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Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

Travel Management on the Mt Taylor Ranger District

Cibola National Forest

Cibola and McKinley Counties, New Mexico



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Mt Taylor Ranger District, Cibola National Forest
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Decision and Rationale for the Decision

Background

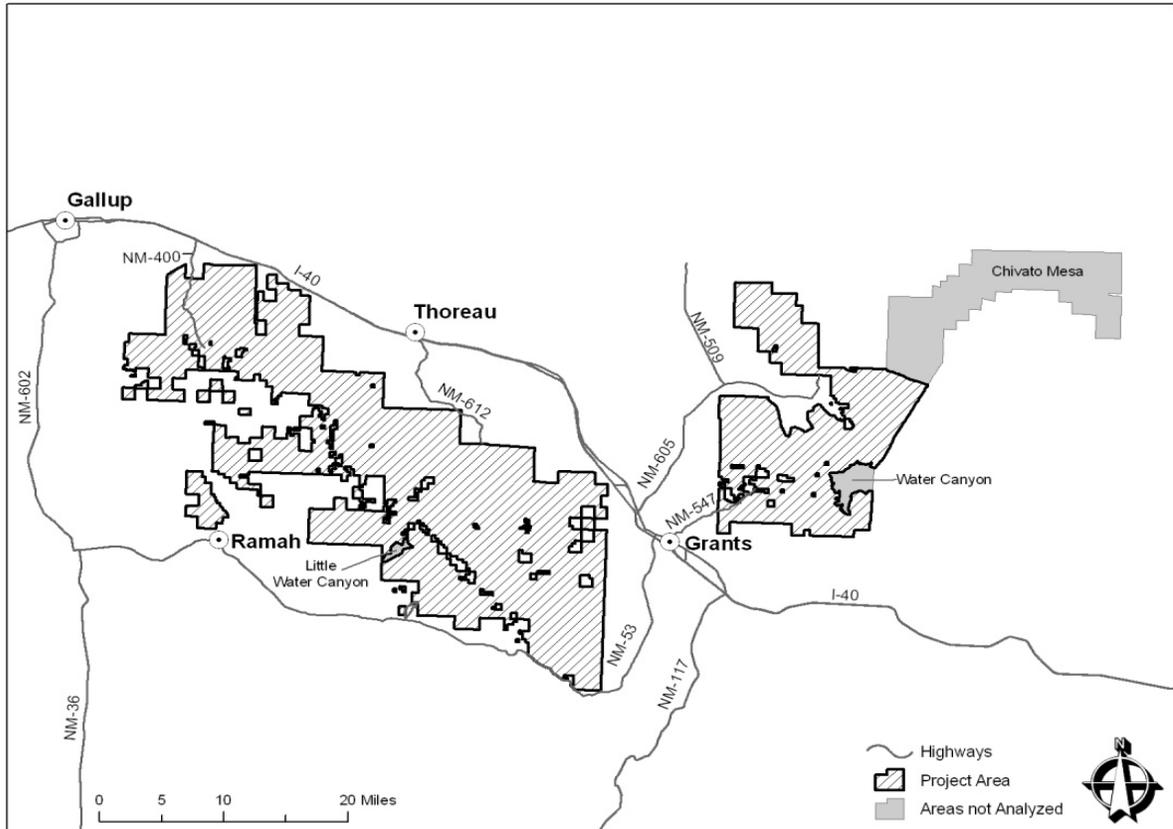
On November 9, 2005, the Forest Service published the final regulations governing off-highway vehicles (OHVs) and other motor vehicle use on national forests and grasslands (Travel Management; Designated Routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use, Federal Register / Vol. 70, No. 216/36 CFR Parts 212, 251, 261, and 295). This Travel Management Rule requires each national forest and grassland to designate those roads, trails, and areas open to motor vehicle use. Designation will include class of vehicle and, if appropriate, time of year for motor vehicle use. Designated routes and areas will be identified on a Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM). After routes have been designated and these designations have been identified on a MVUM, motor vehicle use will be prohibited off the designated system. Section 212.51(a) of the Travel Management Rule identifies the following exemptions to designations: (1) aircraft, (2) watercraft, (3) over-snow vehicles, (4) limited administrative use by the Forest Service, (5) use of any fire, military, emergency, or law enforcement vehicle for emergency purposes, (6) authorized use of any combat or combat support vehicle for national defense purposes, (7) law enforcement response or emergency needs (36 CFR 212.51 (a)) and (8) motor vehicle use that is specifically authorized under a written authorization issued under Federal law or regulations.

The Mt Taylor Ranger District of the Cibola National Forest is located in western New Mexico (Figure 1). There are approximately 516,000 acres within the district. The area analyzed in this project under the Travel Management Rule comprises approximately 445,623 acres. Approximately 70,377 acres of the district are excluded from the environmental assessment because previous administrative decisions regarding travel management exist for these areas that comply with the Travel Management Rule (36 CFR 212.50(b)).

The Mt Taylor Ranger District transportation system serves a variety of administrative and public purposes. Timber harvest, livestock grazing, fire management, law enforcement, facilities management, and recreation are all important administrative activities that rely on the forest transportation system to be successful. There are 987 miles of National Forest System roads on the Mt Taylor Ranger District that are open to public travel. Of these, 91 miles are managed for standard passenger vehicles such as family sedans. There are 896 miles of system roads that are

managed for high-clearance vehicles, such as pickups or sport utility vehicles. Additional system roads (approximately 77 miles) are closed to the public and used for administrative purposes only (Cibola National Forest GIS).

Figure 1. Project area location



Previous Decisions

The Travel Management Rule directs that “the responsible official may incorporate previous administrative decisions regarding travel management made under other authorities, including designations and prohibitions of motor vehicle use, in designating National Forest System roads, National Forest System trails, and areas on National Forest System lands for motor vehicle use” (36 CFR §212.50b). The previous decisions that will be incorporated into MVUM designations are:

- “Checkerboard Transportation Management Plan,” which designated 48 miles of existing roads as motorized system roads for all classes of vehicles on Chivato Mesa (USDA Forest Service 1998) and the “L-Bar Land Exchange Environmental Assessment/Decision” which amended the “Checkerboard Transportation Management Plan” by adjusting the designated motorized system roads to 30 miles on Chivato Mesa (USDA Forest Service 2000). The subsequent Forest Closure Order 03-0300 signed August 2009 prohibits year-round motorized cross-country travel off the designated road,

and seasonally closes the designated roads for resource protection on Chivato Mesa (See “Previous Decision Map PD1–Areas Outside the Analysis Area” in appendix A).

- “Cibola National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan” (forest plan) prohibits off-road vehicle use in Water Canyon to protect sensitive soils and in Little Water Canyon as part of a potential research natural area shown as areas covered by a previous decision on Alternative A map noted as “Areas Covered by a Previous Decision” (Forest Plan 1985, pg. 128, 135, 159, and 167 or Forest Closure Order 03-0314 signed February 2, 2010).

The following forest closure orders would continue to be applied to the referenced system roads:

- Forest Closure Order 03-376 signed March 31, 2011 (that supersedes Closure Order 03-0267 signed February 2009), which is a seasonal closure (Habitat Protection Area) in the Ft. Wingate area that prohibits motorized travel off NFSRs 151, 152, 162, 164, 166, 402, 481, 496, 503, 546, and 547 between December 15 and March 31 (USDA Forest Service 1995).
- Forest Closure Order 03-0301 signed August 2009, which is a seasonal closure that prohibits motorized travel on NFSRs 569 and 192 between December 15 and April 15 in Rice Park and on San Mateo Mesa (USDA Forest Service 1999).

Decision

I have given careful consideration to the resources affected by the proposal and have read and considered the effects discussed in the Environmental Assessment and the Biological Evaluations. I have listened to and understood the public discourse that has resulted from this proposal including those responses received during the 30-day comment period. I also considered the existing Forest Plan, guidance provided by law, regulation and policy and consultations with District and Forest specialists and the USDI Fish & Wildlife Service. I have reviewed the project record, which shows a thorough review of relevant scientific information, a consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgment of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk. I have considered the best available science in making this decision.

Based upon my review of all alternatives, their effects, comments received in response to the proposals, and the criteria specified for consideration in the Travel Management Rule, I have decided to implement Alternative C with modifications to address new information and resource concerns related to steep slopes, sensitive soils, dense forest, and range improvements.

The modifications to the alternative are as follows:

- Increase all designated motorized trail width from 50” or less in width to 65” or less in width.
- Not designate 1.3 miles of open system road (NFSR 453L) as a motorized trail.
- Not designate 0.8 miles of open system road (NFSR 236) and .43 miles of unauthorized road proposed as a motorized trail at Spud Patch Canyon.
- Not designate 0.5 mile of NFSR 43 (from NFSR 40 to NFSR 49E) proposed as a motorized trail and designate it as a road for all motorized vehicles.
- Not designate 3.8 miles of motorized dispersed camping corridor past NFSR 544B.

- Not designate 2.5 miles of motorized dispersed camping corridor along NFSR 575.
- Not designate 1.0 miles of motorized dispersed camping corridor on the upper end of NFSR 503.

This alternative as modified for this decision provides for the following changes from the existing condition (see attached maps):

- Restrict 312 miles of system roads that are currently open to public motorized use to administrative use only (these roads would not appear on the MVUM).
- Change 15 miles of closed roads to open system roads for all motorized vehicles.
- Add 82 miles of unauthorized routes to open system roads for all motorized vehicles.
- Add 41 miles of unauthorized routes to motorized trails for vehicles 65 inches or less in width.
- Convert 38 miles of open system roads to motorized trails for vehicles 65 inches or less in width.
- Convert 17 miles of closed roads to motorized trails for vehicles 65 inches or less in width.
- Change 79 miles of open system roads to closed roads with a coincident designation as a motorized trail for 65 inches or less in width.
- Change 8 miles of closed roads to receive a coincident designation as a motorized trail for vehicles 65 inches or less in width.
- Add 18 miles of unauthorized routes to motorized single-track trail for motorcycles only.
- Convert 2 miles open system roads to motorized single-track trail for motorcycles only.
- Change 5 miles of open system roads to closed roads with a coincident designation as a motorized single-track trail for motorcycles only.
- Designate 300-foot corridors for motorized dispersed camping along either side of 92 miles of specified roads.
- Reroute three segments of NFSR 447 totaling approximately 1 mile. The NFSR 447 reroute construction would be surfaced with aggregate, and boulders would be used to close the abandoned sections.
- Reroute 0.2 of a mile of motorized trail to bypass private property and to link two segments of Road 169 GX.
- Seasonally restrict motorized vehicle travel on 29 miles of designated motorized trails from December 1 to March 1 annually to minimize conflict between livestock and motorized use.
- Seasonally restrict vehicle use on 14 miles of designated motorized trails from December 16 to August 31 annually. These motorized trails will be open from September 1 through December 15 annually (during the fall big game hunting seasons) for additional hunter access.
- Designate a 344-acre OHV area. This area is bounded by a fence, designated roads, drainages, and the edge of McKenzie Ridge. The boundary would be signed to clearly

define the OHV area. The parking and loading/unloading area would be designated within the designated OHV area.

When combined with previous decisions, the selection of this alternative will result in 674 miles of roads open to all vehicles, 208 miles of trails open to vehicles 65" in width or less, 92 miles of motorized dispersed camping corridors, and 344 acres designated for an OHV area. Motorized cross-country travel would be prohibited except as authorized in the decision or as authorized in one of the eight exemptions listed in 36 CFR 212.51(a).

See Decision Maps 1-3 for a visual representation of this decision.

Design Features Associated with this Decision

- All motorized vehicle use will be restricted to routes designated and displayed on the motor vehicle use map (MVUM.) Motor vehicle operators are responsible for acquiring the MVUM prior to motorized travel on the Mt Taylor Ranger District.
- Motor vehicle use of routes not designated on the MVUM will be prohibited after the map is released, unless provided for under special authorization or legal rights of way.
- This decision does not make any changes to the use authorization of trails by foot, bicycle, snowmobile and horse travel. This decision does not designate or prohibit non-motorized uses.
- The following vehicles and uses are exempted from these designations: 1) aircraft, 2) watercraft, 3) oversnow vehicles, 4) limited administrative use by the Forest Service, 5) use of any fire, military, emergency, or law enforcement vehicle for emergency purposes, 6) authorized use of any combat or combat support vehicle for national defense purposes, 7) law enforcement response to violations of law, and 8) motor vehicle use that is specifically authorized under a written authorization issued under Federal law or regulation [36 CFR 212.51 (a)].
- Forest Service personnel will be allowed limited administrative motorized use of any route for the protection or management of resources.
- As time, money, and Agency discretion allows, roads and trails not designated may be mechanically closed following additional NEPA analysis. Examples of closure methods include, but are not limited to: gating, ripping and seeding, re-contouring, and placement of felled trees and/or rocks. Mechanical closures would be implemented over time, where resource damage is occurring and/or sensitive wildlife habitats are being affected.
- Access for permitted activities (e.g. firewood gathering, forest product gathering, mineral exploration and development, maintaining water developments, and recreation events) on National Forest System lands is independent of general public access. Individuals or groups with written authorization will be allowed to conduct their business according to their authorization; however, the Forest Service reserves the right to control when and how access is achieved, such as through the approval in the permits or through annual operating plans. It is the responsibility of all permittees to follow the terms of their permits.
- Emergency fire suppression activities will continue to be exempt from seasonal restrictions and restrictions on use, except in wilderness and other congressionally

designated special areas that restrict off-road motorized use. Any Federal, State, tribal, or local office, in the performance of an official duty, could receive permission to use motorized vehicles on unauthorized routes not designated as part of the transportation system.

- The Forest Supervisor can implement special orders to restrict public use of roads and trails where substantial resource damage is occurring, where a public safety hazard exists, or where implementation of other management activities is deemed necessary. This may include seasonal restrictions on an annual basis (e.g., for calving areas or active raptor nests) as well as temporary restrictions for short-term conditions (e.g., mudslides and wet conditions, timber sale activities, fire risk, etc.), as authorized in the Code of Federal Regulation 36 CFR Part 261.
- Any previously unauthorized roads that are designated will be given a system number and will become part of the forest transportation system. These roads will be surveyed for heritage resources prior to being added to the system. Any heritage resources located along the road will be mitigated through avoidance, testing for subsurface deposits, data recovery, plating over resources in the road or road reroutes. These routes would not appear on the MVUM until mitigation is complete.
- Management objectives will be developed for each new or previously unauthorized route designated for use on the MVUM.
- On-the-ground signing will be used to clearly identify the road system number that corresponds with the MVUM.
- Motorized dispersed camping corridors do not include private land nor are they designated within 300 yards of any man-made water structure used for livestock or wildlife (State of New Mexico Chapter 72, Article 1-8).
- The district will identify portals, gateways or trailheads where motorized vehicle use information can be displayed including using TREAD LIGHTLY! and LEAVE NO TRACE programs to educate motorized users. A variety of methods could be used, including posters or brochures. Safety and outdoor ethics training will be provided for responsible motorized recreation use to Forest Service personnel that work in public contact positions in administrative offices and field patrols so that they have the training necessary to share information.
- User education and information will be emphasized as management tools to inform the motorized recreationists of appropriate uses, ethics, and interactions with other users. Information will be distributed through active user groups and clubs to achieve compliance.
- Partnerships and volunteer opportunities for proposing, constructing, and maintaining motorized road and trail routes, user education, and monitoring will be emphasized.
- Cooperation with county law enforcement officers will explore opportunities to improve compliance with county and State transportation laws on county and State roads that access motorized recreation areas.

Mitigation Measures and Monitoring

The tables below briefly summarize the mitigation measures and monitoring requirements for this decision. A detailed monitoring plan is available in Appendix E. These are in addition to best management practices and the standards and guidelines from the Forest Plan.

Mitigations

Mitigation	Description
User Education	Motor vehicle use information will be displayed at portals, gateways, or trailheads where multiple use may occur. User education and information would inform recreationists of appropriate uses, ethics and interactions with other users. Information would also be distributed to user groups and clubs to encourage compliance.
Heritage sites	Under the Travel Management Heritage protocol, project activity areas with the potential to impact archeological resources will be inventoried prior to project implementation. Mitigation will be done where needed to reach a finding of no effect or no adverse effect under the National Historic Preservation Act before the road, trail, area, or camping corridor is shown on the MVUM. Mitigation that is undertaken will vary with the type of site and its relationship to project impacts. Mitigation could range from site avoidance, to dropping a road, trail, or corridor from designation, and/or data recovery of information from the site.

Monitoring

Monitoring Objective	Description	Methodology
Required Monitoring		
Enforcement and Education	Determine if motorized vehicle users are complying with road designations on the MVUM.	Train and coordinate with district employees to prepare and submit incident reports to law enforcement when people are observed or reported to be in violation with vehicle designation or new unauthorized routes are created.
Heritage Resources	Periodic inspection of heritage resources with potential future impacts within designated roads, trails, and/or motorized dispersed camping corridors.	Heritage resource specialists will inspect sites per the Travel Management Heritage Protocol Agreement or while inspecting other priority heritage assets.

Soil and Water Resources	Determine if BMPs are effective in preventing indirect effects Determine if assumptions in analysis are accurate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impacts to dry meadow from re-route • Impact related to OHV area 	Incorporate project area into annual BMP monitoring as per Forest Plan Assess condition of re-route on meadow Assess soil and water resources in and adjacent to OHV area
Optional Monitoring		
Recreation	Determine if the designation of roads through Travel Management has a negative impact on recreation activities and experiences on the District.	The Forest will work with the National Visitor Use Monitoring survey team to add additional survey days and times to gather data about the impacts of travel management on visitors.

Cibola Forest Plan Amendment

Amendment 11 of the Forest Plan, which became effective in 2008, prohibits cross country travel except as designated on the MVUM. This amendment takes effect on the Mt Taylor Ranger District with the signing of this Decision Notice and release of the MVUM.

To provide for consistency between the plan and the Travel Management Rule, this decision amends the forest plan to retain the current forest wide road density direction (1.90 miles per sq. mile average) and eliminate road density guidance for each management area and its associated analysis areas on the Mt. Taylor Ranger District. We will continue to allow for the temporary increase in road density (2 to 3 miles per sq. mile) in active vegetation management areas in all management areas.

This amendment will also delete or change the standards/guidelines listed on pages 120, 128, 135, 159, 167, and 196, which refer to OHV area closures and restrictions, obliteration, and maintenance, signing of closed areas (no longer appropriate), or specific acreages of OHV closed areas on the Mt. Taylor Ranger District. These are no longer necessary because all areas outside the designated system will not be open for public motorized use.

I have determined that this is a not a significant plan amendment. I have considered several factors including:

- This amendment is late in the life of the current Forest Plan, which is scheduled for revision within the next few years.
- This amendment does not affect the goals, objectives, and outputs described in the plan.
- It does not change management prescriptions but does make the plan consistent with the direction in the Travel Management Rule.
- This amendment only applies to the Mt Taylor Ranger District.

This LRMP amendment was reviewed for its consistency with the Region-wide Programmatic Land and Resource Management Plan Biological Opinion (BO). It was determined to be consistent with the LRMP Biological Opinion because it results in effects to species and designated critical habitat in a manner and extent that were analyzed in the BO, it does not result in exceeding the amount of take issued in the BO, it meets the assumptions stated in the BO; and it would result in continuing to implement the Terms and Conditions of the BO.

Rationale for the Decision

This decision was not easy or simple, and not without effects. I considered social as well as natural resource issues. The comments received during the process reflect the diverse interests in and concerns about the use of the Mt Taylor Ranger District. The analysis of comments is not a voting process. I have carefully and objectively assessed public comments and the information available in the EA, including the purpose and need, issues, and alternatives and their effects, in reaching my decision. Through my discussions with attendees of public meetings, and the comments received throughout this process I am aware of the passionate feelings individuals have for the resource values of the Mt Taylor Ranger District and the value of motorized and non-motorized recreation for participants in a variety of activities.

I have selected Alternative C with the modifications I incorporated over the other alternatives because this alternative provides reasonable access for motorized recreation on the Mt Taylor Ranger District while considering other resource concerns. My decision prohibits unrestricted cross-country travel in areas where it has been allowed in the past to comply with the Travel Management Rule direction.

This decision provides motorized access for all types of vehicles throughout the district. Based on the analysis presented in the EA and the comments received, it is evident that the Mt Taylor Ranger District is valued for multiple forms of recreation, many of which are facilitated by motorized access to areas on the district. Alternative C best meets the needs of the public because it incorporates more miles of roads and trails, excluding motorized big game retrieval, than the other action alternatives and protects natural and cultural resources. In addition, the 344-acre OHV area provides rock crawling opportunities. Past use of the area has shown limited impacts to the resources due to the rocky nature of McKenzie Ridge.

The designations provide motorized access to areas of the district valued for activities such as camping, hiking, picnicking, hunting, forest product gathering and wildlife viewing. All roads designated with this decision will be open to all classes of vehicles. The resulting system will provide a variety of motorized recreation opportunities by including routes that vary in difficulty. This will provide four-wheel drivers with a diversity of terrain and challenges.

Comments received indicated that there was a need to limit some roads to OHV use (vehicles less than 65 wide). Alternative C provides 183 miles of designated motorized trails for users seeking that type riding experience. This alternative also includes 25 miles of roads that will become motorized single-track trails for motorcycle use only.

I am not approving motorized big game retrieval off the designated system with this decision. The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish has encouraged the Forest Service to consider hunting related OHV activities similar to any other form of motorized recreation and to apply restrictions equally as part of the Travel Management process (see project file, April 30, 2008). The additional miles of road and trail designations provided in this alternative will result in a road density that will facilitate big game retrieval without driving cross-country. Excluding motorized

big game retrieval will help address concerns related to motorized trespass into private lands, creation of unauthorized roads, and will help protect natural resources.

The motorized dispersed camping corridors incorporated commonly used and known spots identified during the scoping process. They are generally located in flat, open areas near roads throughout the district. Most spots have user-constructed fire rings and other evidence of regular use. My decision excludes 7.3 miles of motorized dispersed camping corridor along NFSR 544B, 575, and 503 from this alternative due to terrain conditions such as slopes and rocky surfaces, fences that would have conflicted with the corridor, or the existence of dense vegetation that would require extensive mitigation before designation. In addition, I did not designate the motorized trail proposed on NFSR 453L and 236 because of watershed and soil concerns. I decided not to change the designation of NFSR 43 to a motorized trail for that section from NFSR 40 to NFSR 49E because the road tread is needed for motor vehicle access to NFSR 49E.

The interdisciplinary team examined the comments from the public, other agencies, and tribes to generate the issues, which it then used to develop alternatives. The issues related to the effects of the proposed action are described on pages 9-11 of the EA. I selected Alternative C with modifications because it meets the Purpose and Need described in the EA on page 5 and provides a response to the issues identified in the EA.

1. Motorized Big Game Retrieval for Big Game Species

The proposed action does not allow motorized big game retrieval off of designated system roads. During public involvement, comments were submitted that shared the concern that this would impede a hunter's ability to retrieve legally tagged big game.

I selected Alternative C because it provides additional roads and trails that will facilitate the collection of downed game without necessitating motorized cross-country travel. This follows recommendations provided by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and resource analyses available in the EA.

2. Motorized Dispersed Camping

There were two opposing issues raised with the proposed action. The first concern was that a 100-foot motorized dispersed camping corridor on would not provide sufficient separation between the road and dispersed camping spots to provide for a safe, quality camping experience. Comments from campers stated concerns that concentrating campers next to roads would result in an unsafe and unsecure campsite. Dust and noise created by motor vehicles would adversely affect the overall motorized dispersed camping experience. There were additional comments that the proposed action did not provide enough motorized dispersed camping corridors across the district.

Conversely, other respondents felt there is too much motorized dispersed camping. They contend motorized dispersed camping corridors in the proposed action would result in too much land designated for motorized dispersed camping, which would increase motorized cross-country travel in these areas and, therefore, have greater impact to resources in these corridors.

There is a long history of motorized dispersed camping on the District. The majority of motorized dispersed camping corridors included in this decision are located in areas that the public has historically used. While there is some compaction and disturbance at

commonly used sites, the existing sites are reasonably stable and seldom are new sites created. These sites were analyzed for resource concerns and selected with resource considerations. I selected this alternative because it provides the most corridors of sufficient width for motorized dispersed camping (92 miles).

3. Off-Highway Vehicle Use

There were a variety of concerns related to OHV use and the desire for a variety of motorized recreation opportunities. Some of the proposed designated OHV trails do not form loops, so that it would be necessary to travel the same route out and back. OHV users responded that this type of OHV trail access and designation was undesirable and that users would like to see more loops to allow for a more varied experience.

Because the proposed action designates trails for vehicles less than 50 inches in width, users of utility terrain vehicles (UTVs)—also known as side by sides—would not be allowed to use these trails because many of the UTVs exceed 50 inches in width. Scoping comments from UTV owners requested that designated trails should also accommodate UTVs.

The proposed action did not designate an area for motorized cross-country travel for OHV use. There were a number of comments identifying an area north of County Road 50 on McKenzie Ridge as desirable for a designated area. Those who commented included jeep groups that participate in rock crawling in that area.

This decision results in 852 miles of roads and trails open for public use. The roads will be open to all vehicles. Additionally, they will provide users with a variety of terrain for motorized recreation activities as well as access to parts of the forest identified during public involvement as important for recreation activities. Comments received during the comment period indicated that most motorized recreationists wanted roads open to all vehicles and a few commenters who preferred a trail system for specific classes of vehicles.

The 344-acre OHV area was included in the decision because activities within the area create minimal impacts to natural resources. The terrain limits speed and use of area. Past use of the area has shown limited impacts to the resources due to the rocky nature of McKenzie Ridge.

4. Habitat/Species Impacts

The comments expressed concern that the number of designated roads in the proposed action fragments wildlife habitat, and motor vehicle use on these roads would result in wildlife harassment.

Based on the number of miles available for public motorized use, Alternative C has more anticipated effects to habitat and species concerns compared to Alternatives B and D, however these effects would be less than the existing conditions or Alternative A (no action). By prohibiting motorized cross-country travel, confining motorized dispersed camping to corridors, and designating the roads open to the public, there will be a substantial reduction in environmental effects compared to the existing conditions. I selected Alternative C because it will result in a reduction of effects to habitat and species concerns while providing for access to public lands.

5. Hunting

The proposed action designated some roads in quality hunting areas. Some comments requested consideration of motorized seasonal closure(s) on designated roads in quality hunting areas only during the elk and deer seasons to enhance a more primitive hunting experience.

I selected Alternative C because it reduces National Forest System Roads open to the public by approximately 13% and the reduction of roads are in key big game habitats and around water sources. Prohibiting motorized cross-country travel and reducing road densities would benefit the wildlife and improve hunting quality.

6. Designation of Unauthorized (User-created), Closed, Decommissioned, or New Roads

There is a concern that designating unauthorized, closed, decommissioned, or new roads would have excessive negative effects to natural or heritage resources.

This decision will designate 76 miles of unauthorized, closed, and decommissioned roads and trails. The EA analyses indicate that designating these roads would allow access and still protect natural and cultural resources. Segments of roads that could result in effects on resources were excluded from the decision. Before being published on the Motor Vehicle Use Map, these newly designated unauthorized, closed, and decommissioned roads that do not meet Forest Service standards will be reconstructed and/or maintained to Forest Service standards for level 2 roads or motorized trail standards. This will improve the drainage of the roads/trails and reduce erosion.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, four other alternatives were considered in detail. A complete description and comparison of these alternatives can be found in the EA on pages 13-18 and Tables 3 and 4 on pages 24-25. Four additional alternatives were considered and eliminated from detailed study, as discussed on pages 22-23 in the EA.

Alternative A - No Action

The EA included the No Action Alternative as a baseline for comparison of the effects of the changes that would occur under each of the other alternatives. Motorized cross-country travel is currently unmanaged and allowed on approximately 445,623 acres, which represents 86 percent of the Mt Taylor Ranger District (515,536 acres), and would remain open to cross-country travel under this alternative. Unmanaged cross-country motorized travel has resulted in the proliferation of unauthorized roads. All of these routes would continue to be open to motorized use, unless prohibited by a separate closure order or legislative action. Motorized dispersed camping would be unrestricted in the areas open to motorized cross-country travel. There are 987 miles of National Forest System roads on the Mt Taylor Ranger District open to general motorized use. Of these, 91 miles are maintained and managed for passenger vehicles. There are 896 miles of system roads managed for high-clearance vehicles, such as pickups or sport utility vehicles.

Alternative A - Rationale for Non-Selection:

In its entirety, including no changes to motorized cross-country travel, this alternative is not consistent with the requirements of the Travel Management Rule. However, the portion of No Action that would leave existing system road designations unchanged could have been selected with the modification of prohibiting motorized cross-country travel. This would have resulted in no changes to the 987 miles of existing system roads currently open to motorized travel and no addition of motorized trails on the District. However, many of the system roads present a high risk to natural and cultural resources while providing low benefit to the transportation system. In addition, there are many roads on the district that are redundant and access the same area or are short spurs developed for management activity access and do not benefit recreational or other public motorized use. These effects make this alternative less acceptable than Alternative C.

Alternative B – Proposed Action

This is the proposed action that was presented in the “Scoping Report for Mt Taylor Ranger District Travel Management Proposed Action” dated October 7, 2008, with minor changes as a result of additional field review. Alternative B would have resulted in a motorized system with 620 miles of National Forest System Roads open for public motor vehicle use. Of these roads, 83 miles would be unauthorized, decommissioned, or closed roads and 1 mile would be new construction of a reroute to mitigate a resource concern. About 80 miles of motorized dispersed camping corridors adjacent to system roads would be designated.

Alternative B - Rationale for Non-Selection:

Alternative B provided fewer roads and motorized dispersed camping areas than Alternative C. During public involvement, local residents who are frequent, long time users of the District requested specific roads/trails and dispersed camping corridors in response to the proposed action. In my decision, I feel that many of these additional roads/trails should be included in the designated system. Alternative C better provides for motorized recreation and hunting access that was requested during public involvement. In many cases these were traditional roads/trails, regularly traveled for a variety of recreational uses. Even though Alternative C provides additional roads compared to Alternative B, I feel that the balance between resource concerns and access needs can be better achieved with Alternative C.

Alternative D

Alternative D would provide the same motorized network of roads and trails as Alternative C except Alternative D would allow motorized cross-country travel from specific roads for retrieving downed big game by an individual who has legally taken the animal. This alternative would allow hunters to drive up to one-half mile off specific designated roads to retrieve a legally tagged elk, mule deer, or black bear during the big game hunting season. Under this alternative, UTVs would be allowed on motorized trails that are designated for vehicles 65 inches in width or less (UTVs, ATVs and motorcycles).

Alternative D - Rationale for Non-Selection:

I did not select Alternative D because Alternative C provides the same open road system as Alternative D. Although Alternative D provides for motorized big game retrieval within one-half mile of specific roads, I believe that the road density in Alternative C provides adequate facilities for the retrieval of downed game without necessitating motorized cross-country travel. This is consistent with recommendations provided by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and resource analyses disclosed in the EA. Additionally, based on comments received from the

public Alternative D may have more impacts on the quality of the hunting experience because it does allow for motorized big game retrieval.

Alternative E

Alternative E would result in a motorized system of 427 miles of roads and trails open for public motorized use. Alternative E would not designate corridors for motorized dispersed camping, would not allow motorized cross-country travel for motorized big game retrieval, and would not designate an OHV area. This alternative would not allow the use of UTVs on designated motorized trails.

Alternative E - Rationale for Non-Selection:

This alternative provided fewer roads and motorized trails than the other action alternatives. Although this alternative addressed the concern about designating unauthorized, decommissioned, closed roads and wildlife harassment and wildlife habitat fragmentation, the exclusion of these would have resulted in a designated system that did not provide access to areas of the district that are important for recreation and other public uses, both motorized and non-motorized. Additionally, Alternative E did not provide many of the roads and trails identified during public involvement as important for motorized recreation, motorized dispersed camping, motorized trail system, and hunting access.

Public Involvement

The Mt Taylor Ranger District travel management interdisciplinary team (ID team) initiated a collaborative process to inform the public about the travel management planning process in October 2007. The ID Team hosted two phases of open house sessions in Gallup and Grants, NM during development of the proposed action. The initial open house sessions provided information about the Travel Management Rule and its implementation. The second phase focused on public input and solicited detailed information on how individuals use and enjoy national forest lands within the analysis area.

Forest Service officials asked the public to define the roads, trails and areas important to them for providing opportunities for motorized uses. Meeting participants identified on maps the motorized routes they used to access desired areas. Base maps for the exercise displayed authorized and known unauthorized roads. The public identified additional unauthorized roads previously unknown to, or unmapped, by district personnel.

The ID Team hosted two additional open houses at the district office and maintained an open door policy for public input for individuals and groups. This approach allowed people who were unable to attend the initial sessions to provide input to the process.

The ID Team posted detailed maps at the district office in Grants, NM, and at the McKinley County Agricultural Service Center in Gallup, NM, for public review and comment. The ID Team received hand-drawn maps, GIS data, verbal descriptions, emails, and letters with additional input. Information about travel management, maps, public meetings, and project contacts was available online on the Cibola Travel Management web site for the public outside of the local area. Local newspapers were used to notify the local public.

The following concerns and requests were shared during the public involvement process. The interdisciplinary team (ID team) considered the public's concerns and requests in developing the proposed action and later alternatives:

- Provide a motorized trail riding experience where all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) are not competing with full size 4x4 trucks;
- Provide designations for motorized dispersed camping once the district is closed to motorized cross-country travel;
- Provide for motorized big game retrieval that minimizes enforcement challenges and creation of unauthorized routes;
- Provide motorized opportunities that better meet the public's forest access priorities that were identified during the public involvement; and
- Reduce wildlife habitat fragmentation or resource damage from multiple routes that provide access to the same areas.

Tribal Consultation: The Mt. Taylor Ranger District consulted with eight tribes that use the district for traditional cultural or spiritual activities. These include the Pueblo of Acoma, Pueblo of Zuni, Pueblo of Laguna, Pueblo of Sandia, Pueblo of Jemez, Jicarilla Apache, Hopi Nation, and the Navajo Nation.

The forest first informed these tribes about travel management in August 2008 when the process was highlighted in the forest's annual tribal consultation letter. Subsequently, follow-up consultation meetings were held with these tribes in the fall and winter of 2008. A follow-up workshop was conducted in Acoma, NM, on November 03, 2008. The Navajo Medicine Men Association was consulted in January 2009 for clarification on traditional uses. The eight tribes were also included in the NEPA scoping process.

The ID Team considered the information gathered from tribal consultation and incorporated it into development of the proposed action and alternatives. Further information on tribal involvement efforts is contained in the project record located at the district office.

Scoping: In addition to the extensive public involvement used to develop the proposed action, the ID Team sent a scoping letter and report to 493 people on October 7, 2008. The scoping letter, report, and maps were posted on the Cibola National Forest's travel management Web page. Press releases were sent to local area media outlets to announce the release of the scoping letter and report. The ID Team also hosted two open houses after release of the proposed action, one each in Gallup and Grants, NM. Approximately 67 written comments were received (EA page 7). A list of interested individuals, tribes, and local, State, and Federal agencies involved in the scoping process is on file in the project record located at the district office. The project has been on the forest's schedule of proposed actions since 2008.

Using the comments from the public, other agencies, and tribes, the interdisciplinary team (ID team) identified issues regarding the effects of the proposed action (see EA pages 9-11). Based on the issues, the ID Team created and analyzed the alternatives described above.

As required by the agency's notice, comment and appeal procedures, the Cibola NF offered a 30-day comment period on the proposed action. The legal notice for the comment period was published in the Albuquerque Journal (the newspaper of record) and the Cibola Beacon on

August 13, 2010 and in the Gallup Independent on August 16, 2010. Copies of the EA were mailed to those who had requested a copy in advance of publication, and letters announcing the availability of the EA were sent to those on the Mt Taylor District mailing list and those who had attended public meetings or otherwise expressed interest in the EA. During the comment period the Forest Service held two open houses in Gallup and Grants, NM that provided the public an additional forum to provide comments on the Proposed Action. I received a total of 53 responses during the comment period. Comments received were through mail, fax, or hand-delivery or received and recorded from phone calls or personal visits.

Finding of No Significant Impact

The significance of environmental impacts is considered in terms of context and intensity. This means that the significance of an action is analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human and national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. In the case of a site-specific action, significance usually depends upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Intensity refers to the severity or degree of impact (40 CFR 1508.27).

The following is a summary of how Alternative C, as modified on pages 3-4 of this document, addresses the 10 significance factors identified in 40 CFR 1508.27(b). The best available science was considered in the determinations made in these findings including methods of data collection, analysis, cause and effects analysis and means to mitigate adverse effects.

Context

The Mt Taylor Ranger District is located in northwest New Mexico. The total area affected by this decision is approximately 445,623 acres within the district boundary excluding private lands. Approximately 70,377 acres of the district were excluded from the environmental assessment because previous project decisions for these areas already comply with the travel management rule.

Pueblos of Acoma and Laguna are located to the southeast side of the district. The Navajo reservation borders the district on the northwest and southern sides and the Pueblo of Zuni to the south and west. Towns in the vicinity include Grants and Gallup. Other communities affected by management on the Mt Taylor Ranger District include Ramah, Zuni, Thoreau, Prewitt, Bluewater, San Mateo, and Cubero. The city of Albuquerque is a little over a one hours' drive east from Grants.

The effects from the proposed actions would affect those persons living and recreating within the project boundary. Effects may be either beneficial or adverse, depending on the points of view of the persons affected. Although travel management decisions affecting national forests may be of national interest, the effects related to this decision are generally limited to the local area.

Intensity

Intensity refers to the severity of the impacts. The following ten factors are considered in determining the intensity of effects.

(1) Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse.

This action reduces the environmental impacts of motorized recreation by prohibiting unmanaged cross-country travel and implementing mitigation and design criteria to reduce impacts of the designated roads, trails, and area. The EA discloses both beneficial and adverse impacts (Chapter 3 Environmental Consequences). None of these effects, either alone or after mitigation measures have been applied, represent a significant impact. I considered both adverse and beneficial effects in reaching my conclusion; the beneficial effects were not used to offset or compensate the adverse effects in making the determination.

(2) Degree to which the actions affect public health or safety.

After considering the analysis in the EA, I conclude that implementing the chosen alternative would not significantly affect public health and safety because of the limited scope of the actions. The process of designating routes has been successfully implemented on numerous National Forests across the nation, and some of those systems have been in place for decades. Managing motorized vehicle use on public lands will increase the safety of persons using vehicles as well as those who encounter them on the Mt Taylor District. There is no evidence that motorized vehicle use will increase or decrease because of this decision, only that it would be regulated to specified areas. Please see the sections on public safety and law enforcement in the EA (pages 28, 29, 31 and 46-49).

Areas with abandoned mines will be less accessible by motorized vehicle and will be less likely to be discovered, thereby decreasing the likelihood of mine-related accidents in these areas.

(3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area.

I have concluded that the selected alternative will not have a significant effect on any unique characteristics and ecologically critical areas on the Mt Taylor Ranger District. Measures have been incorporated to protect cultural resources that exist near roads. No other unique characteristics or ecologically critical areas as described in 40 CFR 1508.27(3) - park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers - exist in the area. There are no Inventoried Roadless Areas within the analysis area.

There are current mining proposals located south of San Mateo Mesa and west of La Jara Mesa. There would be no effect on this area except for the elimination of public off-road motorized access. Miners with valid claims in the area would retain their legal access to their mines. Motorized access would be authorized under plans of operation.

(4) Degree to which the effects on the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

I recognize that designating roads, trails, and areas for motorized use has generated controversy. Many people have expressed a desire for additional designations. Others have indicated concern for the degree of motorized designations, and requested fewer designated routes than those designated with this decision. However, there is no substantiated scientific controversy over the effects as described. The opposing opinions related to the motorized recreation experience and protection of wildlife and other natural resources were addressed during alternative development and are discussed in Chapter 3 of the EA (pages 27-112).

(5) Degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

The Forest Service has considerable experience with the activities to be implemented. The effects of management of motorized vehicle use on public lands are discussed in the effects analysis in

Chapter 3 of the EA (pages 27-112). They are not highly uncertain; nor do the effects involve unique or unknown risks. Therefore, they are not significant.

(6) Degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

Implementation of the Travel Management Rule decision on the Mt Taylor Ranger District will not set a precedent: it is a nationwide initiative required to be implemented by every National Forest (EA pages 1-3). The designation of routes for public motorized use does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. Procedures are in place to periodically revise the MVUM to accommodate changes as a result of future management decisions. Any future proposals that alter the designated system will be evaluated through the National Environmental Policy Act process, consistent with current laws and regulations.

(7) Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.

The decision was evaluated in the context of other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions. This action does not individually, nor when considering other activities within the area affected, cumulatively result in significant effects. This determination is based on the discussion of cumulative effects in Chapter 3 of the EA (see EA pages 33, 46, 49, 52, 87-89, 96-97, 101-102, 109, 111-112). This is primarily based on the predicted effects from the modest level of overall change that would occur as a result of the route designation process. I have also considered travel management planning underway on other national forests in the region, and on Bureau of Land Management lands, and other OHV management by State of New Mexico, county and local governments on nearby lands.

(8) Degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources.

There would be no significant adverse effects to these resources when mitigation measures are applied (EA pages 105-109). The designation of roads and trails, and restriction of cross-country travel will reduce the potential impact to all known and unknown cultural resources. The project complies with the protocol specified in the programmatic agreement with the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). As per the protocol, the archeological clearances are being phased. Routes and areas that are approved in the travel management decision will not be open to the public and shown on the MVUM until heritage clearances and mitigation measures have been completed. Tribal consultation revealed no concerns that this decision would affect areas of importance to culturally-affiliated tribes (EA pages 110-112).

(9) Degree to which the action may adversely affect an Endangered or Threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat. The Biological Assessment and Evaluation (BAE) prepared for the project determined that the project “may affect but not likely to adversely affect” the Mexican spotted owl or its habitat (EA pages 78-80). The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service concurred with the determinations of effect on February 14, 2011.

(10) Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or other requirements imposed for protection of the environment.

The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. The action is consistent with the Cibola National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended with this decision.

Conclusion

Based on the context and intensity of the environmental consequences documented in the *Environmental Assessment for Travel Management on the Mt Taylor Ranger District* and its project record with respect to the 10 significance factors addressed here, I find that Alternative C, as modified on pages 3-4 of this document, when implemented in conjunction with the design features and mitigations in the decision will not significantly affect the human environment. Therefore, I find that implementation of Alternative C, as modified with mitigation measures, is not a major Federal action requiring the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision for travel management on the Mt Taylor Ranger District is consistent with the intent of the long term goals and objectives listed on pages 33-34 of the *1985 Cibola National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (as amended)*(Forest Plan). The project was designed in conformance with Forest Plan standards and incorporates appropriate Forest Plan guidelines for Management Areas 11(Forest Plan, pages 141-148); 12 (Forest Plan, pages 149-157); 13 (Forest Plan, pages 158-162); and 15 (Forest Plan, pages 174-181). The project was developed in consideration of the best available science.

The decision is consistent with other applicable laws and regulations including the National Historic Preservation Act and the Endangered Species Act. The measures included in the proposal to protect soil, water and air resources ensure compliance with the Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act.

Implementation Date

If no appeals are filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to regulations at 36 CFR 215. Those who provided comments during the comment period are eligible to appeal the decision under the regulations. The appeal must be filed in writing (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, express delivery, or messenger service) with the appropriate Appeal Deciding Officer. Submit appeals to:

Corbin L. Newman Jr.
Regional Forester/Appeal Deciding Officer
USDA Forest Service
Southwestern Region
333 Broadway SE
Albuquerque, NM 87102

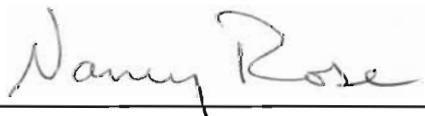
or fax to (505) 842-3173

If hand delivered, the appeal must be received at the above address during business hours (Monday - Friday 8:00 am to 4:30 pm), excluding Federal holidays. Electronic appeals may be submitted to: appeals-southwestern-regional-office@fs.fed.us (.doc, .rtf, or .txt formats only). The appeal must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic appeals.

Appeals, including attachments, must be in writing, fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.14, and filed (postmarked) within 45 days following the date notice of this decision is published in the *Albuquerque Journal*. This publication date is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframes provided by any other source.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Keith Baker, Cibola National Forest, 2113 Osuna Road NE, 87113, or phone at (505) 346-3820.



NANCY ROSE
Forest Supervisor
Cibola National Forest

April 14, 2011

Date

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