

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

---

### Witness Testimony

---

Testimony of

Gene Meinen

before the Committee on Resources,

Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

Hearing on

LEWIS & CLARK BICENTENNIAL EVENT

May 25, 1995

Idaho County, geographically the largest county in Idaho, is located in the north-central region of the state. Our borders extend from the State of Montana to the State of Oregon. Idaho County is approximately 8,500 square miles, which equates to about 5.4 million acres.

Within the boundaries of Idaho County are approximately 4.5 million acres of national forest. 5 national forests have their boundaries within Idaho County, and the Nez Perce National Forest is entirely within the county boundaries.

Idaho County's major industries are timber, ranching, and farming. The timber industry is the primary source of employment and income for the county's 15,000 residents.

Law enforcement and the safety of Idaho County's citizens fall upon the Idaho County Sheriff's Office. The sheriff's office consists of 14 road deputies, 3 detectives, an Undersheriff and myself. Primary duties are criminal investigations, civil processes, search and rescue, and traffic enforcement.

As the USFS is taking the lead in the designing of the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial Event, the planning has just recently begun to recognize the public safety issues that will arise when the projected number of visitors to our area become a reality.

The USFS projects that 1 to 4 million additional visitors will come to the Lewis & Clark Corridor on State Highway 12, and the Lolo Motorway during the bicentennial season. Law enforcement and emergency medical services in that area cannot even begin to handle the impact that would be generated if just a fraction of the projected number of people come to our area.

To help you understand this situation, the current emergency medical services are provided by 3 ambulances and 1 quick response unit, all located in separate and remote, small mountain communities extending over 100 miles along State Highway 12. Citizen volunteers, who staff these emergency units, are working people

who respond if they are available. Response times can be one to two hours depending on conditions.

The State Highway 12 response area consists of a two-lane winding scenic mountain highway requiring reduced speeds in numerous portions of the highway. This does not include response times to emergencies on the Lolo Motorway Corridor that is parallel to State Highway 12. The Lolo Motorway is a single lane dirt road located to the north of State Highway 12. This road is approximately 80 miles long and will be extremely difficult to access and traverse, even considering the permit system proposed by the USFS that will allow up to 800 people in the corridor at any given time. This number of people will require constant monitoring to address public safety, natural and historical protection issues.

The USFS proposed plan for the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial Event, it talks about the availability of air medical services use of helicopters. These units would respond from Missoula, Montana and Spokane, Washington.

It is my opinion, based on past experience, that these services are not a reliable resource. Because of the mountainous terrain here, there are a lack of heliports. The air service is still dependent on ground ambulances to transport the patient to the landing sites. Another major factor is the weather conditions during the summer. This mountainous area experiences many thunderstorms and low level cloud cover that often prohibits air access.

Five deputies are presently assigned to the community of Kooskia and the northeastern region that encompasses the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial route. However, their duties are primarily centered in the surrounding Kooskia area, with the remote region of the county being secondary. At present there is not proactive patrol in that portion of the county due to lack of manpower, citizen population, and the logistics of getting personnel into the area.

The Lewis & Clark Bicentennial Event will create a tremendous law enforcement burden on Idaho County resources. The anticipated number of tourists to this remote area will create an environment ripe for crime and accidents to occur because of the remoteness of the area and the lack of a law enforcement presence.

Furthermore, I feel there will be a significant impact on search and rescue resources caused by people going into an unfamiliar, hostile environment. Tourists are not generally prepared for the hazards of the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial route. Also you must realize that other than the primary road, this area is virtually unchanged since the time of Lewis & Clark.

The USFS has presented a number of contingency plans and operational procedures for addressing the above issues. However, the USFS by policy, number 1599.03 (see attachment) does not recognize or fund any search and rescue activities occurring within national forest boundaries by the local sheriff's departments. The USFS continues to promote and encourage recreational use that creates search and rescue activities at considerable expense to the local taxpayer. For example: in July of 1998 an USFS District Ranger, who has considerable knowledge of Lewis & Clark history, and experience in the woods, was hiking the Lewis & Clark Trail off of the Lolo Motorway. This individual was reported missing and a search was initiated that lasted 5 days. This search cost the Idaho County taxpayers over \$7,000.00.

Many other local resources will be significantly impacted by the USFS promotion of this event. Some areas of great concern are the increased numbers that could be incarcerated in the county jail. Our jail is old and at the present time doesn't meet our needs. With this increase comes an additional caseload for the prosecuting attorney's office our court system.

At present, the Idaho County Sheriff's Office has an antiquated radio system that is in need of an update. Our radio system is the only dispatching service for fire, ambulance, and law enforcement in Idaho County.

Another area of concern on a local level is the additional vehicle traffic on our locally supported road system. The proposed route of exit for the Lolo Motorway is a gravel road that is not designed for a large amount of vehicle traffic. This directly effects law enforcement in dealing with traffic control.

In closing, this is an event that is being sponsored by the USFS and financed by the Idaho County residents. With the significant drop in timber dollars and the inequity of the PILT Program, the Idaho County taxpayers cannot and should not be expected to finance this historic event.

Thank you,

R.E. Meinen, Sheriff  
Idaho County Sheriff's Office

###