

Fish Lake Monitoring – 7/8/23 and 7/9/23 – Paul Busch

Drove up Lake Creek on Saturday, 7/8/23. Started the Lake Creek trail #419 close to 5:30 pm. One other vehicle was there, a pickup truck. There were no OHVs. There was a large sign board, but no sign about the trail closure to motorized vehicles (Fig. 1/Fish Lake PB 1). There was quite a bit of trash in the area, including directly under the “pack in in, pack it out” sign.



Figure 1:

Sign at Fish Lake trailhead.

I hiked quickly. The ‘trail’ is a worn OHV road, expanded and overused. Signs of use this season like tread marks were obvious. A pair of bollards stood in the trail, but there was no gate (Fig. 3/Fish Lake PB 3). The smaller trail sign still showed OHV use was legal and open (Fig. 3/Fish Lake PB 2).



Figure 2: A pair of posts without a gate at base of #419 trail



Figure 3: The trail #419 sign at the trailhead

There were no gates along any stretch of the trail from the trailhead to the lake. There is no evidence of enforcement. Tread marks are common (Fig. 4/Fish Lake PB 4).



Figure 4: Recent tread marks on the #419 trail

At stream crossings, of which there are several, sediment erosion is clearly increased from OHV use (Fig's 5/6, Fish Lake PB 5 and Fish Lake PB 6). Further up, I took the "shortcut" trail intended for hikers, #419A, which I preferred. It was in pretty good shape.



Figure 5: Sediment pollution from OHV use in Japanese Creek. Increased sediment can harm bull trout downstream in Lake Creek.



Figure 6: The normally pristine waters of Japanese Creek.

At 7:30 I passed through some meadows and arrived at the lake itself. Between the meadows and that peninsula is the worst of the motorized damage (Fig. 7/Fish Lake PB 7). Brett calls it a parking lot, and it is clear why. A hundred of feet of campsites and OHV parking areas bleed into one another on the north side of the lake (Fig. 8/Fish Lake PB 8).



Figure 7: Desire lines from OHV use just before the lake.



Figure 8: At the northern lake edge, parking lots, trails, and campsites are difficult to distinguish

I was thankful it was early enough in the season to have dodged the dust that would eventually choke the area. Flimsy signs asking motorists to keep their OHVs out of the camping areas were ineffective. A large signage board toward the end of the camping area had no information about the recent closure (I did not take a photo but I believe Brett Haverstick did). Again, any uninformed OHV user would likely have no idea that their presence was not legal, and that it could cost them thousands of dollars in fines.

Saw wolf scat and elk or moose prints on the trail to the only primitive campsite on the lake. Brett and I caught up. He told me he took a photo of an OHV at the lake before I arrived. However none were present in the evening.

The following morning, Sunday the 9th, Brett and I headed up the 419 trail north to the stateline trail #738. It is a narrower, steeper and less used section of trail. However, evidence of motorized use (single track dirt bikes, probably) was clear. These tracks continued southward on the #490 trail toward Bruin Hill. Again, I did not take photos but Brett Haverstick did.

After looking into Montana, we hiked back down and began the trip down to the car (Fig. 9/Fish Lake PB 9). We took a snack break and drove back toward the North Fork 250 road.



Figure 9: Recent use on the #419 trail headed back down toward the trailhead.

As we were headed toward Hoodoo Pass, Brett spotted a large public sign board parallel to the road. On one panel there was a large information sheet that read “FISH LAKE TRAIL CLOSED TO MOTORIZED USE.”



We took several photos. I had not seen a similar sign on the 250 road anywhere from Orofino to the Cedars campsite just to the south. It may be the only public signage in the area updating the public. In all likelihood, a motorist driving from the Idaho side would not have any idea the trail was closed to motorized use. We drove on to Missoula.