

Bridgeport Ranger District sued to close motorized routes

BY ANDY GEISEL
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The Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) filed a lawsuit on Oct. 20 in Federal District Court challenging the recently adopted Travel Management Plan (TMP) for the Bridgeport Ranger District (BRD). The action alleges the BRD violated the National Environmental Policy Act, the National Forest Management Act, the Administrative Procedure Act, two Presidential Executive Orders and certain implementing regulations.

According to the CBD, the lawsuit directly takes on the U.S. Forest Service's decision to allow off-road vehicles in sensitive areas in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest along the California-Nevada border. In March, the agency designated 220 miles of new motorized routes, including routes for SUVs, ATVs and motorcycles in the forest's Bridgeport Ranger District.

In the suit, the CBD is petitioning the court to declare that the BRD violated various laws, orders and procedures and to declare the Final Environmental Impact Statement

(FEIS) and the Record of Decision (ROD) to be invalid, essentially ordering the BRD to start over. Also as part of the litigation, the CBD wants the court to order the Ranger District to immediately close all 220 miles of newly added routes and any other routes the CBD specifically requests be closed during the court proceedings. Lastly, the CBD wants the court to award the organization its costs, attorney fees and other relief the court deems appropriate.

"The newly designated routes cross key habitat areas for federally protected Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep and Lahontan cutthroat trout, as well as habitat for pine marten and many other species," the CBD said in a press statement. "The routes include 11 new miles in sage-grouse nesting habitat and 79 new miles adjacent to streams. The Forest Service admits off-road vehicles can hurt wildlife by disrupting behavior, crushing animals, tearing up habitat and impairing water quality for fish and frogs."

"We cannot allow the Forest Service to ignore its responsibilities to protect rare and imperiled species and their habitats," said Rob

Mrowka, the Center's Nevada-based ecologist. "The streams, meadows, lambing and nesting areas, and other places without roads are critical for the conservation of these species."

The outcome of this, and similar lawsuits filed by the CBD in recent months, would likely have the potential to close much of BRD land to motorized use. The Coalition for Public Access (CPA) disputed the CBD lawsuit, saying it has "had communication with the Blue Ribbon Coalition, a national non-profit organization dedicated to protecting responsible recreational access to public lands and of which we are a member organization, to seek their advice and assistance, and ensure the U.S. Forest Service vigorously defends the Travel Management Plan and Record of Decision." The CPA further said that while it doesn't agree with all provisions of the ROD, it does think that the Environmental Impact Analysis was completed with "relative fairness to competing interests" and that the Travel Plan "attempted to strike a balance between motorized and non-motorized use of the forest."

The CBD said such motorized areas were thought to be protected from new roads under the Clinton administration, and criticized the protection afforded under the Obama administration as "only haphazard." With the addition of the 220 miles of new motorized routes, the total miles of routes opened to vehicle traffic on the Bridgeport Ranger District amounts to 1,510 miles, which the CBD posited is greater than the driving distance across the United States between the Mexican and Canadian borders.