

## Gazette Opinion: D.C. stalemate limits forest funding for travel plan

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The Custer National Forest spans 1.2 million acres scattered from the Beartooth Mountains above Red Lodge to pine-studded buttes near Camp Crook, S.D. Nearly half of the acreage - about 513,000 acres - is in the Beartooth area, which includes a portion of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. But when the forest undertook the writing of a new travel plan for the Beartooth Ranger District, most of the public comments focused on a 75,000-acre area about 30 miles east of Red Lodge.

Many strong opinions

The Pryor Mountain portion of the Custer National Forest is beloved by outdoor enthusiasts who have varied and conflicting ideas about how this swatch of the forest should be used. Strong opinions favoring more access for all-terrain vehicles and strong opinions favoring limited motorized access have streamed into The Gazette's Voice of the Reader columns for the past few months. A forest spokeswoman estimated last week that well over 200 comments had been received on the Beartooth Travel Plan, with many concerning the Pryor area.

In the midst of this debate, it is important to note the limited resources the forest has to implement and enforce whatever travel plan it makes. The entire forest has just one full-time law enforcement officer. Five other staff members are trained as forest protection officers but have other full-time jobs. In most years, between five and 10 seasonal workers also receive forest protection training. If need arises, the Custer Forest can call for help from other forests in the region or request assistance from local sheriff's departments. But for routine patrols, the enforcement ranks are minimal.

In the Pryor forest area, summer visitors could see vandalized information signs and little evidence of road maintenance.

The draft environmental impact statement noted public comments on "the lack of enforcement, such as resource damage and diminished recreation experience for other forest visitors. Some comments suggested that there was a need for additional law enforcement personnel to handle the increase of motorized use on the forest."

The amount of maintenance performed annually on roads and trails depends on funding. According to the draft statement, most miles of Beartooth District trails and roads (even roads designated for passenger cars) haven't received any annual maintenance in most years of late.

Continuing resolutions

The Custer National Forest had a total budget of about \$10 million last year for managing 1.2 million acres of public lands in two states. Like most other federal agencies, the forest is operating on the same budget it had in the fiscal year that began on Oct. 1, 2005. Congress didn't pass a budget in 2006 and continued the previous year's budget. The federal government is now 2½ months into the 2008 fiscal year and has no new budget. President Bush vetoed budget bills passed this fall, but not all budget legislation has even reached the president's desk. The stalemate continues with Bush threatening to veto all budget bills unless domestic spending is reduced below the level in last year's budget, which is the same as the previous year's.

The Custer Forest expects to have a decision on the Beartooth Travel Plan early this summer and to have free travel maps available in October so forest visitors will know where they are permitted to ride and hike. Most individuals will follow those rules regardless of whether they are using ATVs or walking. Most forest users will follow other laws: They won't litter, poach wildlife, vandalize or deface the public land they love. The minority, the scofflaws, will continue to be an enforcement challenge.