

What's the future of e-bikes on Utah's public lands?

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ST. GEORGE — With several groups voicing concerns about protecting nonmotorized trails for hikers and equestrians, the Bureau of Land Management recently clarified how to manage electric bicycles on public lands.

[Instruction Memorandum 2023-051](#) clarifies how the agency will regulate this popular activity. The “e-bike rule” was published in November 2020 and is known as Increasing Recreational Opportunities Through the Use of Electric Bikes.

David J. Hercher, the public affairs specialist for the Kanab Field Office and the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, told St. George News the purpose of the memorandum is to ensure public safety and the protection of BLM-managed resources, while also helping facilitate one of many benefits public lands provide: outdoor recreation.

“This internal guidance spells out how Bureau of Land Management offices should regulate and accommodate e-bike usage to ensure consistent, safe and sustainable multiple use across the 245 million acres the bureau manages,” he said.

The agency manages both motorized and nonmotorized areas and trails, with nonmotorized areas “largely established to protect natural and cultural resources and to ensure that the public can find recreational opportunities free from off-road vehicle use.”

Currently, according to the BLM website, e-bikes are defined as off-road motorized vehicles. The memorandum states that the e-bike rule amended BLM's off-road vehicle regulations to include a definition for e-bikes and “created an authority by which authorized officers may allow e-bike use on trails where motorized vehicles are otherwise prohibited.” Class 1, 2, and 3 e-bikes were excluded from the definition of off-road vehicles.

“However, certain considerations warrant a cautious approach in the manner and situations where the rule is used,” it adds.

The e-bike rule authorizes the BLM to, under certain conditions, exempt e-bikes from the definition of an off-road vehicle and be treated the same as nonmotorized bicycles. According to a news release, the agency may allow e-bikes on trails, where off-road vehicle use is otherwise prohibited, “when the electric motor is not exclusively propelling the e-bike for an extended duration.”

Hercher added that the “e-bike guidance” protects recreation and non-recreational resources on BLM lands.

The Public Lands and Recreation Back Country Horsemen of America, one of many organizations commenting on BLM’s new guidance concerning the use of e-bikes on nonmotorized trails, said chance encounters with fast-moving bicycles is a concern for many equestrians.

“Equestrians often choose to avoid trails where there is a potential for encounters with fast-moving bicycles,” Randy Rasmussen, director for the horseman group, told St. George News.

“Our selection of trails is based, in large part, on safety concerns and the sometimes unpredictable response of our horses in the event of a surprise on-trail encounter,” Rasmussen said. “The use of e-bikes and their potential for travel at relatively high speeds elevate the potential for such surprise encounters.”

“While the use of e-bikes continues to grow in popularity, hikers, equestrians and others should not be forced to accept new risks associated with e-bike use on shared-use trails,” he said.

While e-bike usage has increased dramatically in recent years, he said the science on the impacts of their use on public lands, wildlife and others using these trails and landscapes is still emerging.

Hercher said the recent guidance requests BLM offices to work with National Conservation Lands and Community Partnerships Program leadership to implement the 2020 e-bike rule.

Specifically, the bureau states that district and field offices should “obtain concurrence before excluding e-bikes from the definition of an off-road vehicle or authorizing e-bikes on trails on which motorized vehicles are otherwise prohibited. This requirement will ensure we are using the best available science and data in our decision-making.”

As the new guidance in the Memorandum recognizes, this limitation “is intended to help keep speeds down and prevent riders from venturing too far into the backcountry, may be difficult to police on remote, nonmotorized trails.”

Another area the new guidance addresses is people with disabilities, whom Hercher said may request a reasonable modification to ride an e-bike on trails that are not open to e-bikes or other off-road vehicles. Granting such requests does not require the heightened oversight by BLM leadership required by the new guidance.

“One Bureau of Land Management priority is to work to ensure that all families, now and into the future, have equal opportunity to recreate on our public lands,” Hercher said. “E-bikes help meet this priority by expanding access to recreational opportunities, particularly those with limitations stemming from age, illness, ability, or fitness.”

An attorney for Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance said they support this new “cautious approach” in managing e-bikes, especially electric mountain bikes on public lands.

Judi Brawer, wildlands attorney for the alliance, said that conservationists and human-powered recreation user groups have long worked hard to get areas and trails designated as nonmotorized.

“Adding a new use, motorized mountain bikes, to already crowded trails necessitates the caution and further study provided for in this new guidance,” Brawer said in a news release.

In an email to St. George News, Mark Larabee, advocacy director for the Pacific Crest Trail Association, said e-bike users should have great places to ride. He said his group also supports the new guidelines.

“We welcome the Bureau of Land Management’s conclusions and hope that the agency dives deeper into the impacts of e-bikes on public lands and other

forms of recreation,” he said. “E-bike users should have great places to ride, and land managers must ensure that this new user group is brought into the mix thoughtfully.”

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