

Wapiti Ranger District

November 12, 2015

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Susan Stresser
203A Yellowstone Avenue
Cody, WY 82414

Dear Susan,

Susan and I appreciated the Forest Service "thank you" event and the recognition of Elk Creek Ranch and the many other organizations that have partnered with the Service. I apologize for taking advantage of that moment but I need, first, to register some general concerns about the travel management discussions/debates and, second, to add another proposal to your growing list. Perhaps you will decide it would be best to delete the background of "General Comments." You have heard these arguments over and over, but it is important for my soul to put them to paper in the best way I can. I thank you in advance for your patience in considering my comments and proposal.

General Comments:

I have been troubled by the consideration of motorized travel in the Clarks Fork District (because it is the land I am most familiar with) for some time, but those concerns coalesced recently when Susan and I traveled to Ireland. We had promised ourselves some travel in retirement, but the great recession and our growing commitments to Elk Creek put a damper on that resolve. Last year our daughter was invited to run in this fall's Dublin Marathon, and we finally pulled the trigger on a trip to Ireland. Two of our stops were national forests in Ireland. They were wonderfully maintained with the best groomed trails I have ever seen, but they were so domesticated, so tame, so unnatural, and so small in contrast to the Shoshone. Those two days steeled me to be more forward in my questions about this travel planning process. You are doing a wonderful job of getting us all to sit down and talk, but if we project this process of compromise and conflict management forward for a number of generations we will start looking much more like Ireland. We should not doubt it—we are on a "slippery slope" where the decisions made in the next year will set our course for many years.

I was very encouraged in the first meeting when you stipulated that no decisions would be made in travel management that could jeopardize the sustainability of the wilderness, back country character of the Northern Shoshone. (I am not saying that as eloquently as you did.) What concerns me is the apparent or perceived obligation to add one or more motorized trails now and the obvious determination of the motorized community to do much more with scant regard for the clear line you drew. Perhaps adding one motorized trail would pose a minor risk to the character

of the Northern Shoshone, but surely, in the long term, that process is a zero sum game.

I keep running into questions that have not been answered or seemingly even considered.

- Trail and Road Information for the Greater Big Horn Basin Area: At the first meeting I did a bad job of suggesting that we did not have enough information on the hiking, horseback, motorized, and bike opportunities in the Shoshone, much less the Big Horn Basin BLM, the Custer-Gallatin, and the Big Horns. This goes directly to the question of fairness, which has been raised by the motorized community. As far as I know, that information has still not been gathered and collated, much less considered or shared. I think some FS personnel have noted how little we all know about many of the illegal trails. How many miles of trail and roads in this greater area are primarily used by motorized travel, by bike, by hikers, and by horse folks. That information seems vital to the travel management planning.
(I understand that considering a larger area than the Northern Shoshone may seem odd, but all of us living in the Big Horn Basin travel to our favorite outdoor sites, bringing our means of travel in our autos, trucks, bike racks, and trailers. Even those of us fortunate enough to be located in the forest, need to travel to see and enjoy other areas. So considering the larger area and getting the accurate information, far from being odd, is the only way to judge the fairness, equal access debate.)
- Impact of Different Modes of Travel: What are the comparative, one-day impacts on the forest and the wildlife of the hiker, the rider, the biker, the four-wheeler, and the snowmobiler? Is that question even part of the discussion. I am a horse person most of the time, and I understand that my horse and I take a greater toll on the forest and wildlife than a hiker or backpacker. One reason I worry less about snowmobiling than four-wheeling is that the impacts of snowmobiling, as far as I can see, are minimal if there are no wildlife conflicts. How far do four-wheelers travel in a day, compared to the hiker and the rider? What is the impact of that travel? This issue should clearly be addressed and understood. It gets to both the questions of fairness and the preservation of the wilderness character of the Northern Shoshone.
- Backcountry Experience vs. the Sport Experience: I was at first interested in and later troubled by one conversation at our first travel planning meeting. The four-wheeler representative and I at our table agreed that we needed more information on the trails and roads. We both agreed that such information would help people select trails appropriate to their experience, whether on horse, on foot, or on machine. Then he added that he and others were especially interested

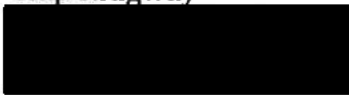
in the "challenging" trails. He went on to say that challenge is what made the Upper Sunlight trails so popular. As I thought back to that comment, it struck me how different it is for the riders and hikers. Most of us would be thinking about the backcountry experience first. The July 20, 2015, issue of "High Country News" includes an article on the proliferation of illegal mountain biking trails in Arizona and how the Forest Service and others are dealing with it. The article concludes by looking at the divide between the "sport" of the activity itself versus the backcountry experience. Certainly hunters and fishermen are sportsmen, but their means of travel is not the sport. They are not looking for fun challenge getting to their sport. When the travel is the sport and the sport is the primary goal, what does that mean in the long-term for the forest?

- Accessibility Question: The argument frequently raised by the motorized community is that some people—senior citizens, handicapped individuals—have no other way to share in the outdoor experience. It is a good argument but it is also overstated. The four-wheelers I know are all hale and hearty and some, as noted above, looking for challenges. Building trails and roads over scree fields is not only illegal—it is physically difficult. So, yes, the Forest Service in the travel management process needs to keep in mind those who need some motorized access, but most of us, almost all of us, can some times simply get off our horses, off our bikes, out of our cars, and off our four-wheelers and walk.
- A Finite Resource: I understand, an old argument but truly it is the bottom line. What we are presently discussing will reduce our true backcountry by some amount. It will not be recovered. . . not ever. A quick look at Ireland shows where that process of development leads.

Sorry, Susan, for going on so long. Thanks for your patience and consideration. The proposal follows.

Sincerely,


Hap Ridgway



Proposal: That all illegal, unauthorized trails be closed unless the Forest Service finds that one such trail, in fact, is appropriate for the Forest Plan, in which case it would count as a "new" trail and serve as the addition to the motorized trail inventory that has apparently been mandated for the Northern Shoshone.

The arguments against officially forgiving and approving illegal roads are simple:

- The roads were not allowed for reasons important to the Forest Service's interest in preserving the backcountry character of the Northern Shoshone. Those reasons, in all likelihood, still exist.
- Those interests should also be ours not just because we enjoy the backcountry but also because that natural resource fuels Wyoming's second most important industry. Protecting the resource is protecting Wyoming's economic health, especially when our heavy reliance on extractive industries creates the boom-bust cycles.
- Rewarding illegal behavior sets exactly the wrong precedent for the future. We understand that most folks involved in motorized travel are law-abiding, but once one of the more adventuresome, less law-abiding riders lays down a track the game is on.
- That precedent over time is truly frightening. Will every illegal trail be made legal just because it exists? Where does this end?

The head of Sulfur Creek provides an object lesson in the ways of illegal trails. Over time, many four-wheelers created a trail across a scree field and made their way up through the lower and then the upper basins under Sunlight and Stinkingwater Peaks. Then they ran the trail straight up the last pitch of the pass above Copper Lakes. When I last saw that country the trail was not quite to the top of the pass, but it was close. Many people made a number of decisions to make that trail and, thus, to break the law. That area needs to be protected because it is fragile and it is important grizzly bear habitat. If that trail is "forgiven," what will happen next in that drainage or over Galena Pass or in other great high alpine areas? What is the message it will send, loud and clear, to those four-wheeling folks who want to make new roads?