BIC Access, Habitat, Wilderness and Set Aside Sub Committee Key Focus: How do you provide access for human needs and protect important habitat?

Intent: Access including motor and mechanized vehicle access is important for the social, cultural, economic, and environmental wellbeing of local communities and to the citizens of the United States. Access that balances the human element and the environmental element is needed across the forest.

Background: Forest access was one of the most contentious issues that raised objections in the last ROD for the Blue Mountain Forests in 2019. A forest plan is a programmatic document and does not generally make site specific decisions on travel and access management, open forest designation and road densities, which are more appropriately part of a Travel Management Plan. Motor vehicle Access by a maintained and unmaintained system of roads are a necessary part of the managed landscape, providing critical access for resource management, public use and wildfire protection while supporting the culture and customs of the local communities. Any reduction of access, trails and roads will have an impact to our local communities and the management of our public lands. Understanding how the forest road system is managed for these purposes is important for safe and responsible public and administrative use and for maintaining a sustainable transportation system.

Research has demonstrated the potential for impacts to water quality, fish and wildlife habitat from road and trail systems. Some impacts to water quality, fish and wildlife, and habitat can be the result of road and trail design, placement, distribution and maintenance; as well as their designation (i.e., motorized or non-motorized). Forest road and trail system use, density and habitat conditions can have negative effects on wildlife in general and specifically on elk distribution. Balancing access with habitat considerations requires analysis of site-specific needs and issues and is best achieved at the project level.

Desired Conditions

Public Use: The public desires a simple way of staying informed on forest access. A current and comprehensive inventory of all forest roads and trails that is displayed on an easily read map which clearly lists status is essential.   Any proposed changes to status of the road system l would be evaluated and analyzed at the project level through the NEPA process in coordination with the local governments and with public notice and involvement. Where applicable, road and trail systems available for public use should be maintained according with its designated purpose. Any use restriction previously reviewed and approved through the NEPA process should be clearly and effectively posted for the public and reflected on updated maps.

Administrative Use: Road and trail systems within the managed landscape support safe and effective access for administrative use. This includes fire suppression and prescribed burning; forest management and timber harvest; grazing and livestock management; mining; habitat management and weed and invasive species control. Roads maintained for administrative access but not suitable or available for general public use have appropriate controls (signing, gates, berms, etc.) to prevent inadvertent public use and an effective compliance monitoring plan is in place. These roads are not scheduled for decommissioning

User Created Routes: During the inventory process, routes that are found to have been created by repeated motor vehicle travel off designated routes (user created routes) will be clearly identified.

Objective criteria, such as evaluating historical maps and aerial imagery shall be used for determining whether, and when a user-created route was formed. These routes would be evaluated and analyzed at the project level for social, cultural, historical, and economic, significance balanced with habitat and environmental concerns, while, at a minimum, seeking to ensure access in the general area. The evaluation would occur in coordination with local governments with public involvement through the NEPA process. The public and user groups would be well informed and provided ability to comment on changes in management actions

Elk Security: Forest habitats, trails and road systems are managed and maintained to support elk populations that are broadly distributed on spring/summer/fall habitat generally from April through November. Elk habitat provides a balanced juxtaposition of adequate nutritional resources for elk during summer thru winter, minimizing human disturbance effects year-round, and providing sufficient vegetative hiding cover (Rowland et al. 2000, Long et al. 2008, Toweill and Thomas 2002).

Consistent with other desired conditions and management area direction, 30 to 100 percent of a sub watershed provides effective security for elk as defined by Hillis et al. (1991). Adequate areas of minimal or no motorized use exist within flat, high visibility landscapes to encourage elk to remain on public lands. In steeper lands with increased topographic relief and/or vegetative cover, effective elk security encourages elk to remain on public lands. Effective security allows elk to utilize available forage and cover during calving season in the spring and early summer and help maintain body condition on winter ranges. Hiding cover and forage patches are distributed to provide adequate biomass and quality forage such that elk remain on National Forest System lands to provide year-round recreational and cultural opportunities and minimize damage to crops and pastures on private lands.

Set Aside Desired Conditions

Appropriate uses of general forest area are not constrained by new administrative set asides. The subcommittee does not see the need for any additions to set asides. Understanding that the forest service has to evaluate the suitability and eligibility through the forest planning process for future set asides, any recommended set asides should be limited to Inventoried Roadless Areas.

For Standard and Guidance

Notice should be posted along road systems under consideration for management action to ensure affected users groups receive notice.

December 15, 2020 v