Forest Service to hear wide-ranging objections to Divide Travel Plan

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The Helena National Forest will hold a meeting in August to hear objections to its proposal for travel planning near the Continental Divide west of Helena. The objections include those from motorized users for the Forest Service’s plans to close some routes, while others thought the plan violates environmental laws and would harm wildlife and habitat.

In April, the Forest Service issued a draft final environmental impact statement for the Divide Travel Plan and draft record of decision, which defines which routes are open to motorized travel in the 155,000-acre planning area. The decision proposes an overall reduction in motorized routes, but does include some new loop routes.

Local nonmotorized user groups, including members of the Montana Wilderness Association and Last Chance Backcounty Horsemen, threw their support behind the plan. Several called it “courageous” for limiting motorized use in some contentious areas such as Sweeny Creek and the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail.

The decision opened a 45-day objection period for the travel plan, and a 60-day objection period for a forest amendment redefining big game security standards. Objectors must have commented during development of the plan to have standing to object.

Of the 29 objections received by the Forest Service, 15 of those were found to have standing, and will be included in an Aug. 19 meeting, said Helena National Forest spokeswoman Kathy Bushnell.

The objection process has been used on a handful of recent projects, providing a meeting and a chance to resolve issues before the Forest Service issues a final decision.

The Capital Trail Vehicle Association, a vocal critic of the plan, issued an objection letter along with letters from several members. The group objected to the reduced number of roads and trails open to motorized use, which limits the type of users able to access the forest.

“We are extremely concerned about losing this much multiple-use and recreational opportunity in an area that is relatively close to Helena, has been designated by congress for multiple-use and is ideal for multiple-use,” the letter says. “We are also concerned that ultimately the general public will not accept the significant loss of access and multiple-use under the draft decision when it hits the ground.”

**Association member Mike Sedlock said in his objection letter that he felt the Forest Service had failed to adequately consider the need for motorized access of some forest users.**

**“I strongly feel that the Forest Service is ignoring the motorized access needs of senior citizens and disabled persons dependence upon and use of motorized vehicles in order for them to continue recreating on and enjoying our public lands,” his objection says. “Public access means for all uses, not just the community that is still physically able to hike or can afford to own a horse or pay an outfitter for their services.”**

A scathing objection from a former Forest Service employee questioned the legality of several of the decisions and the potential fallout with forest users.

“To continue with a decision that is likened to poking the residents of Powell County in the eye with a sharp stick is going to be a political and relational disaster for the Helena National Forest,” David R. Carroll wrote. “As a person who worked 28 years for the US Forest Service, and is also probably the most familiar person with all of these roads and the people here, I find it socially, environmentally, politically and legally a most tenuous and absurd proposal.”

The Alliance for the Wild Rockies and Native Ecosystems Council objected in dual letters on the grounds that the plan did not comply with environmental laws and procedures, and would degrade already degraded watersheds and mountain slopes, in turn degrading wildlife habitat.

One letter cites the importance of the Continental Divide as a wildlife linkage zone, but faults the Forest Service for not recovering critical habitat for federally listed Canada lynx and bull trout. It further questions how the plan will impact wildlife requiring dense forest cover, calling for a supplemental environmental impact statement to address the concern.

The second letter criticizes the big game security amendment, which replaces a hiding cover standard with big game security areas free from motorized travel. The objection questions the basis and monitoring of the proposal, saying in part that the amendment does not address the needs of other wildlife and does not use the best available science.

“The current proposals for both the travel management and the amendment are agency plans that are simply being forced down the public’s throat, so that the true priority of the Helena National Forest, or logging, can proceed without cumbersome restrictions for wildlife. Just because the agency can do this is no excuse for actually doing it,” the second letter says.

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