

May 8, 2007

VIA EMAIL traveldir@fs.fed.us

(hard copy to follow)

Travel Management Proposed Directives

Attention: LeRoy Schmitz c/o USDA Forest Service Northern Region

PO Box 7669

Missoula, MT 59807

**RE: ACCESS FUND COMMENTS ON UNITED STATES FOREST SERVICE
PROPOSED INTERNAL AGENCY DIRECTIVES REGARDING TRAVEL
MANAGEMENT (FEDERAL REGISTER/VOL. 72, NO. 46 / FRIDAY, MARCH 9, 2007 /
NOTICES)**

Dear Mr. Schmitz,

The Access Fund welcomes the opportunity to comment on behalf of the American rock climbing community on the United States Forest Service's (USFS) proposed internal agency directives regarding travel management to make them consistent with and facilitate implementation of the agency's final travel management rule. Public participation throughout the decision-making process is the cornerstone to any effective management decision and the Access Fund applauds the USFS solicitation of input on this very important topic to climbers and to those land managers who manage climbing resources. It is particularly appropriate the Access Fund work closely with the USFS on any management revisions concerning rock climbing given the memoranda of understanding (MOU) that the Access Fund has with the USFS relating to any climbing management initiatives within the National Forest System¹

As more fully explained herein, the Access Fund urges that USFS further amend its travel management directives to acknowledge rock climbing, and access to climbing resources, as a legitimate use of our National Forest lands. As way of background, most climber-created trails on USFS lands develop as climbers make repeated visits to climbing-specific destinations that are not serviced by existing trail systems, or move around in predictable ways within a climbing area. Climber trails are not unlike river-access trails in that they may see low traffic volume or access steep and difficult terrain. Thus climber trails, like river access trails used by fishing enthusiasts, merit less procedural requirements for maintenance or elimination of redundant trails, which would be inappropriate for high volume multi-visitor use trails.

The "process predicament"² encountered with current directives is that once established these climbers' "trails" are deemed "non-authorized" or "illegal," yet the activity of rock climbing is recognized as a legitimate use of the resource. Land managers frequently are caught in a bind, where the very procedures they need to follow to achieve their mission— to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations— are keeping them from accomplishing their mission. Neither ecosystem values nor the public that uses and cares about the conservation of USFS lands are well served when responsible management actions such as impact mitigation take a back seat to process. In the words of the Aldo Leopold, "Conservation ... is a positive exercise of skill and insight, not merely a negative exercise of abstinence or caution."³ It is our hope that our suggestions herein

¹ See <http://accessfund.org/pdf/AF-03-MOU-USFS.pdf>.

² <http://www.fs.fed.us/projects/documents/Process-Predicament.pdf>

³ Aldo Leopold, "The Farmer as a Conservationist," in *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays* by Aldo Leopold, ed. Susan L. Flader and J. Baird Callicot (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 25

provide insight and perspective to remove unnecessary procedural barriers to the conservation of USFS lands as they relate to access of climbing resources.

The Access Fund

The Access Fund, a 501(c)(3) non-profit advocacy and conservation organization, is the nation's largest climbers' organization, representing over 1.6 million technical rock climbers and mountaineers nationwide. The Access Fund's mission is to keep climbing areas open, and to conserve the climbing environment. Preserving the opportunity to climb and the diversity of the climbing experience are fundamental to our mission.

The Access Fund encourages an ethic of personal responsibility, self-regulation, and Leave No Trace practices among climbers; works cooperatively with public land managers on conservation projects and management planning, supports local climbing organizations, provides funding for conservation projects and scientific studies, develops and distributes educational materials, represents the interests of climbers on public policy issues, acquires and manages land, and annually sponsors over 100 Adopt-a-Crags across the country. The experiences found only in our national forest system are some of the core opportunities the Access Fund seeks to preserve.

Rock Climbing in the Nation's Forests

Most climbers in the United States have, will, or aspire to climb in America's national forests. Indeed, the United States Forest Service oversees some of the nation's most significant and world-famous technical climbing areas such as the California's Needles in Sequoia National Forest, Tahquitz and Suicide Rocks in San Bernardino National Forest, Pikes Peak in Colorado's Pike National Forest, Cochise Stronghold in Arizona's Coronado National Forest, Rumney and Cathedral Ledge in New Hampshire's White Mountain National Forest, and Seneca Rocks in West Virginia's Monongahela National Forest. Each of these areas and many others represent truly world class climbing areas sought out by climbers from around the world.

There is a long tradition of climbing in America's national forests. Technical climbing in the forests of the Sierra Mountains, for example, goes back to the mid-1860s and continues today as one of that area's primary user groups. In 1927 climbers were active on the East Coast when Appalachian Mountain Club members Robert Underhill, brother and sister Lincoln and Miriam O'Brien (later Underhill), Elizabeth Knowlton, Fritz Wiessner, and Bill House, and the cousins Bradley Gilman and Hassler Whitney all made belayed ascents of the steep rock faces of the Cannon, Cathedral, and Whitehorse cliffs in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. In many cases, technical climbing had been on-going at these areas long before Congress turned them into national forests under the jurisdiction of the USDA.

Given the central position that USFS lands occupy for climbing in the United States, the Access Fund seriously considers any changes to forest policy and works hard with local land managers and climbers to maintain the unique conditions of climbing environments in our national forests. Accordingly, we have helped cultivated an impressive tradition among the climbing community of conservation activism and stewardship in our national forests. Our Adopt-a-Crag program has spearheaded dozens of cleanups and trail maintenance projects across the country in our nation's forests. Additionally, each year the Access Fund directs membership dollars and corporate and community partner support into our Access Fund Grants Program, and many of our grants have benefited specific national forests. Climbing Preservation Grants are awarded for conservation projects, land acquisitions, scientific studies, local climber activism, and climber education around the country. Examples of Access Fund grants awarded at USFS units include the

Buttermilks in California, Maple Canyon in Utah, Rumney in New Hampshire, and Yourak Pillars in Oregon.

Standards and Guidelines for Climber-Created Trails

The Access Fund asks that the USFS incorporate our comments governing the management of climber-created trails into the proposed internal agency directives regarding travel management. In general, it is the Access Fund's position that oversight and management of climbers' trails need not be rigorous if there is no identified threat to natural resources or other values. What the Access Fund is advocating for is a common-sense approach to addressing the creation of non-authorized trails that access climbing resources. As with accessing river recreational opportunities (FSM 2354), rock climbing requires forest visitors travel to a particular destination that is sometimes not serviced by the inventoried trail networks. In other words, the trail is a necessary part of the experience, but is not the goal or focus of the experience.

Climber trails usually "follow the path of least resistance," avoiding obstacles and minimizing the effort to reach a climbing destination. Sometimes called "social trails," typically, climber trails develop in three general locations: 1) along the quickest route from a parking area or point of an established trail to the climbing site; 2) on the simplest descent from the top of a mountain or cliff; and 3) on routes between cliffs and boulders within the climbing site. Unlike hiking, biking, cross-country ski trails or the myriad of other activities mentioned in the Forest Service Manual that utilize trails designed, constructed, and maintained by the USFS,⁴ climber trails tend to be primitive with minimal improvements, are often sited on steep slopes, and incorporate "scree" or "talus" slopes. Once a trail becomes established, factors such as soil characteristics, topography, ecosystem characteristics, climate, and local vegetation's resistance and resilience will dictate its prominence in the landscape.

At some point, if many climbers use an area, some degree of formalization and stabilization of climber trails may become desirable. In some cases trails may be ill-defined causing climbers to unknowingly take several trails to the same destination. Some climber trails may adversely affect resource or aesthetic values. Such trails can easily be minimized or in some cases eliminated. Currently, however, the USFS faces substantial NEPA obligations if it decides to acknowledge or eliminate *any* trail even if such trail is not part of the current travel inventory. This analysis can be quite lengthy and costly. We believe that NEPA process issues should not become *de facto* paralysis on addressing climbing-access trail maintenance needs and redundancy due to NEPA's prolonged procedural requirements.

To address the concern of multiple trails to a single climbing resource the Access Fund recommends that acknowledging the presence of and eliminating redundant climber-created trails be designated as a "categorical exclusion"⁵ from the NEPA process. CATEXs do not exempt a proposal from the NEPA process; however, they often help reduce the necessity of an EA or EIS⁶

4 FSM Chapter 2350 Introduction

5 Agencies can identify actions in advance of project proposals that do not significantly affect the human environment. For these, neither an EA nor an EIS is necessary. See 40 C.F.R. §§ 1501.4(a)(2), 1507.3(b)(2)(ii), 1508.4. Categorical exclusions (CATEX) are pre-designated activities that do not individually nor cumulatively have a significant effect on the environment. Considering the self-limiting character of accessing climbing resources, the acknowledgement of climber-created trails will have neither an individual nor cumulative impact on the environment. Rather a CATEX designation for climber access trails will actually work to allow more responsible stewardships efforts—such as Access Fund Adopt-A-Crags—that can mitigate adverse resource impacts.

6 Consistent with the CEQ regulations, the Forest Service promulgated a series of categorical exclusions, which are set forth in the Forest Service Handbook. 1909.15, 31.1b & 31.2. If a proposed action fits within a categorical exclusion, NEPA review is not required unless there are "extraordinary circumstances" related to the proposed action. Forest

Thus, acknowledging trails accessing climbing resources as CATEXs would help limit the implications of time-consuming NEPA processes while still allowing for EAs under extraordinary circumstances.

Forest Service Manual

In addition to making it easier for unit managers to address redundant climbers' trails through CATEXs, the Access Fund also requests the acknowledgement of rock climbing as an activity on USFS land in the FSM addressing trails and recreation. It is the Access Fund's understanding that the Forest Service Directive System (which consists of the Forest Service Manual and Handbooks that codify the agency's policy, practice, and procedure) serves as the primary basis for the internal management guidance and control of all programs and is the primary source of administrative direction to Forest Service employees. Because many unit managers manage for rock climbing the US Forest Service should consider specifically including "rock climbing" as a recreational activity in the Introduction to FSM 2350.⁷

Trail, river, and similar recreation opportunities are characterized by activities that involve relatively low-density use and that occur over broad expanses of land or water. These include activities such as hiking, caving, **rock climbing**, mountaineering, over-snow vehicle use, cross-country skiing, horseback riding, bicycle riding, off-highway vehicle use, driving for pleasure, boating, hunting, and fishing.

The Access Fund also recommends the inclusion of providing recreation opportunities and access for responsible use of "rock" resources, in addition to forest, water, and cave already listed in FSM 2305.2- Objectives and FSM 2350.3- Policy.⁸ This language will help to empower unit managers to work cooperatively with local Access Fund Affiliates and volunteers on "mutually beneficial programs, projects, training, and other recreation activities" as set forth in the MOU between the USFS and the Access Fund.

Conclusion

The USFS provides unique and diverse climbing resource of significant importance. On behalf of the American climbing community, the Access Fund welcomes the USFS's efforts to solicit public input. We hope our comments will provide a meaningful contribution to proposed changes in Forest Service Manual directives regarding travel management objectives and strategies.

The Access Fund would welcome the opportunity to work with you to draft language that addresses the concerns raised herein. Please do not hesitate to contact either myself at 303.545.6772 x112 or Jason Keith, Access Fund Policy Director by telephone, 303.545.6772 x102, or email at jason@accessfund.org, if you would like more input or wish to discuss any of

Service Handbook, 1909.15, 30.3(1)(b); 40 C.F.R. § 1508.4. Extraordinary circumstances are those circumstances "in which a normally excluded action may have significant environmental effect." 40 C.F.R. § 1508.4; FSH at ¶ 30.5. The scoping process is used to "determine the scope of the issues to be addressed and for identifying the significant issues related to a proposed action." 40 C.F.R. § 1501.7. The Forest Service conducts scoping for "all proposed actions, including those that would appear to be categorically excluded" Forest Service Handbook, 1909.15, 30.2(3). If extraordinary circumstances having a significant effect on environment are revealed during scoping, then the Forest Service conducts an EA. *Id.* at 30.2(3). Once the agency considers the proper factors and makes a factual determination on whether the impacts are significant or not, that decision implicates substantial agency expertise and is entitled to deference.

⁷ http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/ohv/FSM_2350.pdf, pg. 15.

⁸ *Id.*

the points covered in this letter. We look forward to working with you to maintain climbing opportunities and conserve the climbing environment in US Forest Service.

Respectfully Yours,

Deanne Buck
Programs Director
The Access Fund

cc:

Jim Bedwell, USFS Director of Recreation and Heritage Resources
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