

Foresters try to find balance in travel plan

BRETT FRENCH Of The Gazette Staff | Posted: Friday, November 9, 2007 11:00 pm

Crafting a new travel management plan for the Pryor and Beartooth mountains is really about the effects on people who go there, said the man in charge of the process, since few environmental impacts have been identified.

"We haven't found real significant environmental impacts from the proposals," said Doug Epperly, recreation planner for the Custer National Forest.

The Beartooth District of the Custer National Forest is developing a travel plan for the more than 580,000 acres in the district. Comments on the draft proposal are being taken until Nov. 19. A final plan is expected to be drafted by June.

Although the travel plan will cover the entire district, most of the controversy has centered on the Pryor Mountains, a small island range east of the Beartooths that is covered with old mines, miles of roads favored by off-highway-vehicle users and a variety of archaeological sites.

The area is rich in artifacts, everything from cairns to stone circles and fasting beds. All told, there are 392 recorded archaeological sites on the Beartooth District - 229 in the Beartooth Unit and 163 in the Pryors. Evidence of human use goes back 12,000 years, according to the draft document, and the area has long held special significance for the Crow Tribe.

Few comments

Given the amount of interest in recreating on the forest, Epperly was surprised that few people attended a series of meetings held around the region last month to seek more information about the planning process.

"I guess I would've expected a little more, especially at the Billings one," Epperly said, considering that about 160 people attended the Forest Service's attempt to craft a collaborative travel plan.

Yet the agency acknowledged in its draft plan that attempts to bring disparate user groups closer to a consensus failed to reach "substantive points of agreement."

"We haven't gotten a ton of written comments," Epperly said. "I expect them to flood in before the 19th," the last day to comment.

Comments must be substantive, though, in order for the Forest Service to consider changing a proposal.

"We continue to get comments that say, 'I like Alternative A or Alternative C.' We need to know what their rationale is for change," Epperly said. Specifics have more potential to sway the agency.

Lots of detail

Specifics and details fill the hefty document that is the draft travel plan, including a number of interesting statistics about who uses the Beartooth District and what they do there.

For example, hunting was the highest-ranked primary activity in the Beartooth District, with 15.3 percent of visitors or an estimated 116,000 visits a year. Next on the list was hiking and walking at 14.5 percent, and then came downhill skiing at 13.5 percent. Driving for pleasure, the motorized activity associated with the greatest number of visits at 37,900, was ranked as a primary activity by 5 percent of those interviewed. On the Custer, off-highway-vehicle use accounts for only 2.9 percent of total recreation use.

Two-thirds of Custer National Forest visitors are considered nonlocal - that is, they live more than 50 miles from the forest boundary. By that standard, Billings area people count as nonlocal.

Given the figures, it would seem logical that the Forest Service would slant its recreation opportunities to where there is the most demand, and based on its own figures that would be hunting and hiking.

But Epperly said that's not how travel planning works.

"Visitor numbers are considered," he said. "But at the same time we're a multiple-use agency. Some uses take more acres to have a quality experience. In my mind, it's a little more complex."

OHV miles retained

Off-highway-vehicle users, though, could argue that the reason motorized visitor numbers are low is that they don't have adequate opportunities.

Yet under the Forest Service's preferred alternative, motorized users stand to retain miles of riding opportunities in the Pryor Mountains.

Here's a breakdown: Alternative A (considered the motorized alternative) would provide a 15 percent increase in motorized recreation opportunity, putting 71 percent of the area in motorized settings. Alternative B (the preferred option) would provide a 10 percent increase, putting 66 percent of the Pryors in a motorized setting. Alternative C (the nonmotorized alternative) would cut motorized recreation opportunity by 3 percent, leaving 53 percent in a motorized setting.

For nonmotorized users, Alternative A would result in a 14 percent decrease in opportunity, Alternative B a 6 percent decrease and Alternative C a 4 percent increase.

Divided debate

Motorized recreationists, though, can argue that with 55 percent of the Beartooth District within the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness - one of the most heavily used wilderness areas in the Forest Service's Northern Region - they deserve equal opportunity.

Only 17 percent of the forest is classified as roaded or semi-primitive motorized, compared with 81 percent considered semi-primitive nonmotorized or primitive. In the district, 34 trail heads provide access to 279 miles of trail. There are 280 miles of roads on the district that are open all or part of the year.

In comparison, the Pryor Mountains have about 10,000 more acres in a motorized than nonmotorized setting - 44,000 acres (57 percent), compared with 33,900 in nonmotorized, or 43 percent. Here, the quiet users can say the district isn't being fair to them.

Should the Forest Service provide equal opportunity? Or should it be required to protect unroaded areas for future generations? It's a debate that divides forest users. And as the agency noted in its draft plan, "as travel management decisions are made on public lands locally and within the region, conflict is not likely to be alleviated."

Robert Lubbers, a member of the Pryors Coalition of conservation groups, said his group thinks the Forest Service is being too shortsighted.

"The people who use it have to start thinking long range about the effects of their use," Lubbers said. "This is a finite resource, and we better start thinking about what happens when that finite resource stops providing that wondrous outdoor experience."

He's also concerned that forest officials didn't consider establishing a noise decibel rating to ensure there are quiet areas.

Ed Melcher of Families for Outdoor Recreation, a motorized-user group, said his members would like more time to make comments on the plan, but in general they're pleased with how the Forest Service has approached the issue.

"We'd like to see some minor changes to the preferred alternative," he said. "We'd like to see some additional loops connected."

Kerry White, of Citizens for Balanced Use in Bozeman, said his group is unhappy with the plan and is likely to appeal.

Looking for balance

Although much of the Beartooth District is in wilderness or nonmotorized settings, Epperly said the Forest Service feels no need to try to counterbalance that by giving motorized users more opportunity in the Pryor Mountains.

"We're trying to do the best we can to provide for all users and meet the needs of as much of the demand as we can," Epperly said.

"But we have a finite resource, too, and we have to make some hard decisions about where we provide those opportunities."

The fact that the agency proposes to close two of the only three developed motorcycle trails, which are along the Beartooth Front, may further fuel the suspicion that motorized use is being segregated to the Pryors.

But Epperly said the decision to eliminate two motorcycle trails in the Myers/Lodgepole creek areas was based on wildlife considerations.

"There is a big-game travelway through that area," he said. "It does kind of bisect those two trails.

"What the district feels is that there is a really high demand for nonmotorized use on the Beartooth Front. This will provide an additional opportunity to relieve some of the future and existing pressure on the Beartooth Front."

But the Forest Service struggled with the proposal, Epperly said. He hopes that feedback from the public will help further refine the proposal.

"That's one area we'll be paying a lot of attention to the comments we get to help us figure it out," he said.

Economy has no effect

One area that is unlikely to influence the forest's decision is economics. A survey found there are 518 jobs and \$10.9 million of total labor income attributable to nonwildlife and wildlife recreation on the Beartooth District.

Of that figure, motorized activities were responsible for approximately 22 total jobs and \$447,700 in labor income, compared with 72 total jobs and \$1.46 million in labor income related to nonmotorized activities. Despite these figures, the document goes on to say that "it cannot be generalized that motorized or nonmotorized activities contribute more or less to the local economy on a per visit basis."

Although not required to consider the economic effects of their decision under the National Environmental Policy Act that governs forest planning, Epperly said the agency looks at the numbers because of the potential for economic and social effects any decision the agency makes.

Both sides - motorized and nonmotorized - praised the Forest Service's attempts to reach a decision on travel planning.

"They really have come out to the community, and they're a lot more willing to take public input," said Melcher of Families for Outdoor Recreation.

"They're between many rocks and a lot of hard places," said Lubbers, of the Pryors Coalition.

Contact Brett French at french@billingsgazette.com or at 657-1387.