

Smokey Bear Collaborative Group Recommendations for the Hale Lake Area

Background: The Smokey Bear Collaborative Group first met in September of 2018. The goal of the group was to bring multiple forest user groups together to discuss options for the Hale Lake area in Lincoln County, New Mexico. The previous travel plan for this area was created in 1986. Primary uses at that time were ranching, hunting and firewood collection.

Since that time, the area has been used for recreation purposes, but no designated areas or planned user sites have been created. The Smokey Bear Ranger District sent a team out to map the existing roads in the Hale Lake Area. The team mapped both authorized and user made roads. The resulting map showed an extensive web of roads crisscrossing the area with little regard for land conservation or asset preservation. The goal of the Smokey Bear Collaborative Group is to provide the Smokey Bear Ranger District with options and recommendations as they move to create a new recreation/travel plan for the Hale Lake Area. To accomplish this goal, the group has met regularly to discuss ideas and options.

Current Status: The total project area covers 35,550 acres. 29,000 of those acres are under the Forest Service's jurisdiction, with the remainder being private land. There are 158.5 miles of road in the project area, and about 1/3 of the roads are user created. None of the roads are paved. Some are closed, some are only accessible by high clearance vehicles, and some are appropriate for passenger vehicles. Land use problems that have been observed include erosion and severe rutting on user created roads, illegal dumping, damage to meadows and degradation of road surfaces due to runoff.

There are no special considerations in the Hale Lake Area, so the Forest Service has the opportunity to design and plan that embraces multiple uses. The goal of the Smokey Bear Ranger District is to create a travel management plan that supports the highest and best use of the Hale Lake area.

Recommendations: In discussing proposed uses for the Hale Lake Area, the Smokey Bear Collaborative Group arrived at a consensus on many items. These include the following:

- Respect for the Land – the group as a whole recommends developing a travel plan that will protect the landscape found within the Hale Lake Area. They are supportive of actions that may include closing and restoring user created roads. The general consensus was that by designating usage areas, the public will be less likely to create their own roads and damage the land. Specific archaeological sites and owl pac areas should be avoided and uses restricted. Any trails created must be built to sustainable standards and should be designed to prevent erosion and resource damage.
- Respect for Private Property – the group recognized the significant impacts that the public can have on private property and lease holders in the area. Private property owners are concerned with the level of illegal activities that are currently found within the project area and have additional concerns about increased traffic and negative impacts. The group recommends creating a reasonable buffer around private

properties. A larger buffer area can be created around homes. The buffers are intended to restrict development of trails and infrastructure within the buffered areas. Private property owners will have the opportunity to work with the USFS in determining the actual size of the buffer zone on a case-by-case basis. Signage identifying private property and closed areas should be erected.

- Safety Concerns – with an increase in use, the group recommends designating spots within the project area that can be accessible to helicopters. These areas are designated on the map, and may be restricted to turn-around access only. The group also discussed making sure roads are maintained to allow access by emergency crews.
- Camping Areas – The group recognizes that there are multiple developed campsites closer to Ruidoso, but would like to see “primitive” or dispersed campsites within the project area. These sites can include a fire ring and limited parking. Any campsites cannot be within 300 yards of a man-made water feature according to the NM Department of Game and Fish.
- Parking/Trailheads – Several areas that would work well as parking lots and trailheads have been identified and noted on the map. The lots need to be big enough for people to pull a trailer in, park and turn-around without difficulty. Location 1 is by the Stetson Gallery, Location 2 is off of 443 closer to Hale Lake, and Location 3 is in the northeast portion of the acreage.
- Bathrooms – the group recommends including bathrooms at each of the designated parking lots.
- Where feasible the desire is to have water available at the Hale Lake parking areas.
- Trails – The group prefers developing loop trails versus in and out style trails. The goal is as much connectivity as possible.
- Tunstall Murder Site – the group would like to see a parking area on the road (off 443) near the Tunstall Murder Site. The road to the site is currently very rough. The group recommended providing alternative access on a single-track trail. Interpretation as to the importance of the site should be developed and placed at the site.
- Hunter Retrieval Sites – the Hale Lake Area is used frequently by hunters. The group would like to see a hunter retrieval plan developed where hunters can use motorized vehicles to retrieve downed game on otherwise closed roads. NM Department of Game and Fish will have input in how to create an enforceable retrieval plan.
- Seasonal Closures – the group was supportive of actions that may require seasonal closures due to conditions and the potential for damage to assets. Seasonal closures may be applied to specific activities depending on the need.
- Wildlife – the group recognizes the importance of the wildlife in the area. The group is supportive of providing a designated rest area for wildlife. Opinions differed on where that rest area should be located, and how much acreage should be set aside.
- Communication – while a communication strategy is not part of the transportation plan, the group felt it is critical to recognize the importance of strong communication as trails are developed. Educating the public on how to responsibly use the Hale Lake Area for recreation will be critical to the long term success of the plan. This would include adequate designation of private property and marking of closed areas.

- The group would like to initiate efforts where self-policing and maintenance of trails becomes a reality. Public/Private partnerships will be important to the success of these efforts.

Specific user groups presented the group with their recommendations for user areas and trails.

- Horse Riding Trails – because the Hale Lake Area is US Forest Service lands, horseback riders can use much of the area. The group agreed that the southwest portion of the project area below 443 is ideal for a developed trail system. The group felt strongly that a shared-use or multi-use approach was preferable, and this area could also be used by hikers and mountain bikers. Additional trails would be available using the identified parking areas as trailheads. Developed trails near 443 A, B and C would also be desirable.
- Mountain Biking Trails – the group would like to see 25 to 50 miles of mountain bike trails including high and low altitude with trailheads. They identified possible mountain bike trails near Hale Lake. These trails will be determined based on the topography of the area. These trails do not currently exist, but the proposed design would come off of public roads in the area. Single track trail sites can be determined after the locations of two-track trails are determined. Trails with varying degrees of challenge should be created.
- OHV/Motorized Vehicles Option A – the motorized vehicle users recommend multiple loop trails where terrain permits throughout the Hale Lake Area. These routes are noted on the map. They prefer loops where possible and recommend opening Hale Canyon road. Option A includes loops open to motorized vehicles in the southeast portion of the project area.
- OHV/Motorized Vehicles Option B – option B would eliminate the motorized vehicle trails below 443 and east of the Schneider, Nelson and Tays properties.
- OHV/Motorized Vehicles Option C - New Mexico Game & Fish recommends no motorized vehicle traffic south of 443 to provide a rest area for wildlife. Designated trails should be kept away from grazing and wildlife areas.
- OHV/Motorized Vehicles Option D – option D would eliminate the Red Loop and the Hale Canyon Loop but maintaining the Blue Loop (the Dog Town Loop) minus the spurs. This option supports the wildlife rest area recommendations.
- Neither Options B, C or D were suggestions or requests of the Motorized OHV Representative or the OHV Support Group. Consensus was not able to be reached on this issue, so Options A, B, C and D are presented as stand-alone options representing diverse views.