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Two Cents Worth: Environmental heavyweight renews road closure battle

Centers for Biological Diversity joins Nevada Wilderness Project this time around

The battle over road closures to outdoor recreation in our area is heating up again, and this time an environmental heavyweight has entered the fray.

This time around, wilderness is not the battleground source. It's something called a U.S. Forest Service Travel Management Plan (TMP) for the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest (within the Bridgeport Ranger District).

And, in addition to the Nevada Wilderness Project (which spearheaded the expanded wilderness proposal in Lyon and Mineral Counties last year), an outfit called the Center for Biological Diversity has weighed in with opposition to proposed action in the USFS scoping document.

The Center brags of a membership of 200,000 and on-line activists throughout Nevada and the United States. And, yes, the local Friends of Wovoka's is included (just check out its blog).

The Forest Service, in December, 2008, conducted public meetings in Hawthorne, Bridgeport and Smith Valley to glean public input on its TMP; and a scoping document was the result of part of the public involvement process.

The TMP addresses motorized travel in the 1.2 million acre Bridgeport Ranger District, and it requires designation of those roads, trails and areas that are open to motor vehicle use in National Forests.

The scoping document states that the Bridgeport Ranger District "currently manages about 1,500 miles of motor vehicle routes for public use. Motor vehicles will continue to be welcome on these roads and trails. The proposed action would recognize and adopt an additional 300 miles of existing informal (user-created) roads and trails."

So, the USFS actually listened to the public input. It has said it has found some "unauthorized routes are well-sited, provide excellent opportunities for outdoor recreation by motorized and non-motorized users, and would enhance the National Forest system of designated roads, trails and areas."

The report adds, "Routine route closures are not within the scope of this project."

The Center for Biological Diversity (which says it has successfully led statewide campaigns to designate more than 2.5 million acres as wilderness, with another 500,000 acres of National Conservation Areas since 1999) and the Nevada Wilderness Project recently put the Bridgeport Ranger District on notice (via letter) with comments on the Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (NOI).

The proposed Wovoka Wilderness site was specifically mentioned, and the environmental groups assert that the Forest Service proposal "unnecessarily rewards past illegal off-road vehicle use to the detriment of wildlife." They also ask how the agency intends to maintain and manage another 300 miles of roads when it lacks the manpower and resources to do so with existing approved roads and

trails.

The letter charges that the scoping document is "woefully inadequate" and additionally charges that many of the 300 miles of user-created roads and trails proposed for addition to the TMP are "renegade routes" which are "intrusive into Inventoried Roadless Areas and even the proposed Wovoka Wilderness area. Additionally, many routes penetrate into seclusion areas for big horn sheep and critical mule deer winter habitats. Many threatened springs, seeps, and riparian areas and some threaten imperiled plants."

The Center and NWP include a table for roads and routes that they feel should be evaluated for closure to motorized vehicles.

So what does all this mean?

We were alerted that the non-action taken by our Congressional delegation, which decided not to force wilderness designations down our throats and agreed no such action would be taken without "local" generation and support, would not be the end of this public access battle.

Now you can see how the next approach is going to be made.

You can just see the Nevada Wilderness Project licking its wounds, getting a transfusion from the big boys, and laughing at we peon residents, saying, "We know what's best for you. If we can't get what we want one way, we'll keep coming back with other ideas until we do--no matter what the public might say!"

Then, you wonder where the animosity comes from?

--Jim Sanford is a longtime Yerington/Mason Valley resident and the former Editor and Publisher of the Mason Valley News.
