

DIVIDE TRAVEL PLAN STATUS UPDATE

Helena National Forest - Helena Ranger District

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Where we are at in the Planning Process

This newsletter has been prepared as an update on where the Helena National Forest (HNF), Helena Ranger District is at in the preparation of the Divide Travel Plan.

In December of 2008, the HNF held several public meetings and received comments on the proposed action that would be incorporated into an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the proposed Divide Travel Plan. Based on comments received, two additional alternatives were developed.

In preparation of the EA, the HNF identified certain affects that *may* be cumulatively significant. As a result, the HNF is preparing a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) to analyze the effects of proposed changes to the existing motorized public access routes and prohibitions within the Divide travel planning area for wheeled and over-snow motorized vehicles.

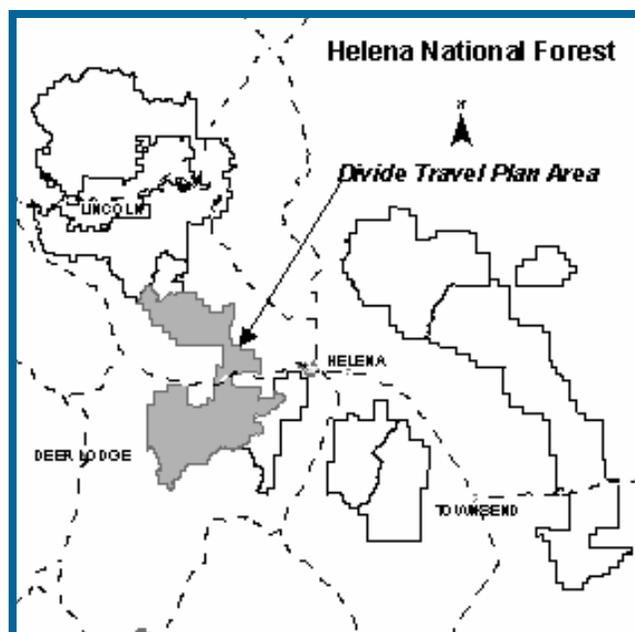
The official comment period will be when the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) is released. We anticipate the DEIS being released in October 2011.

Background

Travel Planning for the Divide Area was initiated in 2003, along with the South Belts and Blackfoot areas of the HNF. That effort was halted after large scale wildfires in the summer of 2003. In 2005, the Forest Service issued a new Travel Planning Rule which changed the scope of the possible changes of the 2003 effort and emphasized collaboration with the public as part of development of proposed changes. The final rule requires designation of roads, trails, and areas that are open to motor vehicle use.

Planning Area

The Divide Area includes approximately 155,480 acres of public land located in Lewis & Clark and Powell counties. The area encompasses Black Mountain and extends to the Tenmile Drainage over to the Little Blackfoot /Bison Mountain Area. Also included are four inventoried roadless areas: Electric Peak, Jericho Mountain, Lazyman, and Nevada Mountain.



Purpose of the Travel Plan

The objective of this proposal is to provide a manageable system of designated public motorized access routes and areas within the Divide Planning Area. As a result, this project would designate open roads, motorized trails and motorized over-snow routes and areas in the Divide Planning Area.

Potential changes to the transportation system in the Divide area on the HNF are part of a larger, nationwide effort by the Forest Service to update travel plans on all of the National Forests with the larger goal of identifying which roads and trails are open for motorized use and eliminating off route wheeled motorized travel and the creation of unauthorized routes.

Alternatives have been identified through discussions with forest users, landowners, agencies, local government, tribal contacts, recreation groups and advocacy groups and through written comments.

Consistent with Forest Service travel planning regulations, the designated wheeled motorized routes within the Divide Travel Planning Area will be displayed on a Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) and made available to the public free of charge.

PROPOSED SCHEDULE

Draft EIS (DEIS)— October 2011
45 Day Comment Period on the DEIS
Anticipated Decision— 2012

When released, the DEIS will be posted on the HNF webpage at:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/helena/projects>

Decision to be Made

This effort is similar to the South Belts travel planning decision on the HNF. It will result in an administrative decision on whether a route is open to motorized use, or closed. It will also focus on proposed changes to the current transportation system including potential seasonal restrictions.

The tools used to implement this decision will be limited to new maps (MVUM), posting signs, and information posted on the Forest website.

No ground disturbing activities are included and no new construction of routes are proposed as part of this project.

Scope of the Decision — Our travel plan analysis will serve as the site specific analysis needed to replace the Northern Region OHV decision made in 2001 and is consistent with the 2005 Travel Planning Rule. Exceptions to motorized use of closed roads and off route areas not available to the public may be authorized, but not limited to, activities such as search and rescue, weed control, access to private property, permitted uses, fire suppression and law enforcement activities.

Items Outside this Project Scope — Previous decisions of the 2007 North Belts Travel Plan Decision, the Elkhorns, Gates of the Mountains Wilderness, Clancy/Unionville and the Cellar-Oglivie (Soundwood) area will not be revisited. Any changes to the transportation system that are tied to effects of these projects are separate from this process, but will be evaluated if warranted. Dual-use routes are not proposed for inclusion in this project.

Forest Plan Consistency — Preliminary analysis indicates this proposal may require a programmatic amendment to the HNF Forest Plan for the project area regarding the standard for the hiding cover/open road density index. The proposed programmatic plan amendment would establish a new standard for elk security for those herd units within the project area. As a result, the Forest Plan standard would be amended specifically at this time and place as it relates to the Divide Travel Planning Area.

Proposed Action

Reduce Complexity of Current Forest Visitor Map —

The HNF's current visitor map includes 18 different travel restriction types including seasonal restrictions. The Proposed Action (PA) would reduce these to three.

Non System (NS) Routes — Routes not currently recognized as part of the HNF system roads were identified during field reviews and discussions with land owners, permittees and other forest users prior to developing the PA. The PA identifies which routes would be closed to motorized use and which would remain open. Those that are included in the decision would be incorporated into the Forest Road or Trail System.

Over-snow Routes — Currently, the existing condition has areas on either side of a road prism as open to over-snow motorized use; however, the road itself is closed. The alternatives would identify the road prism in areas open to over-snow vehicle use to match the use identified in the surrounding area. These would be open to over-snow motorized use from 12/2 to 5/15.

Wheeled motorized vehicle travel for camping would be allowed within 300 feet of designated system routes, including roads and trails (unless signed otherwise) as long as: 1) no new permanent routes are created by this activity; 2) no damage to existing vegetation, soil, or water resource occurs; 3) travel off-route does not cross streams; and 4) travel off-route does not traverse riparian or wet areas.

Designated Roads & Trails—This would include all terminal facilities, trailheads, parking lots and turnouts associated with the road or trail. The designation also includes parking a motor vehicle on the side of the road when it is safe to do so without causing damage to NFS resource or facilities, unless prohibited by state law, a traffic sign, or a Forest Service special order. Parking would be limited to within 30 feet from the edge of the road surface.



- ◆ Approximately 40 miles of roads would be closed to wheeled vehicles year-long. Approximately 30 miles are currently open to highway legal vehicles year-long with no restrictions, and approximately 10 miles are open for part of the year with restrictions and different dates.
- ◆ Approximately 6.8 miles of road would be closed to over snow motorized vehicle travel.
- ◆ Seasonal restrictions would be placed on all trails open to motorized wheeled vehicles 50" or less. There are no seasonal restrictions in the existing condition.
- ◆ Approximately 4 miles of trail would be open to wheeled motorized vehicles 50" or less from 5/15-10/14; this includes Forest System Road (FSR) # 136-007 and # 4104-A1 located in the Bison Mountain Area.
- ◆ Signs would be posted to clarify changes to the transportation system on the ground.



- ◆ The stream crossings on FSR # 495-D1 that provides access to Motorized Vehicles 50" or less from May 16 through October 14 on FSR # 4104-A1 would be closed to motorized use until the fords can be replaced with a bridge, bottomless arch or culvert.
- ◆ The stream crossings that provides access to the Larabee Gulch Trailhead on FSR # 227-D1 and the access to Golden Anchor on FSR # 4001 would be closed to motorized use until the fords can be replaced with a bridge, bottomless arch or culvert.

Comments submitted during the 2008 scoping period do not need to be re-submitted unless the comments are different. If a party wants to seek standing to participate in the appeal process and has submitted comments previously, then, a written request needs to be submitted during the DEIS comment period expressing

Preliminary Issues

Many comments received during past comment periods, have spoke specifically to the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDNST), and the Sweeny Creek, Kading/Limburger Springs, and Electric Peak areas. These areas generated the most public interest regarding motorized and non-motorized uses. As a result, the following items have been incorporated into the features for the Proposed Action:

- ◆ The Kading/Limburger Springs and Sweeny Creek areas would be closed to wheeled motorized travel for resource and winter wildlife protection.
- ◆ FSR # 227 would be closed at the turn around located just past Kading Campground and FSR # 227-E1 would be closed to wheeled motorized vehicles.
- ◆ FSR # 1802 & FSR # 1802-C1 would be closed to wheeled motorized vehicles year-long.
- ◆ Winter closures would be in place for the Hahn Creek area as well as lower elevation west facing slopes in Clarks Canyon north to Threemile Creek.
- ◆ FSR # 314 in the Spotted Dog area would be opened to highway legal vehicles from 5/16 to 10/14 and closed to wheeled motorized vehicles from 10/15 to 5/15.
- ◆ Additional segments of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDNST) totaling approximately 13.5 miles would be closed to motorized use.