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Comments: [External Email]Lolo Restoration Committee Comments On Forest Plan Revision

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Recreation Management Comments for the Revision of the Lolo NF Forest Plan

Recreation on National Forests offers numerous public benefits and provides the most common means by which people interact with their public lands and relevant agency staff. The recent post-COVID explosion of outdoor recreation on the Lolo National Forest as well as population growth in western Montana have made recreation management a key area for future investment. Issues raised by the public during the Plan Revision Scoping Process have identified the needs to articulate specific desired conditions for Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) classes, the management and maintenance of roads and trails, the potential opportunities for mountain bikes and e-bikes, and the location and constraints applied to "Concentrated Recreation Use Management Areas" (MA5). The LRC finds each of these issues to be relevant and worthy of more detailed direction in Alternatives generated for the Revised Forest Plan.

The overarching principle that the LRC wishes to emphasize is the minimization of human impacts on natural processes in the forest by visitors to the Lolo NF. This does not mean eliminating human use of the forest - on the contrary, we support forest recreation for its many human benefits, including the generation of public support for conservation. We also acknowledge that human uses of the Lolo NF will likely increase during the upcoming planning cycle, and we see this expansion of people enjoying their public lands as a positive development. However, these trends must be addressed by management with far more serious consideration of the placement of recreational infrastructure, the development of new opportunities to enhance the visitor experience, and the rational enforcement of constraints on unfettered use. Constraining these human impacts infers a host of considerations, such as the distribution of recreation opportunities and the actual design of recreation infrastructure.

The LRC realizes that the Forest Plan cannot address all the issues surrounding the management and maintenance of roads and trails, since these issues are site-specific and subject to Transportation Planning decisions. Obviously, roads and trail design will need to incorporate design features that recognize the capabilities of new travel technologies, such as mountain bikes, e-bikes, and "side-by-side" off road vehicles. However, the standards and guidelines within the Revised Lolo Forest Plan can be effective in shaping the contours of future Transportation Plans. The LRC recommends three guidelines to support rational transportation planning for outdoor recreationists: (1) Fostering partnership opportunities with existing user groups (mountain bikers, horseback riders, etc.) to build support for trail locations, maintenance, and use restrictions to learn and address the multiple interests of forest visitors; (2) The encouragement of rational "loop" trails that allow visitors to experience a wider expanse of areas than simple "out-and-back" routes; and (3) The creation of road or trail opportunities that segregate incompatible uses, such as horseback riding trails and mountain bike/e-bike trails, by time and space. This latter technique is already frequently applied for winter recreation to segregate cross-country/backcountry skiers and snowmobilers.

The LRC believes that careful design and ongoing oversight of recreation impacts by agency staff of can accommodate the likely expansion of visitor use to the Forest. By creating partnerships and ensuring monitoring results are communicated effectively, visitors to the Lolo NF can be viewed as an asset to the overall protection and management of the Forest.