehicle use, and once designation is

completed, prohibits motor vehicle use off the designated routes. This rule can be viewed at www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/ohv/.

In 2004, the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest completed a Forest Scale Roads Analysis Process Report (RAP). This RAP had four key findings:

- Recreation use across the Forest was projected to increase;
- In some areas high levels of OHV use was causing significant degradation to soil, water, biological and visual resources;
- The Forest level RAP could be used in finer scale analysis; and
- Road maintenance funds are not adequate to fully maintain all inventoried roads on the forest.

As part of this project, the Ely Ranger District conducted a Travel Analysis Process (TAP) (per draft Directives FSM 7712.1). This TAP verified some of the findings of the Broad-scale Forest-wide RAP.

Forest Plan

Projects conducted within National Forest System lands are guided by Forest Plans for the specific National Forest. A Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) embodies the provisions of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), its implementing regulations, and other guiding documents. The Humboldt Forest Plan (USDA 1986), sets forth the direction for managing the land and resources of the Humboldt National Forest. This action responds to the forest wide and management area specific goals and objectives outlined in the Humboldt Forest Plan. Specifically, the proposed action implements goals 1, 6 and 8, which address the need to provide a diversity of recreation opportunities that, include both motorized and non-motorized recreation. Goal 8 specifically addresses motorized recreation opportunities and its relationship to other resources. At a more general level, the project is consistent with goals 9, 10, 13, 15, 21, 24, 29, 32, 33, 43, 48, and 53, which require the design of proposals to be consistent with other resource management issues (USDA, IV-1 IV-15, 1986).

This proposal is also consistent with direction to maintain the present amount of Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) Primitive and Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized area (USDA p. IV-18 1986).

Standards and guidelines are the management requirements necessary for achieving the Forest Plan goals and objectives. Standards and guidelines provide the constraints within which management practices will be performed. In relation to this project, there are three standards and guidelines that are consistently identified for each management unit:

- Provide a trail system adequate for administrators, permittees, and the public. (pg IV-152)
- Provide habitat for sensitive and federally listed threatened and endangered species. (pg IV-153)
- Protect and improve key wildlife habitats. (pg. IV-153)

Decision Framework

Based on the environmental analysis in this EA, the District Ranger will decide which routes motorized traffic will be restricted to, and what areas, if any, will be open to cross-country motorized travel. The District Ranger may choose an alternative that contains various parts of the three alternatives presented here.

Public Involvement

Over the past two years, the District collected public input on travel planning in preparation for this project. Table 1 below lists the efforts made by the District to inform the public of the project, to gather input related to routes, and to work with tribes, other agencies, county governments and individuals and organizations.

Table 1: Public Involvement Activities conducted for the Ely Travel Management Project	
Summer and Fall 2005	Held open houses every Thursday from 3 pm to 6 pm to gather public comments.
Fall 2005	Sought input from Ely Bureau of Land Management
June and October 2005	Consulted with Ely Shoshone, Duckwater, and Yomba Tribes
July 8, August 12, 2005	Published articles on travel management in Ely Times
November/December 2005	Met with Nevada State Parks and Nevada Department of Wildlife
Fall 2005	Provided Nye and Lincoln County maps to Tonopah Ranger District Office for public review
January 2006	Met with staff from Great Basin National Park to discuss travel management
December 2006	Received proposal from South Steptoe Technical Review Team for roads and trails located on part of Ward mountain and in Areas south of Cave Lake State Park.

2007	Provided quarterly updates to the White Pine Coordinated Resource Management Steering Committee
February 23, 2007	Presented information to White Pine, Lincoln, and Nye County on Project at Tri-County meeting
April 2007	Met with Duckwater Shoshone Tribe to discuss the project
May 15, 2007	Mailed request for comments to 240 individuals and organizations.
May 23, 2007	Published Press Release in The Ely Times
May 18, 2007	Provided update to County Commissioners from White Pine, Lincoln, and Nye counties at Tri-County Meeting
June 2007	Met with Ely Shoshone Tribe to discuss the project
June 5, 2007	Presented the proposed action and maps to the White Pine County Public Land Users Advisory Committee
February 29, 2008	Provided second update to County Commissioners from White Pine, Lincoln, and Nye counties at Tri-County Meeting
March-April 2008	Met with Yomba Tribe, Ely Shoshone, Goshute, and Duckwater Shoshone to discuss the project

During the Scoping period (May 23-June 21, 2007), the District received 19 letters from interested individuals, state agencies, and organizations. The District used these comments to develop the issues and alternatives in this EA. Two individuals and one state agency provided specific comments on the following routes:

Dan Heinz suggested closing Kolcheck Road (59571) at the junction with the Cleve Creek road (59435) because it was not needed. He also recommended changing the end of Cleve Creek Road (59435) into a motorized trail instead of a system road. In the Proposed Action NFS Road 59571 would be designated as a trail open to motor vehicles < 50”, and the end of Road 59435 would be designated as an NFS trail (non-motorized).

Gene Kolkman requested that the motorized portion of the Ice Plant Trail (E1498) be closed because it provides direct access to his property. The South Steptoe Valley Technical Review Team for roads located on Ward Mountain identified this trail during the initial project outreach in 2006 as a route that provided good access. Conflicts

between users of the trail and private property owners, (speed, noise, and resource damage), are discussed in chapter three of this EA. In this Proposed Action, route E1498 is proposed as a NFS trail open to motorized vehicles <50”.

Nevada Division of Wildlife (NDOW) asked the District to:

- Add the Harris Canyon Road (59628), Harris Canyon to Prune Springs Road (E12715), and a road in the southeast corner of the Schells (U59369) to provide hunter access;
- Confirm if Mustang to Stove Springs(U59404A) and Upper Chicken Springs (U59058) are cherry stems excluded from the Wilderness;
- Edit maps to show how the Hendry’s Creek Road (59429) access the trailhead;
- Add upper Horse Canyon Road (59151);
- Add Mosier Canyon (extend 59438)
- Add the North Fork of Rye Grass Road as a motorized trail. (U59143D);
- Add Cottonwood Spring-South Schell route as a motorized trail (19718); and
- Add road that connects Cooper Canyon Road with Route 578. (U59578, U59353).

The proposed action was adjusted to address some of NDOW’s comments as appropriate.

Issues

The Interdisciplinary Team separated the issues into two groups: significant and non-significant issues. Significant issues are those directly or indirectly caused by implementing the Proposed Action. Non-significant issues are those: 1) outside the scope of the Proposed Action; 2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; or 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) NEPA regulations require 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)”.

The IDT identified five significant issues.

Recreation 1: Restriction of motorized vehicles to designated routes would prohibit Forest visitors from driving cross-country to hunt, retrieve game, create dispersed campsites, or engage in other motorized off-road recreation activities. This could result in reduced use of the District and discontent among some users.

Recreation 2: Addition of user-created routes to the forest transportation system, may reduce the quality of the non-motorized recreation experience in some areas. The addition of these routes could result in conflicts between motorized users and non-motorized users.

Roadless: Addition of 23 user-created routes (22.6 miles) in Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs) to the forest transportation system may degrade roadless characteristics and wilderness attributes.

Biological and Physical Resources: Addition of 250 miles of user-created routes as could result in degradation of watersheds, soils, vegetation, and terrestrial and aquatic wildlife habitat. The addition of these routes could also increase the spread of noxious and invasive species, which could further degrade wildlife habitat conditions and vegetation communities.

Social/Economic: Addition of 250 miles of existing user-created route to the forest transportation system and restriction of motorized vehicles to designated routes could result in an additional economic burden as the District or counties respond to the changing forest transportation system.

During scoping, the District received several comments that are either part of the purpose and need, part of the Proposed Action, or already decided by laws, regulations, or policy. The interdisciplinary team also identified issues brought up by the public during scoping that were outside the scope of the project, irrelevant to the decision being made, or conjectural in nature. These issues will not be carried through the analysis process but have been documented and included in the project record.

