



Date: December 6, 2006

Greetings:

I am pleased to announce that I have made my decision for the Gallatin National Forest Travel Management Plan (Travel Plan). This decision is the culmination of a four year planning and public input and comment process to develop and adopt a management plan for public access and travel within the Gallatin National Forest. The highlights of these changes are described in this letter. Travel Plan establishes goals, objectives and standards that will provide guidance for future management activities related to public access and travel and amends the Gallatin Forest Plan to remove a number of existing standards. My decision is similar to alternative #7 as described in the Draft EIS with some notable changes.

The Record of Decision, (ROD) which will be released to the public on December 8, 2006 is long and detailed for good reasons and it's the publication that officially documents my decision. The intent of this letter is to lay out the general framework of the decision in a concise and readable manner. For more details refer to the ROD and or Final Environmental Impact Statement available on the web at: ([http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/gallatin/travel\\_planning](http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/gallatin/travel_planning)). Compact disks (CDs) and a limited number of hard copies are also available by calling (406) 587-6701.

### **General Rationale For My Decision**

In making my decision for a Gallatin National Forest Travel Management Plan I carefully considered a variety of factors and reasons in making choices within specific travel planning areas and for specific routes and areas. However, from a broad forest-wide perspective, I was guided by the following:

**1. Summer Recreation Opportunities.** In my decision, one of my objectives was to provide well-distributed opportunities for both OHVs and exclusive non-motorized uses of the Gallatin National Forest trail system outside of Wilderness. In reviewing public comments, particularly from those whom regularly recreate on the Forest, I heard that: (a) Motorized users desired half-day and evening ATV and/or motorcycle trail rides within a reasonable travel distance from area communities. (b) Non-motorized users also desired half-day and evening hiking, horseback riding and mountain biking opportunities in a non-motorized setting within a reasonable travel distance from area communities. Both user groups also desired opportunities for longer trips and for trips to recreational destinations such as lakes, peaks or vistas. Public comment informed me that trails open to motorized use do not provide the type of experience most non-motorized users are looking for. Public comments also indicated that roads do not provide the experience most motorcyclists are looking for. Therefore, in my decision I attempted to provide a mix of non-motorized trail opportunities, motorized opportunities for beginner and intermediate skill levels



(i.e. ATV and motorcycle opportunities on roads and some trails), and more challenging motorcycle opportunities on single-track trails.

My objectives to increase the amount of non-motorized setting and respond to laws and agency direction and other critical resource issues are largely accomplished by bringing motorized use under greater management control rather than attempting to limit the amount of use.

This decision also implements a time-share approach to provide a high quality non-motorized experience on several trails near Bozeman that will provide specified periods for hikers and stock users to use those trails at times where motorized use, and in some cases mountain bike use, is restricted.

I believed it was important for community stability to retain the summer motorized use opportunities in the Cooke City and West Yellowstone areas similar to what exists today, and to provide well distributed motorized trail opportunities across the Forest in the Bridger, Crazy and Gallatin Mountain Ranges.

**2. Winter Recreation Opportunities.** Similar to summer uses I also had an objective to provide well-distributed opportunities for both snowmobiling and exclusive cross-country skiing and snow-shoeing in non-motorized settings. Again, public comments indicated that there was a need for both. Accessibility, terrain and snow conditions, in addition to resource issues, were greater factors in identifying winter use opportunities than was proximity to area communities.

For snowmobiling I wanted to maintain those opportunities that have been historically popular. I'm sensitive to the importance of maintaining the current situation around the communities of West Yellowstone and Cooke City. I also tried to maintain opportunities for high-marking and other backcountry use in the southern Gallatin Mountain Range, the west slopes of the Crazy Mountains and the Fairy Lake Travel Planning Area. This is a shift from what I had included in my Draft EIS preferred alternative and is largely due to public comments informing me that I would be removing a unique and popular experience for the snowmobile community. The opportunity I've provided in my decision though is still more restrictive than it is currently due to other resource issues and my desire to provide opportunities for skiing and snowshoeing in non-motorized settings. Other issues influencing my decision included compliance with the Montana Wilderness Study Act, Forest Service policy on management of recommended wilderness areas, respect for the traditional values of the Crow Tribe in the Crazy Mountains, and protection of winter habitat for lynx and wolverine.

For cross-country skiing, my objective is to increase the amount of opportunity provided closer to urban areas, especially around Bozeman. My decision still emphasizes family-oriented cross country skiing in the Hyalite drainage, but does provide a separate snowmobile route accessing the Grotto Falls Trailhead from the Moser Creek Road to accommodate ice climbers. My decision will allow plowing of the main Hyalite Road to the Blackmore Day Use area and the area around the reservoir will be managed for cross country skiing. Public comments we received overwhelmingly support the plowing of the Hyalite Road during the winter. My decision also emphasizes cross-country skiing on the east side of the Bridger Mountains from the

Middle Fork of Brackett Creek south and creates some non-motorized winter opportunities on the west side of the Crazy Mountains in Sunlight Peak and South Fork Shields.

**3. Resource Protection.** A third objective I had was to bring existing and projected recreation use levels to a point where they are consistent with achieving desired conditions for other resources. This included managing travel such that it is in compliance with laws, regulations, policy and other higher lever direction and ensuring that anticipated effects fall within accepted parameters or identified thresholds of maintenance and protection that are supported by research or monitoring information. In general, this objective set the sideboards within which recreation opportunities (1 and 2 above) could be provided. In summary, resource protection objectives were met by:

- Within the Cabin Creek Recreation and Wildlife Management Area, ATV opportunities were limited to one designated route, the Oil Well Road, and motorcycle routes were limited to primary trails to be consistent with direction in the Lee Metcalf Wilderness Act applicable to this area.
- Within the recovery zone for the grizzly bear, summer motorized use was limited or reduced based on a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and a Conservation Agreement (CA) with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and more specifically, the need to maintain or reduce open motorized route density and increase the amount of secure habitat to support recovery.
- Within the Lionhead recommended wilderness, motorized use was limited because I believe managing for such uses runs contrary to Forest Service Region 1 guidance to manage for uses consistent with wilderness values.
- Within the Ibex and East Crazies Travel Planning Areas, motorized use was restricted to protect the integrity of areas that are of traditional value to the Crow Tribe. The “checkerboard” land ownership pattern and the easements across private land that only allow foot and horseback travel in the East Crazies are the other reasons for this restriction.
- Mechanized use was restricted on some trails leading into Wilderness to discourage encroachment into Wilderness.
- Elsewhere, summer motorized use was reduced or precluded either permanently or seasonally for facility protection; to reduce potential sedimentation of streams containing cutthroat trout; to preserve quality fall big game hunting; to maintain key wildlife movement routes; and to address private land in-holder concerns.
- Snowmobiling was configured in certain areas (e.g. the upper Bridgers and Gallatin Mountain Ranges) to provide winter habitat for mountain goat and wolverine.

### **Decision and Rationale for Areas of High Public Interest**

**Hyalite-Porcupine-Buffalo Horn (HPBH):** My decision meets the intent of the Montana Wilderness (WSA) Study Act (i.e. to maintain the pre-existing Wilderness character as it was in 1977). I have limited the proliferation of snowmobile use across the HPBH by geographically reconfiguring the approximate acres used by snowmobiles pre-1977 to a configuration of similar acreage that better matches what snowmobilers told me were most desirable to them today. My decision allows snowmobile use in approximately 12% of the WSA while preserving the

remainder in remote winter settings with ample opportunity for solitude and challenge. My summer decision for the HPBH excludes the use of ATV's and allows motorcycles on 50% of the trail miles (pre-1977) used historically. These decisions for summer allow for pre-1977 use while limiting motorized use to maintain Wilderness character.

**Snow Plowing Hyalite Road:** My decision to winter plow the Hyalite Road to the Blackmore Day Use Area is intended to make available an outstanding winter experience in Bozeman's backyard for all experience levels of cross country skiers. The decision also maintains the ability for snowmobiling to access the ice climbing areas above Hyalite Reservoir after the Hyalite Road is closed to motorized vehicles beyond Blackmore. Snow plowing will be dependent on available funding and my decision reflects different ending points for plowing if funding is not available to plow all the way to Blackmore.

**Lionhead Recommended Wilderness:** My decision will not allow snowmobiling in the Lionhead recommended wilderness as was proposed in alternative 7 of the Draft EIS. This is more consistent with Region 1, Forest Service policy regarding management of recommended wilderness areas.

**Spring Stock Restrictions:** My decision does not include blanket spring stock restrictions as recommended in alternative 7 of the Draft EIS. Public comments from stock users and further analysis on the ground convinced me that these restrictions could be limited to a number of specific routes (12 trails) where significant spring damage was occurring from stock use.

### **Your Comments**

Thousands of comment letters were submitted during the three comment periods provided on the proposed Gallatin National Forest Travel Management Plan. In August of 2002 we began the public involvement process with the release of a document we called the "Starting Benchmark." Through the Benchmark we wanted to give you something to react to, thereby helping us to understand the issues and concerns we should address through analysis and in the development of alternatives. We were amazed at how important certain roads, trails and parts of the Forest were to people in their desired recreational pursuits. One surprise was the large number of comments received from ice climbers using the Hyalite area. While we were aware of that activity, we underestimated the number of people taking advantage of it. We also learned a lot about the divergent value sets our Forest users have and how mixed uses in certain areas can lead to diminished recreational experiences. The comments you provided on the Starting Benchmark helped us considerably to identify the alternatives to study and issues to consider through the analysis process.

Your comments on the Draft EIS helped us improve upon the analysis to create a better Final EIS. Many of the changes made were due to the comments you provided. However, the largest benefit to me was through the discussions we had and letters we received specifically commenting on Alternative 7, which was my preferred alternative at the time. Some of the more significant changes I made in my decision based on what I heard from you included the following:

- Stock users convinced me that proposed blanket spring restrictions across the Forest on mountain bike and stock use was going too far in attempting to correct a problem that could otherwise be addressed through restrictions on specific routes or information and education
- Stock users also influenced my decisions regarding a yearlong area restriction on the Beartooth Plateau and for the Lava Lake and Pine Creek Trails. My decision now permits stock use on the Beartooth Plateau area from August 1<sup>st</sup> to December 2<sup>nd</sup>. Instead of stock use prohibitions on the Lava Lake and Pine Creek Trails, these will now be available for riding during the fall.
- Comments from the Montana Pilot's Association led me to include an objective and standard for potential future proposals for backcountry landing strips but with a caveat to exclude areas of the Forest where this use is not appropriate.
- Cross-country skiers convinced me to drop the marked ski route and associated snowmobile area closure from the Skunk Creek Road (#974) to the Stone Creek Divide.
- Comments from skiers and snowmobilers led me to reconfigure the snowmobile area restriction in the Fairy Lake area to allow for some high-marking opportunities and transport of skiers to popular areas. They also influenced me to make the first two miles of the Bear Canyon trail a ski trail only in winter and to lift the rest of the snowmobile area restriction within the canyon.
- Snowmobilers were influential in my decision regarding the area to leave open for snowmobile use in the HPBH Wilderness Study Area.
- Motorcyclists helped me identify a trail configuration for the Cabin Creek and Taylor Fork Travel Planning areas more conducive to the opportunities they desired while still maintaining secure habitat for grizzly bears. They were also influential in my decisions for trails within the Deer Creeks Travel Planning Area and other parts of the Forest.
- The Crow Tribe helped us design a travel management plan for the east side of the Crazy Mountains that would respect their traditional values and still provide for a variety of both motorized and non-motorized uses.
- Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks recommendations were used in making my decision on snowmobile area restrictions within the Bridger Mountains, the Taylor Fork Travel Planning Area and the Porcupine-Buffalo Horn Travel Planning Area.
- Comments from ice climbers, skiers and others helped me craft my decision for winter travel in the Hyalite Travel Planning Area and develop a contingency plan should the plowing of the road become infeasible.
- Non-motorized users helped me conclude that separation of these uses from motorized uses was important in some areas, leading to the time share trails.

These are just a few examples of how your comments were used. Throughout the analysis process the comments you provided helped me to continue to formulate my thoughts and ultimately arrive at this decision for a travel management plan.

### **Implementation**

My intent is to begin implementation of the Travel Plan in the spring of 2007, upon signing a special order pursuant to 36 CFR 261 and release of the motor vehicle use map and over-snow vehicle use map. My decision however is subject to administrative appeal which is a process

that allows you to ask for a higher level review of the analysis and documentation associated with it. Although some of you will disagree with my decision, my hope is that you will find that I was fair and considerate of your concerns and therefore will accept it. If not, the appeals process is available to you and I respect your right to use it. If you do, it is important that you consult the Record of Decision for information on how to file.

Thank you for your interest and commitment to the travel planning process. I believe we have a much improved plan because of your involvement with us over the past four years. I look forward to working with you as we implement the plan in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rebecca Lockett Heath". The signature is written in a cursive style with some loops and flourishes.

REBECCA LOCKETT HEATH  
Forest Supervisor