

comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement should be as specific as possible. It is also helpful if comments refer to specific pages or chapters of the draft statement. Comments may also address the adequacy of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement or the merits of the alternatives formulated and discussed in the statement. Reviewers may wish to refer to the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act at 40 CFR 1503.3 in addressing these points.

Comments received, including the names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposal and will be available for public inspection.

(Authority: 40 CFR 1501.7 and 1508.22; Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Section 21).

Dated: April 11, 2003.

Martin D. Chavez, Jr.,

Forest Supervisor, Carson National Forest.

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Helena National Forest, Montana Travel Management Plan for the South Belts, Divide, and Blackfoot Project Areas

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement.

SUMMARY: This Notice of Intent (NOI) describes the Helena National Forest's proposal to revise the existing travel management on National Forest System lands in the South Belts, Divide, and Blackfoot project areas. The decisions to be made focus on what routes (both motorized and non-motorized) will be open or restricted depending on other resource needs. Signing or other physical structure will be used to implement the decision to reach chosen management objective. No route obliterations or relocations will be analyzed under this decision.

DATES: Comments concerning the scope of the analysis must be received by May 15, 2003. The draft environmental impact statement is expected late June 2003 and the final environmental impact statement is expected April 2004.

ADDRESSES: Send written comments to Kimberly Delgado-Public Affairs Officer c/o Helena National Forest, 2880 Skyway Drive, Helena, MT 59602.

For further information contact Chuck Neal-Forest Travel Planner or call at (406) 449-5201.

If you prefer, a "scoping" letter is available on the Web at r1_Helena_webmaster@fs.fed.us. You can submit comments at this location by typing on the subject line "Attention Public Affairs Officer."

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

Forest wide travel management planning update originally was proposed in November 2000. Formal public involvement for that planning effort began with the publication of the NOI to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement in the **Federal Register** in December of 2000. A scoping letter describing that proposal was mailed to over 1,300 individuals and groups and public meetings were held in the communities of Lincoln, Townsend, and Helena in December 2000.

In response to that NOI and scoping effort many letters, postcards, e-mails, petitions, and maps were received commenting on the proposal. A private contractor conducted a content analysis to identify the issues and concerns and grouped them into main categories. This content analysis was completed in March 2001. These responses are retained in the record.

In 2001, a number of factors influenced the Helena National Forest to set aside the 2000 Forest wide travel planning effort. These factors included the requirements to complete a Forest Roads Analysis and the need to place priority on restoration and timber salvage in response to the severe fires of 2000.

An additional change that influenced the complexity of the 2000 Forest wide travel planning effort was the July 2001 off-highway vehicle regulations affecting National Forests and BLM lands in Montana, North Dakota, and portions of South Dakota. This direction applies to all government lands where a site-specific travel plan has not been implemented and restricts wheeled motorized travel to roads and trails where evidence of motorized use existed at that time.

The Forest Wide Travel Plan of 2000 was rescinded in March of 2003 due to elapsed time since the appearance of the NOI in the **Federal Register** and changed scope of the proposal.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose for initiating this proposal is to have a network of open roads and trails that addresses the need for a variety of vehicular and non-

vehicular use while meeting goals, objectives, and standards for the multiple resources present within the project areas.

The Helena Forest Plan, signed in 1986, did not fully anticipate the growing popularity of ATV's and snowmobiles. Subsequently, off-road travel and user-created routes were increasing until the 2001 OHV decision prohibited cross-country motorized travel. The decision amended the Helena Forest Plan to eliminate this activity and further directed the Forests to prioritize areas for subsequent site-specific travel planning. Therefore, there is a need to update the Forest Travel Plan to address both motorized and non-motorized uses.

The Helena National Forest visitor map displays 23 different time blocks for restrictions. This makes understanding, implementing, and enforcing the travel plan complex both for the users and the Forest Service. Therefore, there is a need for a more clear, simplified travel plan that is easier to understand and enforce.

Proposed Action

The Helena National Forest proposes to implement a travel plan for the South Belts, Divide, and Blackfoot project areas that provides motorized and non-motorized opportunities for both roads and trails. Forest Plan goals, objectives, and standards for other resources were key to the development of this proposed action such as providing adequate seasonal habitat for wildlife and maintaining water quality.

The proposed action is summarized below. Site-specific, route-by-route detail for each project area is available upon request. The proposed action includes the following elements:

1. Motorized and non-motorized roads and trails are identified and include the following four route types:

- * Roads open to vehicles that meet the requirements of state laws,
- * Motorized trails open to vehicles 50 inches wide or less,
- * Non-motorized trails, and
- * Snowmobile routes.

2. Potential "connector" local road or trail locations are identified for possible future decisions.

3. Open and restricted routes and areas for snowmobiles are delineated. Big game winter range areas are not open to snowmobile use; however, designated snowmobile routes through winter range are identified.

4. Vehicle access within 300 feet of an open, designated road is allowed primarily to access dispersed camping sites and other uses as long it does not result in unacceptable resource damage