

ELKO DAILY FREE PRESS

Group concerned about species, damage to land

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-Julie Wootton

Editor's note: This is the third in a series of stories about the U.S. Forest Service's Travel Management Plan.

ELKO — The Center for Biological Diversity isn't opposed to off-road travel in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, but wants to make sure users aren't causing environmental damage.

Rob Mrowka, an ecologist and conservation advocate for the center, said during an interview with the Free Press that the center is concerned with how routes created by motor vehicle users are affecting habitats and watersheds.

"We are not opposed to off-road recreational vehicles, but we're concerned about user-created routes in the wrong places causing environmental damage," he said.

Mrowka, who is based in Las Vegas, said he's responsible for issues across Nevada through the Center for Biological Diversity. He spent 28 years as a Forest Service employee in Utah's Fishlake National Forest, including as forest supervisor, and also was the manager of the Clark County Environmental Planning Division.

The Center for Biological Diversity addresses issues both nationwide and worldwide, according to the organization's website.

Nevada's office opened in February 2008 and has been involved with Travel Management Plans in



Submitted - Mrowka

the Ely, Austin/Tonopah and Bridgeport ranger districts. The Forest Service has issued a Record of Decision for each of those districts.

The center submitted comments during the public scoping period prior to the release of the draft EIS for the Mountain City, Ruby Mountains and Jarbidge ranger districts, Mrowka said.

"We identified species, streams and meadows of concern," he said.

Since the draft EIS was released, the center worked to collect data in order to submit comments.

"We're concerned about the sheer magnitude of routes that would be added," Mrowka said.

Under the Forest Service's third alternative in the draft EIS, about 1,103 miles of routes would be open to motor vehicle use.

"That's a lot of routes that are open to motor vehicle use," Mrowka said.

He said the center is asking whether those routes are truly necessary.

"We aren't opposed to motor vehicle recreation," Mrowka said, but added that uses of forest areas need to be well balanced.

The Center for Biological Diversity, in addition to Elko County Commissioners and several elected state officials, asked for the first six-month extension of the public comment on the draft EIS.

Mrowka said the center wanted more time to conduct field work in the Elko area. He said he spent time in the Ruby Mountains this summer looking at proposed routes and "documenting problem areas."

The organization also hired someone to go out and look at routes.

The center is concerned about riparian species in the area, including cutthroat trout, bull trout, the Columbia spotted frog and a number of plant species.

"We have a lot of concerns about the impacts on water," he said, adding that motorized vehicles often cross streams at a steep angle, causing sediment to be delivered into a stream.

Mrowka said motorized vehicles create impacts to wet meadows where sensitive species live.

In addition, he said motorized vehicle use impacts opportunities for quiet recreation and a good hunting experience.

"We are also concerned about the quality of the hunt," Mrowka said. "It appears to us that a lot of routes are seasonal use routes."

If users have created routes into roadless areas to retrieve big game, such as elk and deer, it's a concern shared by some environmental groups, he said.

Mrowka said there are about 950 miles of user-created trails within the Mountain City, Ruby Mountains and Jarbidge ranger districts. Trails should be looked at to determine which ones are redundant, he said.

Roads that "make sense and are well situated" should be added to Forest Service maps and should be designated as open to motor vehicle use, he said.