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Summit County snowmobilers face changes in national forest

New travel management plan goes into effect next winter

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Editor's Note: Look for another story about the travel management plan's designated dirtbike, ATV and Jeep uses in the Dillon Ranger District in Wednesday's Summit Daily News.

Travel Management Plan resources

The Dillon Ranger District is providing a variety of resources for forest users to become familiar with the new travel management plan before full enforcement begins in May 2012 for the summer roads and trails and next winter for snow-oriented uses.

- TRAVEL MANAGEMENT MAPS are available for review at the Dillon Ranger District office and online
- SINGLE-PAGE RECREATION GUIDES help trail users understand the permitted uses and the correct trail path
- MOTOR VEHICLE USE MAPS are printed and available to pick up
- TRAVEL PORTAL KIOSKS at about a half dozen major entrances to the national forest – such as Tiger Road, Ute Pass and French Gulch – have information posted
- VOLUNTEER PATROLLERS are on the ground to educate trail users

The Forest Service's travel management plan, finalized in May, is now in its educational stage in which trail users must learn the roads and trails that are open, which are closed, and in what areas various uses are permitted. And there have been major changes for snowmobilers.

Forest Service Supervisor Scott Fitzwilliams decided it wouldn't be ideal to begin implementing the rules associated with the plan until May 2012 for the summer portion and sometime next fall for snow-related uses (it was scheduled for implementation starting Aug. 25). That means snowmobilers have about a year to learn the maps and begin altering their favorite routes if they conflict with the decision.

“People will get a good chance to know the decision,” Dillon Ranger District recreation staff officer Ken Waugh said.

Waugh said decisions on what to incorporate in the travel system were made based on their condition, whether the route was a duplicate, whether

the recreation uses needed multiple routes in one area (for example, on Quandary Peak), and the Forest Service's ability to maintain and patrol the trails with current resources.

“This is a system we feel we have the resources to maintain,” Waugh said.

One important change for snowmobilers to be aware of is a buffer zone near Elliot Ridge north of Silverthorne. The half-mile buffer is meant to eliminate the mistake of snowmobilers crossing into the Eagles Nest Wilderness. Signs will go up this winter when the snow begins to stay, and topography helps identify the area's boundaries, Waugh said. He said he hasn't heard many complaints about this change.

However, a controversial modification is Miner's Creek near Frisco. It will close because users didn't turn around when the road ended, Waugh said. Indiana and Pennsylvania gulches near Blue River will close for the same reason, he said.

“You can't go there because you didn't stop,” he said. “We could have kept it, but it would have been a huge management burden.”

Another change that could create feedback is removing snowmobiling from the Peru Creek branch of the Montezuma area.

“Cross-country skiers had no place to go to be away from snowmobilers,” Waugh said, adding that there's plenty of conflict between uses such as noise, odors, tracks and more.

“We needed to have some non-motorized opportunities in that area for residents and visitors,” he said.

Trails in the Forks of the Swan River used by Brian Holt of Good Times Adventures Snowmobiling and Dogsledding have been approved for incorporation into the plan. Nearby, snowmobiling is permitted on areas of the Golden Horseshoe, with some separated areas for other uses. Holt may begin working with the Forest Service to add to the area's approved system of trails, Waugh said.

Expanding the system

High Country Snowmobile Club appealed the travel management plan during the appeals period, saying the Forest Service didn't provide enough snowmobile opportunities, Waugh said.

"We didn't," he said simply. "We closed areas that used to be open."

However, there are many opportunities for adding trails to the system, whether it be summer or winter uses. For example, conversations are underway with the High Country Snowmobile Club to potentially become part of the volunteer patrol program to help confine trail users to their designated areas. That volunteer effort would help the Forest Service open areas that need heavy patrol and are sources of complaints from other users, such as Indiana and Pennsylvania gulches.

In many cases, trails were closed because all or part of them cross private property. One such set of trails are those that connect Baker's Tank Trail with Baldy Road. Their elimination can be addressed by citizens who want to take on the time and financial investment of evaluating them for inclusion.

That action comes with a price, though, Waugh said. Because the decision factored in the Forest Service's ability to care for its road and trail system, people who want to add trails will be required to help finance the NEPA process as well as continued maintenance on the desired trail.

"If it's important, you can put up the money," Waugh said. "Our resources are already committed to this system."

Waugh said there are already success stories, such as the Aspen Grove Trail. The Town of Breckenridge helped gain the easement where the trail below Boreas Pass cross private property, so it has been incorporated into the system.

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