

BEHIND THE GREEN DOOR

Land sacrifice in the Applegate

*Applegate
Jan Feb 06*

BY CHRIS BRATT

How do you like the idea of having an ever increasing number of motorcycles, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and other off-highway vehicles (OHVs) having easy access to thousands of Applegate Valley acres to "recreate?" Well, like it or not, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is intent on moving forward with their OHV Plan to permanently establish a vast OHV playground here in our backyard.

This scheme, called the Timber Mountain/ John's Peak OHV Management Plan (OHV Plan), spirals far beyond the confines of Timber Mountain and John's Peak just west of Jacksonville. The OHV Plan will provide a designated destination playground for OHV enthusiasts on a minimum of 16,250 acres of public land and afford access to thousands of additional public and private land acres. The OHV Plan includes roads that lead all the way to Grants Pass along the northern ridges of the Applegate Valley.

The BLM got off to a bad start when they proposed this OHV Plan more than ten years ago in their 1994 Resource Management Plan (RMP). The following paragraph shows the extent of BLM's remarks in their RMP document: "Three areas, Ferris Gulch (2,200 acres), Timber Mountain/John's Peak (16,250 acres) and Quartz Creek (7,120 acres) will be managed to provide for OHV use. All three areas will be "limited to existing roads and designated trails."

The accompanying Recreation Map #9 for the RMP does not even list these three OHV areas nor does it locate any OHV areas on the map. BLM designated these three OHV areas in their RMP with virtually no public participation in the planning process, no available onsite data and incomplete information about exactly where these areas were located.

Prior to their RMP decision, the BLM did not do the required analysis to determine whether their OHV Plan would be in serious conflict with local communities and landowners surrounding the proposed project. Neither did the BLM do the required surveys of the lands within their OHV Plan Area to determine the extent of OHV damage that had already occurred from decades of extensive, illegal trail building (an OHV damage assessment in the use area is still not available from BLM). BLM also failed to consider, prior to their RMP designation of 16,200 acres, the extent of future adverse environmental impacts as a result of their contemplated dramatic increase in OHV use in the area or the staff and money available for area rehabilitation, law enforcement,

education programs, etc.

BLM has failed to fully assess these and other problems prior to designating these 16,250 fragmented and scattered public land acres for long term OHV use. This failure has exacerbated the conflicts between the BLM, local Motorcycle Riders Association, affected communities, environmental groups and concerned area landowners. In addition, during the past few decades, BLM has not shown the willingness or ability to control or limit OHV use as required to "existing roads and trails" on the lands they manage in the OHV Plan Area. What the BLM has allowed to happen in the OHV Plan

There are two other significant unresolved matters that BLM has refused to consider thus far in their OHV Plan. One is the ongoing timber sale programs of both the BLM and the industrial forestland holders within and adjacent to the OHV Plan Area. These timber sale programs continue to open up forestlands and build roadways providing additional access for OHVs. This logging and road building will continue to expand the roads

... a 900-signature petition from concerned Jacksonville residents about OHV ...

and trails within and outside the OHV Plan Area. BLM has not considered these problems with their added environmental concerns either in their timber sale planning documents or their OHV Plan thus far.

The second significant unresolved matter that the BLM must consider is the City of Jacksonville's recent decision not to sell their 1800-acre watershed area to the local Motorcycle Riders Association. This decision and a 900-signature petition from concerned

the concerned residents of both the Applegate and Rogue River watersheds will respond to BLM's OHV Plan when the details of the Plan are known. I believe there will be widespread opposition to the present OHV Plan when it is presented in the winter/spring of 2006.

The BLM's stated purpose for developing this OHV Plan "is to better manage this OHV use." But how can BLM possibly better manage this OHV use when it was clear that their

plan contained virtually no public participation in the original designation process, no information as to where these OHV

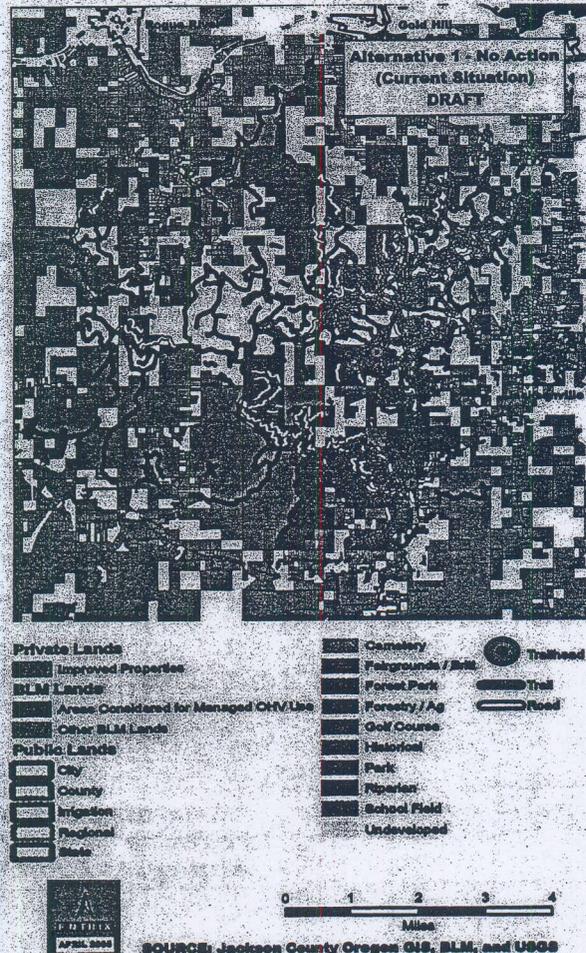
Areas would specifically be located and no available on site data revealing the extent and nature of OHV problems. It is also clear that the BLM has made an arbitrary decision to push ahead in this indefinite OHV consideration area of 16,250 acres with their present, ill-fated OHV Plan. It is not incumbent on the BLM to reestablish or sanction the illegally built OHV trails even in this area with heavy historical OHV use. Neither has the BLM the right to include thousands of private land acres within the boundary of their OHV Plan. Better management of OHV use will not take place under these unresolved conditions affecting this proposed OHV Plan. A better purpose for developing an OHV Plan would be to reform the way we designate and establish OHV areas on public lands.

We presently have the opportunity to reform all of BLM's OHV Area designations. The solution to the problems we face in the OHV Plan can be addressed in BLM's Western Oregon Plan revision process. This RMP Plan revision will consider BLM land use designations of "open," "closed," or "limited" ORV use for all lands in the Medford District.

It is essential to hold off any decisions about the Timber Mountain/ John's Peak ORV Management Plan until these new ORV land-use designations are recommended and considered by the BLM and the public. We don't have to sacrifice all this land to OHVs. Are you "open" to a change?

Let me know.

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Area and throughout the Medford District by not banning or containing illegal OHV use is unlawful. It would be kind to say BLM's commitment and follow-through to their required procedures outlined in their Management Plans and Executive Orders has been missing or unreasonably delayed.

Jacksonville residents about OHV use may prevent OHV users from crossing the city's land and will further fragment BLM's OHV Plan and necessitate additional planning and management decisions. The 900-signature petition drive to block the Motorcycle Riders Association is also an indication of how

Destroying the National Parks

Most of us think of America's national parks as everlasting places, parts of the bedrock of how we know our own country. But they are shaped and protected by an underlying body of legislation, which is distilled into a basic policy document that governs their operation. Over time, that document has slowly evolved, but it has always stayed true to the fundamental principle of leaving the parks unimpaired for future generations. That has meant, in part, sacrificing some of the ways we might use the parks today in order to protect them for tomorrow.

Recently, a secret draft revision of the national park system's basic management policy document has been circulating within the Interior Department. It was prepared, without consultation within the National Park Service, by Paul Hoffman, a deputy assistant secretary at Interior who once ran the Chamber of Commerce in Cody, Wyo., was a Congressional aide to Dick Cheney and has no park service experience.

Within national park circles, this rewrite of park rules has been met with profound dismay, for it essentially undermines the protected status of the national parks. The document makes it perfectly clear that this rewrite was not prompted by a compelling change in the park system's circumstances. It was prompted by a change in political circumstances — the opportunity to craft a vision of the national parks that suits the Bush administration.

Some of Mr. Hoffman's changes are trivial, although even apparently subtle changes in wording — from "protect" to "conserve," for instance — soften the standard used to judge the environmental effects of park policy.

But there is nothing subtle about the main thrust of this rewrite. It is a frontal attack on the idea of "impairment." According to the act that established the national parks, preventing impairment of park resources — including the landscape, wildlife and such intangibles as the soundscape of Yellowstone, for instance — is the law's "fundamental purpose." In Mr. Hoffman's world, it is now merely one of the purposes.

Mr. Hoffman's rewrite would open up nearly every park in the nation to off-road vehicles, snowmobiles and Jet Skis. According to his revision, the use of such vehicles would become one of the parks' purposes. To accommodate such activities, he redefines impairment to mean an irreversible impact. To prove that an activity is impairing the park, under Mr. Hoffman's rules, you would have to prove

that it is doing so irreversibly — a very high standard of proof. This would have a genuinely erosive effect on the standards used to protect the national parks.

The pattern prevails throughout this 194-page document — easing the rules that limit how visitors use the parks and toughening the standard of proof needed to block those uses. Behind this pattern, too, there is a fundamental shift in how the parks are regarded. If the laws establishing the national park system were fundamentally forward-looking — if their mission, first and foremost, was protecting the parks for the future — Mr. Hoffman's revisions place a new, unwelcome and unnecessary emphasis on the present, on what he calls "opportunities for visitors to use and enjoy their parks."

There is no question that we go to national parks to use and enjoy them. But part of the enjoyment of being in a place like Yosemite or the Grand Canyon is knowing that no matter how much it changes in the natural processes of time, it will continue to exist substantially unchanged.

There are other issues too. Mr. Hoffman would explicitly allow the sale of religious merchandise, and he removes any reference to evolution or evolutionary processes. He does everything possible to strip away a scientific basis for park management. His rules would essentially require park superintendents to subordinate the management of their parks to local and state agendas. He also envisions a much wider range of commercial activity within the parks.

In short, this is not a policy for protecting the parks. It is a policy for destroying them.

The Interior Department has already begun to distance itself from this rewrite, which it kept hidden from park service employees. But what Mr. Hoffman has given us is a road map of what could happen to the parks if Mr. Bush's political appointees are allowed to have their way.

It is clear by now that Mr. Bush has no real intention of living up to his campaign promise to fully finance the national parks. This document offers a vivid picture of the divide between the National Park Service, whose career employees remain committed to the fundamental purpose of leaving the parks unimpaired, and an Interior Department whose political appointees seem willing to alter them beyond recognition, partly in the service of commercial objectives.

Suddenly, many things — like the administration's efforts to force snowmobiles back into Yellowstone — seem very easy to explain.

4-11-05

Cut an illegal path in the forest

U.S. Forest Service rangers see a new 'pioneer mentality' on public lands

By **MATTHEW DALY**
The Associated Press

MOUNT HOOD NATIONAL FOREST—Sliding down a rocky dirt path, Forest Service ranger Kevin Slagle struggles to keep his balance.

The crudely cut trail in the Mount Hood National Forest not only is treacherous, but is eroding the land and hurting native trout and other species, Slagle says.

It's also against the law.

The pathway, in the Gibson Prairie area in the forest's northeast section, is one of a growing number of illegal trails scarring public lands throughout the West.

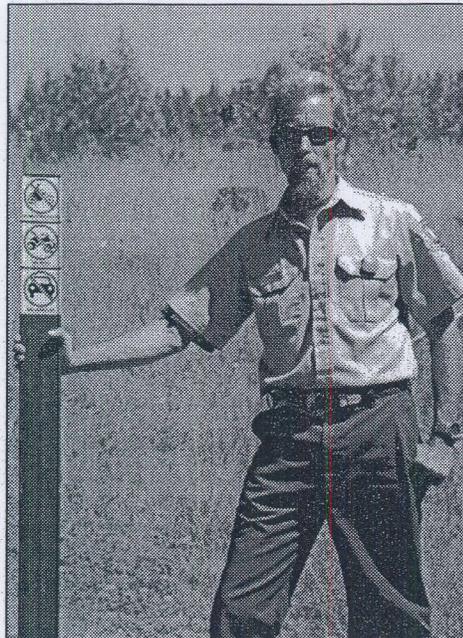
"It's a new pioneer mentality," said Slagle, recreation manager for the Hood River ranger district.

Those who cut the trail—most likely dirt bikers looking for a new thrill on the heavily used forest—"feel they have the right to do it," he said. "Some of them think they are providing a public service."

Forest officials sharply disagree.

Frustrated by the sprawl of illegal trails, the Forest Service has issued a two-year ban for all off-road use of dirt bikes or other motorized vehicles in the Gibson Prairie area. The order covers about 11,000 acres in the northeastern part of Mount Hood, where officials estimate at least 30 miles of illegal trails have been carved since last year.

"It's been an organized effort," Slagle said. "Somebody has gone in there and mapped out a trail system, flagged it on the ground and cut it from the inside out."



Forest Service recreation manager for the Hood River ranger district, poses beside a sign that shows that motorized vehicles are prohibited. Frustrated by the sprawl of illegal trails, the Forest Service has issued a two-year ban for all off-road use of dirt bikes or other motorized vehicles in the Gibson Prairie area.

AP

Similar illegal trails have sprouted in public forests nationwide and become a focus of contention from California to Pennsylvania.

Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth calls unmanaged recreation one of the four major threats facing the Forest Service, along with wildfires, invasive species and loss of open space.

Last year, Bosworth proposed a draft national policy that would restrict all-terrain vehicles, motorized trail bikes and other off-road motor vehicles to designated roads and trails in all 155 national forests and 20 grasslands.

The plan, to be completed this fall, comes as use of off-road vehicles reaches new heights. In the past three decades, the number of off-road vehicle users has increased sevenfold to about 36 million, causing conflicts with other users such as hikers, horseback riders and the growing number of homeowners who live near national forests.

The Blue Ribbon Coalition, an

Idaho-based group that advocates motorized recreation, said most off-roaders are responsible and are being unfairly singled out.

The group wants to ensure that most trails and open areas now used by all-terrain vehicles remain accessible to riders.

"We're committed to working with the agency in a fair and balanced way, but we certainly are not going to put up with trail closures without due process," said Don Amador, the group's Western representative.

Amador called the Gibson Prairie closing arbitrary and said it was unfair that Forest Service officials blamed dirt bikers. Two other Forest Service officials who recently toured Mount Hood with a reporter also identified off-roaders as the most likely culprits.

In truth, Amador said, officials don't know who carved the trail, which stretches for several hundred yards in an area a short walk from a paved road.

The trail's existence "reflects poorly on the management of the area by the Forest Service."

Amador said. "The fact is, they are not out aggressively signing those roads and trails they want people to use."

The whole issue of unmanaged recreation "is not just a user problem, but an agency problem which has not been doing its job," Amador said.