

42 Routes Project – Questions and Answers

Why are you analyzing these 42 routes?

In 2008 the Forest Service designated a system of roads and trails for public wheeled motorized vehicle travel. Parts of the Forest Supervisor’s decision were litigated in Eastern District Court of California. In 2011, the Judge found that 42 routes that appeared to cross meadows had not been analyzed in light of one standard and guideline in the Eldorado National Forest Plan. Because of that error, the designation for that portion of the routes that crossed meadows had to be withdrawn until they were analyzed for consistency with this standard and guideline.

More specifically, the court directed the FS to reconsider the 2008 decision regarding the meadow crossings on the 42 routes in relation to following Standard and Guideline

“Maintain and restore the hydrologic connectivity of ... meadows by identifying roads and trails that intercept, divert, or disrupt natural surface and subsurface water flow paths. Implement corrective actions where necessary to restore connectivity.”

What is NEPA?

NEPA is short for the National Environmental Policy Act of 1972. It is the process for analyzing the environmental effects of proposed ground disturbing activities on Federal lands. The requirements of this law let the Forest Supervisor make an informed decision and give the public an opportunity to give input.

What is a Supplemental EIS?

In 2008, the Forest Service completed a Final EIS and decided which motorized roads and trails would be designated as part of the Eldorado’s system of public wheeled motorized roads and trails. The SEIS is more narrowly focused than the 2008 EIS. This time the analysis will only look at a small part of 42 of the routes as they relate to meadows.

What’s so urgent? Why are you conducting this Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement now?

We realize that these are very popular public motorized vehicle travel routes and that their closure has an immediate impact on people’s ability to enjoy their national forest.

Your first public involvement activity is about scoping. What do you want from me?

The Forest Supervisor starts the NEPA analysis by stating what she proposes to do with the routes. With that proposal in mind, the public has an opportunity to share information and ideas about the proposal and how the problems might be solved. They may also identify issues that should be analyzed in depth and suggest other alternatives they would like to see considered.

Public comments should describe as clearly and completely as possible any issues the commenter has with the proposal.

What is the decision making process and timeline?

The Forest Service will start the Supplemental EIS in early October, 2012. A draft SEIS is expected to be available for public review in late December. Public involvement opportunities will be available in early 2012. The final decision is expected in July, 2013.

The Eldorado National Forest Supervisor begins the SEIS by identifying what she proposes to do with the segments of 42 routes that cross meadows.

The public will have opportunities to be involved in the SEIS, starting in October, at which time people may provide information and ideas that are specific to the Forest Supervisor’s proposed action.

Based on the information and ideas learned during scoping, alternatives to the Forest Supervisor’s proposal will be developed and an environmental analysis of the proposed action and the alternatives will be conducted. A draft SEIS will then be created and a preferred alternative will be identified. The draft SEIS will be made available for public comment.

The Forest’s website will be updated with information about upcoming meetings and other opportunities to get involved including how to have your name added to the email list to receive notifications.

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/eldorado/home/?cid=STELPRDB5362046>

Who will decide if a route is reopened or not?

Eldorado National Forest Supervisor Kathy Hardy.

Do you realize how important these routes are to motorized recreationist?

The Forest Service learned through public involvement for 2008 Travel Management Plan that the routes involved in this analysis are very important to motorized recreationists. As a result, they were included in the Forest’s designated travel system. The court, however, determined that we failed to analyze the routes in light of Eldorado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, SNFRMA Standard and Guideline 100 as it relates to meadows. The Forest Supervisor will keep in mind the information gained through public involvement in the 2008 travel management planning process as she frames up her new decision.

Do you realize how important meadows are to the ecosystem?

Yes. They are special places and very important to the watershed and for wildlife habitats. The SEIS will be very narrowly focused and will just analyze what the judge found was missing in our original environmental analysis.

Can she decide to keep a route open that crosses a meadow?

Yes. Once the SEIS is completed, the Forest Supervisor can decide to amend the Forest Plan and exempt a route that crosses a meadow from the standard and guideline.

How does the Forest Supervisor’s Proposed Action differ from the decision made in the 2008 Eldorado National Forest Travel Management FEIS Record of Decision?

The proposed action differs from the previous decision only in that portions of two routes would not be reopened, and that a Forest Plan Amendment would be included for 20 of the routes to exempt them from meeting Standard and Guideline 100 in the Eldorado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended by SNFPA, at the time of designation.

How can you designate these routes now when you still haven’t determined what your minimum system needs to be as defined in the Travel Management Rule Subpart A?

A Travel Analysis is used to inform Forest Service decision makers about designating roads, trails and areas for motor vehicle use (36 CFR 212 Subpart B) or for identifying the minimum road system (36 CFR 212 Subpart A). A Travel Analysis will be completed for the 42 routes involved in the SEIS to help inform the Forest Supervisor regarding designation of these routes. A forest scale Travel Analysis (then referred to as a Roads Analysis) was completed for the primary transportation routes for the Eldorado National Forest in 2003; however, it only analyzed passenger car forest roads (maintenance level 3, 4, and 5), and did not include roads for high clearance vehicle or closed roads (maintenance level 2 & 1 roads), unauthorized routes, or motorized trails. That 2003 Roads Analysis recognized that local roads, such as those being analyzed in the SEIS, would be addressed in project-level analyses.

Will this be the end of travel management decisions in the Eldorado National Forest?

No. When the original Travel Management decision was made in 2008, the Forest Supervisor said that once the main system was designated routes could still be added or subtracted as situations change. Over the years some routes have been added and some have been deleted. Also, parking for camping and dispersed recreation has been improved in some areas and a few trailheads have been built for equestrians.

Do you have funds for trail improvements?

The Forest Service roads and trails budget has not looked good for years. In fact, in the past few years it has gone down significantly. We’ve found that paying for the environmental analysis for road and trails projects is more difficult than finding external sources of funding for project implementation. Both are scarce, but funds for environmental analysis seem to be the most difficult to obtain.

How are projects prioritized?

The Forest Service is required to conduct an environmental analysis for any ground disturbing action we propose on national forest land. The analysis process requires that we form an interdisciplinary team of specialists to determine the effects of the proposal and alternatives. These folks provide an objective, science based analysis of the effects of doing the project and not doing the project.

The challenge is that there are a limited number of specialists working for the Forest and there are many projects that need to be analyzed. It's all about priorities. In the mix of possible projects are prescribe burning, invasive plants, hydropower, recreation management, meadow restoration, road easements, stewardship projects, etc. Take a look at the schedule of proposed actions on our website to get a better idea of the work we proposed to do each year:

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/eldorado/landmanagement/projects>.

What environmental specialists will be involved in the analysis?

A hydrologist, wildlife biologist and recreation specialists are on the core team. Other specialists can be brought in as needed. These specialists are staff to the Forest Supervisor. No members of the public are on the interdisciplinary team (IDT).

You plan to produce a draft SEIS in December. Why won't you have a decision before July 2013?

We actually hope to have a decision before then. Past experience has shown that situations develop that stretch the timeline. We will make the decision as soon as possible.

A couple of routes go through private land. How can you designate a route through non-national forest lands?

We can't – unless the private landowner has granted the Forest Service an easement for public use of the road.

Will the routes remain closed until the SEIS is completed and a new Motor Vehicle Use Map is completed?

Yes. The portions of the 42 routes that were closed by a court order will remain closed until the SEIS is completed and a new Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) is issued that shows segments of the routes to be open to public wheeled motorized vehicle use.

Where can I get information about which routes are currently closed?

Each Forest Service office has copies of the free motor vehicle use map (MVUM) that shows what routes are currently open to motorized use. The map is also posted on the forest website.