

Forest Service skips a chance to do things right

SARAH PETERS, HIGH COUNTRY NEWS MONDAY, 12 JANUARY 2009

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If you're like me and can't keep up with the Bush administration's last-minute policy changes, you might have failed to notice a recent announcement by the U.S. Forest Service. In its rush to tie up loose ends, the Forest Service is hammering out new internal agency guidance documents, called "directives."

These directives guide the management of both the agency's overburdened transportation system and its network of recreational trails. But what the agency is attempting to do now will leave us with a lopsided playing field when it comes to quiet recreation. Managing our national forests is no easy task, and at best it is a balancing act among many competing interests. In the countdown to the end of the Bush administration, any attempt at achieving true balance appears to have been abandoned.

In its Dec. 9 final Travel Management Directives, which go into effect Jan. 8, 2009, the Forest Service ignores the goals of its 2005 Travel Management Rules, which were supposed to identify and put into place a minimum transportation system. A real analysis would have asked where access was needed for management and recreation and noted where resource damage was occurring, and it would have identified any roads and motorized routes that were poorly designed or under-maintained. Moreover, the 2005 rule required the Forest Service to decide whether to keep a road or motorized route or abolish it and take it off the map.

Unfortunately, the final directives also contained loopholes to this requirement, and most forest managers have taken advantage of them. They've rushed to complete the process as quickly as possible without answering any of the basic questions, leaving them once again flying blind as they try to manage their growing network of roads. Without study and analysis, forest managers lack the information necessary to make informed decisions. The draft directives on travel management procedures that were published for public comment in March 2007 provided better guidance than the final directives. Apparently, it took the Forest Service 21 months to figure out how to wiggle its way out of the commitments to sound management it almost made in its draft directives.

As for trails, a separate guidance document called the Trails Classification Directives -- issued in an interim final form in mid-October after more than two years of delay -- start out by setting a good tone for future management. They offer firm guidelines for trail maintenance and construction, but sidestep recreational planning by creating a confusing and subjective process for determining how trails should be classified.

For example, how does the Forest Service determine whether a trail is open to everybody -- from hikers and people on horseback to drivers of all-terrain vehicles -- or limited only to certain kinds of users? You might assume that the agency would involve the public in important decisions like these, but you would be wrong. The agency has adopted no official system at all. In some cases, it uses a previously existing analysis; in others, it asks agency old-timers to recall what kind of use was originally intended for the trail in question. Then, without further analysis or any public involvement, the agency assigns a use for the trail and maintains it accordingly. If trail users don't agree with that assessment, they just have to speak up and try to get it changed after the fact.

This isn't planning; it's winging it. The Forest Service is hiding from public involvement and refusing to take a comprehensive look at both recreation and the travel system.

The Forest Service needs to understand what's happening on the ground; it needs to know who's using its network of roads, motorized routes and recreational trails as a whole, and determine what parts of it are truly needed, what uses are appropriate, and which roads, trails or uses may be causing too much resource damage or too many recreational conflicts.

Sidestepping these contentious issues in a last-ditch effort to lock in a one-sided policy does a disservice both to our national forests and to those of us who love these special areas and visit them often. If you're curious about how the new trails classification directives might affect you, call or visit your local ranger district office. What you discover might be surprising.

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