Little Belt, Rocky Mtn. Front travel plans
Final decisions released
Ruling could be in effect by this spring

By KARL PUCKETT Tribune Staff Writer  (Tuesday October 2, 2007)

Supervisor Spike Thompson of Lewis and Clark National Forest on Monday announced final decisions on two highly anticipated travel plans— one for the Little Belt, Castle and northern Crazy mountains and a second affecting the southern two thirds of the Rocky Mountain Ranger District.

If they survive appeals and litigation, portions of the plans could be directing motorized and no motorized traffic on 1 million acres in the three island mountain ranges and 262,180 acres of forest along the Rocky Mountain Front as soon as this spring, Thompson said.

The old plans last were revised in 1988. The new travel rules will be in place for the next 10 to 15 years.

Thompson’s decisions follow 58 public meetings over six years in which more than 45,000 comments were collected as the plans were developed.

“If a person looks at either one of these decisions, they probably are going to find things they like and things they don’t like,” he said.

The rulings are final, but the public can appeal within 45 days beginning Oct. 12. The regional office has 45 days to rule on any appeals.

In 2001, as a result of a proliferation of user-created miles in the forest, the regional office directed local forests in Montana and the Dakotas to designate motorized and non-motorized trails. And local forests also were ordered in 2005 to implement a no-cross country travel policy and given four years to complete travel planning.

Public opinion was split on the best way to manage the Little Belts, Castle and northern Crazy Mountains, Thompson said.

“This decision will continue to emphasize motorized recreation opportunities in the Little Belts, consistent with the expected increase in population and demand for motorized recreation,” Thompson wrote in his decision.

The ranges, particularly the Little Belts, were the most logical place to emphasize motorized travel in the overall forest, he wrote, because they traditionally have provided the most motorized opportunities.

In the three ranges combined, the decision provides 1,500 miles of roads or trails for car travel, all terrain vehicles and motorcycles, and the establishment of a primitive landing strip for pilots and designated youth motorized areas.

Some 440,348 acres would be open to snowmobiles. And 170 miles of low-maintenance roads would be converted to jeep trails. “There will be hundreds of miles of roads that will be available,” Thompson said in an interview, although there will be new restrictions for non-motorized users as well.

Thompson said the percentage of motorized miles in the three mountain ranges would decline from 89 percent to 70 percent, with most of the reduction due to the elimination of user-created trails.
For example, two-thirds of the Middle Fork of the Judith River Wilderness Study Area will become off limits to motorized use, and there will be restrictions put in place to protect elk-calving areas.

And trails along the Smith River in the Deep Creek Park area and Tender Foot will become nonmotorized. “There are some good additions in places that make sense,” said Russ Ehnes, vice president of the Great Falls Trail Bike Riders Association.

But, he quickly added, “Overall, it has a lot more restrictions than additions.”

Conversely, the plan for the Rocky Mountain Front reflects that region’s more primitive nature, Thompson said. There will be just 104 miles of road and trails open to motorized use and 29,170 acres available for snowmobiling. “By and large, we’re really emphasizing no motorized travel,” Thompson said.

With minor changes, the plan implements a winter-use agreement that previously was reached by snowmobile advocates, the Montana Wilderness Association, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Forest Service.

The changes will allow snowmobiles along the Benchmark area and Beaver-Willow Creek Road. The purpose was to give residents who live along the Front continued opportunities to recreate.

The travel plan does not include the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, where motorized travel already is off limits. A decision on the Badger-Two Medicine area will be made later, Thompson said.

Mark Good, a spokesman for the Montana Wilderness Association, said the travel plans were a good start but added they could do more to recognize damage he says is being caused by an increasing number of all-terrain vehicles, which continue to become more powerful. “I think we owe it to future generations to protect some quiet places in our national forests,” he said.

FOR MORE INFO: Copies of the final decisions can be viewed online at www.fs.fed.us/r1/lewisclark, area libraries or the Lewis and Clark National Forest office in Great Falls. Call 791-7754 for additional information. You can also access the links below.

The Lewis and Clark National Forest has released its Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and Record of Decision (ROD) revising and updating the management of motorized and non-motorized travel on the non-Wilderness roads, trails, and areas of for the portion of the Rocky Mountain Ranger District south of Birch Creek. A decision for the non-Wilderness portion of the Ranger District north of Birch Creek, commonly known as the Badger-Two Medicine area is not included in this ROD. This area will be addressed in a future decision. This FEIS analyzes and discloses the effects of 5 alternatives for management of motorized wheeled vehicles during the summer months and over-snow vehicles during the winter months. The ROD articulates the alternative selected and provides rationale for the decision.

The Lewis and Clark National Forest has released its Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and Record of Decision (ROD) revising and updating the travel management plan for the Little Belts, Castle, and north 1/2 of the Crazy mountain ranges. The FEIS analyzes and discloses the effects of 4 alternatives for management of motorized wheeled vehicles during the summer months, and 3 alternatives for management of motorized over-snow vehicles during the winter months. The ROD articulates the alternative selected and provides rationale for the decisions.

http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/lewisclark/projects/lbcc_final_travel_plan/lbccfinal_index.shtml