

Forest Access and Set Aside Final Desired Conditions

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

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 (TMP). Motor vehicle access by a maintained and unmaintained system of roads is 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. Reduction of access, trails, and roads will have an impact to local communities and the management of 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 some impact to water quality, and 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 nonmotorized). Forest road and trail system use, density and habitat conditions may have some negative effects on wildlife in general and specifically on elk distribution. Access and habitat considerations require analysis of both site-specific and landscape level needs and issues.

The public is not adequately informed on access and set asides and these desired conditions, among other things, are intended to help address that need.

Desired Conditions

Public Use: The public has a desire to be well informed on forest access, therefore a current and comprehensive inventory of all forest roads and trails is displayed on an easily read map which clearly lists status is essential. Any proposed changes to the status of the road system would be evaluated and analyzed at the project level through the NEPA process in coordination with the local and tribal governments and with comprehensive public notice and involvement. Where applicable, road and trail systems available for public use should be maintained according with their designated purpose. Any use restriction previously reviewed and approved through the NEPA process are 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: emergency response and public safety; fire suppression and prescribed burning; forest management and timber harvest; grazing and livestock management; mining; restoration, fish, wildlife, and habitat management; and weed and invasive species control. Roads maintained for administrative access, but not suitable or available for general public use, have

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appropriate controls (signing, gates, berms, etc.) to prevent inadvertent public use and an effective compliance monitoring plan is in place. These roads will not be 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 to determine if it should be included in the forest system. These routes would be evaluated and analyzed at the project level for social, cultural, historical, economic, habitat and environmental concerns, while, at a minimum, seeking to ensure access in the general area. The evaluation would occur in coordination with local and tribal governments with comprehensive public notice and 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 in a manner that supports and enables broad distribution of elk populations based on their seasonal habitat needs. The desired condition is that habitat is managed to provide a balance of adequate nutritional resources, cover, and human disturbance regimes that encourage elk to remain on public lands. Collaboration and coordination occur that benefits these desired future conditions by addressing the many other factors such as predation, hunting, and private land practices that also effect elk distribution while providing year-round recreational and cultural opportunities and limiting agricultural damage on private lands.

Set Asides: Appropriate uses of general forest area are not constrained by new administrative set asides; understanding that the forest service has to evaluate the suitability and eligibility through the forest planning process for future set asides, the subcommittee does not see the need for any additions to set asides.

For Standard and Guidance

Notice should be posted, and maps made available along road and trail systems under consideration for management action to ensure affected users groups receive notice. Rigorous and well-funded forest access education should be an outcome of the Forest Planning process.