

Background

The motorized travel management planning process on the Stanislaus National Forest is part of a national effort to designate transportation systems on each national forest. The goal is to develop a sustainable system of routes that provides an array of opportunities for access and recreation on the national forests, as well as protection of various resources by curtailing motorized cross-country travel. In accordance with national direction, the Stanislaus is engaged in a process to ultimately designate a forestwide transportation system of roads and motorized trails.

Designating motorized routes through travel management planning is a 5-step process, which the Stanislaus began in 2003 when a group of concerned publics held a community forum in to discuss Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) recreation on the Stanislaus National Forest. Over 150 individuals attended to identify issues and possible management solutions for OHV recreation. As a result of the forum, a group called the Stanislaus Recreation Stakeholders (SRS) formed with the Forest Service as an ad hoc member.

In response to a Memorandum of Intent (MOI) with the California Department of Parks and Recreation, the Forest started an OHV route inventory in 2004. Later, the Forest Service promulgated the 2005 Travel Management Rule which further identified the need for motorized travel management. In late 2005, the Forest held three public meetings in Sonora, Greeley Hill and Arnold, sharing the route designation and OHV inventory process with 240 attendees. The Forest completed the OHV inventory in June 2006, with CD copies mailed to 500 individuals.

In late 2006 and early 2007, the Forest held seven meetings and 3 open houses in Sonora, Greeley Hill, Arnold, and West Point presenting a series of "discussion proposals" to 340 attendees. The discussion proposals covered OHV trail opportunities and potential road changes that the Forest Service planned to propose later in the year.

Scoping

Scoping is the first step in environmental analysis required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). It is the initial opportunity for public participation from those that may be interested in or affected by a proposed action.

The Forest Service first listed the Motorized Travel Management project in the January 2007 issue of the Stanislaus National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA). The Forest distributes the SOPA to about 160 parties and it is available on the internet [<http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/stanislaus/projects/sopa>].

On November 13, 2007 the Forest sent a scoping letter to 950 individuals, permittees, organizations, agencies, and Tribes interested in this project. The letter requested comments on the Proposed Action.

The Forest Service published a Notice of Intent (NOI) in the Federal Register¹ on November 19, 2007. The NOI asked for public comment on the proposal between November 19, 2007 and January 18, 2008. In addition, as part of the public involvement process, the agency held 5 public meetings attended by 237 individuals and 4 open houses attended by 14 individuals.

¹ Federal Register / Vol. 72, No. 222 / Monday, November 19, 2007. p. 64988-64989

Comment Summary

In response to the Forest's request for comments during the NOI scoping period, 3,584 interested parties submitted: 220 letters; an e-mail form letter from 3,268 different individuals; 1 petition with 93 signatures; and, 3 verbal comments. For tracking purposes, the Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) assigned a respondent number² to each letter and a comment number³ for each specific comment. The team reviewed each letter, identifying 616 specific comments.

The IDT identified and screened 383 specific comments that are: 1) outside of the scope of the proposed action; 2) already determined through law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific fact; 5) a comment, opinion, or position statement; or, 6) a question for clarification or information. The screened comments provide the basis for identifying the non-significant issues presented in Table 1. The remaining 233 specific comments generated significant issues falling into the following topics.

Administration

- Increasing motorized use may result in increased non-compliance, unsafe conditions near private residences and unsafe encounters between forest visitors.
- Current and future budgets may not provide adequate funding for maintenance, administration and enforcement of the proposed road and trail system.
- Allowing mixed use on system routes may result in unsafe recreation opportunities.

NEPA

- Consideration for a range of alternatives must be given.

Private Property

- Allowing motorized use near private property may result in noise, dust, trespass and other conflicts with private property owners.
- Some private property owners are unwilling to grant public right of way, thereby limiting motorized route opportunities.

Recreation

- Changing the vehicle type and season of use may affect available camping opportunities.
- Increasing motorized use may result in noise disturbance affecting quiet recreation opportunities.
- Increasing motorized use may result in user conflicts between forest visitors.

Resources

- Motorized travel may increase fire risk and the spread of noxious weeds.
- Motorized travel may affect heritage resources, recreation, sensitive plants, soils, vegetation, watershed and wildlife.

Routes

- Route designations may not provide adequate motorized opportunities.

² For example, respondent number 080115-01 is the first letter received on January 15, 2008.

³ For example, comment number 080115-01-05 is the fifth comment in the first letter received on January 15, 2008.

- Route designations may cause environmental impacts requiring more maintenance.
- Increasing motorized use may result in undesirable road densities.
- Proposed seasonal closures may not adequately protect natural resources
- Route designations may not provide adequate distinction between vehicle types.

Special Areas

- Motorized use may not be compatible with Roadless Areas, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Wilderness and Yosemite National Park.

Special Uses

- Route designations may not provide adequate opportunities for motorized special use events.

Travel Corridors

- Vehicle type, season of use and cross-county travel restrictions may limit motorized access for big game retrieval and dispersed camping.
- Allowing motorized access for big game retrieval and dispersed camping may affect forest resources.
- Authorizing travel corridors allowing cross-country travel within 100' of roads and trails, or allowing parking greater than one car length from the road may affect forest resources.

Issue Identification

Scoping identified issues which are a point of discussion, dispute, or debate with the Proposed Action. An issue is an effect on a physical, biological, social, or economic resource. An issue is not an activity; instead, the predicted effects of the activity create the issue. The IDT separated the issues into two groups: significant and non-significant (see Table 1).

Significant Issues are used to formulate alternatives, prescribe mitigation measures, or analyze environmental effects. Issues are significant because of the extent of their geographic distribution, the duration of their effects, or the intensity of interest or resource conflicts.

Non-Significant Issues are: 1) outside of the scope of the proposed action; 2) already determined through law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific fact; 5) a comment, opinion, or position statement; or, 6) a question for clarification or information. Although non-significant issues are not used to formulate alternatives or prescribe mitigation measures, the EIS will disclose all significant environmental effects including any related to non-significant issues.

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)..." A list of non-significant issues and reasons regarding their categorization as non-significant may be found in the project record.

Table 1 Significant and Non-Significant Issues

Issues		
Topic	Significant	Non-Significant
Access⁴		Disabled Multiple Use Shared Use Snowmobiles Wheeled Oversnow Use
Administration	Compliance Funding Maintenance Safety	Liability Monitoring Signing Speed Limits Volunteers
Economic		Local Economy
NEPA	Alternatives	Analysis Maps
Private Property	Conflicts Noise Right of Way	
Recreation	Camping Non-motorized Noise User Conflicts	
Resources	Fire Heritage Resources Invasive Species Recreation Sensitive Plants Soils Vegetation Watershed Wildlife	Air Quality Global Warming Visual Resource
Routes	Add Routes Close Routes Road Density Seasonal Closures Vehicle Type	Decommission Difficulty Rating Minimum System
Special Areas	Roadless Areas Wild and Scenic River Wilderness Yosemite	
Special Uses	Events	Concession Permits Permittee
Travel Corridors	Big Game Retrieval Camping Cross-country Travel Parking	

⁴ Other topics addressing Access type issues include Private Property, Recreation, Routes, Special Uses and Travel Corridors.

Significant Issue Statements

As described above, issues are significant because of the extent of their geographic distribution, the duration of their effects, or the intensity of interest or resource conflicts. The IDT will use the following significant issue statements to formulate and compare alternatives, prescribe mitigation measures, or analyze and compare the environmental effects of each alternative. The significant issue statements identify **elements** (individual or groups of significant issue topics) along with a **cause and effect** based on public comments (see Comment Summary).

Table 2 Significant Issue Statements

Issue/Element	Cause and Effect
Significant Issue Statement 1: Changes to National Forest System (NFS) routes that reduce wheeled motorized opportunities, increase restrictions on vehicle type and season of use, and prohibit cross-country travel, may affect forest visitors.	
1.1 Motorized Opportunities ⁵	a. Changing the vehicle type and season of use may affect available camping opportunities. b. Route designations may not provide adequate motorized opportunities. c. Route designations may not provide adequate distinction between vehicle types. d. Route designations may not provide adequate opportunities for motorized special use events. e. Vehicle type, season of use and cross-county travel restrictions may limit motorized access for big game retrieval and dispersed camping.
Significant Issue Statement 2: Changes to National Forest System (NFS) routes that increase wheeled motorized opportunities, reduce restrictions on vehicle type and season of use, and allow cross-country travel, may affect forest resources, private property and forest visitors.	
2.1 Administration	a. Increasing motorized use may result in increased non-compliance, unsafe conditions near private residences and unsafe encounters between forest visitors. b. Current and future budgets may not provide adequate funding for maintenance, administration and enforcement of the proposed road and trail system. c. Route designations may cause environmental impacts requiring more maintenance. d. Allowing mixed use on system routes may result in unsafe recreation opportunities.
2.2 Private Property	a. Allowing motorized use near private property may result in noise, dust, trespass and other conflicts with private property owners. b. Some private property owners are unwilling to grant public right of way, thereby limiting motorized route opportunities.
2.3 Recreation	a. Increasing motorized use may result in noise disturbance affecting quiet recreation opportunities. b. Increasing motorized use may result in user conflicts between forest visitors.
2.4 Resources ⁶	a. Motorized travel may increase fire risk and the spread of noxious weeds. b. Motorized travel may affect heritage resources, recreation, sensitive plants, soils, vegetation, watershed and wildlife. c. Allowing motorized access for big game retrieval and dispersed camping may affect forest resources. d. Authorizing travel corridors allowing cross-country travel within 100' of roads and trails, or allowing parking greater than one car length from the road may affect forest resources. e. Increasing motorized use may result in undesirable road densities. f. Proposed seasonal closures may not adequately protect natural resources g. Motorized use may not be compatible with Roadless Areas, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Wilderness and Yosemite National Park.

⁵ This element groups significant issues from the Routes, Special Uses and Travel Corridor topics.

⁶ This element groups significant issues from the Resources, Routes, Special Areas, and Travel Corridor topics.

What's Next

Alternatives

The IDT is developing a range of reasonable alternatives to the Proposed Action that will fulfill the purpose and need for the project and address the significant issues while not violating any minimum environmental standards or objectives. In addition to the two "benchmark" alternatives described below, the IDT will develop and consider several other detailed alternatives that vary primarily in terms of the miles of unauthorized routes added to the NFS.

- One benchmark alternative is the "**No Action**" alternative. Under this alternative the agency takes no affirmative action. This means continued cross-country travel, continued use of unauthorized routes and no changes to the current NFS. The No Action Alternative is not a proposal to add all of the unauthorized routes to the NFS. It is a proposal to "do nothing" and maintain the "status quo".
- Another benchmark alternative is the "**Cross-country Travel Prohibition**" alternative. This alternative only proposes a prohibition on cross-country travel by motor vehicles with no change to the NFS. This alternative shows the opposite extreme of the No Action alternative. It establishes a key benchmark for contrasting the other alternatives. This alternative provides support for the need for action since not adding roads or trails to the NFS will likely limit motorized access to dispersed recreation activities such as camping, hiking, hunting and fishing.

Other alternatives may be considered in the EIS but not analyzed in detail. These alternatives will be described in Chapter 2 of the EIS, in a section called "Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study".

Draft Environmental Impact Statement

After completing the range of alternatives, the Forest will prepare a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) disclosing the effects of the alternatives. The DEIS should be available for a 45-day public comment period in the fall of 2008. The Forest will host public meetings to help explain the DEIS and its contents. Comments on the DEIS will help identify possible changes needed for the final EIS prior to making a decision.