

Smokey Bear Collaborative
May 22, 2019
ENMU Ruidoso

Attendance

Laura Doth, South Central Mountains RC&D, Smokey Bear Collaborative Facilitator
Beau Truitt, Bureau of Land Management
Curtis Coburn, NM Department of Game & Fish
Lance Roe, Backcountry Attitudes
Leroy Cockrell, OHV Users
Anne Myrick, Equestrian Users
Mike Buechter, Bicycle Ruidoso
Robert Barber, Lincoln County Land & Natural Resources Advisory Committee (LANRAC)
Borde H. Williams
George Douds, US Forest Service, Smokey Bear Ranger District
J.P. Kenmore, Lincoln County Office of Emergency Services
Alan Payne
Jodie Canfield, US Forest Service, Smokey Bear Ranger District
Andrew Ellis, US Forest Service, Smokey Bear Ranger District
Israel Chavez, City of Ruidoso Downs
Alan Barton, NM Highlands University, Forest & Watershed Restoration Institute

Introduction

Laura opened the meeting with a brief review of the purpose and goals.

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) is developing an Environmental Assessment (EA) as part of a plan for the Hale Lake area, southeast of Ruidoso Downs. The EA and plan focus on recreational uses of the area, including roads, transportation, and facilities. The Smokey Bear Collaborative (SBC) has been working on a proposed action for the EA. Participants in the SBC representing various recreational users of the Hale Lake area have submitted their interests and perspectives, and the USFS has compiled and mapped these. The purpose of tonight's meeting is to review and discuss the work that has been completed, and will contribute to the proposed action. The goal is to have the proposed action completed in June.

Background

Jodie Canfield, Smokey Bear District Ranger, gave some background information on the work of the SBC. The SBC has been working on the recreational priorities. She will take these priorities and incorporate them into an EA. In the EA, the USFS looks at a variety of conditions and factors, including wildlife, cultural issues, and recreational impacts. Jodie has formed an Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) in the Smokey Bear Ranger District (SBRD) to work on the EA and travel management/recreation plan. IDT members each have expertise that represent these different aspects of the plan, plus there is an engineer on the team. The IDT is on board with the priorities the SBC has come up with.

Public Comments

Jodie said the USFS has put together a pre-scoping letter and sent it out. They've received comments back on the letter, which provide further background for the EA. Andrew of the SBRD

noted that the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) has a strong interest in this project and has submitted comments. Other groups and members of the public have submitted comments as well, and from these, the topics that were raised include range resources, environmental impacts, maintenance on trails system, opportunities for new trails for OHVs, equestrian uses, potential trailheads, day use areas, parking large trailers, and access on the 443 road. In the handout summarizing these, names have been removed, although the comments are part of the public record. The names are not necessary for this group, however.

The comments on the pre-scoping letter indicate that the USFS will have to balance many different interests and topics in coming up with their recreation and transportation plan.

Question – how do these comments stand up against comments received on other plans?

Jodie noted that the SBRD usually doesn't get any comments on its proposals. The public seems to be much more interested in the topic of roads and recreation, however. Andrew noted that when the USFS issues its proposed action, they likely will receive many more comments. The CBD has a strong interest in recreation issues, and will likely be involved. The proposed action that the SBC is developing will be an important document for the area.

While the SBC has contributed a lot of information to the proposed action, there are some topics that came up in the public comments that the SBC has not covered, such as vandalism and misuse of the area. Also, the SBC has touched on but not discussed in detail issues related to private landowners in the area, and creating a buffer zone around private landholdings. Once the recreation and transportation plan is in place, there is the potential that many more people will be drawn to the Hale Lake area, and this could increase problems like vandalism and issues with private landholdings.

Enforcement

Leroy Cockrell, OHV representative on the SBC, met with Curtis Coburn and Eric Chavez and they discussed the legal side of some of the issues in the Hale Lake area. Leroy wanted to know how enforcement of the plan could be handled, especially related to OHVs. Since agencies don't have the resources to patrol the area frequently, it likely is up to OHV users to enforce rules themselves. Leroy was interested in exploring the possibility for a permit system, perhaps a sticker on the side of ATVs so someone could identify them to report misbehavior. But from their conversation, there seemed to be many difficulties in implementing a self-policing system. Leroy believes this is missing an opportunity.

In their conversation, they covered a number of topics, however, including signage, the use of cameras to monitor closed trails, trail maintenance and user-maintained trails. Full-sized 4x4s, like large pickup trucks and Jeeps, present a particular problem. These cause a bigger impact than smaller side-by-sides and ATVs. The large vehicles can run fine on 588, but are a problem on other roads around the Hale Lake area.

USFS IDT Perspectives

Jodie and Andrew, the USFS reps on the SBC, reviewed what the IDT members discussed at a meeting held on May 13, 2019. (See handout). First, in response to the concerns about large OHVs, they noted that there are a lot of roads on the district that can handle large vehicles. Maybe what the USFS needs to do is direct people to these other locations.

The USFS reps also gave some background on the issue of OHVs and enforcement. In 2008, the USFS did an analysis looking at the Hale Lake area, but not much action followed. The SBRD is now reviving this project. She started with her team. They created GIS maps of all the roads. Once this was complete, they started the SBC in Sep. 2018, and now they are in the data gathering stage. Laura has taken on the role of facilitator, and NMHU archives documents. They put the storybook tool online.

The USFS will consider all the feasible opportunities, and those that are reasonably doable and legitimate will be pursued. This doesn't necessarily include everything that this group has discussed, but generally the USFS IDT agrees with most of what the SBC has proposed. Jodie will make the final decision of what will go into the plan.

The USFS IDT agreed that signage is a key part of implementing the plan effectively. On the Sacramento Ranger District, they have nice signs, and this helps to make people behave themselves. The SBRD would benefit by taking a similar approach.

As Jodie noted earlier, in putting together the EA and plan, the USFS must consider a variety of issues. For example, wildlife and particularly listed endangered/threatened species are a concern. The USFS biologists have found a pair of Mexican Spotted Owls (MSO) in the southwest corner of the area under consideration, so there is a Protected Activity Center (PAC) for MSOs in that area. A PAC is a defined area that must be managed carefully to protect this threatened species. There will be no new roads in this area.

The USFS IDT thought the Hale Lake area was not good for single track off-road vehicles. They thought the Gavilan Ridge area would be better for this use.

Dispersed (backcountry) camping will be a part of the plan and will be allowed. Campsites must be at least 300 feet off of a motorized route.

User-created tracks and roads are a significant concern in the area, expressed by both the USFS IDT and the SBC. The decision on the proposed action should include all options for closing user-made roads, which may range from putting a boulder across the front, to putting up a gate and signs.

The USFS IDT members thought a developed parking area near Stetson Road would be good. They thought Lark Road should be kept open, but with no parking nor increased use, as it is in the MSO PAC. In Hale Canyon, there is an issue with erosion that needs to be addressed, and they need to rework some of the infrastructure.

Mountain biking trails/facilities could be constructed, perhaps in a designated area, as funding allows. However, putting in one track across the whole area from east to west is not feasible due to the topography and the current location of roads. The SBRD trails manager can work with SBC biking people to propose a good area for mountain biking.

Roads for OHVs that go up to the scenic overlook areas are OK, and perhaps these could be constructed with loops.

Installing cattle guards and horse passages, and cleaning up pipelines, all are necessary. The team needs to assess ranching around the 588 loop.

On the east side, the IDT recommends maintaining OHV access and new construction of a hiking trail. The IDT supports the Perry Road OHV loop that the SBC suggested, with a few caveats.

There will be a field review in early June to review what was suggested by the Collaborative. In general, however Jodie's IDT was supportive of most of what the Collaborative suggested.

A question came up about equestrian users and conflicts with other uses. The USFS personnel said that equestrians need to be aware of the risks. Equestrian users said that a bicycle would be more scary to a horse than a motor vehicle, since you can hear a motor vehicle coming and get off the trail. But bikes often appear suddenly and scare horses.

A question came up about why full-sized vehicles are not allowed up to the top?

Jodie said the USFS position is that full-sized OHVs are not appropriate for that area. Perhaps this is a discussion that this group needs to have.

A question was raised about how to get emergency vehicles into some of these areas? You'll have a lot of people using the whole Hale Lake area; how do you get in to get people who've broken bones, or had a heart attack?

Andrew said the USFS can't build a new road to get an ambulance in, just given the topography.

Laura noted that recommendations of sites that are suitable for helicopters have been included in previous meetings. You need at least 100' x 100' for a helicopter. However, Andrew noted that people need to realize the risk and accept some of the risk themselves. Getting away from civilization implies risks. Leroy said there are water tanks up in that area where a helicopter could land. We could number them, and have communication with search and rescue as a place to take an injured person. Laura suggested that if search and rescue personnel familiarize themselves with the area, they will know how to get to designated sites; we should include this in our recommendations.

Jodie said the critical points for the discussion tonight are which roads are suitable for which sized vehicles? And regarding the loop around 443, what are the pros and cons?

Full-Sized Vehicles

Laura asked if there were enough other options on the Smokey Bear District for full-sized off-road vehicles, and should we then recommend keeping them out of the Hale Lake area? People have talked to her about the damage caused by OHVs. Which vehicles cause the most problems?

The group agreed that any vehicle can cause problems, but the bigger and heavier vehicles cause worse problems. Having limits is a good idea, but a width limit may not be the best way to go. It may be better just to indicate what acceptable uses are for each area. For example, the 588 loop and part of 443 would be fine for any mudboggers. The vehicle width is less of an issue than a combination of horsepower and weight. In Hale Canyon, you could travel it with a full-sized vehicle now, with little maintenance. This allows access to camping and hunting. The road up there is pretty rough, but this may be part of the appeal. One issue with Hale Canyon is that the road is narrow, so this might restrict the ability of vehicles traveling in opposite directions to get past each other. Getting a full-sized truck through Hale Canyon might take

some work. 588 is fine for a pickup, but Hale Canyon is more of a problem. Smaller vehicles are fine, but larger vehicles are a problem. Perhaps one solution is to designate it as a high-clearance road for 4WD vehicles only. And establish and post a rule that if the trail is narrow, uphill traffic gets the right-of-way. Downhill traffic must move aside.

Laura asked if there were any other roads that might serve for large vehicles. Again, this is just for a proposed action for the USFS. What do we want to put in the proposed action?

A question came up, asking if the USFS has a definition for high clearance vehicle?

Jodie said she would check that out. Andrew said that from the perspective of the USFS, high clearance is more for maintenance. The USFS can put up signs recommending high clearance vehicles only, but if people want to go there, they are on their own.

A question was asked, if you could regulate who gets onto roads by putting concrete posts on the boundaries to keep people from going in with the wrong vehicles? This is done in the Sacramentos.

Jodie said this is a pretty standard practice. Laura noted that as vehicles have gotten larger, they won't fit for trails with older limits enforced with concrete. Andrew added that extensive signage will be key to this. The USFS needs to consult with users about what signs will be effective. Laura said that since the beginning, this group has agreed that signage and communications, public education are important.

ID Team Agreements or Disagreements

The USFS IDT reviewed the proposals by the SBC so far, and agreed with most of what the Collaborative has proposed. Here is a run-down of the IDT's recent meeting.

Lark Access – The IDT thinks it isn't feasible to expand opportunities into this area, due to limited parking, private homeowner conflicts, and no room for trailers to turn around. This is not a good place for developed recreation. Ridgetop is part of this area.

Mexican Spotted Owl (MSO) area – An MSO Protected Activity Center (PAC) has been identified within the project area. There is no way to gain access except by overland travel. Despite many hopes that have been expressed to do things in this area, due to MSO activity, this area will only be available for limited use as part of the Hale Lake project. People can walk or ride a horse into this area, but can't take an OHV in this area.

Green area to east – An area for hiking, equestrian, bicycle trails. The area is good for day use, vehicles with trailers, picnicking, bathrooms and trailheads. Also, perhaps, OHVs in Hale Canyon. It may be possible to create a loop through here. The IDT wants to be sure there is a buffer around the shooting range. Also, there should be a buffer between private land and added developed features. Terrain-wise, an OHV trail may be feasible, that connects up to 443. Two helispots on the southeast and northeast end of 443 seem feasible. A connector trail at the southeast corner is feasible. It doesn't seem to be feasible, given the terrain, to build and maintain trails for hiking, equestrian and mountain biking in the central area.

In order to keep OHVs out of the area, in order for a state agency (e.g. NM Game & Fish) to enforce the exclusion, the state legislature has to pass a statute. It's probably easier for the USFS to enforce it. If a road is designated closed by any state or federal agency, the state can enforce that.

Mountain Biking and Compatible Uses

Laura asked what needs to be considered for mountain biking? Mike said that mountain bikers who travel here from elsewhere are not going to come to ride double track roads. They will come to ride single-track trails. Jodie asked what would be the priority for mountain bikers, the Hale Lake area, or other sites, such as near the high school? Mike said areas closer to town would probably be preferable. But, many locals would like to ride near Hale Lake, but on a single track, such as old MotoX trails. Andrew noted that trails have to be top-tier to get people out to the area. Anything less probably wouldn't draw users and would be futile to develop. Mike said that multi-day loops may be attractive to bike riders – there are people now who do bike-packing. Andrew said this should go into the Collaborative's proposal. Mike added that building new mountain bike trails probably isn't a short-term priority.

Andrew said that the international norm is cyclists must get out of the way for everyone else, including both horses and hikers. But, there isn't public information in this area nor signs that explain this. Ann said a bike with a bell on it is a good idea as well, to avoid conflicts with equestrians. The land belongs to everyone and we need to learn how to get along and use it together. Andrew wanted to be sure everyone understood that when the USFS tries to separate incompatible uses, it is just to make it more comfortable for everyone, not because the USFS wants to create limits.

There was a discussion about the terrain and bike trails, and other uses. Jodie noted that downhill bike trails only allows bikes going one way. Ann said that for equestrians, it is unnecessary to build roads so that horses and riders can get uphill to start on trails, it is better to start a ride with horses going uphill. She said parking for equestrians that is close to 70 is best. It's better to mix horses and motorized vehicles since equestrians can hear noise from OHVs and get out of the way – the noise doesn't bother horses but if horses are surprised on a trail they might get spooked. Horses and riders cannot hear bicycles coming down a trail and that is a problem. For similar reasons, bicycles are also a problem on hiking trails.

Leroy has put together suggestions for trails for OHV use. But he wants to make sure everyone knows that once the trails are designated, OHV users have to run only on those trails, and can't start to take short-cuts and creating new user trails.

In response to some concerns that were expressed, Andrew said that road closures will be part of this plan as well, although the issue of which roads will be closed and where has not been resolved yet.

Jodie noted that Leroy's map has a few more routes than her IDT recommended, but they can look at the suggestions. What do people think of keeping the area south of 443 non-motorized, due to wildlife concerns? It was suggested that it probably wouldn't be a problem to have motorized use, as OHVs have used that area for years and the wildlife is still in the area.

Lance said he has talked with Jody about a whole different type of plan for the area north of the airport, mostly on BLM land. Jodie said the USFS land that abuts Fort Stanton is her next area

of interest. Lance said he gets 5 to 10 people in his store every day asking where it is legal to ride OHVs around here. The Hale Lake area looks positive for OHVs.

Reviewing Maps

Leroy invited people to look at his map and OHV routes. People gathered around Leroy's map and there was an extended discussion about possible routes through the area.

Recommendations

Laura noted that the process of producing a proposed action for the Hale Lake area is at a point where the group can start drafting recommendations. Andrew and Laura will get together and put together the map, then Laura will draft a document that includes what the SBC has talked about. She'll send it out to everyone, and people can comment on it and let her know if anything is missing, and if she interpreted things properly. It would be good to have all the comments back before the next meeting of the SBC.

Andrew said that the group can come up with two proposed actions if there is not consensus in this group on one action.

Jodie said that typically, in a NEPA process, the USFS comes up with the proposed action, but here, she wants to get the proposed action from this group. Her specialists then will develop the alternatives, focusing on each of their specific topics. Things like health and safety, resources, soil & water, relations with private landowners are also important considerations. But Jodie is very open to what this group comes up with.

Laura extended thanks to everyone who has contributed to this process. There has been a surprising amount of consensus in this group. Now the SBC can develop the proposed action. Laura emphasized that she does not have any specific ownership in the outcome, so please, everyone make all the recommendations and corrections as necessary.

Robert Barber gave a good perspective on how to think about suggestions for the final proposed action. He said that when thinking about what to submit, SBC participants need to think about minimizing the risk to users, including grazing and hunting, and also how to minimize the exposure to private land. The Collaborative members also need to consider the fiscal possibilities, and how to prioritize the actions, because the Collaborative, national forest and county cannot do everything at once, due to limited money. So, members need to think about public-private partnerships, including the "sweat equity" that people can contribute, such as those who can build and maintain trails. In prioritizing activities, also think about the amount of use at different times of the year. Also, it is important to protect natural resources and cultural sites. Often, users who have access to recreation areas don't respect it; they dump stuff and ride off road. This is why Congress creates wilderness areas in the national forest, and wilderness would take away all the uses the SBC has talked about.

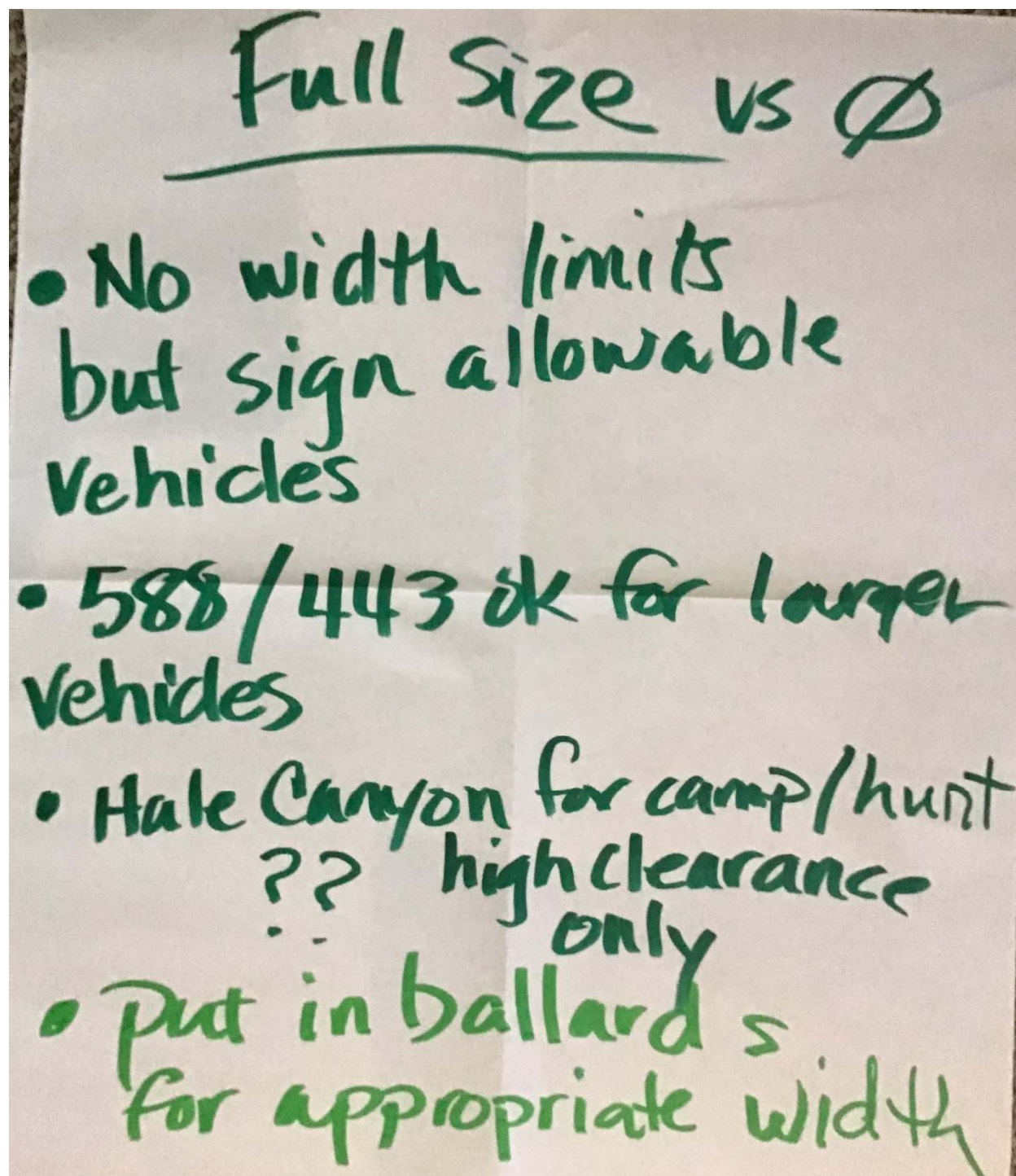
Andrew said that for the immediate future, we need to focus on the how. Robert added that there are things we need to keep in mind now. Andrew said the final document will give the national forest the authority to do the projects. Once the document is in place, then the projects will come up as money becomes available. Laura said having the planning document also is necessary for fundraising. Every funder wants to see the planning document.

Jodie said she would like to continue meeting with this group, to advise her on what the community wants. The Lincoln National Forest's Plan Revision process is getting some traction, and having input from the collaborative would be helpful.

On July 19 they'll roll out the preliminary draft plan for Smokey Bear district. It would be helpful if the collaborative could continue to meet monthly to assist with plan revision.

Next Meeting

The next SBC meeting will be on Wed. June 26, tentatively scheduled to be held at ENMU-Ruidoso. The Lincoln County Emergency Services building is the back-up locale if ENMU-R isn't available).

Flip Charts

Wildlife Concerns

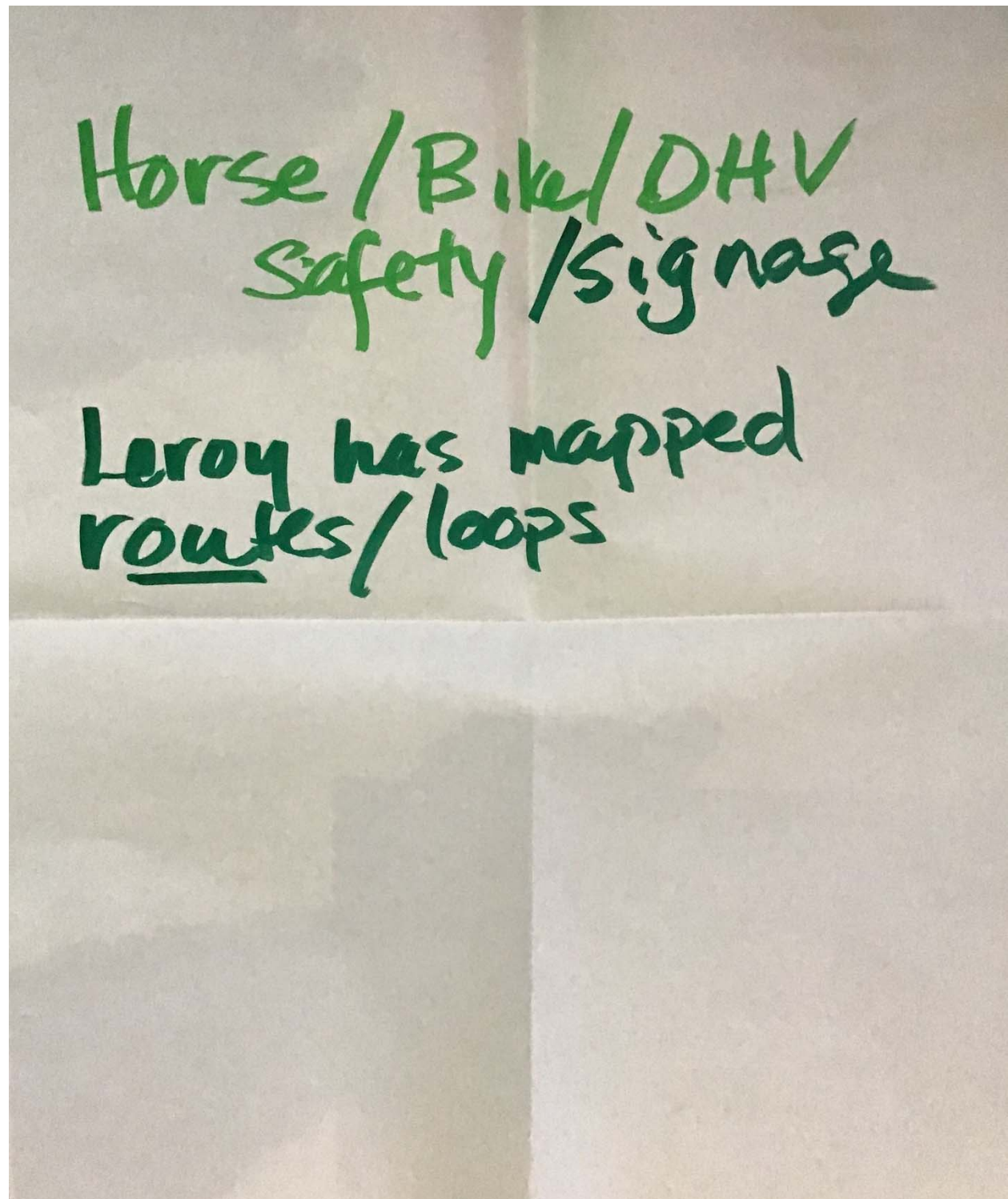
S g 443

Single track

- Keep options open
- Downhill trail w/ Shuttle
- not a short-term priority

OHV

- Stetson TH
- decommission unneeded routes



Photos

