
Forest travel plan eyes 1,500 miles of closures

Final draft designates where to walk, ride and drive

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ASPEN — About 1,500 miles of roads and trails will be open for motorized uses and nearly 2,100 miles of routes will be open to mountain bikes in the White River National Forest under a final draft travel management plan.

Nevertheless, U.S. Forest Service officials are braced for possible complaints over closures of about 1,500 miles of routes.

“There will be some changes for some users who are used to participating in a certain activity in a certain area,” says the plan’s introduction.

Once the plan is completed next year, it will define where people can walk, bike, drive, snowmobile and ski. “These routes, though not as numerous as the total amount that has been created on the landscape — either legally or user-created — will still provide for great opportunities and experiences,” the plan insists.

Routes that aren’t specifically designated for use will be “decommissioned” and the terrain rehabilitated. In some cases, the routes are old logging roads that aren’t official roads but still invite use. In other cases, they are “bandit” trails created by mountain bikers, dirt bikers or some other forest user.

The Forest Service didn’t have a breakdown for how many miles of closures are in the Aspen area.

The agency released its final draft travel management plan earlier this month and is accepting comments from the public through Jan. 6. User groups ranging from the Roaring Fork Mountain Biking Association to Wilderness Workshop to the Pitkin County commissioners are wading through the detailed plan to assess how it affects them so they can make comments.

The agency has tentatively planned public open house meetings in Aspen and El Jebel on Saturday, Dec. 13, to help the public understand the direction of the plan.

Details about those meetings will be released as they are completed. The final plan will be released next year.

Tim Lamb of the Aspen-Sopris Ranger District said a handful of proposed changes will likely grab the most attention in the Aspen area.

“There [are] those little pockets that people are concerned with,” he said.

One is the back of Aspen Mountain. District Ranger Irene Davidson announced earlier this year that snowmobiles won’t be allowed to travel off Pitkin County roads into the forest off Richmond Ridge. The preferred alternative in the travel management plan reflects that decision. The Aspen Skiing Co.’s Aspen Mountain Powder Tours will still be allowed to use snowcats to haul its customers on public lands it uses for the operation.

The decision eliminates the use of snowmobiles by backcountry skiers who use them to make laps in the powder. A citizens' group called Powder to the People is fighting the switch but it appears an uphill battle.

Davidson told the Pitkin County commissioners Tuesday that the permit for the Skico's powder tour business will be issued in a new way that allows the ranger district to keep funds locally and use them for enforcement of travel restrictions on snowmobiles. At least two Forest Service employees will patrol the area for two days per week, Davidson said. People who get busted driving snowmobiles in prohibited areas could be charged \$275.

The Forest Service and Aspen Skiing Co. are pondering whether a parking area known as the "marina" should be closed to overnight parking for snowmobiles. That area is south of the upper Silver Queen Gondola terminal. It's usually home to scores of snowmobiles during the winter. It may be switched to a day-use area only.

Despite the closing of terrain on the back of Aspen Mountain, Lamb said open travel by snowmobiles will still be allowed on 7,000 acres of the district, including parts of Kobey Park, Basalt Mountain, Four Mile Park, Hay Park and Lime Park.

Snowmobiles will be restricted to roadways along Independence Pass, Maroon Creek Road, Lincoln Creek and Pearl Pass/Montezuma roads.

Few changes are anticipated for mountain bikers, although one popular trail on Smuggler Mountain is designated for closure. The Lollipop route from the upper platform on land acquired from Wilk Wilkinson down to the Iowa Shaft was never a sanctioned trail, Lamb said. It was created by users. The Forest Service consulted with Pitkin County Trails and Open Space and decided to close the route and rehabilitate the terrain, Lamb said. Other routes created by mountain bikers over the years in the Smuggler Mountain, Hunter Creek and Four Corners areas have been officially recognized and approved for use in the travel management plan.

A trail from Buttermilk Ridge down to Government Trail will also be added to the system for mountain bikes, Lamb said.

Other changes include the opening of small trail sections to motorcycles at Red Canyon Trail, Sloan Cut-Off Trail and a single track adjacent to Red Rim Road.

Climber routes were added on the Capitol Peak and Pyramid Peak routes.

Route changes in the Aspen-Sopris District include the closure of 3 miles in Kobey Park to motorized uses. Three routes in the upper Fryingpan Valley will be changed from all uses to use for all-terrain vehicles, motorcycles, mountain bikes and non-mechanized uses.

The final draft travel management plan can be found online at www.fs.fed.us/r2/whiteriver/ then by clicking on the travel management link.

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<http://www.aspentimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20081119/NEWS/811189943/1058&title=Forest%20travel%20plan%20eyes%201,500%20miles%20of%20closures&template=printart>