

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 11/15/2014 1:24:55 AM

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Comments: Heart Lake and State Line trails access for mountain bikers

Cycling has a long and storied history in the mountains of Montana. The exploits of the 25th Infantry Regiment of Buffalo Soldiers and their ride from Fort Missoula to St. Louis in 1897 is well known. Since then bicycles have continued to be used to explore the wonders of the mountains including along the Montana-Idaho border. The Montana Mountain Bike Alliance has documented bikes in the Great Burn sharing the trails with horses, and their riders sharing camp, back as early as 1981.

Similar to the 2011 Clearwater Travel Plan, there continues to be a bias against mountain bikes that is not supported by the evidence. Numerous studies have documented that the impact of bikes on trails, watersheds, and wildlife is comparable to a hiker and significantly less than a horse. Assumptions that mountain bikes in earlier eras were incapable of traveling the trails in Great Burn or that that mountain bikers have a prediction to ride off trail are poorly informed assumptions not borne out by the evidence.

Mountain Bikers are responsible trail users. The Bitterroot Backcountry Cyclists, a local chapter of IMBA clears over 100 miles of trails annually, and frequently works with other non profits such as the Backcountry Horsemen to maintain additional trails.

The Bitterroot Backcountry Cyclists supports maintaining recommended wilderness in it's pristine state, and the evidence supports the claim that bicycles do not have an disproportionate impact relative to other non motorized uses. In our experience in the Bitterroot, mountain bikes tend to have a net positive impact, maintaining and clearing trails that would otherwise be neglected. Like other quiet uses, we believe in the value of having untrammelled spaces to explore and appreciate. When the Buffalo Soldiers travelled through Yellowstone back, Lt Moss reported, "Riding through the Gibbon Meadows, we then turned off into Gibbon Canyon, deep, sinuous and picturesque. For miles we fared along the windings of the road, with the ever beautiful waters of Gibbon River at our side, now admiring this, then admiring that. Indeed, this was the very poetry of cycling." What was true in 1896 is still true today whether in Yellowstone or the Great Burn, there is poetry in riding trails.

Over time, bicyclists have traveled almost all of the Great Burn Trails. The State Line Trail has been the key corridor for bicycling outings and access. Often said is the remark, "where else can one ride 28 miles and go by 28 high mountain lakes". Truly the State Line Trail is a treasure. However the whole Great Burn is a special area, both in administrative designation, geography, and heritage. Nearly all similar terrain has already been designated Wilderness whether in the Bitterroot-Selway, the Rattlesnake, the Mission Mountains, or the Pintlers leaving only this small area for us to enjoy the majesty of the Montana and Idaho alpine terrain. The Bitterroot Backcountry Cyclists can appreciate the efforts of advocates to preserve it. We also believe the Great Burn can be preserved without excluding bicycles. This is born out by the fact that we have been riding these trails for decades without disproportionate impact.

Frequently bicycled routes are narrowed down to two areas and a connector. One is upper Kelly Creek and Kid Lake, as accessed from Schley Saddle in Montana. For decades the road leading up to Schley has been a jumping off point for bicycling and snowmobiling. The other most frequently bicycled routes in the area have been all of the trails extending east from Hoodoo Pass to Goose Creek trail # 414. Primary access to Goose Creek and other trails is Trail #738. Connecting the two areas is the great State Line Trail #738 extending from Hoodoo Pass to Schley and Kid Lake, passing the mentioned 28 lakes. This connector has typically been a route for two or three-day horse-supported bicycle rides.

Historical allowed quiet use is appropriate within the Great Burn. Clearly some parts of the Great Burn are not appropriate to remain as recommended wilderness. However the Bitterroot Backcountry Cyclists continues to advocate for reasonable boundary adjustments that would minimally impact to amount of land set aside as recommended wilderness. The total acreage cyclists require is just under 500 acres, less than 1/3 of 1% of the Great Burn recommended wilderness.

The Forest Planning process is where special areas such as recommended wilderness are created and modified. In the absence of true bicycling data and understanding, those same officials must start by examining the comments submitted from bicyclists, some of whom have been riding these trails for over 30 years. The Bitterroot Backcountry Cyclists strongly recommends adjusting the western boundary of the Great Burn back to the east side of Goose Creek trail #414. We also clarify that Trail #738 be removed from Recommended Wilderness from Hoodoo Pass to Goose Creek. We think that a corridor for Trail #738 from Goose Lake to Kid Lake deserves a robust discussion with cyclists at the table. We also recommend that trail #567 be adjusted to show a corridor in the areas of upper Kelly Creek, or adjusted as a snowmobile area as this zone has historically been. We also very strongly recommend that any lands removed from B2 recommended wilderness status be made into C8S management area additions.

The fate of several wilderness bills in the congress indicates that most recommended wilderness will never be designated wilderness. With this in mind the Bitterroot Backcountry Cyclists believe that mountain bikes are an appropriate mechanism for enjoying the remote backcountry and advocate that the Forest Service should be proactive in identifying areas that are appropriate both for multiple use and land preservation under designations less restrictive than wilderness. That may include defining corridors, and adjusting boundaries, shrinking some and expanding others. The trend of using Wilderness and companion designations in concert depends upon diverse groups working together to find common ground and solutions to land preservation. The first step of this political process is dependent upon an accurate Forest Plan. If the Forest Plan is flawed or biased, problems will surface later on in the legislation process. The Bitterroot Backcountry Cyclists implores the Forest Planners to create a better and more accurate Forest Plan by adjusting parts of the Great Burn recommended wilderness boundary in order to reflect historical allowed uses.

Although the Great Burn is recommended wilderness and Forest Plan direction has trended toward managing these areas as designated Wilderness, decisions must be made using actual data about an area's use. Appropriate adjustments will achieve big gains in public support for future designations. Furthermore we believe that in this era of decreased funding for trail maintenance, allowing users with a known passion for trail work can help maintain these trails in optimal condition.

thank you for your consideration,

Jeff Barber

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