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Recreation Management-- a change in thinking?

The Eldorado NF Travel Management planning process has caused me to reflect on the way the Forest Service has changed in regard to recreation management. So far, horsemen have dismissed the travel management planning process as something that only affects off road vehicles. It implications go way beyond that!

The Forest Service has been doing "Travel Plans" for years. The recent approach, however, is different. In years past, the approach has been to restrict motorized travel when there is a specific need to do so -- threatened or sensitive plant and animal species, protection of wildlife habitat, fragile soils, etc. Now the FS has determined that it must complete an 'effects analysis' to assure that the impact of motorized use can be sustained **before** making the areas available for use. We have heard the two strategies described as: "open except for closed" and "closed except for open." The differences have future implications far more significant than we would think at first glance.

In the first example, an area was 'open' *unless there was a specific reason* or problem that was occurring or had occurred that would necessitate closure. These 'closed' areas were determined to be 'unacceptable' for motorized use *through a site specific analysis*. We had the freedom to enjoy our public lands without the constraint of management regulation -- except in those areas that were being adversely impacted by too much or by inappropriate use.

In the second example, an area is 'closed' unless the agency has completed a specific effects analysis to determine that it can be managed to prevent unacceptable impact. The FS will not approve or authorize motorized travel on a route or in an area unless and until they have completed an effects analysis to determine that the area can 'sustain' the use without significantly impacting the human environment. We are confined to those areas where a regulatory agency has determined it is appropriate for us to be. And if the agency doesn't have the budget, staffing, or desire to do the analysis, as in much of the Eldorado NF, the area or route is unavailable.

The necessity to complete an 'analysis' has been the 'standard' for other resource activities for the better part of 40 years -- for example, the agency cannot authorize timber harvest until the appropriate analysis has been completed or authorize commercial livestock grazing without an allotment plan and analysis that assures that the use can be sustained without adverse impact. *To comply with NEPA, the agency cannot authorize an action or activity without first doing an effects analysis to determine that it doesn't have unacceptable impact to the human environment.*

In previous years, it simply hasn't been a priority to apply NEPA to dispersed recreational activities. That started to change under former Chief Bosworth. The Forest Service's Strategic Plan identified "Unmanaged Recreation" as one of the "four main threats to National Forest lands." **Think about the implications if the agency interprets "Unmanaged Recreation" as any activity that has not been approved through an appropriate NEPA and public involvement process!**

Relate this to what we've been seeing in recent years. Certainly the Travel Management Planning Process is the most obvious, but the agency wide process for Recreation Site Master Planning also fits into that "strategy." Unless the budget and resources is available to 'manage' the site in an acceptable manner -- either with appropriated budget, volunteers or by a concessionaire -- a site is proposed for closure.

At a Forest level, we are starting to see this thinking applied to trails. On the Shawnee National Forest, an analysis was completed to determine the levels of use that can be sustained, and unless the trails are 'hardened' to accommodate stock, recreational stock use is prohibited -- an action taken based on an analysis on the Hoosier National Forest which determined that stock use causes more impact than hiking. As a result of the analysis on the Hoosier Forest, the mileage of 'managed' trails was reduced from 600 miles to 258 miles and both bicycles and horses are prohibited except on designated trails. The latter amount was determined to be the mileage that the Forest was capable or willing to manage in a manner that they could determine would not result in unacceptable impact.

In an article that appeared in "Western Horseman" a Forest Service trails staffer on the Shawnee National Forest explained it this way "It's all about sustainability. [T]he USFS is caught between dwindling recreation budgets and a smaller workforce... Designating, designing and constructing sustainable trail system dollars and personnel available allows the USFS to provide a quality riding experience." So, if the Forest Service does not have the staffing and resources to assure that unacceptable impacts will not occur, stock use will be prohibited! **How much of the trail system on your local Forest is being managed to a standard that the agency could predict with a reasonable level of certainty would sustain current and future use levels without unacceptable impact?**

So far, many of us in the western states are dismissing actions on the Shawnee, Hoosier, Chattahoochie-Oconee as an 'eastern states problem.' That may be about to change! If the rumors are accurate (and I have confidence in the source), the Forest Service is about to embark on a Trails Master Planning Process similar to that which they did on developed recreation sites. This process will identify the trails which they feel they are capable of managing, and the standard they are capable of managing to, with existing budget resources. What is unsaid, at this point, is what they intend to do with the huge amount of the trail system that is not within their management capability, if trail management objectives (and managed uses) will be determined by budget availability, and how they intend to address 'off trail' use.

Scary, huh?

Continuing this line of thinking, what's next? Will we be able to camp in a previously unused backcountry site, or an existing site that hasn't specifically been determined to be acceptable? Or will all acceptable sites need to be determined acceptable and designated as open? How about grazing or tethering recreational stock, or off trail access for hunting and packing out of game, or simply to access a scenic view?

This may all seem a little far fetched at this time, but if we look at the trend, and if we look at what NEPA requires, it is just a matter of time. NEPA requires an analysis before the agency can 'approve' an action or activity! The agency has gotten away with not applying NEPA to recreational use simply because no-one has challenged them. High Sierra Hikers has challenged the agency in California based on the specific act of approving a commercial outfitter permit. When/if they make the case that commercial pack and saddle stock cause unacceptable damage, it is a simple step to assert that the agency is also knowingly allowing non-commercial pack and saddle stock use to cause unacceptable levels of impact, and insist, through the court if necessary, that the agency comply with NEPA.

We cannot ask the Forest Service to ignore its responsibility under NEPA, but we can insist that the experience that we desire is given equal and unbiased consideration in the decision process. **Are we prepared to address the challenge?**

Wildland recreation is a limited resource. It cannot *sustain* either over-use or over-management! It needs to be clearly defined, described and defended through management efforts designed to preserve *freedom of choice*.