



THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

Are We Losing Ground? The case against motorizing Montana's Rocky Mountain Front¹

KEY FINDINGS

- *The Rocky Mountain Front's natural values far outweigh its potential as the motorized playground that could emerge from the ongoing Travel Plan revision by the Lewis and Clark National Forest.*
- *A proposed 480-mile transportation network in the Forest's Rocky Mountain Ranger District creates "zones of influence" that affect 54 percent of the district's unprotected lands.*
- *Under the existing 150-mile road network there remain large "core" areas that support an unparalleled collection of wildlife and plant species.*
- *The unprotected 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.*
- *Forest-wide, the Lewis and Clark maintains hundreds of miles of roads and trails open to OHV use, affording ample opportunities for motorized recreation off the Front.*

BACKGROUND

Montana's Rocky Mountain Front is a nationally significant landscape of diverse and biologically rich terrain. Across the Northern Rockies, Wilderness Areas tend to be in upper-elevation areas, which provide breath-taking scenery. These lands, however, do not support the diversity of habitat we find 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, Montana's Front is a backbone of temperate-zone biodiversity, featuring nearly every mammal that lived here at the time of Lewis and Clark's explorations and some 700 plant species--fully one-third of Montana's total.

Wilderness Society researchers used GIS (Geographic Information System) to undertake a spatial analysis on the district's proposed network of motorized routes (both roads and trails). The report found that motorizing 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 block wildlife movement, reduce connectivity, shrink core habitat into isolated parcels, increase "edge effects," such as competition with species that prefer edge and open habitats, boosts nest predation and secondary extinctions from loss of keystone species, and causes changes in microclimates.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The TWS researchers employed GIS to study the densities of motorized routes and to measure their effect on the Front's various vegetation communities. The study was confined to the travel plan area: non-Wilderness forest lands in the District. The analysis broke the District into four study areas:

¹ This fact sheet summarizes an August 2004 report by The Wilderness Society, "Roadless Area Conservation Along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front: Are we losing ground." For a copy, see www.savethefront.org/library/docs/report_losingground.pdf.

Badger-Two Medicine, Birch-Teton, Sun River, and Dearborn. TWS found that route densities varied from .2 miles per square mile in the Dearborn to .9 miles in the Badger. The Forest Service's proposed 480-mile transportation network has a physical footprint of 667 acres. While this represents less than 1 percent of the analysis area, a 1-kilometer "effect zone"—defined as the 500 meters on either side of a road or motorized trail—covers 54 percent of the land, ranging from 24 percent of Dearborn area to 63 percent of the Badger-Two Medicine.

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 and some are characterized by keystone vegetation species, such as whitebark pine. These important 11 land-cover classes cover 40 percent of the district's unprotected holdings.

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 place reasonable limits on motorized access. In accommodating a controversial form of outdoor recreation enjoyed by a small, but vocal minority of users, Forest officials risk harming the Front's rich diversity for future generations to enjoy. "The proposed road and motorized trail system would directly cause fragmentation of wildlife habitat and would likely disrupt natural behaviors and movement patterns for many different wildlife species over portions of the District," the report concludes.

Forest-wide, the Lewis and Clark has 1,500 miles of roads and 1,070 miles of trails open to motorbikes and other motorized vehicles, affording ample opportunities for piston-powered recreation. In the Rocky Mountain District, these opportunities should be confined to the existing road network. In the absence of solid analysis, the district has "an inefficient aggregation of routes that requires continued expenditures of taxpayer dollars to maintain and that destroys valuable public resources," the TWS report states. Off-road motorized use should be left to select areas on the forest's four other districts in the Little Belt, Snowy, Highwood, Castle and Crazy mountains.

For management guidelines, the report recommends:

1. Limiting motorized routes to those that do not harm landscape integrity.
2. Identifying existing routes that are necessary, explaining why they are necessary.
3. Performing fragmentation analysis on these routes.
4. Retire routes that degrade under-protected, lower-elevation habitats.

Specific recommendations for the Front's Travel Plan include:

- Develop a conservation strategy to protect Front's ecological communities that are under-represented in the Northern Rockies' network of protected landscapes.
- Protect relatively undisturbed lower-elevation land cover classes that serve as critical habitat and connect areas used by migratory wildlife.
- Designate areas off-limits to motorized use, particularly in "core" habitat of sufficient size to permit the major life functions for big game and carnivores.
- Confine motorized use to existing roads.
- Maintain non-motorized core areas
- Ensure connectivity with adjacent protected lands, such as Glacier National Park, Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex and the Blackleaf and Sun River wildlife management areas.

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