

**STATEMENT OF
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**Before the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Resources**

**Concerning Travel Management
on the
Targhee National Forest**

**Saturday, February 13, 1999
Rexburg, Idaho**

MADAM CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to be here with you today to discuss travel management on the Targhee National Forest.

The recent actions on the Targhee National Forest to close roads with earth berms within grizzly bear management units (BMUs) have generated considerable public interest. The Forest Service constructed these closures to meet requirements set forth in the US Fish and Wildlife Service biological opinion for the Revised Forest Plan and did so only after long intensive public involvement.

While addressing immediate needs in the BMUs, forest personnel continue to work on a travel management plan for the entire forest based on the Revised Forest Plan. The extensive forest road system constructed primarily to extract timber has served its purpose and is larger than what is feasible to safely maintain. Poorly located and maintained roads reduce water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, and soil stability. Through travel management planning, forest personnel are working to identify a safe maintainable road system that continues to provide access for a wide variety of activities such as recreation, grazing, and timber harvest while improving habitat conditions for grizzly bears, elk, and cutthroat trout.

I will summarize some key points regarding the Targhee travel management planning process and then would be happy to answer your questions.

Targhee Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan)

The Forest Service completed the Revised Forest Plan in April 1997 after 7 years of hard work and with extensive public involvement. The revision addressed the extensive road system the Targhee built in the 1970s and 1980s, much of which has served its purpose and is no longer needed for timber harvest. Therefore, the issue became how much of the road system should be maintained for other uses.

Because the public identified access as a major issue, the Forest Service developed a specific travel plan to accompany each of the seven alternatives considered in the Revised Forest Plan Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The Revised Forest Plan established motorized road and trail density standards for each management prescription area and also designated areas open for cross country motorized use.

Balancing motorized access and other key resource concerns, particularly wildlife and fish, was the major focus for the revision of the Targhee Forest Plan; to reach that balance, the Forest Service addressed these concerns:

- (1) The need to develop a comprehensive grizzly bear habitat management strategy in response to the settlement of a 1994 lawsuit regarding roading and logging in the grizzly bear recovery area;
- (2) The need to meet the Idaho Department of Fish and Game elk vulnerability goals by improving elk security and reducing vulnerability of mature bull elk;

(3) The need to improve water quality to reduce the likelihood the Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout would be listed as endangered species; and

(4) The desire to produce a travel management plan to provide a reasonable mix of motorized and non-motorized recreation opportunities while meeting the habitat needs of grizzly bears, elk, and other species.

Targhee Travel Plan Decision and Remand on Appeal

The Forest Supervisor signed the Record of Decision for the travel plan, implementing direction from the Revised Forest Plan, on August 15, 1997. Citizens for a User Friendly Forest (CUFF) and the Blue Ribbon Coalition (BRC) appealed the decision and the deciding officer partially remanded the decision to the Forest Supervisor in January 1998.

The remand directed the Supervisor:

to keep the Revised Forest Plan direction, including road density and cross country motorized use standards, that guide the travel plan;

to implement the winter travel plan;

to prepare a new analysis of roads and trails open to summer motorized access;

to address RS 2477 assertions made by several counties; and

to get more public involvement and analyze the site-specific effects of individual roads and trails.

After working with the counties on the RS 2477 issue and reviewing all comments regarding specific roads and trails, the Forest Supervisor released a new Travel Plan Draft EIS in late November, 1998. The supervisor analyzed four alternative networks of roads and trails open to summer motorized use. The Forest also held several public meetings and the comment period on the draft EIS was extended to March 5, 1999. The Forest Service expects to complete the final EIS and travel plan in June, 1999.

The preferred alternative in the forest travel management plan draft EIS would provide 1,672 miles of road and 536 miles of trails open to summer motorized use and 862 miles of trails to foot and horse travel. By the end of 1999, the forest would close a total of 939 miles of roads, 466 miles inside grizzly BMUs, of which 398 miles were closed in 1998, and 473 miles would be closed outside the BMUs.

While continuing to provide a good mix of recreation opportunities, the Forest also plans to improve management of the road system by:

- 1) reducing maintenance needs thus focusing its limited maintenance and reconstruction dollars on the higher priorities;
- 2) restoring soils and water quality that poorly located and maintained roads and trails cause;
- 3) providing secure habitat for recovery of the grizzly bear by implementing the travel plan in concert with other forest plan standards and guidelines;
- 4) restoring the habitat in cutthroat trout watersheds to help prevent listing under the Endangered Species Act;

5) providing flexibility to choose management options, such as timber sales, to meet vegetation objectives within the BMUs; and

6) meeting the elk vulnerability goals of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

Relation of Road Closures to the Biological Opinion on the Revised Forest Plan

Effective road closures in the grizzly bear recovery area relate directly to the Forest Plan Biological Opinion provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This requires the Forest Supervisor to achieve the Revised Forest Plan road density standards within the grizzly bear recovery area by the end of calendar year 1999.

To meet those goals, the following standards developed in accordance with the definitions in the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) Task Force Report on Grizzly Bear/Motorized Access Management apply to each BMU, except the developed area around Macks Inn in Grizzly Bear Management Situation 3:

- 1) no more than 0.6 miles of roads and trails will be open to motorized use per square mile of land in each BMU; and
- 2) the combination of open roads, trails, and restricted routes--such as gated roads-- may not be more than 1.0 mile per square mile.

Compliance with the second standard will require the Forest Service to effectively close some routes, not just gating them.

In the remand of the travel plan, the Forest Supervisor had the option to issue an interim closure order in the BMUs to comply with the density standards in the Revised Forest Plan and the time frames established by the Biological Opinion and did so on March 24, 1998. Last summer forest

personnel began to close roads, within the BMUs, necessary to comply with the biological opinion. To ensure that they complete the job by the end of the year. While the majority of these routes were already closed to motorized use by gates, gates alone do not assure that they will no longer be used. The Forest may make some minor adjustments as a result of the new travel plan EIS, but it must meet the open road density standards in grizzly BMUs.

Method of Road Closure

Much of the controversy, which developed this past year, relates to the method the Forest used to close the roads in the BMUs. In most cases, the Forest used large earth berms, the most effective way of closing roads to meet grizzly bear habitat standards.

However, some forest users have told us that the berms also limit other recreation activities.

Snowmobilers, in particular, have expressed concerns that these berms could affect their safety.

To address these concerns, forest personnel have worked extensively this fall and winter with the Idaho Snowmachine Association and local snowmachine organizations to provide signing and other information to alert snowmobilers. As a result, forest personnel have modified some berms in key snowmobile areas in the situation 3 area near Macks Inn, while still meeting the objective of restricting summer motorized access. Outside the BMUs the Forest has more options on how to close roads, and we will continue to work with interested citizens to address the least disruptive ways to close roads.

Madam Chairman, this concludes my statement. I will be happy to answer questions you may have.