**BTNF - E-bike Comments - October 29, 2023 – Submitted by Frances Clark, Wilson:**

I have several concerns based on my regular use of the trails north of Teton Pass, Old Pass Road/Trail Creek, and Lower Munger Trails. I am a botanist so I walk, often slowly, observing the flowers along the way, often talking to others about the plants. I also lead public botany walks in these areas as well. I am in my early 70s, a competent hiker. I live in Wilson.

I have friends of my age cohort who enjoy their e-bikes because they can still get places they once did while younger, they also note that they are very careful and go slower (especially downhill) than many others on both bikes and e-bikes.

My main reasons for being against e-bikes on the proposed trails:

* They increase numbers of fast-moving vehicles on the trails—reduces hiker and horseback riders’ quiet enjoyment and adds more user conflicts, injuries.
* Sheer numbers combined with the type of use degrades trails.
* Impossible to enforce which bikes will be used, even with a permit sticker.
* Opens up a can of worms….increasing demand for more and more bikes pushes out hikers and horseback riders.

Impact to other trail users:

Bikes already are hazardous on trails.

* They go fast…especially down hills. As speed is a lot of the fun, many riders don’t want to slow down.
* Riders don’t see people, dogs, or wildlife before them: The rider is often focused on the trail or is going fast as the trail winds through vegetation. The rider can’t see what’s coming.
* Bikes can be hard to stop.

Bikes reduce hikers’ quality of experience and safety—Because they are easier to ride, numbers will increase, which will significantly impact the hikers experience of being in nature.

* Hikers don’t always hear/see bikes coming, especially from behind.
* It is frightening to any animal, including people, to have something large coming at you fast suddenly.
* Reaction time is much shorter on all sides—near misses or accidents happen.
* For older people, these encounters are particularly scary, perhaps dangerous situations. We don’t necessarily hear the bikes coming and can’t just jump off the trail.
* Bikers are not always courteous—they do not yield right-of-way to hikers and often keep the same speed, and go on by. Only a very few will proactively get off their bikes. The hiker is the one to step aside for safety’s sake. On busy trails, this is very disruptive to the hiker.

There are fundamental user differences that lead to conflicts:

* Hikers tend to go relatively slow, look around, have conversations, stop for closer examination of flowers, birds, scenery, relax.
* Bikers tend to go faster, must focus on the trail, can’t converse readily or instead yell, and riders get joy from thrills of speed and terrain.
* Both parties I think/hope share a mutual delight of arriving at a scenic destination under their own power.

Impacts on the resource:

*Loss of soil and vegetation:* I am a botanist. I look at the ground and the plants. Already, bikes are causing rutting and erosion on steep places of trails and widening the track and mounding soil on corners. (NMBA denies that bikes do more damage than hikers—but anyone who has walked our trails sees the difference). Wheels crush native vegetation and increase invasive species by disturbing the ground and tracking in seed. Because e-bikes go farther and faster, they increase the extent of impacts on more and more trails. The top of Munger and Wally World’s ridge have special plants that are already being challenged by over-use.

*Wildlife will be displaced:* Often people will say “I am not bothering wildlife. I rarely see wildlife.” That is because oftentimes the wildlife has fled. Adding more trails to provide “separate” uses to ameliorate the above concerns about user conflicts, only adds to the fragmentation and degradation of habitat. And again, more people going farther multiplies the disturbance.

*Overwhelming trampling/use of popular viewpoints:* I can think of a place north of Teton Pass which right now is cherished by horseback riders and hikers. It is a bit of a trek in late summer. But always worth it for the spectacle. One of the proposed e-bike trail systems comes very close to this area. Once discovered, I can see the location shared on social media, attracting dozens and dozens of e-bike riders. Terrain, vegetation, and streams will be destroyed by popularity as has been the case with Delta Lake.

Enforcement, safety, budgets

I appreciate the idea of permit stickers to identify level-1 e-bikes. However, who is to enforce the rules? Volunteers? Cooperative NGO efforts? USFS doesn’t have the staff. Already, there are bikes on hiking-only trails. Bikers keep wanting more because they cover more ground, and therefore want new and more space for novelty. Thus there is more area to patrol, in more remote areas.

The potential for collisions between hikers and bikers, and bikers and bikers increases with the number and speed of users. And as these users can go farther into the back country, how do you rescue them if needed?

Already the USFS has limited staff due to budgets, and budgets oscillate over the years. Costs will increase for existing trail maintenance. Building new trails to separate uses is ever more expensive There are already miles of roads that bikers and e-bikers can use with little impact or cost.

Where to provide for parking? The Munger Mountain parking lot is often full, often with bikers. Fish Creek Road has limited space. Top of the Pass is busy even in summer. The trail head for trails north of the pass is already overflowing. Where will people park if you invite more access by e-bikes.

Equity:

E-bikers and bikers have *many other options*! We have miles of new paved bike paths around the county and proposed up and over Teton Pass. E-bikers can also use miles of USFS roads, such as out the Gros Ventre, up Shadow Mtn, out the Black Rock district area, where the extra speed and power is appropriate and enables one to enjoyably cover long scenic distances. These passages are generally much safer to take.

*Most people can and do hike.* Overall, more people are hiking our trails. Look at the visitor use of trails up Cache Creek, Trail Creek, and Grand Teton National Park. People like to hike, it’s a good family activity. Most people can walk safely, not all can bike safely. One’s own two feet don’t cost several thousand dollars.

The proposal includes e-bikes on 17.5 miles of horse trails. *Horseback riders* are already giving up much ground, particularly to bikes. My neighbors used to ride up Wally’s World and Munger, and I have seen them years ago up Phillips Ridge. They don’t go there much now. Bikes preclude safe horseback riding: fast, large, and sudden appearances of bicycles naturally startle horses.

*Age:* I am older, in my seventh decade. Gradually there will be places where I cannot reach on my own steam. While I will miss visiting favorite places, so be it. E-bikes, because of their speed and heft, are harder to maneuver. For the most part it is easier for older people to walk than to ride an e-bike on a mountain trail. Accidents are harder to recover from. People get to make their own calculations, but who will rescue folks?

Specific trails:

*Old Pass Road* is already busy with many hikers and dog walkers of all ages. Moose are frequent. Adding more bikes to reduce “shuttling” is a poor excuse. And the parking lot is often full already. I am not sure what the “Parallel trail” is: Crater Lake Trail? History Trail? Both of these are narrow and have very poor sight lines due to curves and vegetation. Not a good idea to encourage yet more use by bikers.

*Phillips Canyon Trail* has very limited parking on Fish Creek Road, and again is narrow with poor visibility. Also, I don’t see those who have more easily come up the trail on e-bikes stopping on the norther terminus of the loop, but going farther up the scenic valley to the border of the Wilderness.

*Munger* – Extending the use of e-bikes year-round will significantly alter the visitor experience and also threaten bird nesting, soils, and wildflowers. I know the lower Munger Trails well. I see families and older people enjoying the accessible view points, balsamroot extravaganzas in the spring, and the aspen colors in the fall. I go there to bird watch, botanize, lead wildflower walks, etc. Bikes are already popular. Unfortunately, I have been almost run over there three times—very near misses on the shrubbier paths. And the riders didn’t stop! Now I shout when I hear/see a bike coming down hill so that they will look up and see me. Some I can’t see because of the vegetation.

Do not increase use by allowing e-bikes during the fragile times of year when flowers are just emerging, birds breeding, trails are wet, and bigger game roams – such as 399 and her cubs a few years back. The Munger area is a very popular accessible trail system to many. Adding e-bikes year-round and thereby increasing biker numbers will reduce hikers’ experience during favorite nature times as well as potentially harm the nature—again people don’t often see the animals that live there because they flush and fly away first. Don’t displace hikers!

*Big Munger trail* – The lower side of the loop up to Munger Summit was recently reconfigured after significant erosion from ORVs. It is a now wonderful trail with perfect grades for hiking. I would hate to see the trail quality diminished by too-numerous bikers.

I met an older biker on the way to the summit two summer ago. He passed us on the way up and on the way down…I was surprised by how quickly he had made it to the summit, then noticed he was on an e-bike, not just a mountain bike. So quick and easy. He could not have been nicer, and I was delighted for him, but I do worry about many, many more people coming who will be less controlled and courteous.

We all want more – but we don’t have to have it all.

Goal: Prioritize wildlife and passive recreation in the GYE including BTNF: Over these past several years Jackson Hole is becoming a recreation destination promoted by bike sellers, associated non-profits, and the tourism board. Consequently, former hiking trails are being heavily used, even over-run, by users who are unaware of or could care-less about wildlife.

We are in the heart of a world-renowned ecosystem. Unfortunately, the area is being fragmented by new roads and houses, and trails on public lands. Critical habitat is being lost and wildlife scared away. We need to be focused on inviting people to enjoy the region for its unique nature, not for active recreation opportunities that essentially can be found elsewhere. The USFS is a critical partner in helping to focus the resources on what matters most regionally and nationally. Sustaining wildlife and encouraging responsible, respectful enjoyment should be the goal of any BTNF planning. The current proposal is contrary to that goal.