

## Congressional Hearing

### “The Impact of Forest Road Closures”

Testimony of Commissioner Mike McKee, Uintah County, Utah

March 12, 2012

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

I am Mike McKee, County Commissioner of Uintah County, Utah. Thank you for holding this hearing and giving me the opportunity to address the negative Impacts of Forest Road Closures.

In Uintah County, only 15% of our land is privately owned. Because of the small percentage of private land in our County, the Ashley National Forest is very important to the culture and custom of our people.

#### Negative impacts of the new travel management plan:

##### Roads.

The Forest Service claims that they added approved roads. The Record of Decision actually eliminates hundreds of miles of existing roads. These roads provided access to recreation, hunting, fishing, game retrieval, wood gathering, and camping. It also reduced opportunities for the elderly and handicapped to enjoy the beauty of the forest.

These roads have been taken off the map all in advance of future wilderness considerations.

##### Dispersed Camping.

The quality and quantity of the recreational experience has been severely compromised. Our citizens go to the forest to get away from population centers and to have a remote experience. Camping becomes more congested with motor homes lined up side by side next to the roads with dust, noise and increased traffic. Recreationists find their experience to be less than desirable. This issue was of great concern to the citizens of our county. Petitions to “Stop Proposed Travel and Camping Restrictions on Public/Forest Lands” were brought in to the Uintah County Commissioners with nearly 9,000 signatures.

##### Socio- Economics of the Ashley National Forest.

Forest Supervisors have stated that the niche for the Ashley National Forest is recreation. Timber harvest, which was once an important use of the forest, is nearly non-existent today. In years past, hunters, fishermen and tourists from outside our area contributed greatly to the socio-economics of our community. As community leaders and citizens, we are concerned with management decisions that close down much of our forest for recreational opportunities and other multiple uses.

## Flawed Process:

### Cooperation Agency Status.

Uintah County has Cooperating Agency Status with the Ashley National Forest. The Forest Service is required to consult with local governments in preparing a travel management plan. The 2004 planning rules also direct the Forest Service to consult and coordinate with local governments as part of the public participation process. We believe the Forest Service did not meet the legal requirement of including Uintah County in a true Cooperating Agency Status process.

### Reduction of travel from 300 feet off road to 150 feet.

Local government and the citizens strongly objected to this change. We were told that consistency was the reason for the change. In Wyoming, the plan remained at 300 feet while the same forest in Utah was reduced to 150 feet. There was a lack of analysis in Utah. This was nothing more than a policy decision.

### Failure to work with local governments on alternatives.

Uintah County had numerous public meetings and developed a Travel Management Plan for designated routes on the Forest and a Dispersed Recreational Plan. These plans were adopted by Ordinance on August 27, 2007 as part of Uintah County's code. We presented these plans to the Forest Service and asked that the plans be included as one of the alternatives. That request was ignored.

### Inaccurate maps and narrative.

The cooperators and the public never had an opportunity to properly analyze the proposed actions. The maps and narrative never matched each other. In some cases the maps were followed and in other cases the narrative was adhered to. The public never had reliable information to analyze and comment on. Uintah County Commissioners repeatedly tried to get accurate maps and they never were provided.

### Lack of Analysis.

The Forest Service failed to fully analyze the environmental effects of the closure of roads and the reduction of camping areas.

Uintah County appealed to the local Forest Service, and to the Regional Forester and both of those appeals were denied. It was then appealed to the Under Secretary of the Department of Agriculture on March 10, 2010. Commissioner Darlene Burns and I made a follow up visit to Washington, D. C. and were assured that they would get back with us. *To this date there has been no response.*

Please review the submitted materials for a more complete picture of our complaint.

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Michael J McKee, Commissioner

Uintah County, Utah