



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY  
REGION 8

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MAR 3 2016

Ref: 8EPR-N

Melany Glossa, Forest Supervisor  
Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest  
420 Barrett Street  
Dillon, Montana 59725

Re: Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan to Comply with the District Court Order CEQ# 20150340

Dear Ms. Glossa:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 8 has reviewed the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service's Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) for the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest (BDNF) Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) to Comply with the District of Montana Court Order (Winter Motorized Use). In accordance with our responsibilities under Section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act (CAA), the EPA has reviewed and rated this Draft SEIS.

### **Project Background**

In an August 27, 2015 Order, the U.S. District Court for the District of Montana directed the Forest Service to disclose its analysis of impacts of snowmobiles on big game wildlife, apply the minimization criteria of the 2005 Travel Management Rule, and update the Revised Forest Plan as appropriate. The purpose of this Draft SEIS is to evaluate and disclose the potential impacts from over snow vehicle (OSV) use on big game wildlife and the resources cited in the minimization criteria.

### **Comments and Recommendations**

#### *Effects to Big Game Wildlife*

The EPA recommends that the impact analysis of OSV use in the BDNF be expanded to more fully relate current and expected future conditions to management goals for big game. While management objectives and current population numbers were provided for elk, goals were not provided for any other species analyzed in the SEIS. Except for the elk populations, which exceed the stated objectives, it is unclear what the current species population numbers reflect in terms of species health. For instance, we located bighorn sheep population objectives in the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' (MFWP) 2010 Bighorn Sheep Conservation Strategy. The only BDNF landscape meeting those population objectives is the landscape with no snowmobile use, the Madison Landscape. Therefore, we recommend that available objectives or estimates of healthy population numbers, and a statement on whether those objectives are being met, be included in the impact analysis for each of the wildlife species evaluated in the SEIS. Additionally, it would be useful to evaluate whether winter ranges and/or denning habitat for any species analyzed may currently be limited due to snowmobile use.

We also recommend that the alternatives analysis more clearly define direct and indirect effects to the ecological resources being analyzed and the methods or measures used to evaluate the effects. The Draft SEIS includes two indicators that were evaluated in order to analyze effects to big game wildlife: (1) Acres/location of winter range open and closed to motorized winter recreation, and (2) Potential for disturbance from motorized recreation (OSVs). The first indicator is the management decision being considered that could have effects on big game wildlife. The second indicator is the main effect to big game wildlife that could result from the management decisions being evaluated, but the method or metric for assessing the potential for disturbance in the SEIS is unclear. While potential disturbance is described in terms such as “likely” and “unlikely,” it is not always clear how these conclusions were made. In various places, the Draft SEIS states that:

- no winter range areas have been affected by winter motorized travel,
- OSV use has not been identified as an issue for populations of individual species, or
- no declines in a population due to OSV use have been identified.

We recommend that the NEPA document describe the Forest Service’s analytical approach in making these determinations. In some sections, the reader is referred to MFWP reports or informed that MFWP biologists were queried on the matter, but in other sections, there are no references. Understanding the Forest Service’s analytical methods is especially important where population numbers for a species are not available, there are state-wide or regional declines that have been documented (e.g., in the case of moose), or where there is disturbance in some of the winter range. Where possible, having a systematic protocol for analyzing effects allows for more consistent analysis of alternatives and resources. This helps the reader understand the impacts and compare alternatives with respect to their environmental impacts.

The Draft SEIS states that estimated elk numbers on the BDNF have increased, which is relied upon as evidence that snowmobile use is not having adverse effects on the resident elk population. However, based upon the estimated population numbers provided for other big game wildlife on the BDNF, as well as related references, antelope numbers decreased between 2011 and 2014 by 24.3%, white-tailed deer numbers in 2014 were below the 10 year average by 16.4%, statewide decreases in moose have been indicated, and bighorn sheep are not meeting population objectives except in the hunting districts with no snowmobile use. In the cases where there is disturbance in a species’ winter range, it may be useful to make detailed comparisons between the alternatives in terms of observed disturbance. We recommend the Final EIS describe the available information on disturbance in each landscape, the effect of that disturbance, and whether there are specific areas where disturbance is more evident or the consequences have been greater. Such information could be helpful in evaluating the effects of each alternative.

#### *Application of Minimization Criteria*

The 2005 Travel Management Rule directs Forest Service officials, in designating National Forest System trails and areas on National Forest System lands, to consider effects on the following with the objective of minimizing:

- 1) Damage to soil, watershed, vegetation, and other forest resources;
- 2) Harassment of wildlife and significant disruption of wildlife habitats;
- 3) Conflicts between motor vehicle use and existing or proposed recreations uses of National Forest System lands or neighboring Federal lands; and

- 4) Conflicts among different classes of motor vehicle uses of National Forest System lands or neighboring Federal lands.

The Draft SEIS indicates there is little evidence of effects from OSV use on forest resources, including but not limited to soil, watershed, and vegetation resources. Further, it is stated that “No specialists on the Forest have observed impacts to soil and vegetation from OSV use during low snow conditions where the impacts did not fully rehabilitate the following growing season.” However, in the 2009 Final EIS, we note an apparent contradiction that we recommend be clarified in the Final SEIS:

**Topic 4: Recreation and Travel Management.** Technology and popularity of motorized recreational vehicles, particularly winter recreation, has increased. For much of the forest, this use has evolved over time rather than evolved with management. This has resulted in resource damage, wildlife conflict, and conflicts between user groups.

If there has been documented resource damage, it would be helpful to note whether the impacts are due to distance between winter motorized routes/areas and streams, sensitivity of existing soils or vegetation to disturbance, sediment loading to streams, or other factors. This information will help determine opportunities to mitigate or avoid the impacts and inform a better decision.

#### *Monitoring and Mitigation*

OSV use has increased significantly over the last 15 years and the SEIS predicts that use will continue to increase. New technology allows snowmobiles to access areas further into the forest than they could historically. As use intensity increases and technology evolves, it will be important to assure that unanticipated impacts are noted and quickly addressed. High elevation, shallow-soil ecosystems are particularly sensitive to disturbance and they are slow to restore due to the short growing season. Additionally, as snowmobiles become more powerful, their pollution and noise emissions generally increase, and with concentrated use, local air quality and the natural soundscape may also become impacted. Therefore, we recommend that the Final SEIS establish a monitoring and adaptive management plan for sustaining or improving winter season environmental conditions (e.g., for alpine vegetation, air quality, wildlife disturbance, and wilderness character).

As part of the adaptive management plan, we recommend establishing specific management decision points based upon minimum desired environmental conditions (thresholds) in the BDNF, and providing an explanation of how the Forest Service selected the thresholds. We also recommend including a commitment to management actions if monitoring indicates an impact has exceeded a threshold. For example, the adaptive management plan may include patrolling or installing signs at heavily used trailheads to encourage users to limit OSV idling. We also recommend that the BDNF consider development of an inspection and enforcement strategy or program to assure that snowmobiles are abiding by motorized vehicle access limitations and avoiding to damage aquatic and terrestrial resources. This program could be similar to what is being carried out on Mount Jefferson. Finally, we encourage the Forest Service to involve the public and interested stakeholders to continually evaluate the effectiveness of the adaptive management plan and resource protection improvements.

We support Forest Service policies that prohibit off-trail snowmobile use until at least six inches of snow has accumulated. Snow in higher elevation areas is susceptible to wind movement which can leave bare or thinly covered areas that would be difficult or impossible to avoid given the speed of snowmobiles. We suggest the BDNF consider defining specific conditions under which areas would be closed due to thin snow conditions or unique wildlife hibernation or movement patterns.

## Conclusion and Rating

Pursuant to EPA policy and guidance, the EPA rates the environmental impact of federal agency actions and adequacy of the NEPA analysis. The EPA rates the Forest Service's preferred alternative, Alternative 6 Modified, as "EC-2" (Environmental Concerns-Insufficient Information). The "EC" rating means that the EPA's review has identified potential impacts that can be avoided in order to fully protect the environment. The "2" rating means that the Draft SEIS does not contain sufficient information to fully assess environmental impacts. We recommend that the identified additional information, data, analyses, or discussion be included in the Final SEIS. A full description of the EPA's rating system can be found at: <http://www2.epa.gov/nepa/environmental-impact-statement-rating-system-criteria>.

We appreciate the opportunity to review this project and hope our recommendations help the Forest Service when finalizing the SEIS. If you have any questions, please contact me at 303-312-6704, or Dr. Melissa McCoy of my staff at 303-312-6155 or [mccoy.melissa@epa.gov](mailto:mccoy.melissa@epa.gov).

Sincerely,



for

Philip S. Strobel  
Director, NEPA Compliance and Review Program  
Office of Ecosystems Protection and Remediation

