



BlueRibbon Coalition
P.O. Box 5449
Pocatello, ID 83202
208.237.1008
brc@sharetrails.org

Ben Burr, Executive Director

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BlueRibbon Coalition
P.O. Box 5449
Pocatello, ID 83202

US Forest Service
Colton Rosalez
P.O. Box 425
708 Main Street
Wall, SD 57790

BlueRibbon Coalition/ShareTrails (BRC) is writing to provide feedback for the Pinnacles Dispersed Camping plan. BRC is a national non-profit organization that champions responsible recreation and encourages a strong conservation ethic and individual stewardship. We champion responsible use of public lands and waters 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 natural resource managers and other recreationists. Our members use motorized and non-motorized means of recreation, including OHVs, horses, mountain bikes, and hiking to enjoy federally managed lands throughout the United States, including those of the Forest Service. Many of our members and supporters live in South Dakota or travel across the country to visit South Dakota and use motorized vehicles to access USFS managed lands throughout South Dakota. BRC members visit the Pinnacles area for motorized recreation, sightseeing, photography, wildlife and nature study, camping, and other similar pursuits. We would like to add our support to any comment submitted by any other individuals or organizations that advocate for motorized use and increased recreation access overall. BRC members and supporters have concrete, definite, and immediate plans to continue such activities in the future. Many of our members are individuals and organizations with extensive on-the-ground experience in the Pinnacles area.

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We would like to point out, for the record, that during the comment period we were not able to access the documents through the Forest Service website for the full length of the public comment period. Therefore we were not able to access the entire presentation for the full length of time to include project specific information. It is unfortunate we were not able to access the full documentation up until the comment deadline.

NEPA

The Bureau of Land Management is required to show a broad range of alternatives through the NEPA process. In order to adequately comply with NEPA the USFS must have alternatives that increase dispersed camping and recreation. An alternative needs to be considered that increases the amount of motorized trails as well as dispersed campsites. This inequitable privilege of one stakeholder's interest over the interests of other stakeholders taints the integrity of the NEPA process. Otherwise, the agency is treading down a dangerous path of pursuing a planning action that isn't compliant with the basic requirements NEPA.

The purpose and need of this plan is to create better management strategies, not to simply close and restrict use which is what the alternatives given propose. Closure is not management. These areas provide a purpose and need for outdoor access that improves physical and mental health for public land users.

Roads and Trails

Restricting roads that users can access will greatly inhibit the recreational value of the area. Access should be protected for all users including those who wish to dispersed camp. Roads have a purpose and a need as they provide recreation access, they provide access for emergency response, and they act as natural fire barriers.

Dispersed Camping

We do not support closing dispersed camping. BRC believes that all users can and should be accommodated. This plan should ultimately identify reasonable standards for allowing dispersed camping. Keeping open roads will allow use for dispersed camping and help mitigate impact as campers won't be concentrated into small areas. Decreasing amount of areas where dispersed recreation is allowed will only increase impact in those few areas. Management strategies should be exhausted before restrictions and closures of areas to any type of recreational use. BRC supports all recreational activities if done responsibly. There needs to be an alternative that

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opens more dispersed camping sites in addition to keeping available the existing camping experiences.

Economic Benefits

Local communities rely on recreation and dispersed camping for economic opportunities. There has been a surge of use throughout the nation on public lands as well as in the Pinnacles area. Closing roads and restricting dispersed camping would greatly hinder economic opportunity. Many local organizations and businesses recognize the influx of traffic and believe that any user conflict can be mitigated through better signage, more amenities, and education.

Users with Disabilities

We recommend that the USFS use this planning process to finally begin to reverse its decades-long systematic discrimination against those with mobility impairment-related disabilities.

On his first day in office, President Joe Biden issued an “Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government.” This executive order established “an ambitious whole-of-government equity agenda” which focuses on addressing “entrenched disparities in our laws and public policies,” and mandates a “comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality.”

Under this executive order, “The term ‘equity’ means the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as ... persons with disabilities....”

Historically, there has been no group more greatly marginalized and excluded by public land management policies, and motorized travel management policies in particular, than people with disabilities. Outdoor enthusiasts with ambulatory disabilities frequently rely on motorized travel as their sole means to enjoy recreating on public lands. Not everyone has the ability to hike into a remote wilderness area, but many such people are still able to drive Jeeps, side-by-sides, and ATVs, which are restricted to the designated motorized route network.

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Travel management policies focused on “minimizing” the environmental impacts of motorized recreation have resulted in a dramatic decrease in motorized recreation opportunities on public lands over the last 20 years which has disproportionately impacted people with disabilities. Wilderness focused environmental groups with extreme ableist biases have pushed for more and more areas to be closed to motorized recreation and reserved exclusively for hikers, mountain bikers, and other “human powered” and “quiet use” forms of recreation in which many people with disabilities are unable to participate.

Every time motorized routes or areas are closed, people with disabilities that require the use of motorized means to access public lands are barred from those areas forever. There has been little recourse for such people in the past because the Americans With Disabilities Act does not require public land management agencies to consider disproportionate effects on the disabled community, but only requires that they be given access to public lands on equal terms with everyone else. As a result, the USFS has historically failed to give any real consideration to the impacts of motorized route closures on the disabled community when developing travel management plans.

The Biden Administration’s focus on equity, however, changes the equation. While the ADA focuses only on equality of opportunity, equity inherently focuses on equality of outcome. Any policy that is facially neutral but disproportionately harms a disadvantaged or marginalized group is considered inequitable. The USFS is therefore required by this executive order and others mandating that federal agencies consider “environmental justice” in NEPA proceedings to consider whether any route closures in the Pinnacles Dispersed Recreation Plan would disproportionately harm disabled users’ ability to access public lands.

Any approach to travel management that presumes the superiority of non-motorized forms of recreation like hiking over motorized recreation, or that justifies closing motorized access on the basis that people can still hike on those routes, is inherently discriminatory toward people with disabilities. Any large-scale closures of existing routes would unfairly and inequitably deprive people with disabilities of the ability to recreate in the area using the only means available to them. It is imperative that the USFS consider the access needs of disabled users in drafting the alternatives for this travel plan and ensure that people with disabilities who depend on motorized means do not lose access.

Conclusion

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We would like to close by saying we support “shared use”. As long as overall visitation numbers are appropriate for the affected resources, motorized and non-motorized users can be compatible with one another so long as individual users understand designations and plan their activities accordingly. Indeed, motorized and nonmotorized recreation use often overlap as OHV’s often increase accessibility to non-motorized recreational activities such as hiking, camping, equestrian use, etc. We also hold that responsible recreational use of public lands can exist in harmony with ecosystem needs.

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

Ben Burr
BlueRibbon Coalition
P.O. Box 5449
Pocatello, ID 83202
brmedia@sharetrails.org

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized initials 'BB' followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Ben Burr
Executive Director
BlueRibbon Coalition

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Simone Griffin' in a cursive script.

Simone Griffin
Policy Director
BlueRibbon Coalition

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