



Routt Powder Riders

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August 25, 2009

SUBJECT: COLUMBINE ACCESS

Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests
Attn: Jamie Kingsbury, District Ranger
925 Weiss Drive
Steamboat Springs, CO 80487

Dear Ms. Kingsbury,

The Routt Powder Riders Board would like to thank you and Kent Foster for the time, energy and effort you have put into the Columbine Access proposal. The affected areas are very important to our membership and we appreciate your consideration of our thoughts, concerns and ideas. Please note that our members will be submitting individual responses.

Parking:

The Routt Powder Riders believe as we stated in May of 2005, *“Most comments (from the May 12th Planning Commission Meeting at Steamboat Lake State Park) suggested that users of the National Forest do not perceive the Forest as being overcrowded; only the trailheads and parking areas are crowded.”*

One large parking area anywhere will lead to congestion and create negative impacts to the natural environment surrounding that location. The Upper Elk River Community Plan states, *“encourage alternate dispersed trailheads and access to recreational designation areas to relieve congestion.”*

Quarry Parking Area:

The Quarry lot has been used as a recreational parking trailhead since it was developed. If the area were fully plowed and the gate moved *100 to 300 **yards*** north on FSR 550 to allow for parking along the southbound side of the road,

recreational parking at this site would likely be contained to Forest lands at minimal costs.

Overnight parking could be directed to the Marina with signage. If a groomed route from the Marina to RCR 129 clockwise around the lake could be arranged with State Parks, those overnight users could access the Quealy Trail more easily, which would lead to wider use of the Marina Parking facility.

It is more cost efficient to expand the existing parking area at the Quarry than to build a new parking facility *anywhere*. The material excavated out of the hillside to expand the site could be used to build a berm to insulate the recreational impacts from private property owners, which would conform to Routt County's Plan to buffer recreational impacts from defined residential neighborhoods. Permanent sanitation facilities could be installed and it could be built large enough for current needs and provide for pull-through access.

According to USFS representative Kent Foster, the winter complaints regarding the Quarry mostly concern overflow, which occurs approximately just four weekends a year.

Trilby Flats Parking Area:

The Trilby Flats parking area overflows much more frequently and is more of a concern because traffic is moving faster. A multi-use parking area near the intersection of FSR 488 would resolve overflow issues at both the Quarry and Trilby Flats.

The Prospector Trail (FSR 1156) is a single-track motorized route from May to October. FSR 488 is open to all vehicles from June 15th to December 1st. A larger Trilby Flats parking area would serve both summer and winter use.

A parking area in Trilby Flats will actually decrease the traffic through Columbine, as those seeking to head west will park at Trilby and those seeking to head north will park at Quarry.

Therefore, we would suggest a parking area in Trilby Flats that would accommodate 20 truck/trailer vehicles and 20 single vehicles.

This course of action conforms to the Upper Elk River Community Plan, "*New permitted recreational uses shall be located away from or have their impacts buffered from defined residential neighborhoods.*"

Parking on FSR 550 vs. RCR 129:

The scoping document indicates “*OHV use on FSR 550 overflows onto RCR 129.*” Building a new parking lot at FSR 550/413 intersection does not mitigate OHV overflow from traffic headed to/from points south. Forest Service representatives have indicated the proposed new trail would not be open for summer use.

We are concerned FSR 550 was not designed nor built to withstand early winter and late spring traffic demands. A parking area in Trilby Flats with sanitation facilities will provide parking off a paved county maintained road, so FSR 550 is not eroded during spring melts.

We are *very* concerned about the precedent plowing 1.5 miles of Forest Service road creates for other areas in the County. If Columbine residents can push an established parking area miles within the Forest boundaries, will residents near other recreational trailheads have precedent to demand the same? These concerns are a prudent consideration for Forest Service officials.

In 2004 (USFS File # 0265) Jim Linville, representative of FORB, suggested “*If Buff Pass were plowed up to a point one mile above Rocky Flats and the Seed House Road was plowed to Slavonia, huge areas would be opened up to non-motorized day users.*” This is the same person, in the same document, in the same paragraph who suggested “*Even though some parking areas are overcrowded, none of them should be expanded because that will just contribute to more overuse of the areas they serve.*” So what should we conclude? Opening areas to non-motorized users does not contribute to overuse, but expanding parking does?

We must discourage asking the taxpayer, whether local or national, to plow 1.5 miles of Forest Service roads in the snowiest part of Routt County to a new parking facility that would not be necessary if more cost effective methods were employed, namely the expansion of the existing parking area and the creation of a new parking area in Trilby Flats for all recreational users. **We cannot support plowing the additional 1.5 miles to the new parking proposed by the Forest Service.**

Proposed Parking Area at FSR 550/413 Intersection:

The proposed parking area at FSR 550/413 intersection would make an ideal parking facility for peak summer use, thereby minimizing the maintenance

costs borne by the County or Federal taxpayer. It should be large enough to accommodate future growth, approximately 45 vehicles with trailers.

When both a new Trilby Parking Area and the expanded Quarry Parking Area's combined usage indicates a need to plow 1.5 miles of Forest Service road to the new parking area and only after the Trilby Flats and FSR 413/550 intersection parking areas prove to be adequate for the current and foreseeable recreational needs, only then should the closing and reclamation of the Quarry Parking area even be considered.

Parking at both the Trilby Flats location and the Quarry Parking Areas should remain open to **all** recreational users. If the Quarry Parking Area must close because the recreational impacts are a burden to private property owners, the site should be reclaimed.

Groomed Trails:

Jim Linville stated in December of 2003, *"It's going to be harder and harder to find a route from the south side of the mountain (Hahn's Peak) around to the north that doesn't bring loud cries of objection."*

The Forest Service scoping document states *"the purpose of the proposal is to maintain groomed and marked snowmobile trail access and connectivity from Steamboat Lake State Park to the Routt National Forest area north of Columbine."* This connector route will be utilized by locals coming out of Hahn's Peak, visitors seeking gas at SLO, campers at the State Park and guests of Dutch Creek.

Trail alongside of RCR 129:

*"Negative impacts to residential neighborhoods and the residential environment" (Upper Elk River Community Plan) occur when you move a recreational trail from RCR 129 to **anywhere** else. Johnny Walker, a non-motorized user and quiet-use advocate, stated on February 4, 2004, "Landowners should continue to except (we think he means accept) the fact that they live next to a public road."*

The sights and sounds of motorized traffic should be expected along RCR 129, not at the base of Columbine Meadows and especially not through a suggested non-motorized area. The road goes everywhere anyone wants to go. It is the most logical route.

In December of 2003 Jim Linville wrote, *“Creating a new conflict to resolve an old one is, we feel, unacceptable and probably not even legal.”*

There has been a County ordinance in place since the late 80’s which allows snowmobiles to travel along the right side of RCR 129 within the maintained portion. Snowmobilers pay registration fees, burn gas with a road tax included, wear helmets and have running front and rear brake lights. Most importantly, they can conform to vehicular speeds.

Although it is safe for snowmobiles to co-exist with vehicular traffic on RCR 129, it would be safer and conform to the Upper Elk River Community Plan to *“Develop a trail system plan and implementation strategy including a trail along RCR 129.”* From the State Parks to Columbine the road was built with Federal dollars. As such, the right of way has been very clearly established.

In December of 2003 Johnny Walker suggested, *“Would it be possible to build a snowmobile/bike trail alongside of RCR 129 from Steamboat Lake State Park to the quarry area above Columbine? All machines would have fast access to recreational areas and private properties and Columbine Meadows would all be protected!”*

We would ask the USFS, the Routt County Board of County Commissioners, and the Routt County Road & Bridge Department to work together to permit the Steamboat Lake Snow Club to **keep a groomed recreational trail alongside of RCR 129.**

Trail on FSR 490:

Steve Pulford reported on March 13, 2009, *“I have skied on Hahn’s Peak from Columbine more times than I can count. I do not feel that the motorized use on the current trail poses any problems. On a given day, a user might encounter one or two groups of snowmobiles. All the groups I have encountered are respectable and there is plenty of room for both user groups on the road.”*

On April 15, 2003 Leslie Lovejoy wrote to the USFS, *“Our recommendation is to try to facilitate #410 (we believe she means FSR 490) to remain open as a dedicated route for snowmobile traffic on to #129 and then on to the quarry and further . . . Lyman Fancher (Columbine Cabins) agreed with this decision, as preserving Columbine Meadows will benefit his clients. He said that when SLO next applied for use of #410 access he would not oppose it.”*

The Forest Service can permit the plowing of FSR 490 at a depth and width to accommodate other forms of recreational use for *“the public generally”* as

specified in the right of way agreement. **Snowmobiles, groomers, skiers, snowshoers, and wheeled vehicles can all co-exist safely on FSR 490.**

Grooming of the Prospector Trail:

If the Forest Service discontinues the grooming permit on FSR 490, we propose a groomed multi-use trail through the Prospector Trail to Trilby Flats' new parking area. By meadow-hopping through the Prospector, far fewer live trees would need to be cut than the Forest Service Proposal. It would be a much shorter route. It would keep recreational traffic in a natural low spot, less likely to climb up and out onto private property. It keeps motorized users away from Columbine Meadows. The most affected property owners supported this idea when we met with them.

Trail west of RCR 129:

We would appreciate the Forest Service exploring the possibility of a trail to the west of RCR 129. Our preliminary exploration has indicated the excavation of the hillside would be less invasive than that of the Forest Service proposal and fewer live trees would need to be removed to facilitate this route.

Taking the motorized traffic through the Prospector and around the west side of RCR 129 would eliminate any possible conflict in Columbine Meadows, while maintaining desired connectivity.

Forest Service Proposed Trail:

There is a discrepancy regarding that area between the private property and the proposed trail. The Forest Service Proposed Action map shows the area as suggested non-motorized, yet the scoping document states the terrain east of the proposed trail is proposed as suggested non-motorized use. **We believe the area between the private property and the proposed trail should not be designated as non-motorized.**

After walking the proposed trail, it appears a lot of live trees would have to be cut to make the Forest Service's proposed trail work, as well as significant excavating to keep the groomer on the hillside. There was a trail on Rabbit Ears Pass that slid shut and closed access. Steep hillsides must be cut wider to provide for snow slough; is the Forest Service's estimate of disturbed area accurate?

The close proximity of the private well to the suggested trail is a hazard to Forest users and a liability to the groomer-operator who often grooms at night. The risk of water loss could be an issue for the permit holder.

David Mark, former grooming chairman of the Steamboat Lake Snow Club wrote in December of 2003, *"The proposal to run machines right through this area (Columbine Meadows) would do great disservice to the local people who are working hard to cooperate with each other."* Visitors have no vested interest in obeying suggested use areas. **Columbine Meadows is respected by locals and unknown by visitors.**

The Steamboat Lake Snow Club Parking Plan dated March of 2003 stated *"It was also noted by snowmobilers that the temptation would be great to 'play' in the Meadows, after being confined to a road for such a long time."*

In December of 2008 Leslie Lovejoy stated in an email, *"We have concerns this trail would lead snowmobiles into areas we have been trying to preserve for many years. The only snowmobiles that seem to wander onto these areas are during high tourist times by out of towners."* Yet, in the Steamboat Pilot last week she was quoted as stating she could live with a trail through Columbine Meadows.

We believe it will be a very short time before the proposed Forest Service groomed trail, like so many others (SLO, Poverty Bar, etc.), will become non-motorized. The private property owners will complain of trespass and noise. Leslie Lovejoy stated again the day of the trail walk that Columbine is a "natural amphitheatre." The non-motorized users will raise concerns of safety along the trail amid outcries that motorized users are poaching their powder and disturbing their quiet back country experience (which can be satisfactorily achieved in a wilderness area). The Forest Service will soon be forced to mandate the non-motorized area, closing the trail to motorized use altogether.

None of the property owners along the Forest Service's proposed trail support the trail. All have indicated their opposition.

Mark Ensner, a non-motorized advocate, wrote (USFS Doc # 0107), *"This is prime back-country skiing . . . We simply must find an alternative route."*

Grooming of FSR 418:

SLO was granted a grooming permit for FSR 418 years ago and they were unable to maintain the route. Steep side hills, windy conditions, deep snows, high altitude, exposure and hairpin turns were all listed as reasons this route

is not suitable for grooming operations by David Mark, former Steamboat Lake Snow Club grooming chairman.

Final Thoughts:

FORB's assertions that Trilby Flats, Columbine Meadows and Hahn's Peak are currently non-motorized areas are baseless and inaccurate. These areas are all regularly accessed by hybrid users as well as other motorized users. There are plenty of wilderness areas which non-motorized users can access for pristine back country experiences. Suggested use areas inevitably lead to more conflict, as people's expectations are not met. They are difficult to monitor and a nightmare to enforce. **We recommend Trilby Flats, Columbine Meadows and Hahn's Peak remain open to all users.**

Our recommendations seek to advocate the interests of all motorized winter users, while protecting and preserving Columbine Meadows from user conflict. We seek to provide the most sustainable and cost effective solutions, while adhering to the mandates and goals of local and federal governments. We hope our efforts will be rewarded and the Forest Service will recognize the ill-informed parrots of our society and ignore their illogical zeal.

The FORB proposal should be dismissed summarily because its author called it "*ridiculous*" in a May 15, 2009 email. The suggested non-motorized area is not clearly defined on the west side of RCR 129. A State Parks representative indicated there was not adequate parking at the State Park headquarters to support the FORB proposal. An agreement exists between State Parks and the County to not build or expand snowmobile parking at that location. **The FORB proposal is illogical and achieves none of the stated goals.**

Conversely, the Routt Powder Riders' proposed course of action achieves the following goals and mandates:

- The Forest Service Handbook 1909.12 Land Management Planning suggests, "*Land management plan components should provide strategic guidance that contributes to maintenance or achievement of social, economic, and ecological sustainability.*"
- The Forest Service's goal to maintain groomed snowmobile access from Steamboat Lake State Park to National Forest System Road 550 north of Columbine and improve parking on National Forest Service Lands.

- The Upper Elk River Community Plan suggests *“New permitted recreational uses shall be located away from or have their impacts buffered from defined residential neighborhoods”* and *“encourage alternate dispersed trailheads and access to recreational designation areas to relieve congestion while minimizing negative impacts to residential neighborhoods and the residential and natural environment”* and *“develop a trail system plan and implementation strategy including a trail along RCR 129.”*

Thank you again for allowing us this opportunity to voice our concerns and suggestions regarding the Columbine Access Project. We appreciate your consideration.

Respectfully,

The Routt Powder Riders' Board