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Introduction

BlueRibbon Coalition/ShareTrails (BRC) is a national non-profit organization that advocates for responsible recreation and encourages a strong conservation ethic and individual stewardship. We champion responsible use of public lands for the benefit of all recreationists by educating and empowering our members to secure, protect, and expand shared outdoor recreation access and use by working collaboratively with other recreationists, public lands officials, and natural resource managers. Our membership includes over 700,000 motorized recreationists, hikers, camping enthusiasts, equestrians, rock hounders, mountain bikers, and other public land users who regularly access and enjoy recreating on state and federally managed areas throughout the United States.

Many of our members live and/or recreate in Idaho, including the Payette National Forest, and have definite, concrete plans to continue such use in the future. As an organization, we have found travel access via motorized vehicles and dispersed camping opportunities to be key to the accessibility, experience, and optimal use of public lands for recreationists and public lands users across the board. Additionally, our research and efforts in public lands have revealed that appropriate public lands use and ecological management are most effectively balanced and harmonized by creative management practices that open resources to match public demand and that address specific behaviors over the implementation of restrictive closure practices, which only serve to bottle neck increasing demand for appropriate access to public lands and thereby exacerbate existing problems.

We have been encouraged in reviewing the scoping materials for the Lost Ant Recreation Management Project to see clear evidence of efforts to effectively manage, improve, and expand current motorized and non-motorized recreation in the Payette National Forest area. Our organization hopes to continue to see public lands policies and projects which implement common sense maintenance and creative management practices to the ends of preserving ecological health and sustainable public access for generations to come.

Comments

BlueRibbon Coalition recognizes the need for public lands agencies to be able to address land management on a continual basis as new needs arise and we support the necessary general erosion management and trail reconstruction practices suggested in the publicly available scoping material. Specifically, we wish to express our support for the proposed maintenance on trails below the Cold Springs Saddle for soil erosion reduction, sediment loss reduction, and improved recreational experience will simultaneously enhance public land use and promote ecological health.

We further wish to express our strong support for the current trail construction, parking facility construction, and toilet installation currently proposed in the public documentation as a solution for recreational needs and ecological management. We believe that the proposed construction of roughly 500 feet of new OHV trail between the Cold Springs Campground and the OHV loop system, as well as the proposed 15 miles of OHV trail conversion on undetermined, closed, and open season roads will greatly enhance the recreation and general land use experience of motorists and non-motorists alike. It has been our experience that many recreationists use motorized vehicles for access travel to and from areas used for non-motorized recreational and other responsible land use activities. We also wish to express our support for the addition of approximately seven miles of non-motorized, Trail Class 1 trail designed for the use of pack and saddle as well as hiking and mountain biking and the proposal of management to construct 0.3 miles of trail to create a loop for better access and recreation experience.

In appropriately meeting recreational demand and managing ecological impact, we also support the proposals of land management to improve trailhead parking at the Ant Basin South Trailhead to accommodate horse trailers, trucks, and additional passenger vehicles and to construct a turnaround for trucks with heavy equipment. We are likewise encouraged to see the installation of an additional restroom, two hitch rails for stock use, and informational kiosk at this trailhead. The addition of these resources will generally decrease ecological impacts and we are encouraged to see land management moving in this direction for land management policy.

In the decommissioning of Ant Basin Trailhead and 0.9 miles of Trail #324 as a “duplicate” and “less accessible” trail, we would strongly urge the agency to reconsider the value of this trail as a more challenging route with variable scenic opportunities. As an old adage suggests, the journey is often more important than the destination, and this is especially true where recreational opportunities are concerned. Trails which may appear on a map to be mere duplicates of more efficient and accessible routes often offer opportunities for scenery and exhilarating outdoor challenges and exploration. With this in mind, we would advocate for similar reconsideration of

the 0.8 mile segment of Forest Road 50079 currently considered in the scoping documents as a duplicate to the Ant Basin South Trailhead access through #324.

With a general increase in demand for outdoor recreation, land managers should be striving to increase supply by maintaining and opening additional access areas and we are encouraged to see policy in this area largely in harmony with this demand. To do otherwise and enact excessive closures would only concentrate use in the areas left open – restricting overall access further and increasing impacts in those open areas and we urge further action to open and maintain additional access as mentioned above.

Access protection and targeted management are preferable over restrictions and limitations especially during this time when outdoor recreation is exploding in both popularity and public need due to broader public health and economic challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. In the few instances where negative impacts to ecological systems through erosion damage has in riparian areas, these impacts can be more effectively addressed through targeted regulations in precise locations rather than across an entire land management area and we support the example set by those who have put forth such land management proposals in the scoping materials for the Lost Ant Recreation Management Project. We hope to see additional land management offices and agencies implement similar measures.

Conclusion

We would like to conclude by saying that we support access to the Payette National Forest for all recreation user groups and express our appreciation for the proposals put forth by the management officers over the Payette National Forest. As long as overall visitation numbers are appropriate for the affected resources, the activities of both motorized and non-motorized recreationists can be compatible with one another and the environment. We also believe that the proposed responsible maintenance of existing and development of additional trail systems within the existing area will relieve environmental impacts and contribute to general public health and responsible recreation.

BRC would like to be considered an interested public for this project. Information can be sent to the following address and email address:

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized initials 'BB' followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Ben Burr
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