



Partnership for the National Trails System

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October 26, 2020

U.S. Forest Service
Director, Recreation Staff
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250-1124

This letter has been submitted to:

<https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/CommentInput?project=ORMS-2619>

Re: Proposed Revisions to Forest Service Manual 7700 – 7715 Regarding E-bikes on National Forest System Lands

Dear U.S. Forest Service Director of Recreation,

On behalf of the Partnership for the National Trails System (PNTS) and its 30+ member organizations, please accept the following comments on the proposed revisions to U.S. Forest Service Manuals (FSM) 7700 through 7715, regarding E-bikes on National Forest System (NFS) lands. We appreciate the opportunity to comment and seek clarification on how e-bikes will be managed on National Forests.

We recognize that e-bikes have a place on public lands, and believe they should be allowed on National Forest lands where other motorized vehicles are permitted. We seek to more clearly define and strengthen the sections of the Forest Service manuals to prevent the use of e-bikes from interfering with the nature and purposes of our nation's Scenic and Historic Trails.

Definition: We commend and support your definition of an Electric Bicycle (E-Bike) as: “Also referred to as an electric mountain bike (eMTB), a type of motor vehicle with two wheels attached to a frame, one behind the other, equipped with fully operable pedals and an electric motor of less than 750 watts ...” (7705, p. 20). This definition clearly differentiates an e-bike from a bicycle, which is defined as “A pedal-driven, solely human-powered device, with two wheels attached to a frame, one behind the other.” (7705, p. 20). Should the Forest Service seek to change the definition of an e-bike/eMTB we expect the agency to follow the required rule-making process.

Criteria: E-bikes are motorized vehicles. As such, they are not allowed along a National Scenic Trail. “*The use of motorized vehicles by the general public along any national scenic trail shall be prohibited*” (16 U.S.C. § 1246(c)). The proposed revisions to FSM 7710, Section 7715.5 (Specific Criteria and Guidance for Designating e-Bike Use on Trails), states that: “*E-bikes are not allowed on a National Scenic Trail unless a regulatory exception authorized by the National Trails System Act is met or there is an exception in the enabling legislation for the trail.*” .”

(7515.5, 4, p. 22). Due to its ambiguity and its potential inconsistency with the requirements of the National Trails System Act we recommend that the following sentence precede the proposed revision to further clarify the statement: “*E-Bikes are defined as motor vehicles for the purposes of addressing the requirements of the National Trails System Act.*” We also recommend that references to U.S. Forest Service management policies for National Scenic Trails in FSM 2350 be cross-referenced in FSM 7700, and that e-bike use on National Historic Trails be addressed in FSM 7700.

We would like to stress the importance of ensuring that all Forest Service trails proposed for e-bike use receive site-specific engineering and environmental assessments prior to decisions to allow e-bikes. We agree with the U.S. Forest Service’s commitment to ascertaining site-specific considerations for e-bike use, and urge the U.S. Forest Service further strengthen its language to ensure that an environmental assessment is conducted for the use of e-bikes on a site-by-site basis. By definition and by their nature, e-bikes and bicycles are different. Allowing motorized vehicles on trails that are not designed or designated for motorized use would have a significant impact on both the safety and enjoyment of non-motorized users such as hikers, backpackers, equestrians, climbers, mountain bikers and others. An assumption that effects of e-bike use is comparable to the effects of bicycle use, or that a site previously deemed appropriate for a person-powered bicycle could be considered appropriate for e-bike use, could result in harmful and irreparable damage to trails as well as to the safety and well-being of trail users (7515.5, 4.b., p. 22). A National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis should be conducted on each site to ensure the unique conditions and differences in a landscape of a site are considered (7515.5, 4.c., p. 22).

Further, we ask that the U.S. Forest Service demonstrate consideration of the unique impacts of e-bikes on the physical conditions and the natural and cultural resources of a trail, as well as trail safety and the potential for user conflict. We also urge you to include a thorough public input process as part of an environmental assessment of a proposed decision that may permit e-bike use, so that other trail users have the opportunity to provide input on trail user safety and potential user conflicts.

Permitted Use: Non-motorized trails were created to ensure that the public could find recreational trail opportunities free from the ever-growing motorization and mechanization of our modern society. Millions of public lands users value nonmotorized trails for access to the outdoors. The introduction of motorized uses on non-motorized trails could forever change the backcountry experience for these users. We support and are actively engaged in efforts to expand access to recreation and we fully recognize that e-bikes have a place on public lands. However, e-bikes are motorized vehicles, and they should be only be allowed National Scenic or National Historic Trails where other motorized uses are permitted.

The Federal Register Notice (Sept, 24, 2020, Vol. 85, No. 186) for the FSM 7700 Travel Management; Chapter 7700, Zero Code; Chapter 7710 Travel Planning states that “*the proposed revisions would add a paragraph to Forest Service Manual (FSM) 7702 to establish promotion of e-bike use on NFS lands as an objective.*” Given the aforementioned potential threats the use of e-bikes poses to landscapes and non-motorized trail users on National Historic and Scenic Trails, we urge the U.S. Forest Service to revise its description to state “*the proposed revisions*

would add a paragraph to Forest Service Manual (FSM) 7702 to permit e-bike use on NFS lands as an objective.” This alternative wording allows FSM 7702 to achieve the objective of providing guidance for the permitted use of e-bikes without actively promoting their use on trails shared by non-motorized recreationalists.

Inclusion of National Historic Trails: We recommend that guidance stating, “E-bikes are not allowed on a National Scenic Trail...” should be extended to National Historic Trails to provide clear instruction for both National Scenic Trails and National Historic Trails on U.S. Forest Service lands. Because e-bikes are defined as motor vehicles, they should only be allowed on National Historic Trails where other motorized vehicle uses are permitted.

Again, thank you again for the opportunity to submit our comments on the proposed changes to FSM 7700 and 7710 regarding e-bikes. We appreciate the approach U.S. Forest Service has taken to address the management of e-bike use on Forest Service lands, and we believe the documents will provide clearer and better guidance with the incorporation of our comments. PNTS values its long-term, positive partnership with U.S. Forest Service as we work to improve and support our treasured National Trails System. We look forward to continue working with you as we work to protect, support, and promote the National Scenic and Historic Trails for all.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions regarding these comments.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Valerie Rupp". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent.

Valerie Rupp
Executive Director