Comments on Rapid River Trail Travel Management EA

Albert Becker, April 2, 2021

I appreciate opportunity to comment on the specific trails being considered for travel management designations in the Rapid River drainage. I fully understand and am aware of the importance of water quality and related issues with Wild River designation, Rapid River Chinook Salmon hatchery, adjacent Hells Canyon National Recreation Area, other National Forest uses in the area, etc.

Briefly, let me qualify my related background. I worked as the Resource Assistant on the New Meadows Ranger District with management responsibilities of all resources other than Timber and Fire for over ten years (’81-‘92+). In the Rapid River area significant time was spent on Recreation, Trails, Rangeland Mgt. (livestock), Special Uses (permitted outfitter), coordination with HCNRA Riggins Mgr., prescribed fire use, wildlife/IDFG coordination, and reconstruction of the Whitebird Ridge Road for planned timber sale access (Lockwood Timber Sale).

My first introduction to Lake Fork Trail #188 was a pack trip I took in 1982 with the District Range Conservationist Tom Tidwell. We started at Rail Road Saddle to review the rehabilitated Salmon River Stock Driveway, dropped into Rapid River on Trail #177 to Lake Fork #188, up Lake Fork and continued on thru the Rapid River drainage (Paradise Flat, Iron Springs, retook some historical range study photos in Horse Pasture Basin) continuing on the Rankin Mill Trail #191 to the West Fork of Rapid River and then down to the IDFG Hatchery. The most memorable trail on that trip was Lake Fork #188. It was not much more than a continuous bog hole that was virtually impassable safely for equines. I pledged to never take a horse on that trail again until the bogs were rectified.

Ten plus years later that happened. The Boise ‘Cascade Saw Mill in Council had shut down. There was a group of skilled, enthusiastic, physically fit and ‘tough’ able bodied folks that had time and joined together in a group called**; TEAM** (**T**rails for **E**qual **A**ccess **M**anagement). They coordinated closely with the Forest Service under a Volunteer Agreement and spent a good part of a summer clearing, falling, digging mud, installing large stringers and treated timber decking on all of the needed bog crossings down Trail #188 to Trail #177. It was now a “walk in the park”. They were nominated for and received a Volunteer Achievement Award from the Governor of Idaho. Trails #188, #183. #184 were designated open to two wheeled motorized vehicles, The Curren Mtn road bed (Trail #191) was open to ATVs to Paradise Flat. I believe TEAM formally adopted these trails for maintenance (early ‘90s). At that time Management felt that two-wheeled motorized use trail crossing did not impair the Wild River designation.

In 1996 the Payette restructured management and ‘zoned’ Recreation/Trails into the Wilderness Zone, East Zone (out of McCall RD) and West Zone (out of Council RD). Rapid River area is in the East Zone.

There were some consequences of more use in the area. The historic Iron Springs town site was virtually liquidated by looters. Motorized trail travel did not stop at Paradise Flat and encroached into the Hells Canyon Wilderness. I have not been on these Rapid River area trails in recent years and I know the adopted trail agreement is long gone. However, based on other trails I have been on in the general Rapid River area, I’m confident these are all marginally maintained.

I have hunted elk and deer in the Rapid River area every year for the last 40 years. Based on my personal success ratio, harvesting an elk cannot be the reason I return. It is a special place and I have witnessed a lot of changes with a lot more peopla. Returning motorized trail use on the subject trails will create more hunting pressure. However, Rapid River is a very pristine landscape that is relatively accessible for a multitude of users year-round. With it’s high water quality value, anadromous fishery importance, quality scenic and backcountry amenities, it deserves noise protection from motorized trail use. There are few undisturbed areas such as this that are as easily accessible. There is considerable semi-primitive motorized access opportunities on all sides of Rapid River.

I have seen these Rapid River trails both open to some motorized trail access and closed. For Rapid River Area resource values and majority user values, I support the non-motorized alternative. The Proposed Action of motor cycle turn a rounds will be unachievable from a compliance standpoint and not realistically enforceable (based on experiences I have had).