

Smokey Bear Collaborative
June 26, 2019
ENMU-Ruidoso

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Attendance

Laura Doth, SCMRC&D
Robert Barber, LANRAC
Wallace Downs, LANFAC
Mary Ann Siegel, Little Bear Forest Reform Coalition
Yolanda Nelson, Local land owner
Bo Nelson, Local land owner
Barry Nelson, Local land owner
Linda Tays, Local land owner
Mike Tays, Local land owner
Pud Schneider, Local land owner and permittee
Marsha Schneider, Local land owner
Jack Walker, Local land owner
Borde Williams, Local land owner
Curtis Coburn, NM Dept. of Game & Fish
Jill Andrews, Equestrians
Anne Myrick, Equestrians
Clark Taylor, Grazing permittee
Joseph Graham, Outfitters
Andrew Ellis, USFS, Smokey Bear Ranger District
Jodie Canfield, USFS, Smokey Bear Ranger District
Alan Barton, NM Forest & Watershed Restoration Institute

Background

Laura Doth, Smokey Bear Collaborative (SBC) facilitator, presented a brief history of this group. The SBC has been meeting since Sep. 2018. The US Forest Service (USFS) had not updated the travel management plan for the Smokey Bear Ranger District since 1986. The purpose of this group is to come up with recommendations to hand off to the USFS. The USFS then will have to do their full scoping and develop a proposed action for Hale Lake Area. This group has put in lots of hard work and has had many good conversations, and what the group ended up with is a set of recommendations for the USFS.

Today, we'll review these recommendations, and edit what needs to be changed.

Smokey Bear District Ranger Jodie Canfield has an Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) working on the new travel management plan. The IDT will meet tomorrow, and will pick up with what this group has produced.

There are several local land owners attending this meeting. Clark Taylor has represented the property owners well during the process, and we're delighted to have many other property owners here today.

Andrew Ellis from the Smokey Bear Ranger District reiterated that we're happy to have many new participants here tonight. Andrew reviewed the map showing the SBC's recommendations. Andrew noted that the map is not a USFS proposal, it is a product of the collaborative group. We will edit the document tonight, and then it will be turned over to the USFS. The process will continue, as the USFS is still gathering information from other sources. The process does take time, although this process is moving faster than usual. The USFS is still early in the process, and has several conflicts to resolve. The IDT will work with this info, and there still will be a public process to go through, and then there will be a roll out with lots of media.

Laura reviewed some of the SBC's accomplishments, agreements that will go into the recommendations. She noted that safety has been an issue, and the SBC has identified two areas for landing helicopters, which are shown on the map. The group has discussed camping options, and since there are other places near Ruidoso with developed campgrounds, camping in the Hale Lake area will be dispersed, meaning backcountry-style camping, in sites with a fire ring and a place to pitch a tent. The SBC also has discussed how to access the area with horse trailers, and the need for a turnaround is important. There are three areas for equestrian and trailer access, two at the west side and one on the east side.

Andrew noted that the USFS has made some adjustments to the sites recommended by the SBC, in consultation with Laura, based on what is possible due to the terrain.

Laura continued to review some of the agreements the SBC has reached. For hiking and mountain biking, the terrain is very diverse, so rather than identifying specific trails, these uses are merely identified as areas suitable for these activities. A buffer area has been added around the shooting range. At the southwest end there is a Protected Activity Center (PAC) for Mexican Spotted Owls (MSO), so this area has not been looked at much for further development. On the map, dotted lines indicate areas for OHV access, based on what SBC participants have recommended. The New Mexico Department Game and Fish (NMG&F) has recommended some sites for wildlife, which need buffers and quiet areas. The SBC has not reached consensus on this issue, so the document offers three different options to USFS. Hopefully with public input we'll find some common ground.

Recommendations

Laura reviewed the recommendations to the USFS and the group made suggestions for changes.

The document starts with a brief profile of the SBC and characteristics of the Hale Lake project area.

◆ Respecting the land – the SBC supports a travel plan that protects the land in the Hale Lake area, and the collaborative supports closing some roads, so that the public will be less likely to create their own roads. Also, trails should be created to sustainable standards.

Question – who will enforce closing of roads?

Laura said that implementation of the plan is a whole different ball of wax. For now, the SBC will focus on helping the Smokey Bear Ranger District to prepare the plan. Later, the collaborative will consider how to implement the plan. The ranger district here has one officer in charge of enforcement, and NMG&F has limited resources, so enforcement is a challenge.

Jodie said that Eric Chavez, who is the USFS law enforcement officer of the ranger district, is part of the IDT. He has noted that the Sacramento Ranger District has good signage and routes, and people police themselves well. With good signs and clear direction on the width of vehicles and the like, people work within the parameters. We need to get things better organized on the Smokey Bear District. Once we do, this should stand for a long time.

◆ Respect for private property – the SBC recognizes the impact the public can have on private property. The collaborative supports creating a reasonable buffer around private lands. The dimensions of each buffer should depend on the topography. Within the buffers trails and infrastructure should be restricted, so that owners of private property won't have a lot of people nearby. There also should be signs posted identifying private property. There will be an education process to teach people how to interact with private property, e.g., what to do with gates (leave a gate as you found it).

At first, the suggestion for buffers was one-quarter mile around private property, but due to varied conditions the group suggested perhaps 250 feet would be appropriate. However, the recommendation the collaborative is making is that buffers be a "reasonable" distance and size, since they will vary depending on conditions.

Laura asked if the SBC wanted to add something in the recommendations that would identify a minimum buffer size?

There was discussion among the landowners present at the meeting. It was noted that the standard would have to be different for homes versus pastures. Also, Andrew noted that the restriction will be for infrastructure, trails and the like. The USFS cannot stop anyone from walking right up to private property. Laura said this is where signage would be important. The SBC's recommendation to the USFS will be for buffers to be "reasonable" and the USFS can come up with an idea of what that means. Jodie said in the public participation process, the parameters for reasonable buffers can be defined more clearly. Laura will add language into the recommendations stating the public will have the opportunity to work with the USFS on buffer areas on a case-by-case basis. The idea of the buffer is to restrict noise.

◆ Safety Concerns – the SBC recommends spots for helicopter access, and making sure roads are maintained for emergency vehicle access. With increased use of the area, this is an important consideration.

Question – will the helicopter spots have signs?

Jodie said yes, the USFS can put signs in that identify the helicopter landing areas. In the turnaround areas that will also serve as helipads, the USFS can put a sign up that says "No Parking, Turnaround Only" so people won't park there, in case there is a need for emergency helicopter access. Laura added this suggestion to the list of recommendations.

◆ Camping Areas – members of the SBC noted that there are multiple developed campsites near Ruidoso, so adding developed campsites in the Hale Lake area is unnecessary. The SBC recommends that primitive "dispersed" camping be added in the Hale Lake area, however. This may include hike-in spots. Andrew noted that primitive camping is generally allowed on national forests for anyone who is a certain distance from any developed site. The recommendation refers to "hardened" dispersed sites with designated campfire sites. Jodie noted that with fire

restrictions in place, people can only have a fire in metal fire rings in developed campgrounds. She doesn't want people to see fire rings in dispersed campsites and think it's OK to have a fire there under fire restrictions. This is up to the USFS, however. Laura will also add language that camping isn't allowed within 300 yards of a manmade water source.

The USFS doesn't want language that restricts backpackers included in the plan.

There was discussion among landowners and the USFS representatives on signs for water sources. Laura said the SBC has universally agreed that signage, communications and education are necessary to implement this plan.

◆ Parking and Trailheads – the SBC identified several sites that would be good for parking lots and trailheads on the map. Three of these sites have been explicitly included in the list of recommendations. Laura added another potential parking site that would accommodate hiking. There was some discussion about signage in the parking areas.

◆ Bathrooms – having bathrooms at the developed sites, or at least some of the sites, is on the “wish list” of the SBC. This is a recommendation for the USFS as it is what the collaborative wants. Having it in the recommendations may make it easier for the USFS to make this happen.

Where feasible, the SBC also would like to have water available at one of the parking areas.

◆ Trails – the SBC expressed a preference for loop trails and as much connectivity as possible. The recommendations don't go into too much detail as the actual trails will depend a lot on topography, but the preferences are for loops and connectivity.

◆ Tunstall Murder Site – the SBC recommended interpretation of this site, as well as improved access since the road there is rough. Perhaps a single-track trail to the site in addition to the road would improve access.

◆ Hunter Retrieval Sites – the SBC suggests a hunter retrieval plan which would allow hunters to use motorized vehicles to retrieve game. Jodie noted that this should apply to otherwise closed roads (not just anywhere across the landscape). This may include a time limit, and may require people to sign in and/or get a key before they go into closed areas, but the USFS and NMDG&F will consider this recommendation. Laura added that NMDG&F will have input with the USFS in making decisions about an enforceable retrieval plan.

◆ Seasonal Closures – the SBC supports seasonal closures if necessary, and if conditions require it to protect assets. Laura added a sentence that said the closures may apply to specific activities depending on the need.

◆ Wildlife – the SBC is supportive of providing areas for wildlife, but there was not agreement on where these should be located.

◆ Communication – a communication strategy is not part of the transportation plan, but the SBC recognizes the importance of good communications to the success of the plan. Communication includes public education, particularly regarding designations around private property and marking closed areas.

Specific User Groups

(1) Horse Riding Trails – horseback riders can use much of the USFS land. The SBC identified areas for developed trails, and favors a shared or multi-use approach so the same trails can be used by hikers or mountain bikers. Trails should connect to parking areas.

(2) Mountain Biking Trails – recommendation is for 25 to 50 miles of mountain bike trails at both high and low altitudes, and connected to trailheads. Trails will be determined depending on topography; the SBC prefers some loops near Hale Lake. Once two-track roads are determined, single-track trails for mountain bikes can be determined.

(3) OHV Areas – the map shows OHV trails, as Option A. This is what the OHV people want to do, mapping all the trails. Option B would restrict the trails south of 443 and east of the Schneider property. There also is Option C that is more restrictive, eliminating OHVs south of 443. Option D would restrict much of the area south of 443, but leave some of the blue routes at the east end. (the Dog-Town loop, minus the spurs); Option D represents the wildlife rest area. Andrew asked people to suggest names for the different loops – this will help the public remember them on signs, for example. Implementation is an issue but the first approach would focus on self-policing, with the hope that this will work. If not, a different approach will have to be worked out. Jodie said that from previous experience with a travel management plan, she learned that having good signage and maintaining signs is key, and also they started with law enforcement the first season, then after that people did a good job of self-policing.

Additional Suggestions

Robert suggested that we add a recommendation for public-private partnerships that would encourage self-policing and maintenance. Jodie noted the SBC just started an adopt-a-trail program to maintain and police trails. Robert said if people put sweat-equity into trail maintenance, they will police it and make sure others follow the rules.

A question came up about wildlife, and where the wildlife rest area would be. Laura said the four options for OHVs specifically address where the areas for wildlife would be set aside.

Jodie said that what is good about the options is that they help the USFS develop alternatives for their EA, and analyze the effects of the different options relative to various factors. In making decisions, Jodie will look carefully at the recommendations the SBC has come up with.

Laura said that in the “grant world,” collaborative groups are important. Laura would like this group to continue for fundraising, and for other purposes. The Smokey Bear Collaborative can contribute to many other projects, including transportation plans for other parts of the Smokey Bear Ranger District.

Robert said that on July 16, from 3:00 to 7:00 pm, the USFS will have an open house to discuss the Need for Change and the preliminary draft revised forest plan. The Need for Change is a key part of the process, and they need many people looking at and commenting on this.

Jodie said the Smokey Bear District staff is looking at the northern end of the district, and could add travel aspects to their plan for the area. This is coming up soon. This ties to the North Sacramento WUI Plan. Note: The North Sacramento WUI Plan is available for viewing on the

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Smokey Bear Collaborative website. Laura noted that having plans and strategies in place are important for fundraising.

The South Central Mountains RC&D does most of fire mitigation work in area, through lots of CFRPs that provide funding for thinning. The SBC can do lots of different things. If people have ideas for projects, bring them to Laura.

Andrew noted that the SMC is not tied specifically to the USFS. The group can identify other issues in the county, and Andrew will be the USFS representative on the collaborative.

Laura said that once the travel plan is done, then the SBC will have a lot to do, because we'll need money for signage, for trail building and maintenance. The RC&D can also produce materials such as brochures to educate people.

There were several landowners from the Hale Lake area in attendance at this meeting, and they said they oppose the transportation plan, because they face a lot of trespassing and vandalism, such as drinkers that are shot up. They want the area to stay as it is, and the transportation plan would encourage more traffic through the area, which they don't want to see. The Smokey Bear Collaborative is making a decision for them.

Laura responded that the SBC is gathering information, and is not making any decisions for anyone.

A landowner stated that the safety issue is crucial, both for locals and for others who use the area. There is a big threat of a wildfire in the area. There is a lot of preservation that needs to take place out there. Every day a little bit is lost. A lot of the forest has been thinned or cleared. Having a permitting system in place for riding OHVs would help to police the location. Jodie said we may get to that, but we're not there yet in NM.

Robert suggested that perhaps we need to beef up the language regarding respect for private property in the recommendations, since landowners have expressed a concern about illegal use and damage from increased use.

Andrew said he wants to be clear that the set of recommendations that the SBC is producing is not the end point for the process of creating the travel plan. These are just recommendations. The USFS is listening to lots of different perspectives and will continue to do so.

Laura added a sentence to the Private Property section acknowledging the concerns expressed by private property owners about increased use and illegal activities, and negative impacts.

Clark noted that the SBC is local and has the inside track on what local people want from the national forest. The forest plan will have comments from all over the nation, but this group can play an important role in commenting and encouraging others to comment on the plan.

Andrew invited members and the public to call him at the USFS office and he can answer any questions about the NEPA process. The end of this process is still a few months away. Andrew can add anyone to an email list to make sure everyone who wants to hear about the whole process.

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