

## Forest travel plan comment period extended

By [SCOTT McMILLION](#), Chronicle Staff Writer

The public comment period on the Gallatin National Forest's comprehensive travel plan has been extended by 72 days, Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont., announced this week.

Plus, Gallatin officials will write a more extensive analysis of the economic impacts of proposed closures of numerous travel routes to motorized users.

The comment period had been scheduled to close in mid-May. It has now been extended to Aug. 1, Gallatin spokeswoman Lorette Ray said Tuesday.

The extension is "a bit shorter than Denny asked for, but not unacceptable," Rehberg spokesman Brad Keena said.

Last month, Rehberg asked for four extra months for the public to comment. He said at the time he was concerned about U.S. Forest Service plans "to severely restrict motorized travel."

He said people need more time after the snow leaves the high country to look at proposed changes on the ground.

"Hopefully, this will give the folks the extra time they feel they need," Ray said.

She said it's hard to tell how the extra comment time will affect the timing for completion of the travel plan, but "obviously, it's going to push us back."

Forest officials have been working on the travel plan for more than two years and had scheduled a final decision for early in 2006.

The current proposal calls for some sharp restrictions on motorized users on the 1.9 million-acre forest.

The miles of roads open to vehicles would be "generally unchanged," the forest plan says. But the miles of trails open to all-terrain vehicles would drop from 281 to 166.

Trail miles open to motorcycles would shrink from 457 to 238.

Meanwhile, some roads now closed to all but administrative uses would be opened to recreational drivers.

Acres open to snowmobiles would drop from 84 percent of the forest outside wilderness areas to 52 percent.

Bicycles would also see some restrictions, and horseback riders would see trails closed in the spring.

All proposals are tentative at this point.

The expanded economic analysis "should show the economic impacts of road closures in the greater Gallatin area," Rehberg's announcement said.

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