



## THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

# Travel Plan Revision Must Put Wildlife Ahead of Motorized Use on Montana's Rocky Mountain Front<sup>1</sup>

### KEY POINTS

- *The Rocky Mountain Front's natural values far outweigh its potential as the motorized playground that could emerge from the ongoing Forest Service's Travel Plan revision.*
- *Of the five alternative plans under consideration, **Alternative 3**, which confines motorized vehicles to roads, best protects wildlife values and traditional recreation opportunities.*
- *Under the existing 150-mile road network there remain large "core" areas--blocks of contiguous habitat--that support an unparalleled collection of wildlife and plant species.*
- *Alternative 3 maintains the lowest route densities and the largest core areas, while allowing access with 23 percent of the land remaining within a mile of a motorized route.*
- *The unprotected national forest land along the Front features a broad range of elevation zones and land-cover types that are not well represented in Montana's inventory of protected lands.*

### BACKGROUND

Montana's Rocky Mountain Front is a nationally significant landscape of diverse and biologically rich terrain, harboring treasured herds of big game--elk, bighorn sheep and mule deer--as well as healthy communities of threatened species. Across the Northern Rockies, Wilderness Areas tend to be in upper-elevation areas. These places lack the diversity of habitat at lower elevations and in riparian areas, such as those tucked along the eastern slope of the majestic mountain front the Blackfeet called "the backbone of the world." Today, the Front remains a backbone of temperate-zone biodiversity, featuring nearly every mammal documented in Lewis and Clark's explorations and 700 plant species.

These natural values are at stake as the Lewis and Clark National Forest revises its Travel Plan for its non-Wilderness lands on the Rocky Mountain Front. Wilderness Society researchers used GIS (Geographic Information System) to undertake a spatial analysis on three of the five alternatives under consideration. Allowing motorized use in unroaded parts of the Front would carve up many land-cover types and elevation zones that are not well represented among protected lands in the Northern Rockies. Motorized routes impede wildlife movement, reduce connectivity and shrink core habitat into isolated parcels.

The unprotected national forest portions of the Front represent a broad range of elevations, from 4,300 to 9,400 feet, and land-cover classes. This helps explain why the Front is one of our nation's crown jewels of biodiversity. Of the Front's 21 land-cover types, 11 are not well protected in the Northern Rockies. These 11 cover 40 percent of the district's unprotected holdings.

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<sup>1</sup> This fact sheet summarizes the Wilderness Society's August 2005 comments regarding Travel Plan revision on the Lewis and Clark National Forest. For the full text, see [www.savethefront.org/library](http://www.savethefront.org/library).

## **METHODOLGY AND FINDINGS**

The TWS analysis studied the the degree of habitat fragmentation that would result from three of the Forest Service’s alternatives. The “no-action” Alternative 1 is a benchmark look at existing conditions and Alternative 5 combines elements of Alternatives 4 and 3, so our research left these two out. The table below compares Alternatives 2, 3 and 4 in these areas:

- **Route density analysis:** The portion of the Front with motorized route densities greater than 1 mile per square mile.
- **Distance-to-route analysis:** The portion within 1 mile of a motorized route.
- **Core area analysis:** The portion containing habitat at least 1,640 feet from a route. (Studies show that bears avoid habitat this close to a route.)

	Route density	Distance to route	Core area
Alternative 2	32 percent	63 percent	68 percent
<b>Alternative 3</b>	<b>8 percent</b>	<b>23 percent</b>	<b>91 percent</b>
Alternative 4	19 percent	43 percent	80 percent

What do the above fragmentation metrics mean for wildlife? Here is a selection of just some of the report’s findings, drawn from scientific literature:

- The 1-mile route density threshold marks a drop-off in effectiveness of elk habitat. Alternative 2 and 4 would thus undermine significant portions of the district’s effectiveness as elk habitat outside the Dearborn area.
- Alternative 2 exposes nearly two-thirds of the Front to potentially harmful influences of motorized use. Applying a narrower 1,640-foot distance-to-route threshold, bears would still avoid 32 percent of the Front’s non-Wilderness land under this alternative.
- **Alternative 3** would maintain the Front’s critical habitat since 91 percent would fall within core areas. A comparison of the average sizes of core habitat, blocks of contiguous land beyond 1,640 feet from a route, show that core areas are eight times larger under Alternative 3 than under Alternative 2. (**32,931 acres** vs. 4,302 acres.)

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study finds the natural values of the Front so compelling, this area should be spared the unnecessary harm that could occur if the revised Travel Plan fails to limit motorized use. Opportunities for motorized recreation abound on other, less sensitive lands administered by the Lewis and Clark National Forest. Protecting the Front’s rare wildlife resource, the subject of a century-old conservation legacy, should be the guiding principle behind recreation management here.

### **Select recommendations for the Travel Plan (see full report for complete list):**

- Adopt Alternative 3 which best secures habitat by confining motors to roads.
- Maintain non-motorized core areas
- Ensure connectivity with adjacent protected lands, such as Glacier National Park, Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex and the state’s Blackleaf and Sun River wildlife areas.
- Close all routes lacking designated use or providing redundant access.
- Designate all routes closed unless marked open.
- Close all user-created routes.
- Establish a process for closure and reclamation.
- Establish clear mechanisms and funding for maintenance and enforcement.

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:**

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