



January 13, 2009

Jan FauntLeRoy, Divide Travel Plan Leader
Helena Ranger District
2001 Poplar
Helena, MT 59601

DIVIDE TRAVEL PLAN SCOPING

Dear Travel Plan Leader,

Thank you for this opportunity to provide scoping comment on the Divide Travel Plan, an area that we believe is integral to the mission of the Helena Hunters and Anglers Association (HHAA). HHAA promotes the highest standards of ethical conduct and sportsmanship and is dedicated to protecting and restoring fish and wildlife to all suitable habitats, and to conserving all natural resources as a public trust, vital to our general welfare.

HHAA firmly encourages land management that promotes ethical hunting experiences. We have participated on the Governor's Hunter Behavior Advisory Council which recognized expanding ATV use as a serious detriment to the traditional hunting experience, a point of serious conflict between hunters, and an acute source of increasing resource impacts to both public and private lands. The Hunter Behavior Advisory Council report specifically asked public land management agencies to address the issue of ethical hunting environments. The proposed travel plan for the Divide exacerbates these concerns.

HHAA has a keen interest in the Continental Divide as a vital wildlife movement corridor linking landscapes across the state and between ecosystems, particularly the Northern Continental Divide and Greater Yellowstone. The evolution of the Divide Travel Plan will ultimately define the functionality of the Continental Divide as a wildlife movement corridor. Currently all linkage areas within Western Montana adjoin the central linkage zone. This central linkage zone has been called The Hub, and it does in fact connect all other movement areas within the western portion of the state as described by on-going corridor research. The proposed Divide travel plan does not encourage the function of the Continental Divide as wildlife corridor through either restoration or protection. In fact it promotes substantial conflict with wildlife and their habitat by opening at least 66 miles of previously closed roads to motorized use.

We urge the Divide Travel Plan to reflect the concerns and desires of the Western Governor's Association Resolution to acknowledge important wildlife travel corridors in the West. Our own local Lewis & Clark County Commission adopted a Resolution in June 2008 acknowledging the need "To Protect and Promote the Conservation of Wildlife Habitat and Corridors on the Continental Divide." The Helena National Forest has initiated travel planning for the Divide but it has not offered responsible options, and so a responsible option must be built from the ground up by the citizens. Unfortunately this must apparently be done without leadership from the Helena National Forest. Examples of this lack of leadership are demonstrated by failures to:

- offer a reasonable option that will protect natural resources,
- reduce petroleum-based fuel use (and thus assist with the dilemma of climate change – recognized internationally as the most pressing problem of our time),
- minimize user conflict,
- sustain and reclaim wildlife movement corridors,
- recognize seasonal wildlife habitats and fisheries needs,
- meet forest plan objectives that are now 23 years old, and
- recognize sedimentation issues that are affecting water quality status to major streams such as Tenmile, Little Prickly Pear, Little Blackfoot, and their tributaries.

As stewards of the public trust in natural resources, you are well aware that the foundation of healthy, functional landscapes are their soils and watersheds. Our primary interests focus on healthy soils and watersheds, and abundant, effective and secure wildlife habitats. Motorization of landscapes compromises all of these natural resource values and results in habitat fragmentation. As noted in *Conservation Thresholds for Land Use Planners*¹,

"While there are many threats to biological diversity in the United States, the loss and fragmentation of habitats and ecosystems have become the most significant². The survival of plant and animal species and whether our natural systems will continue to provide essential services—recycling of nutrients, flood and pest control, and maintenance of clean air, water, and soil—significantly depends upon where and how land is used, converted, and managed."

We request that any travel planning decisions for the Divide landscape be based on a thorough literature review of motorized impacts to:

- soils,
- watersheds,
- habitat fragmentation,
- introduction of invasive species,
- fishery needs,
- seasonal wildlife habitat needs, security and effectiveness,
- displacement of wildlife,
- user conflicts, and
- local water quality restoration needs.

As a starting point, we recommend reference to *The Effects of Recreation on Rocky Mountain Wildlife – A Review for Montana*³.

Wildlife literature documents that when road densities begin to exceed one mile per square mile of land that wildlife habitat begins to become disproportionately compromised, and that 50 percent of elk habitat is no longer effective once road densities reach 1.7 miles per square mile. The Helena Forest Plan accepts a 50 percent loss of habitat at the onset. While HHAA would prefer much more habitat retention, we are fervent in our conviction that public land wildlife habitat losses exceeding 50% are unacceptable.

It was suggested at a meeting held with Helena Ranger District personnel at the Montana Wilderness Association office on December 10 that increasing road density could contribute to reduction of elk populations. This line of logic is flawed in at least two ways. First, *Elk Management in the Northern Region: Considerations in Forest Plan Updates or Revisions*⁴ states, “reducing habitat effectiveness should never be considered as a means of controlling elk populations.” Secondly, when road densities and/or motorized use becomes excessive on public lands, wildlife are displaced from public land onto private land, exacerbating both game depredations to private land owners and rendering the primary wildlife management tool of public hunting ineffective. As the 2009 Montana legislative session opens, one of the most contentious issues that the wildlife management agency faces is redistribution of wildlife onto private lands where game damage has become a critical issue. The proposed travel plan for the Divide exacerbates these concerns.

As a prelude to analyzing Alternative 2 Proposed Action, HHAA requests inclusion in the pending EA or EIS, appendixes that lists the following:

- (1) Decision Notices or Records of Decision that have been issued for all projects conducted within the Divide Travel Plan area for which roads or trails were used or constructed. Describe decisions that determined the subsequent deposition of each road/trail – i.e. how each would be managed in the future. We wish to confirm that all decisions, past, present and future are in full and clear compliance with the Helena National Forest Plan (current plan 1986).
- (2) Executive Order 11644 - We wish to see an evaluation of all roads and trails as proposed in Alternative 2 or any future alternative, in the context of Executive Order 11644. E.O. 11644 states that the duty of US Forest Service is to prevent harm to public land resources, including soils, waters, plants and wildlife. Such an evaluation is crucial to the integrity of the NEPA process and the long history of public participation relative to management of the Helena National Forest’s public lands and impact mitigation to those lands. We believe that if this step is conscientiously undertaken that then, and only then, can decisions be made concerning appropriate recreational uses that might be allowed on the landscape.
- (3) Road density – for all roads that will remain on the landscape and be used by motor vehicles for all or a portion of the year, a table indicating the road density for each section in which that road occurs.
- (4) An implementation schedule relative to all changes incurred by a new travel plan.
- (5) Clear definition of how and when the new travel plan will be enforced.

We are dismayed by the contentious approach that the Helena Ranger District has taken to address travel planning on this segment of the forest. The appropriate process would involve incorporating resource specialist recommendations into the “proposed” alternative. Such an approach would have the least consequence to natural resources because specialist with backgrounds in soils, hydrology, fisheries, wildlife, and cultural resources, among others, would have shaped the proposal. As it stands now, this Forest Services sponsored process appears to be formatted to be a back alley brawl where recreational users are pitted against one another rather than where protection or reclamation of soil, water, and habitat are managed for sustainability and healthy function. All forest plan standards and guidelines need to be met or beneficially exceeded.

At the public open house held on December 1, 2008, when asked what the biologist for the forest thought about certain proposals to open roads that have previously been closed due to resource concerns, he stated, “our biologist isn’t too happy with it.”

A final travel plan must:

- Reduce habitat fragmentation
- Reclaim or at a minimum thoroughly “trash” and gate roads that are creating resource concerns. The original purpose for these roads and trails have passed and they should be removed from the landscape -- effective closures are needed.
- User-created routes must *not* be sanctioned.
- Roadless areas must not be opened to motorized uses of any kind, including snowmobiling.
- Entire areas are in need of reclamation (Sweeney Creek)
- Recognize and eliminate or mitigate exacerbating effect of other known activities (mine waste hauling, winter ski facilities, highway upgrades, mining activity, etc.)

We support motorized routes that are:

- (1) carefully placed,
- (2) designed to have little or no impact on soils, water or wildlife habitats,
- (3) have not originated from free-lance motorized users,
- (4) are officially acknowledged through a public review process as designated routes, and
- (5) meet all Forest Plan standards (current plan is 1986)

More specifically, the following list of roads, trails and areas are those for which HHAA has specific comment. However we reiterate that we wish to have the previously described concerns and requests addressed as well.

General Summary of Recommendations based on Alternative 1

- A plethora of dead-end and spur roads on Map Alternative 1 that are shown in black and listed as “Open to Highway Legal Vehicles” have not appeared on previous travel maps (1991, 2006), such as those in Ward Gulch and Skelly Gulch. The fact that they remain

available to motorized users on Map Alternative 2 is surprising given the extreme density and dead-end nature of the routes.

- All mule deer and elk winter ranges should be reflected. Seasonal road closures should be in effect unless a designated route is identified.
- Extreme disproportionate deference is being provided to snowmobile users to the detriment of other values. In some areas snowmobile use is allowed yearlong even with low or no snowpack – there appears to be no restriction.
- Keep all “yellow” roads closed yearlong – these have been closed in the past.
- Keep all pink roads closed to wheeled vehicles yearlong.
- Reclaim all RED roads – these are user created routes.
- Reclaim all “MTR” routes – these are user created routes.
- Continental Divide Trail – dedicate its entire length to non-motorized use. Reroute the trail where needed. Move the trail in the vicinity of Jericho Mountain to O’Keefe Mountain to route 1863, which actually occurs ON the Continental Divide, and connect into 495-D1 in Section 22 T8N R6W. Move the trail or delete motorized use from the trail 136, 622, 1855, 1802.
- Keep all motor vehicles, including snowmobiles, out of all roadless areas.
- Post “Designated Route Maps” throughout the area and keep the maps refreshed (replace when damaged or removed).
- Place “Designated Route Markers” (DRM) on all open routes, similar to snowmobile trail markers. DRMs should be placed at least every ¼ mile and at all road junctions so that the location of the designated route is clear. HHAA members volunteer to assist with placement.

North of Highway 12

We support maintenance of the following routes as open. All others should be closed. All spurs and user-created routes should be effectively closed through trashing, and where necessary, gating.

- 774 – Deadman
- 708 – Snowshoe to Uncle Ben Gulch
- 571 – Roundtop to Uncle Ben Gulch to Uncle George Gulch
- 1855 – near Roundtop in Section 9 to Uncle George Gulch
- 1805 - Highway 12 to Uncle George Gulch to Austin

- 1860 – Priest Pass Road from 1805 to 335 to Highway 12

North of Highway 12 - Special comment:

- Continental Divide Trail – Move the trail or delete motorized use from the trail 136, 622, 1855, 1802.
- 335-A1, A2 – it would be a mistake to open these routes because motorized users would soon be gaining access to the cross-country ski area to the southwest. Illegal routes are already penetrating into this area.
- Sweeney Creek – RECLAIM this area. Mule deer winter range must be reclaimed. Motorized use should be banned from this area. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks as well as members of Helena Hunters and Anglers Association have repeatedly submitted concerns and comment to the Helena Ranger District over the years regarding the abuse of this area. Those letters are referenced as follows:
 - Stephen Platt to Ranger Duane Harp March 24, 2004 resource damage from ORV use in the Sweeney Creek area
 - Stephen Platt to Ranger Duane Harp April 23, 2004: OHV abuse in Sweeney Creek follow up
 - Stephen Platt to Ranger Duane Harp December 5, 2008: Divide Travel Plan
 - MFWP to Ranger Denis Hart August 23, 1991: Sweeney Creek Timber Sale
 - MFWP to Ranger Denis Hart April 18, 1992: Sweeney Creek winter range and military training
 - MFWP to Ranger Duane Harp May 2, 2002: Snowmobile parking lot in Sweeney Creek
 - MFWP to Larry Cole at HRD April 26 2004: Sweeney Creek resource damage
- In addition to Sweeney Creek damage per se, there are also several routes between and Sweeney Creek and 335-A1 and A2 that have been pioneers and need to be physically blocked and rehabilitated.

South of Highway 12

We support maintenance of the following routes as open. All others should be closed. All spurs and user-created routes should be effectively closed through trashing, and where necessary, gating.

- 695 – Highway 12 to Rimini
- 299 – Rimini to Park Lake Road
- 218 – Rimini to Porphery Mine
- 1876 – Banner Creek to Clear Creek (past Scott Reservoir)
- 495 – Camp Child to Telegraph Creek – close at CD Trail or leave open to motors and in exchange close 18i63 to become the CD Trail
- 227 – Highway 12 to Kading Campground
- 314 – Elliston Creek to N. Fork Spotted Dog
- 1870 – 314 to south edge Section 4 at Baldy Ridge – close south onto Baldy Ridge

South of Highway 12 - Special comment:

- 1864 and 1864-A1 occur in Bear Creek in the Jericho Mtn Roadless Area and should not appear on any map
- Reclaim unnumbered “pink” road east of Jericho Mountain – an offshoot of Minnehaha
- 1801 and all spurs including 4104-A1, A2, and B1, and 495-D1 should NOT be open to snowmobiling. Snowmobilers have been observed violating the Electric Peak Roadless Area from this Bison Creek area.
- Continental Divide Trail – Move the trail in the vicinity of Jericho Mountain to O’Keefe Mountain to route 1863, which actually occurs ON the Continental Divide, and connect into 495-D1 in Section 22 T8N R6W.
- All 1876 routes that reach the Clancy-Unionville divide must be closed and trashed or reclaimed to avoid entrance to the Clancy-Unionville Travel Management Area that is closed to motorized vehicles from the Tenmile Creek divide.
- All motorized roads/routes in the Jericho Mountain Roadless Area should be reclaimed.

For the record, a copy of comments submitted on August 15, 2003 by the Helena Hunters and Anglers Association regarding the Divide Travel Planning process (subsequently abandoned) are called to your attention by reference.

Sincerely,

Stan Frasier, President
Helena Hunters and Anglers Association

¹ Kennedy, C., J. Wilkinson, and J. Balch. 2003. Conservation thresholds for land use planners. Environmental Law Institute. Washington D.C. 55 pp.

² Wilcove, D., D. Rothstein, J. Dubow, A. Phillips, and E. Losos. 1998. Quantifying threats to imperiled species in the United States. *BioScience* 48:607-615.

³ Joslin, G., and H. Youmans, coordinators. 1999. Effects of recreation on Rocky Mountain wildlife: a review for Montana. Committee on Effects of Recreation on Wildlife, Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society. 320pp.

⁴ Christensen, A.G., L.J. Lyon, and J.W. Unsworth. 1993. *Elk Management in the Northern Region: considerations in Forest Plan Updates or Revisions*. Intermountain Research Station General Technical Report INT-303. U.S. Dept. of Agriculture. 11pp.