

WTA at Work

Action for Trails »

A Golden Opportunity

Help the U.S. Forest Service manage their land in eastern Washington

One of the last things the late guidebook author Ira Spring said to me—in a raspy, but thundery voice—was, “Protect Golden Horn.”

Found within the Liberty Bell roadless area, near Cutthroat Pass and Tatie Peak, Golden Horn is one of those remarkable places that was not included in North Cascades National Park due to the judgment that it was not of National Park calibre. Indulge me as I challenge that sentiment. After receiving my mandate from Ira, I’ve talked about Golden Horn with anyone who will listen, but I’ve never found a venue that affords a reasonable chance of protecting it—until now.

Like all national forests, the Okanogan-Wenatchee and Colville National Forests are managed according to a Forest Plan, a fifteen-year document that is used to guide day-to-day and year-to-year projects on national forests. Earlier this summer, the Okanogan-Wenatchee and Colville National Forests released a proposed action—essentially a rundown of the major issues they’ve identified since they started developing their revised Forest Plan way back in 2003. They touch on recreation, the road access system, threatened and endangered species habitat and waterways. This is the first thumbnail sketch of a much larger and more detailed final product, so the proposed action is quite general.

Mandated by Congress through the National Forest Management Act, forest planning is a deeply involved, all-hands-on-deck process that takes years and involves thousands of stakeholders. Prepare to follow this issue for a while. From the perspective of hikers, a few interesting points have emerged already. Other points need further clarification, and still more are potentially thorny. Here’s a look at four potential issues:

- In the Access System section, the proposed action states that “Any national forest system road, bridge, trail, or dock that is not needed to meet resource or social and economic objectives and/or user-created roads would be decommissioned and the landscape restored.” I would like to know what tools they’ll use to decide which trails and roads are worthy of keeping on the system. Clearly, roads that lead nowhere or are no longer used are not of interest to hikers. But what about roads to lightly used

trails or the trails themselves? Hikers need clarity on this issue, and should ask for it.

- Forest managers propose to “Reduce the trail maintenance backlog on 10 to 20 percent of the trail system.” That’s a goal we can get behind, but again, clarity will determine how useful this plan is for hikers. Where will they concentrate their efforts? Do they plan to eliminate the backlog on those areas?



Advice From Ira Spring: “Protect Golden Horn.” Photo by Wade Trenbeath.



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- They plan to “provide five additional non-motorized settings readily available to nonmotorized winter recreationists distributed across the southern half of the forest.” We want to make sure these sites stay in the proposal, as snowshoeing is growing in popularity among hikers seeking to extend their trail season.

- Finally, we’re concerned that land managers plan to continue allowing motorized recreation in areas proposed for wilderness. We believe that if areas are recommended for wilderness designation, they’re worthy of being managed as such in order to preserve their wilderness characteristics.

This plan also recommends areas for addition to the National Wilderness Preservation System. (See the sidebar at right for our thoughts and concerns about specific areas.)

Our assessment of the proposed wilderness additions is that there are both highlights and lowlights. In some places, we believe the Forest Service has bitten off a respectable chunk of roadless land to add to the system, and we’re happy about that. In other areas, we feel they haven’t gone nearly far enough. Case in point, their preliminary wilderness recommendation proposals do not include Golden Horn, with the Forest Service opting to recommend only two small sections of the Liberty Bell roadless area for wilderness designation and leave thousands of acres out. Ira wouldn’t stand for this omission, and I’m not planning to, either. This is a golden opportunity to speak out for Golden Horn, and dozens of other stellar backcountry destinations.

The comment period on the proposed actions will end on September 28. Looking ahead, watch this space for more information as we receive it. You’ll be the first to know when the next step, a Draft Environmental Impact Statement is imminent. We hope that document comports with the interests of hikers. If not, we’ll have more work to do. But with the support of hikers like you, who are engaged in the behind-the-scenes workings of our land management agencies, we’ll make progress toward a forest plan that is good for us and for the wildlands we love.♦

Take Action

Share your thoughts with the planning team. Submit a comment letter by mail or email before September 28. Mail your letter to **Plan Revision Team, Okanogan Valley Office, 1240 Second Avenue South, Okanogan, WA 98840**. Or email your comments to **r6_ewzplanrevision@fs.fed.us**. Consider making some of the points we’ve outlined above, while speaking to your own personal experiences on the Okanogan-Wenatchee and Colville National Forests. You can find the proposed actions on the forests’ websites—**www.fs.fed.us/r6/wenatchee** and **www.fs.fed.us/r6/colville**.

Forest Service Recommended Wilderness

Changes to the rules surrounding forest planning now require national forests to make wilderness recommendations as part of their planning process. The Okanogan-Wenatchee and Colville National Forests have now done that.

Their recommendations offer a mixed bag for hikers. In some areas, forest managers have recommended most or all of the acres in a particular roadless area for designation as wilderness. In other places, they’ve given short shrift to outstanding scenic and conservation values. In the list of highs and lows below, we’ve given the number of total acres included in each roadless area followed by the number of acres recommended.

Highlights

Abercrombie Hooknose roadless area—37,000 total potential acres, 35,200 recommended

Abercrombie Hooknose is in the Colville and has been on the target list for wilderness advocates for decades. The fact that the forest managers recommended better than 90 percent of the available acres is a good sign.

Salmo-Priest adjacent—16,700 potential acres, 13,600 recommended

The only existing wilderness area in the Colville could grow to become a 42,600-acre area under this proposed addition.

Heather Lake roadless area—10,000 potential acres, 9,400 recommended

Adjacent to the Henry M. Jackson Wilderness, the Heather Lake area is stunning and is heavily used by hikers. Given that there is little non-conforming use, including this area is an easy call for the Forest Service.

Twin Lakes roadless area—21,400 potential acres, 15,400 recommended

Also very noncontroversial, this section includes three trails that enter the Glacier Peak Wilderness. There is no use by motorized recreation or mountain bikers. There is also no mining or grazing in this area. Again, this is not a difficult call for the forest managers to make.

Lowlights

Entiat-Chelan roadless area—162,000 potential acres, 19,500 recommended

This chunk is the biggest potential east-side addition to the Glacier Peak Wilderness. The only area recommended here is the Rock Creek section, which is wholly noncontroversial. The Myrtle and Entiat areas are excluded because they are home to motorized uses, and the area around Holden is excluded to allow management of the area around Holden Village.

Teaway roadless area—74,200 potential acres, 15,800 recommended

The Teaway offers extraordinary promise to add to the Alpine Lake Wilderness. Excluded acres are used by large parties and ORV users. The Three Brothers motorized trail, which is almost never used and dead ends at the Alpine Lakes boundary, is included in the proposal. The Teaway houses a wealth of potential wilderness acre and is an important gateway to the Alpine Lakes Wilderness. Forest managers should take a closer look at this area and increase its recommendation.

Liberty Bell roadless area—114,700 potential acres, 5,200 recommended

Home to Golden Horn and adjacent to both North Cascades National Park and the Pasayten Wilderness, the Liberty Bell roadless area offers some of the best opportunities for additions to the system. We suspect that the vast majority of this area was excluded due to the 43 active mining claims cited, as well as the North Cascades Basecamp heli-skiing permit.