

WYOMING GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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April 18, 2007

WER 704.01
Ashley National Forest
Travel Management Plan
Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area
Sweetwater County

Kris Rutledge
Environmental Coordinator
Ashley National Forest
355 N. Vernal Ave.
Vernal, UT

Dear Ms. Rutledge:

The Staff of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department has reviewed the travel plan in revision by the Ashley National Forest for the Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area (FGNRA) within Wyoming. We offer the following comments for your consideration.

A major concern for our Department is access to the reservoir for anglers and other sportsmen. There are many access points to the reservoir, ranging from little used two-tracks to two-lane paved roads. These allow people to disperse, fish, camp, and recreate around the entire body of water. The need for access at all parts of the reservoir was addressed during the 1983 Draft Ashley National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. Comments at that time included, "First, the present road system should be maintained to insure adequate fishermen access to the reservoir. This would include all roads presently being used." That is also our view at this time, with the considerations listed below.

We recommend no roads be closed unless supported by sound biological or resource management criteria. We also emphasize that in addition to dispersed travel and camping below the high water mark of the reservoir (elevation 6,040 feet), we recommend the Forest Service allow dispersed camping and travel on all spur roads within 1/8-mile perimeter above the high water mark of the reservoir in Wyoming.

The east side of the reservoir is crucial winter range for deer from Slippery Jim Canyon on south to the Utah state line. Elk crucial winter range also overlaps the deer range within the FGNRA at several places. On the west side it is crucial winter range for pronghorn from a few miles north of Lost Dog up and around the Blacks Fork arm and on south to the Utah line. Other species of concern are greater sage-grouse, pygmy rabbits, and midget faded rattlesnakes. There is only one documented sage-grouse lek within the FGNRA boundary, while there are about ten

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known leks close enough to the boundary that hens likely nest and raise their broods there. Pygmy rabbits depend on stands of tall sagebrush, while midget faded rattlesnakes need rock outcroppings and other habitats that are found within the area. Retaining the function of these important habitats will be a concern.

There is pronghorn, deer, elk, rabbit and sage-grouse hunting on the FGNRA utilizing the roads that are present. The ability to access many areas does not appear to have a negative impact on the populations. Many of the two-tracks and other minor roads become unusable during the winter, and the roads that are maintained or remain usable do not seriously affect wintering populations.

Most people using the FGNRA probably do not know that pygmy rabbits and midget faded rattlesnakes are present, and therefore have little impact on these species. Exotic pet collectors could be a threat to the rattlesnakes, but the roads being open or closed would not change that threat.

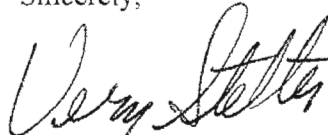
Since there are so many roads in and near the FGNRA, there is a road in the vicinity of, if not directly through, all sage-grouse leks in the area. Because of the season when leks are occupied and the time of day when birds are present, these roads are likely the reason that some of the leks may be unoccupied or inactive at times. The ability to temporarily close roads through important sage grouse habitats should be addressed.

While ATV, off-road, or hiking restrictions would be very difficult to enforce, especially considering the lack of rangers to patrol these remote areas, we recommend a focused effort on controlling off-road abuses in and around the hills north of the Lucerne Bay marina and around Stateline Cove.

We welcome the opportunity to work with Ashley National Forest personnel to make this plan one that will benefit both recreational users and wildlife. Please contact our local wildlife biologist, Grant Frost, at (307) 875-3223 for additional specific information, or to schedule a meeting to discuss any of these issues.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,


JOHN EMMERICH
DEPUTY DIRECTOR

JE:VS:sc
cc: USFWS