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Scoping Comments on the proposed Three Trails OHV Project

The Oregon Chapter Sierra Club and the League Of Wilderness Defenders-Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project have reviewed the Crescent District's scoping notice and accompanying maps for the proposed Three Trails OHV project on the Crescent Ranger District Deschutes NF, and submit these joint comments on the Three Trails OHV Project as currently proposed.

The Sierra Club represents over 20,000 members throughout Oregon, including over 1,000 Juniper Group members throughout central and eastern Oregon. Sierra Club members feel strongly about nature, wilderness, wildlife and the environment. Our members regularly enjoy hiking, camping, birding, wildlife watching, recreation and ecological study within the public lands of central and eastern Oregon, including the project area and surrounding national forest and LSR lands.

LOWD-Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project has many members and volunteers throughout the Northwest. Members and volunteers of the LOWD-Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project regularly use the Crescent Ranger District Deschutes National Forest, including the proposed project area and surrounding forest watersheds and LSR areas, for hiking, ecological study, watching wildlife, viewing forest native botanical diversity, and avian species study.

Overview of Issues

One of the overarching issues regarding ongoing OHVs and Travel Management Planning was addressed recently in our comments on the related proposed Lava Rock OHV trail system designation: While our organizations appreciate the Deschutes National Forest's stated intention to prohibit cross-country travel by OHVs, and limit OHVs to designated systems only, such a closure can be done by a legally and environmentally warranted necessary Emergency Closure Order for the entire Deschutes.

In the Crescent District however, it is understandable given there are no designated OHV systems at present, that such a complete closure may be politically untenable albeit desirable from a conservation-natural resources perspective. Given enforcement issues, and accustomed use concerns, it would be difficult at best to close the entirety of the Crescent District to OHV use when some people have become accustomed to using OHVs in the area already. It may be that establishing emergency closure exemptions for limited interim trails in areas that clearly have little of no natural resource concerns could help offset overall OHV closure impacts, until a TMP EIS has been completed. Given the significance of resource concerns in the District, and the current levels of OHV use and resource damage, such exemptions should be stringently limited to ecologically acceptable areas only, which are far smaller in extent than the current proposed Three Trails systems. Additionally, exemptions should only be temporary, as full designation would require a completed TMP EIS process. Exemption areas could include trails in logging and

management degraded heavily roaded areas, but must avoid all LSRs, RCHAs, old growth areas (the rock pit could be excluded from this area – as it clearly is not old growth), hiking and equestrian trail areas, and valued natural resource areas, including connective wildlife habitat, rare plant areas, popular hiking trails, and mushroom areas.

With the limited exemptions noted above, the agency should not delay such a closure order, as the forest's natural resources and recreational values are being irreparably degraded daily, with an urgent need for curtailment of rampant widespread OHV abuse throughout the forest. This is true for the entire Deschutes, Crescent District included, and is likely the case with the region's other public lands also.

Undertaking a lengthy EIS process for such a closure only circumvents the agency's legal responsibility to protect public lands under its management, allowing yet more damage to occur, and adding to the irresponsible illusion that the agency is obligated in any way to provide play areas for environmentally harmful, resource destroying, intrusive, noisy, disrupting machines and those who operate them. Forgoing such a closure, and undertaking segmented TMP and OHV trail NEPA processes; with the segmented Three Trails project proposing the designation of an extensive trail system with OHV incursions into ecologically important LSR, old growth, connective, and riparian habitat, is not a legally or ecologically acceptable option.

The Deschutes and BLM already have designated OHV trail systems and play areas that are far greater in acreage extent than the proportional small percentage of the public that uses OHVs, and far greater than the agency's ability to enforce regulations, prevent damaging OHV incursions into treasured natural areas including the designated LSR habitat and important salmonid waterways, or restore damaged areas. As such, instead of proposing additional trail systems beyond the capabilities of agency resources to effectively manage, we recommend an interagency public lands wide Programmatic EIS on Travel Management. The EIS objectives include:

- Codifying a forest-wide emergency closure to OHVs – limiting these to currently designated systems only (and in the Crescent District to limited interim areas as described above);
- Analysis focus on reducing resource damaging roads, removing excess roads to comply with Forest Plan road density standards and wildlife thresholds;
- Assessing the impacts of current OHV systems;
- Assessing federal agency resource needs, capabilities, and effectiveness in enforcing OHV regulations and preventing OHV harms to the environment;
- Assessing impacts from roads and OHVs to natural recreational qualities of serenity, solitude, intact natural conditions, and the ability to view and enjoy wildlife and nature;
- Assessing the impacts of road systems and OHVs on wildlife, and native species biodiversity and abundance;
- Assessing the impacts of road systems and OHVs on federal and state listed species and species of concern;
- Assessing the impacts of road systems and OHVs on waterways, aquatic systems and species, and forest hydrological patterns and functioning;
- Assessing the impacts of road systems and OHVs on native plants and the spread and introduction of invasive exotic plants;
- Assessing OHV impacts upon residential communities neighboring affected public lands.

These above emergency closure action and follow-up PEIS analysis needs represent just some of the resource issues that need to be implemented and addressed in an EIS well-before additional OHV systems such as Three Trails can be legally and ecologically considered.

Travel Management Working Group General Recommendations, Natural Resource Issues, and NEPA

As proposed, the Three Trails OHV project would directly and significantly adversely affect the interests of the members and volunteers of our organizations. The Three Trails project needs to be refined and better restricted to remain within the resource recommendations expressed by conservation representatives and others during the year-long collaborative working group consensus process.

Conservation recommendations include prohibitions on OHV use within or near designated LSR, old growth, connective wildlife habitat, riparian areas, natural recreational trails, and areas of ecological significance such as rare plants, springs, and natural geologic features.

Current plans call for OHV trails and road use within LSR on Royce Mountain, as part of the Junction trail system. Junction also includes shared hiking, equestrian, and OHV sections of trail. Natural recreation is incompatible and antithetical with OHV use and its corresponding noise, dusts, degradation, and fumes. There should be no OHV trails beyond or near LSR boundaries. There should be no shared use of natural recreational trails and campgrounds with OHVs. There should be no OHV trails within or near riparian areas. OHV trails should be additionally limited to already management impacted locations where OHV disturbance would not inflict adverse environmental harms upon wildlife, watersystems, and the natural resource quality of the area.

Finally, there is no requirement in the Travel Management Plan to actually create and develop new ORV trails. It is understandable given the lack of designated trails in the Crescent District, long term OHV closure plans, and current OHV use levels, there is a desire to locate ecologically acceptable trail systems. The Travel Management Plan offers such an opportunity, while overall it's main emphasis should remain proactively protecting irreplaceable natural resources by closing restoring existing ecologically damaging OHV routes, excessive roads, and user-created trails.

The Proposed Purpose and Need Violates the NEPA, NFMA, and Agency Resource Protection Mandates

Purpose and Need of the Project is Impermissibly Narrow

NEPA requires federal agencies to base their project analysis and disclosures on accurate, expert, professional information. The agency is bound by legal mandates, directives, and responsibilities to protect public lands natural resources from undue degradation. The proposed segmented NEPA processes, and differing Purpose and Need project subsets, are largely inappropriate and unsubstantiated given NEPA legal analysis requirements, current resource and management issues, and the vast extent of existing interconnected OHV trail systems both on the Deschutes National Forest and on adjoining BLM lands. The purpose and need as proposed preclude a comprehensive analysis of responsible resource actions; including closing ecologically significant portions of the project area to OHVs, reducing road densities to Forest Plan standards, and curtailing motorized impacts as appropriate to better match designated management objectives in areas such as LSRs, old growth and connective habitat, natural recreational trails, and ecologically sensitive areas.

An agency must not define the purpose and need of a project so narrowly that the proposed action is the only possible course of action. EPIC v. USFS, D.C. No. CV-04-01705-GEB (9th Cir. 2006)(attached). In the recent EPIC case, the Ninth Circuit found that the purpose and need of a timber sale project was so narrow that it was impermissible. The proposed action was the only possible course of action to fulfill the purpose and need, so there was no real analysis of alternatives.

The proposed purpose and need of the proposed Three Trails OHV Project is also far too narrow. The Forest Service has limited possible actions towards developing OHV trail systems, the extent of which are ecologically harmful and largely incongruous with the agency's legal responsibilities and ecological directives. Under the proposed narrow purpose and need, the Forest Service could only develop and analyze alternatives that increase OHV trail systems in the area, predisposing the decision-maker to either leave the current unacceptable cross-country OHV degradation as is (under a no action alternative)

or choose an alternative that designates trails in areas where ecologically they should not be permitted at all.

The Forest Service must withdraw the proposed Three Trails OHV Project, and develop a comprehensive EIS addressing the direct and cumulative impacts of OHVs across the District and adjoining public lands systems, the scientific research recommendations related to OHVs and affected natural resources, impacts to forest integrity, ecological functioning, wildlife species and habitat, hydrology, and biodiversity.

Natural Quiet as a Resource

“Natural quiet” has become increasingly scarce on public lands throughout the Western U.S. Its scarcity is a result of many factors, including the increase in both commercial and military air traffic, and an increase in the use of all-terrain vehicles and other OHVs coupled with advances in engine technologies that have allowed OHV enthusiasts to penetrate deeper into the backcountry each year.¹ Given the growing scarcity of natural quiet coupled with the beneficial effects of natural quiet to most wildlife populations and the recreational experience of forest visitors, the Three Trails OHV NEPA documentation must identify natural quiet as a resource worth protecting. One or more alternatives, including the agency’s proposed action, should incorporate an objective of retaining natural quiet (to the extent within the Forest Service’s control) in important landscapes, watersheds, or “soundsheds.”

Motorized Mayhem or Wild Nature?

National forests across Oregon’s eastside are magnificent in natural wonders and beauty. From the tumbled geology of eastern Oregon’s weathered Blue Mountains, to the volcanic wonderlands of the Cascade’s rain-shadow, our forests are home to a wealth of biodiversity. Alive and vibrant with gorgeous wildflowers, birdsongs and canid howls, cascading streams and falls, deep incised canyons, towering weather carved rocks, and Cheshire wildlife, the region’s complex ancient forest mosaics are sculpted by fire, climate, moisture, and time. Many people in the region, from transitory visitors to long-time residents, come to these forest wonderlands to enjoy and experience the serenity and inspiration of untrammelled nature.

In our increasingly mechanized society, public wildlands are among the only remaining places where people can get away from the incessant noise and intrusions of industrial machines. Yet a small percentage of the visitors to our wondrous forests cannot seem to leave their treasured machines behind. Called by a variety of names ranging from Off Highway Vehicles (OHVs), All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs), or “Terrain Annihilating Zehicles” (TAZ – for the mechanized version of the fabled TaZmanian Devil), the widespread intrusion of these machines into our last remaining natural lands destroys the serenity, and severely harms the wildlife, plants, soils, and waterways of our region.

For years public forests have been largely open to OHV travel, including random user-created cross-country routes. As a consequence widespread OHV damage and disturbance has significantly increased. While the Forest Service has basic regulations prohibiting OHV-caused natural resource degradation, and has varied requirements in OHV trail system areas, they lack the enforcement personnel to prevent OHV harms, and lack funding and resources to restore OHV damaged waterways and forests. Currently any adult with an OHV, and children with adult accompaniment, can drive OHVs willy-nilly across our national forests, to the detriment of wildlife, and the natural experience of us all.

In a beginning effort to rectify rampant OHV abuse of public lands, the Deschutes, Ochoco, and Umatilla National Forests are conducting varied environmental analysis, with plans to close the forest to

¹ See, for example, Off-Highway Vehicle Trail Impacts on Breeding Songbirds in Northeastern California, *The Journal of Wildlife Management*, 71(5): 1617–1620; 2007.

cross country OHV travel by late 2009 or 2010, while unrealistically – given their inability to regulate systems - designating additional OHV trail systems throughout large areas of the region's forests.

In this Deschutes Three Trails OHV Project, the agency has proposed a mix of curtailing unregulated OHV use with a series of designated trail systems. Some of these trails are located in more environmentally acceptable areas, while significant portions are located in and nearby LSRs, natural recreational trails, designated old growth, riparian systems, and connective wildlife habitat. Given the incompatibility of OHV use and impacts with natural resources, ecological integrity, wildlife habitat, and natural recreational qualities on public lands, the choice presented to the agency and the public really comes down to that of either extending existent “motorized mayhem” even further beyond the agency's ability to regulate and control impacts, or taking effective management actions to proactively protect and restore “wild nature” qualities throughout the region's forests, including the greater Three Trails project area. The proposed Three Trails project must be significantly reduced in scope to prevent designating OHV use in areas where this would result in ongoing cumulative harms, in contravention to natural resource needs and the greater public's natural values and recreational needs and desires.

The EIS for this process must disclose the full extent of OHV depredations, and acknowledge agency resource limitations and enforcement capabilities. If trail systems are to exist at all on public lands forests, these must be reduced in size and extent so the agency can effectively ensure natural resources are protected, and capably enforce regulations. Trails must be kept far from ecologically valued areas including essential wildlife habitat, watersystems, old growth and roadless areas, and areas treasured by wildlife and recreationists alike for their natural serenity and beauty.

OHV systems are also incompatible with residential areas bordering public lands, whether these be populated communities or remote rural locations. Most people live near public lands forests for the natural qualities and peace inherent in nature. OHV impacts, from incessant loud noise, to airborne dusts, exhaust fumes, and severe environmental damage to soils, waterways and vegetation irrevocably destroy the natural qualities of our forests for all. As OHV abuse continues to grow across the region, we are hearing growing citizen calls for more responsible agency efforts to proactively protect our wildlands forests and WUI communities from OHV harms.

Cumulative Impacts Issues from Interlocking OHV Trail Systems Across Oregon

In addition to this proposed Three Trails OHV project, other agency OHV plans across the region's forests include Willamette National Forest OHV links to the Deschutes, which cross the Crest trail and use an historic wagon trail; the “Lava Rock” system in the Deschutes Bend-Fort Rock District; the East Ochoco OHV trail system around Big Summit Prairie in the Ochoco National Forest; and the Heppner District Umatilla Forest's West End OHV trail system which would link a county OHV park with forest lands.

OHV proponents are jockeying to create systems that link routes throughout the region's public National Forests and BLM lands, spanning from the Wallow-Whitman through the Umatilla, Malheur and Ochoco forests, across BLM lands into the Deschutes, and on to the Willamette National Forest in a huge, somewhat disjointed, interconnected system of unenforceable dimensions and unfathomable harms. By designating official trail systems, OHV proponents are attempting to establish their noisy damaging impacts to public forests as both acceptable and somehow “compatible” with natural recreation and environmental values.

. It is imperative that instead of pandering piecemeal in illegal segmented EAs for otherwise interconnected OHV systems, that federal agency's adhere to their resource protection responsibilities and directives and take effective actions to reign in rampant OHV abuse, protecting the natural serenity and beauty of our public wildlands for those of us here today and the generations yet to come.

Natural, LSR/Old Growth, & Unroaded Areas

We are concerned that the proposed designated OHV trail system will negatively impact non-motorized recreation and values associated with natural old forests/LSR and unroaded areas in the vicinity. Old growth and unroaded areas of 1,000+ acres in size provide valuable natural resource attributes that must be protected. These include: water quality; healthy soils; fish and wildlife refugia; centers for dispersal and restoration of adjacent disturbed sites; reference sites for research; non-motorized, low-impact recreation; carbon sequestration; refugia that are relatively less at-risk from noxious weeds and other invasive non-native species, and many other significant values. Designating open trails in or adjacent to old growth, LSR, and/or unroaded areas will have detrimental impacts on water quality, soil health, vegetation, non-motorized recreation, and wildlife habitat. We ask you to consider how the proposal will impact these areas and come up with a plan that will keep OHVs out of these areas. Trails should not be designated adjacent to these areas, as this would likely cause OHV abuse within them, harming the natural values of the area.

Need for Travel Management

We are supportive of Forest Service efforts to prevent off-highway vehicle (OHV) use in sensitive areas, effectively regulate where use may occur and prevent harmful impacts, conflicts associated with OHV use, and to close and rehabilitate unnecessary and redundant forest roads and user-created routes. Consistent with Executive Orders 11644 and 11989 and applicable Forest Service regulations, it is our belief that OHV use is appropriate only where it can be demonstrated that such use will be controlled and directed so that it does not adversely affect forest resources or the safety of users of the national forest, and where it can be demonstrated that OHV use will not pose significant conflicts with residences and other uses on the forest or adjacent public lands.

It is our hope that the greater Three Trails area and Crescent Ranger District forestlands will be managed for the benefit of all visitors and can be shared by all people who respectfully value and appreciate our public lands and national forests.

National forests as a whole experienced a dramatic increase in OHV use during the period 1982 to 2000. While there is no question that OHV use on many Forests increased markedly throughout the 1990s, it is important to note that the rate of OHV growth nationwide peaked in 2003 and no longer is growing. The reasons for the recent reversal of the OHV use growth curve are not well understood but have nonetheless been documented by the Powersports Business/Motorcycle Industry Council, the Outdoor Industry Foundation², and Forest Service personnel associated with the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment.³

In light of this documented pattern — a trend likely to be continued and reinforced both by the current economic recession and the fluctuating fuel costs that recently rose and fell from, and may return to, \$4/gallon - the agency's underlying premise of a need to accommodate ever-increasing levels of OHV user demand on the Deschutes National Forest is seriously questionable and largely unsubstantiated. However, the absence of upward pressure for OHV use on the Forest does little, if anything, to mitigate the upward spiral of the power, traction and maneuverability — and associated potential for causing adverse environmental impacts — being built into modern off-road recreational vehicles.⁴

² Outdoor Industry Foundation. *Outdoor Recreation Participation Study. Eighth Edition, for Year 2005. Trend Analysis for the United States.* June 2006.

³ Schuster, R.; Cordell K.; Mitchell, J.; Betz, C.; Zarnoch, S. OHV Recreational Use in the United States. Paper presented at the 60th annual meeting of the Society for Range Management, February 2007.

⁴ In 2005 Congressional testimony, former USFS Chief Bosworth stated that “[t]oday's [OHV] vehicles are also more powerful and more capable of off-highway travel than those of a decade ago.” Statement of Dale Bosworth concerning motorized recreational use of federal lands before the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health and The Subcommittee On National Parks, Recreation, of the United States House of Representatives' Public Lands Committee on Resources, July 13, 2005 at 4.

Unmanaged and improperly managed motorized recreation on our National Forests is a serious, intensifying threat to the health and integrity of our National Forests. Moreover, such use increasingly conflicts with our National Forest's quiet-use recreationists, whether hunters, anglers, hikers, kayakers, rafters, or backpackers – many of which are represented by the staff and members of the signatories to these comments. Former Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth succinctly demonstrated that unmanaged OHVs are a “major threat” affecting our nation's forests and should be “one of the highest priorities for the agency” when he stated:

Each year, the national forests and grasslands get hundreds of miles of unauthorized roads and trails due to repeated cross-country use. We're seeing more erosion, water degradation, and habitat destruction. We're seeing more conflicts between users. We have got to improve our management so we get responsible recreational use based on sound outdoor ethics. How do these threats affect outdoor recreation? As I said, our focus in the Forest Service is on protecting air and water, habitat for wildlife, scenery, and naturalness. That's what people come to the national forests to find—but increasingly they're not finding it. They're not finding it if forests are out of whack and unhealthy. They're not finding it if invasives and loss of open space are driving out our native species. And they're not finding it if stream banks are collapsed, trails eroded, and sensitive meadows degraded because we're not properly managing recreational use.

Dale Bosworth, USFS Chief, “Ensuring the Future of Outdoor Recreation,” Partners Outdoors, Snowbird, UT (Jan. 11, 2004).

As then Chief Bosworth explained above, the rapid expansion of motorized vehicle use damages our National Forests. Motorized vehicle use carves unlawful, unauthorized routes and trails into our National Forests, triggers erosion and water quality degradation, fragments and degrades wildlife habitat, and creates serious conflicts amongst the hunters, anglers, hikers, kayakers, rafters, backpackers, and other users of our National Forests. It is against this background that the Deschutes NF Three Trails OHV Project must be viewed.

NEPA Analysis & Segmentation

At present the agency has planned for separate EIS processes addressing OHVs, including the greater TMP analysis closing the forest to cross-country OHV travel, and separate NEPA processes for designated OHV systems. It may be that nearly concurrent EIS projects are needed – though this is legally and ecologically questionable. However, if so, the closure process should be completed first, as the environmental analysis issues addressed, including cumulative impacts issues and effectiveness of agency trail systems regulation, enforcement capabilities, restoration accomplishments and needs, and overall resource requirements and impacts will help set the necessary foundation for evaluating proposed localized systems such as Three Trails.

However, given the agency's legal mandates to prevent resource degradation, directives to protect natural qualities and resources of our public lands, and to provide quality recreational experiences for all that are compatible with natural qualities; it is clear that the agency legally may issue an emergency closure prohibiting all cross-country OHV travel and all OHV travel on non-designated OHV routes and trails. An EIS is not needed for this urgently necessary legally and environmentally responsible action. Following such closure, an EIS on Travel Management Planning, addressing environmental impacts from roads, OHVs (including snowmobiles), existing trail systems, and enforcement, regulation, and restoration needs must be conducted well-before proposals as extensive as Three Trails may legally considered. The agency has no mandate or requirement to provide OHV systems. It does have the legal

He continued by noting that this new capacity is related to “[d]amage to water quality, erosion, loss of wildlife habitat, and introduction of invasive species jeopardize the health of the land, the sustainability of the use, and the opportunities people come to the national forests to enjoy.” *Id.* at 5.

responsibility to protect natural resources. Road density levels and impacts are already in excess of Forest Plan standards and wildlife threshold levels. These need to be reduced, with excess and resource damaging roads closed, removed, and restored to natural topography and vegetation. It would be a violation of the Deschutes LRMP, NFMA, and likely the ESA to add the additional significant detrimental impacts that would result from creating a designated OHV trail system as proposed, given that the agency has failed to address and rectify current resource harms and standards violations. Again an EIS is necessary to adequately address these significant issues.

Connectivity with Other Proposed or Foreseeable OHV Routes

On a landscape scale, the agency must address and disclose cumulative impacts issues that are likely to result from, or contribute to, the impacts of the proposed Three Trails OHV proposed action. Thus, the District must also disclose whether regional connective OHV routes are planned or proposed by other federal and state agencies and/or OHV user groups. The baseline for “environmental analysis that is the heart” of the NEPA process must “be accurate and complete.” In summary, the EIS as currently planned would fall far short of NEPA’s “hard look” requirements by ignoring the existing and potential future use of routes that extend beyond the project boundary.

Federal courts have recognized the significance of increased motorized trail use as a necessary component for environmental analyses relating to trail designations. Specifically, “the environmental significance of [the trail project] cannot be accurately assessed unless the potential for increased use resulting from the cumulative impact of the projected network of [OHV] trails planned for the [Ranger District] is carefully considered.” *Wash. Trails Ass’n v. United States Forest Serv.*;⁵ *see also North Cascade Conservation Council v. United States Forest Serv.*⁶ (“Within the NEPA scheme, however, any proposal adding to this [OHV] system that may adversely affect the environment must be examined in light of the entire existing system”).

Scope of Cumulative Impact Analysis

In conducting a cumulative effects analysis for the Three Trails OHV Project, the Forest Service must provide detailed information about the present effects of past actions—*whether or not* those actions were subject to NEPA review at the time of the action. As the regulations note, “[c]umulative impacts can result from individually minor but collectively significant actions taking place over a period of time.” 40 C.F.R. § 1508.7. Thus even a “minor” past action (i.e. one not subject to NEPA review at the time) must be analyzed in the cumulative effects review of a new proposed action.

It follows that the effects of the following past, present, and foreseeable future actions must be considered in the cumulative effects analysis for the Three Trails OHV Project:

- Road building;
- Creation of unauthorized, user-created routes;
- Siviculture activities;
- Dispersed camping;
- Soil erosion;
- Impacts to LSRs and old growth;
- Impacts to connective forest habitat;
- Water quality impacts;
- Wilderness values and unroaded areas

⁵ 935 F. Supp. 1117, 1123 (W.D. Wash. 1996).

⁶ 98 F. Supp. 2d 1193, 1198 (W.D. Wash 1999).

- Effects on listed species; and
- Lack of enforcement of road/route/trail designations, system connections with other systems, and foreseeable creation of illegal, user-created routes.

Minimum Systems Regulations

The proposed action must address the “minimum system” regulation found at 36 CFR § 212.5(b)(1). Should the Three Trails OHV Project proceed and the Forest Service develop and select an alternative that does not address the “minimum system” regulation, the agency would risk appeal and litigation as the process moves forward. Under the circumstances, we believe that the most appropriate course of action would be for the District to postpone the project NEPA analysis until such time as the requisite travel analysis and the accompanying report is completed and shared with the public. At a minimum, this would include development of an alternative that complies with the “minimum system” regulation, is both ecologically and fiscally sustainable given current and anticipated funding levels, and includes a detailed plan for monitoring, mitigation, and enforcement—including “conditional decisions” which would grant the authority to take effective action to address violations of standards uncovered during subsequent monitoring and enforcement without having to complete additional analysis.

Impacts to Wildlife

The proposed OHV routes traverse throughout a significant extent of public lands that contain habitat for Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed terrestrial and avian wildlife species, and federal and state regional wildlife and avian species of concern. The analysis must adequately disclose current status information on these and other affected species including other wildlife species that historically have existed, and may presently occur, in the planning area. The analysis must adequately address the likely direct and cumulative impacts from OHVs, related management actions, and other area management projects upon these and other wildlife and avian species.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on the Three Trails OHV Project. Unfortunately, notwithstanding clear evidence of the Forest’s good-faith efforts to eventually implement the Travel Management Rule closing the forest to cross-country OHV travel, as we have outlined there are a number of areas where this proposal has fallen short of the substantive mandates imposed by the applicable Executive Orders as well as federal environmental policy laws and the Agency’s own regulations. We also understand the political realities the Crescent District is facing given the lack of designated systems in the area, current use levels and accustomed expectations, and the plan to soon close the forest to OHV use except in designated areas. We encourage the agency to incorporate our recommendations to better protect ecologically valued areas from OHV harms. Additionally, we welcome a meeting with Forest decision-makers and planning staff to discuss specific points or provide clarification of our recommendations. As the comment period has been extended, we will be sending in additional comments by or before March 27, 2009.

Sincerely,



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Oregon Chapter Sierra Club et al comments on the proposed Three Trails OHV Project.

March 2, 2009

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