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TOP STORY

## Forest Service response doesn't close door on mountain bikes in Bitterroot WSAs

PERRY BACKUS pbackus@ravallirepublic.com 3 hrs ago

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The issue of mountain biking in two Bitterroot National Forest wilderness study areas will be decided in the near future. A regional-level review was completed last week on about 3,200 objections the Forest Service received on the agency's decision to close 121 miles of trail within the Sapphire and Blue Joint wilderness study areas to mountain bikes.

Courtesy of Lance Pysher

The Bitterroot National Forest's new supervisor will decide soon whether mountain bikers will have access to two wilderness study areas.

A regional-level review was completed last week on about 3,200 objections the Forest Service received on the agency's decision to close 121 miles of trail within the Sapphire and Blue Joint wilderness study areas (WSAs) to mountain bikes.

Regional reviewing officer Bill Avey said the Bitterroot National Forest's travel plan decision that prohibited bicycles in the wilderness study areas met the requirements of the law. But he also left the door open for the decision to be modified to allow limited bicycle use under a proposal offered by the Bitterroot Backcountry Cyclists organization.

"In either case, the Forest must provide clear rationale for its course of action," Avey wrote in his decision.

The Bitterroot National Forest closed the two wilderness study areas to mountain biking when it updated its travel plan in 2016.

Last June, a judge ruled the forest had not offered the public an opportunity to weigh in on the issue of mountain biking in those areas, and required the agency to take another look at the issue, which included a period for the public to file objections.

In March, members of the Bitterroot Backcountry Cyclists and the International Mountain Bicycling Association proposed a resolution the groups said would “minimize and mitigate encounters between mountain bikers and other recreationists” in an effort to maintain the wilderness character of the two WSAs as they existed in 1977.

While the law that originally set aside the WSAs does not prohibit certain uses, Avey's letter said multiple court cases have clarified how the agency shall manage the areas until they are either added to the wilderness preservation system or released from the study, including ensuring the areas' overall 1977-era wilderness character not be degraded.

The Bitterroot National Forest has not set a timetable for the final decision on the mountain biking issue.

“We are working through the objection reviewing officer's letter and instructions back to the Forest regarding the 3,200 objections,” said Bitterroot Forest spokesman Tod McKay. “Although we were not given a specific deadline by the regional office, working through these complex issues and moving forward is a top priority for Bitterroot Supervisor Matt Anderson.”

Under the mountain bikers' proposed plan, biking in both WSAs would be off-limits from October to May. The proposal would open four trails in the Blue Joint WSA and eight in the Sapphire Mountains.

The Chain of Lakes Trail in the Sapphire Mountains — “by far the most popular trail ... for day-use and overnight excursions” — would remain closed to mountain bikers under the groups' proposal.

“The remainder of the (Sapphire Mountains) WSA has significantly less traffic due to extensive previous burns, a lack of water and a general lack of easily accessible aesthetic destinations for hikers,” the groups' proposal read.

The groups provided the Forest Service with additional data on the levels of recreational use on the areas they are asking to be opened to mountain biking.

“We are encouraged that the objecting officer found that our data on recreational use in the WSAs potentially allows for managed use of the WSAs by bikes while still maintaining the pre-existing wilderness character,” said Lance Pysher of the Bitterroot Backcountry Cyclists.

“We look forward to working with new Forest Supervisor, Matt Anderson to implement a well-managed plan that balances recreation and preservation of the Blue Joint and Sapphires,” Pysher said. “Hopefully we have turned a corner and we can look forward to working with other local community organizations to come up with a long-term plan to resolve the status of these cherished wild spaces.”

Longtime Friends of the Bitterroot member Jim Miller said that organization was pleased the regional reviewing officer affirmed the Bitterroot National Forest’s decision on the legality of prohibiting mountain bikes from the WSAs, but was also discouraged the door wasn’t slammed completely shut on the long-simmering issue.

The uncertainty over the Bitterroot Forest’s travel plan update has been going on for 11 years. Miller said the WSA issue in terms of the Bitterroot has a 30-year history.

“We have put a lot of time and effort into this as has the Forest Service,” Miller said. “It’s a difficult position for the regional office to put a brand-new forest supervisor on an issue that’s been around for 30 years. We sincerely hope that Supervisor Anderson will


consult with the Forest Service officials who have been involved for a long time, take a look at the long legal history and come to, what we believe, is the right decision to uphold the record of decision and keep the areas closed to mountain bikes.

“The WSAs were set aside for potential inclusion as wilderness under the Wilderness Act,” Miller said. “The Wilderness Act doesn’t allow bicycles. We’re opposed to bicycles because we want these areas to become wilderness in the future.”



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Perry Backus  
Associate Editor  
Reporter for The Ravalli Republic.

