

BREAKING TRAIL

Bug Creek project making headway



Photo provided

Flathead Area Mountain Bikers and Flathead National Forest will continue work on the forest's first dedicated mountain bike trails around Crane Mountain this spring.

The Forest Service's Bug Creek Integrated Resource Management Project seeks to introduce wildfire mitigation efforts, improve vegetation and wildlife habitat and provide outdoor recreation opportunities. The project area – roughly 35,675 acres – spans between Flathead and Swan Lakes on the east and west sides of Crane Mountain. The Bug Creek trail system will include about 15 miles of trails, 5.3 miles of mountain bike specific trail and 9.8 miles of multiuse single track.

"This is a good example of a project that includes everything: the Forest Service, the urban-wildland interface, wildfire mitigation, revenue for local loggers and local people building these trails... It's pretty cool to see the vision and have it actually happen," FAMB Executive Director Ron Brandt said.

Historically, the Bug Creek area has been used for unsanctioned recreation. People have created their own trails and camping spots, demonstrating a need for a larger network of recreation opportunities in the area. Brandt noted that Ron Cron, a local mountain biking fanatic and recreational visionary, put in a lot of the work to work with government agencies to help flip these "taboo" trails into something that can be maintained for public use.

"The local communities have expressed support and a desire for a non-motorized and mountain bike-specific trail system

in the area around Bigfork," Flathead National Forest officials said in a release. "Implementation of this project will create fantastic recreational opportunities close to town and improve access for the mountain bike user group, as well as mixed use, like hiking and trail running on the Swan Lake District of the Flathead National Forest."

In 2024, FAMB and the Forest Service entered a partnership to develop the trail system. There will be a long-term cost-share for maintenance between the organizations and trail crews from both parties will work together to get them up and running.

Last season, FAMB hosted two community digs and helped bring two preexisting trails into the official network. Just under 1.5 miles of new trail work were completed to reconfigure existing trails to nonmotorized trail standards. The Forest Service estimated that 60% of the vegetation management work is complete.

"Additionally, we are planning the design and construction of new trails," the Forest Service Flathead National Forest commented. "Flathead Area Mountain Bikers will be organizing community dig events and working with volunteers in the trail construction work."

While community support has helped back the project thus far, Brandt expressed concerns that recent changes to Forest Service staffing brought on by the newly implemented Department of Government Efficiency may affect the organization's resources.

"The USDA Forest Service remains committed to ensuring public health and safety while balancing access to recreation areas during this transitional time," Flathead National Forest stated. "Recreation services and public access are vital to local economies. It is our intent to maintain access

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to recreation opportunities to the greatest degree possible."

Funding for trailheads, specifically, is needed.

"There's a really impressive community that has bought into this down there, but the reality is it's going to take some money as well," Brandt said.

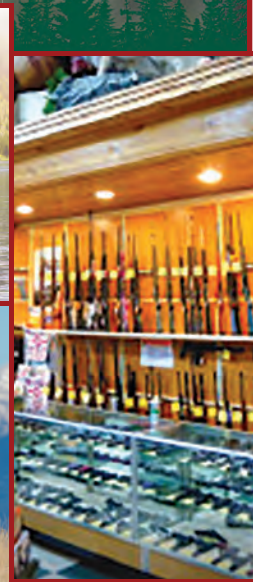
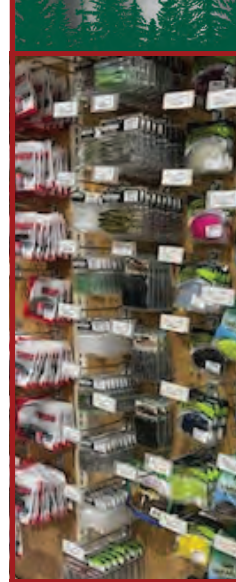
Grant work is being done to help fund the project. There are some unknowns as well, logging in the area may ultimately help fund the trails.

Community meetings are being planned

for the spring and summer to help iron out the details of the project and pick up volunteers. The Flathead Area Mountain Bikers' webpage will be updated with information as it is available.

As for recreation this season, the top of the Crane Mountain Road may be temporarily impacted by the timber sale activities but will be open again to the public once activities conclude. Vegetation management is projected to be complete in the next two years with recreation improvement work keeping pace as areas are opened.

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